

Australian government lifts “terror alert” level

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Amid an inflammatory media campaign to whip up public fears of supposedly imminent terrorist attacks, the Australian government today raised its official terror alert level to “high.”

Lifting the alert from “medium”—for the first time since the current rating system was introduced in 2003—means claiming that a terrorist attack within Australia is “likely,” not just “possible.”

Prime Minister Tony Abbott claimed that the shift was essential, despite admitting: “We have no specific intelligence of particular plots.”

Under the cover of combatting Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias, the fraudulent “war on terror” launched in 2001 is being revived in a bid to drum up support for the renewed US-led war in Iraq and Syria for dominance in the Middle East.

Domestically, the purpose of the indefinite “war on terror” is to bolster the powers of the police-intelligence apparatus to suppress political dissent and social unrest. War and terrorist scares also serve to divert the intense public hostility to the government’s austerity budget measures, many of which remain stalled in the Senate because of the widespread popular opposition.

For weeks, Abbott, his senior ministers and Australia’s spy and police chiefs have been promoting the possibility of a catastrophic terrorist attack at home. “If there is one thing that could damage the rich and strong fabric—social fabric—of our country it would be a mass-casualty event,” Abbott declared last month.

Thus Abbott is playing up the prospect of such an event, and claiming that the small number of Australian residents alleged to be fighting in Syria and Iraq—up to 60 according to the spy agencies—present a virtually existential threat to Australia.

Abbott depicts ISIS as “pure evil”—despite it being

directly spawned by the ongoing US regime-change operation against the Assad regime in Syria.

Even before President Obama’s speech on Wednesday night announcing the expansion of the military intervention into Syria, Abbott had already signalled his government’s readiness to send special forces, military trainers and fighter jets to join the offensive.

Similar moves to resurrect the “war on terror” are underway in the US and its military allies. In Britain, the Cameron government two weeks ago elevated that country’s terror alert level from “substantial” to “severe” on almost identical claims of large-scale threats posed by Islamic fundamentalists returning from Syria and Iraq.

As with every terrorist scare campaign in Australia since 2001, there have been conveniently timed police raids and arrests.

About 180 federal and Queensland state police officers raided a suburban Islamic bookshop and eight other premises in Brisbane on Wednesday. In front of media cameras, two men were arrested on charges of “preparing” to enter Syria to “engage in hostile activities” or recruiting for, or providing funds to, jihadist organisations.

Australian Federal Police (AFP) Assistant Commissioner Neil Gaughan claimed it was a “coincidence” that the arrests were made within hours of Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) chief David Irvine appearing on national television on Tuesday night to insist that the terror threat level had to be raised. Gaughan admitted, however, that the men were under surveillance for 12 months and there was no evidence an attack was being planned in Australia.

During Irvine’s TV appearance—one of an

unprecedented burst of media appearances by an ASIO director-general—he refused to say how many Australians had returned from Syria. He only said the number was “more than 20” and indicated that they were all closely monitored by ASIO and the police.

Irvine denied that the government’s intensified military involvement in Iraq would increase the risk of a terrorism incident. He conceded, however, that this was “a popular line that you hear.” There are well-justified public concerns that by putting Australia on the frontline of Washington’s aggression in Iraq and Syria, the Abbott government is inevitably fuelling the possibility of terrorist responses.

Murdoch media outlets have been in the forefront of the terror scare campaign. They ran alarmist headlines yesterday proclaiming that terrorist “plans” existed for attacks in Australia. Unnamed “authorities” reportedly told the *Australian* that ASIO and the AFP had identified people with “settled intentions” to conduct attacks.

Despite being described as “vague”—along the lines of “we’ve got to do something”—it was these so-called plans that justified raising the alert level, according to the *Australian*.

Provocatively, the newspaper published a cartoon literally inciting terrorism in Australia. In line with crude media attempts to foment anti-Muslim hysteria, the cartoon depicted a demonic-looking Muslim cleric berating his followers for the fact that Australia’s terror alert level remained at medium. “Call yourselves extremists?” he shouted.

Likewise, the News Corp web site volunteered “prime targets” for terrorist attacks that would “rock the Australian way of life.” Citing comments by a Sydney University academic, it nominated the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House, as well as Sydney’s Central railway station.

Attorney-General George Brandis stated yesterday that an elevated alert level will mean an “enhanced level of policing,” including at big public events, such as football matches. Working people will face major police mobilisations designed to create a political atmosphere in which another barrage of terrorism legislation can be pushed through parliament.

Security analysts predicted heavy police presences and security checkpoints at public transport hubs, airports, entertainment venues and prominent buildings,

as well as increased surveillance of phone and Internet communications.

The Labor Party immediately underlined its backing for raising the alert, with Opposition Leader Bill Shorten pledging to work with the government on terrorism and “keep the politics out of it.” While in office from 2007 to 2013, Labor retained and extended the already draconian powers handed to the police and intelligence agencies since 2001.

No draft has yet been released of the latest anti-terrorism package—the second in a month—even though it will reportedly be tabled when parliament resumes on September 22.

What is known is that the bill will overturn fundamental legal and democratic rights. It features widely opposed measures, including a “metadata” plan to compel Internet providers, phone companies and social media outlets to store all their data for two years so that the spy agencies can trawl through everyone’s on-line activity records.

Another provision will effectively reverse the onus of proof in terrorism-related trials by declaring parts of the Middle East to be “designated areas.” Anyone travelling to these zones will have to prove that their trip was innocent, or face imprisonment.

Muslims will be the first to be vilified and targeted under this legislation, but more broadly it intensifies a repressive framework directed against the working class as a whole. These vast powers will be used to crack down on opposition to the drive to war and the assault on health, education and welfare spearheaded by the Abbott government’s budget.



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