American FBI instigates another Australian anti-terrorism raid

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Australian police carried out another large "counter-terrorism" operation yesterday in Victoria, the country's second most populous state. At least 100 Victorian and federal police, some heavily armed, raided and searched a number of homes in five northern and western suburbs of Melbourne.

According to police, the raids were the product of an eight-month investigation dubbed "Operation Hohensalzburg" and were carried out at the urging of the FBI in the United States. While seven warrants were executed, just one man, 23-year-old Hassan El Sabsabi, was arrested. He was charged with six counts of "making funds available to a terrorist organisation."

Sabsabi is accused of sending funds to someone associated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on March 1, and of making five money transfers to someone involved with the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra between March and August. Police reported that he was under close surveillance for nine months. He allegedly provided an American citizen who travelled to Syria to join either ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra the sum of $12,000.

Australian Federal Police (AFP) Assistant Commissioner Neil Gaughan told a press conference: "There is no information or intelligence to indicate that this man [Sabsabi] was involved in planning an attack." Sabsabi's arrest, however, has been generally portrayed in the media as further proof of the extent of domestic terrorism and ISIS sympathisers.

In court yesterday, the prosecution obtained an extension of time in order to analyse the data seized in the morning raids. An estimated 25,000 pages were copied from various computers and other devices in the seven homes, reportedly consisting mostly of social media postings. About 500 phone calls and text messages will also be trawled through for evidence against Sabsabi.

According to the police, the "large amount of electronic evidence" could result in more charges. Sabsabi did not apply for bail and could be held in high security detention until a committal hearing on February 3, 2015.

The highly dubious explanation given by the authorities as to why they arrested Sabsabi now, and not earlier when he allegedly transferred funds, is that the FBI believed he was on the verge of making another transfer. A more likely explanation is that the raids were carried out to maintain the momentum in a barrage of claims by the government, police and mass media that Australia is under threat from domestic terrorists linked with ISIS.

Yesterday's raids followed the September 18 operation in Sydney and Brisbane, which involved some 800 police and Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) agents and raids on 15 houses. Despite the massive state mobilisation, and blanket assertions by the government and media that the raids prevented an imminent plot to kidnap and behead random people, only one man was charged: 22-year-old apprentice motor mechanic Omarjan Azari. Allegedly told in a phone call to "kill a kaffir" [non-Muslim] by an Australian citizen fighting with ISIS in Syria, Azari is accused of the vague offence of "conspiring to act in preparation for, or plan, a terrorist act or acts."

The police offered no evidence that Azari was concretely preparing or planning to commit a specific terrorist act, let alone behead someone. The prosecution is instead alleging that the young man had thoughts or intentions to do something of an unspecified nature, at an unspecified time and unspecified place. Such charges leave the door wide open for politically motivated frame-ups.

Yesterday's raids also followed the September 25 police killing of 17-year-old Abdul Numan Haider in Melbourne's south-eastern suburb of Endeavour Hills. Haider was asked by police to meet them in a car park near the local police station, where he allegedly attacked two officers with a knife. He was killed with a single gunshot to the head. According to witnesses, he was running away from the wounded officers and toward the police station when he was shot.

Significant questions remain about Haider's mental state. The teenager was reportedly distraught after his passport application was denied the week before and police then entered his family home without a search warrant, just hours before the incident. There are scant details about what actually unfolded in the car park and why the police shot to kill. Haider has nevertheless been branded a "lone wolf terrorist" and accused in the media of intending to behead the police officers in the name of ISIS.

The hysteria over terrorist threats coincides with the deployment of Australian military forces to join the US-led wars in Iraq and Syria and the tabling of draconian new legislation that boosts the powers of the intelligence and police agencies and strips away fundamental civil liberties.

Under the *Foreign Fighters Bill* currently before the Australian parliament, anyone charged with financing terrorism overseas can be jailed for life. Police will also be empowered to arrest people if they "suspect" a person is committing an offence as opposed to if they "believe"—a stipulation that currently requires police to have some form of evidence rather than just suspicions.

The purported fight against terrorism is being used as the pretext for both war abroad and an attack on democratic rights at home. The alleged terrorist incidents in Australia have been seized upon by the Obama administration to try to justify its renewed military operations inside Iraq and Syria as operations to "degrade and destroy" ISIS.

Yesterday's raids highlight the fact that so-called anti-terrorist operations take place in Australia in the closest collaboration with, and in this case, the direct instigation of, American intelligence agencies. Since the "war on terror" was declared by the US and Australian governments in 2001, the military, intelligence and police agencies of the two countries have been integrated to an unprecedented degree.

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