

The Australian media and the severed-head photo

Nick Beams
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It is a maxim of contemporary politics that whenever a government wants to introduce new laws that attack basic democratic rights, the corporate-owned media will produce a “terror scare” campaign to try to manufacture the support of “public opinion” for such measures.

So it has proved to be again in Australia this week.

On Monday, with Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s government experiencing political problems with its proposal for sweeping new anti-terror laws, the *Australian*, on cue, published a gruesome front-page picture.

Purportedly taken from the Twitter account of an Australian “foreign fighter,” Khaled Sharrouf, it allegedly showed his son, aged between seven and 10, holding the head of a decapitated soldier in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic Caliphate established by the Islamic State (ISIS). The caption below read: “That’s my boy.”

It was the centre of discussion in the media throughout the day, all aimed at providing backing for the government’s proposed new laws.

The measures include requiring Internet service providers to retain data for two years so that intelligence agencies can trawl through it, reversing the onus of proof for Australians returning from overseas to require them to prove that their trip was for “legitimate” purposes, broadening the definition of the offence of advocating a terrorist act, and lowering the threshold for arrest without warrant for terrorism offences.

The proposed legislation was unveiled last week but immediately ran into trouble. An attempt by Attorney-General George Brandis in a television interview to explain the “metadata” the government claimed to be targeting, and why it was necessary for the spy agencies

to have access to it, was the subject of considerable ridicule and satire. At that point, Rupert Murdoch’s editorial chiefs decided to step in.

In an editorial on Tuesday, the *Australian* made no bones about the reason for the article and the photos published the previous day. The paper’s senior editors, it said, thought “very carefully” about whether to run the pictures before deciding to do so.

“To comprehend the Abbott government’s response to the conflict, including its proposed new counter-terrorism laws, requires a clear understanding of the atrocities being perpetrated overseas,” it declared. The involvement of Australian fighters was “extremely vexing” and “hence the Abbott government’s far-reaching measures.”

Rather than providing clarity, the motivation of the *Australian* is the exact opposite: to create as much political confusion and disorientation as possible, so that the government’s legislation will get through.

A “clear understanding of the atrocities” requires an understanding of the war in which they are being conducted and the reasons for the rise of organisations such as ISIS. That is the last thing the editorial chiefs of the *Australian* have in mind, for it would expose only too clearly the real aim behind their latest campaign.

The war in Syria, and all its atrocities, including creation of at least 2.5 million refugees who have fled the country, is the outcome of the drive by US imperialism and its allies since 2011 to overturn the regime of Syrian President Assad—part of the regime change operations in the Middle East initiated in response to the Egyptian revolution and the overthrow of Mubarak.

In Libya and Syria, the US has turned to extreme right-wing Islamic fundamentalist forces to carry out its objectives. As a result, Libya has been turned into a

bloody battleground as the factions, set in motion by the US, fight over the spoils.

Likewise, Syria became the breeding ground for Islamist militia including ISIS, which extended its operations into Iraq. The Australian political establishment is deeply implicated in both enterprises. In 2011, the then foreign minister in the Gillard Labor government, Kevin Rudd, was one of the foremost advocates for US military intervention in Libya, while his successor in the post, Bob Carr, touted the assassination of the Syrian president.

In the longer term, ISIS is the product of US military interventions stretching back over nearly four decades. It is an offshoot of Al Qaeda, which, in turn, originated in Afghanistan as a result of the backing of the US for mujahedin groups in the war that began in 1979 against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. Forces such as Al Qaeda got their start with the provision of at least \$5 billion worth of weaponry from the US over a ten-year period.

Similarly, over the past three years, the US, together with its allies in the Gulf States and Turkey, have provided funding for “opposition” groups in Syria, most of which has flowed to the Al Qaeda offshoots, such as ISIS, to wage a sectarian war. Having helped create ISIS, the imperialist powers now declare that its existence necessitates further military intervention in Iraq and attacks on democratic rights at home.

The media campaign against the danger of the recruitment of “foreign fighters” in Australia is likewise steeped in hypocrisy and lies. There was no such campaign against similar activities in Bosnia during 1992 or in Kosovo during 1999 because in these cases the US and Australia were fighting against the government of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and “foreign fighters” were useful.

Moreover, the corporate media never conduct any serious analysis of the conditions that give rise to the recruitment of would-be jihadists because they are so deeply implicated. Every day the press, television news and talk shows and radio shock jocks conduct an unending propaganda campaign against Muslims and Islam. Last Saturday, for example, the *Australian* carried a banner headline “We’ll fight Islam for 100 years.” In such conditions, is it any wonder that extreme right-wing Islamist groups are able to recruit “foreign fighters”?

In Tuesday’s editorial, the *Australian* came to acknowledging the political conditions for such recruitment was to point to the fact that many young people “have been drawn to action by the conflict in Gaza.” The editorial then hastily passed over that issue, lest it raise too many disturbing questions.

Nor is there so much as a reference to the social conditions that provide fertile ground for recruitment. In the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne, young people, officially described as being of “Middle Eastern appearance,” living in areas of high unemployment and poor social facilities, are constantly subjected to harassment by police squads. There is hardly a young person in any of these areas who has not at some point been stopped, questioned or even searched.

The three sons of Khaled Sharrouf, who were pictured posing with him in camouflage fatigues and holding guns, should, of course, be in school. If they were, however, they would be bombarded by a government-sponsored propaganda campaign—a “celebration” (Prime Minister Abbott’s term) of the 100th anniversary of World War I.

Here, a very different standard is applied. This war and its atrocities—the continual sending of young men over the top to die in a hail of gunfire or be blasted to smithereens by exploding shells in the profit interests of the imperialist powers—was, again in Abbott’s words, the “crucible that forged our nation.” This propaganda is being force-fed into children in Australian schools and even kindergartens.

The militarisation of society, of which the World War I commemoration is part, is the surest sign that a new imperialist world war is in the making, for which the Middle East could well be a flashpoint. Preparations for war internationally always involve the suppression of fundamental democratic rights at home. This is the meaning of the *Australian’s* intervention.



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