

“Terrorist” sword seized in Australian police raids was plastic

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The Fairfax press revealed last week that the inscribed Arabic sword seized during unprecedented police raids on September 18—and portrayed by the media as the weapon that would be used in an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-inspired plot to kidnap a random person and behead them in the street—was actually a plastic ornament. Moreover, it is a plastic Shiite ornament. Its inscription pays homage to Imam Ali, whose veneration by Shiites is considered by the Sunni Wahhabist extremists who make up ISIS as heresy.

The revelation adds to the numerous, disturbing questions about the raids on 15 homes in five Sydney suburbs, which was the largest anti-terrorism operation ever carried out in Australia and involved some 800 state police, federal police and Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) agents.

Police armed with military assault rifles and supported by armoured vehicles cordoned off entire neighbourhoods. People were ordered to lie on the ground as their homes were ransacked. Fifteen people were arrested and hauled off to police stations for interrogation. Video footage and photographs of some of the detainees were published by the police on Twitter and the official police media site and then re-published by every television and print outlet.

The media went into a frenzy, recounting sensational information they received from “unnamed” sources. However, it was the photo of the sword, being carried by police officers in a transparent evidence bag, which provoked some of the most lurid assertions. The *Daily Mail* breathlessly headlined its report: “Was this the lethal sword terror cell planned to use to behead an innocent victim on a Sydney street?”

From the beginning, there were glaring discrepancies between the initial police statements and the claims that

an imminent terrorist attack had been thwarted. A press release issued shortly after the raids stated that the police had “no information regarding a specific attack, including dates, time or location.” However, by the end of the day, 22-year-old Omarjan Azari had been named as a “terrorist.” The media was full of reports that he had taken a phone call from an Australian ISIS member in Syria in which he had been instructed to film the beheading of someone and post it on YouTube. Press coverage dwelt at length on the police seizure of an unspecified weapon from one home, and the ominous photo of the sword.

The government and the police subsequently made no attempt to explain that the sword was plastic and thus allowed the idea to circulate that Muslim fanatics had been on the verge of beheading someone. It has directly contributed to a hysterical and xenophobic atmosphere and the abuse and assault of Muslims, especially veiled women, by racist elements.

The revelation about the sword fully confirms what the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote on September 18: “Everything about the raids reeks of a cynical and sinister attempt to justify Sunday’s announcement by the government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott—with the full support of the opposition Labor Party—to send Australian F-18 jets and Army special forces to join US military operations in Iraq against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).”

Not long after those words were published, US Secretary of State John Kerry also utilised the alleged terror plot to justify the US-led intervention into the Middle East on the pretext of fighting ISIS. He told a congressional hearing that Australia had “arrested a large group of people that they suspected of being ISIL [ISIS] members, supporters, sympathisers ... who were planning some kind of extravaganza of brutality. So we

have to decimate and discredit a militant cult masquerading as a religious movement and claiming with no legitimacy to be a state.”

Three-and-half weeks later, the following can be said about the preparations for an “extravaganza of brutality.”

There were no plans to commit an ISIS-inspired murder, let alone behead someone, in Sydney. Omarjan Azari has been charged with the offense of “conspiring to act in preparation for, or plan, a terrorist act or acts.” This charge, which was introduced in 2005 as part of draconian “anti-terrorism” legislation, means only that the prosecution will allege that Azari was intending to do something. The character of the charge leaves the door wide open for a frame-up.

The evidence against Azari is a purported phone conversation two days before the raids with Mohammad Ali Baryalei, a man who travelled to Syria to join the Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front and then allegedly transferred his allegiance to ISIS. The police have admitted that the word “behead” was not used. Baryalei, who is an unstable and dubious individual, allegedly stated that Azari should “kill a random kaffir [non-Muslim].”

What Azari said in the phone call has not been released by police. One of his cousins told journalists that the young man had stopped using his mobile phone because he believed it was being monitored by ASIO. His passport had been revoked six months earlier on the grounds he might leave Australia to join the Islamist groupings fighting as part of the US-backed civil war against the Syrian government.

The possibility cannot be excluded that Baryalei acted as a police provocateur. His alleged phone call can only be described as very timely for the US and Australian governments. It gave them their “evidence” of an ISIS conspiracy in a western country, under conditions in which they were using ISIS as the pretext for not only war, but another round of anti-terrorism laws that strip away more democratic rights.

After the mobilisation of 800 police and ASIO agents, Azari was the only person who has been charged with a terrorism offense. Another man was charged with illegal possession of what had been reported as a firearm but turned out to be a taser. The only other charges were “resisting arrest,” which have been levelled against two women who allegedly

interfered with the police who were ransacking their homes.

The arrests in Sydney, and in separate raids in Brisbane, were nevertheless utilised to place three detainees under Preventative Detention Orders (PDOs), which give police the power to hold and question someone for 14 days without any charges. This was the first time PDOs have been applied. According to the federal police, one man was put on a PDO simply because he ceased cooperating with interrogations.

One family that was subjected to a raid has launched legal action over police brutality. A woman was dragged from her bed by officers after she refused to expose her uncovered body. She was also allegedly punched. The “men” in the house, two boys aged 14 and 15, were handcuffed while the premises was searched for 12 hours. Dogs were brought in, computers seized and their backyard dug up for unexplained reasons.

As for the owner of the plastic sword, he is 21-year-old painter Mustafa Dirani, from a Shiite Afghan immigrant family. He does not know Omarjan Azari and has no history of involvement with any Sunni extremist grouping. Everything suggests that he and his friend Maywand Osman were included in the raids solely to increase the number of targets. They appear to have been selected because they were recently involved in a car accident that has been linked to a brawl. The warrant issued to search his parent’s home dramatically stated that he had engaged “in preparation or planning terrorist acts” between May and September 2014.

The entire affair underscores the advanced decay of every institution of bourgeois democracy. The government, the parliamentary opposition, the judiciary, the police and the media all participated in an operation, which could have been taken from a military handbook on psy-ops, to instil fear in the Australian population and to justify war and stepped-up state repression.



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