

Australian government warns of more police anti-terror raids

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Attorney-General George Brandis and Australian Federal Police (AFP) assistant commissioner Neil Gaughan last Monday night declared that the population, especially Muslims, faces more terrifying police raids like the ones conducted in Sydney and Brisbane on September 18.

“Get used to it,” was the basic message delivered by Brandis and Gaughan, who is the AFP’s counter-terrorism commander, in a provocative joint performance on national television.

“What we will see now is more raids like we saw in Sydney because the environment has changed,” Gaughan stated. Brandis said he made “absolutely no apologies” for the raids, during which family homes were ransacked, women and children terrorised and 15 people dragged off for interrogation.

Those raids were the largest of their kind ever conducted in Australia. More than 800 police commandos and intelligence agents burst into houses in the pre-dawn hours, accompanied by street closures, helicopters in the air and saturation media coverage.

The operation was timed to serve definite political purposes. It sought to stampede public opinion behind the renewed “war on terror.” The raids came days after Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s government declared a terrorist alert, and just as Australian forces were dispatched to the Middle East, and further anti-terror legislation was presented to the Australian parliament.

It soon became clear the raids were part of an international campaign by the US government to step up its war drive in Iraq and Syria, under the pretext of combatting the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), or ISIL.

Within hours of the raids, US Secretary of State John Kerry claimed they underscored the necessity for support for the US war. He falsely told a congressional committee: [T]he Australians today arrested a large

group of people that they suspected of being ISIL, members, supporters, sympathisers in Australia who were planning some kind of extravaganza of brutality in Australia.”

In reality, despite sensational government, media and police claims of thwarting an imminent terrorist “beheading” attack, only one arrest was made on a vague charge of “conspiring” to plan an unspecified terrorist act. It later emerged that the word “behead” was not even used in the supposed incriminating phone call made to the accused man, 22-year-old apprentice motor mechanic Omarjan Azari.

On Monday night, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Q&A” program provided a platform for Brandis and Gaughan. The show, whose normal format is a panel of politicians and commentators taking questions from a vetted audience, was turned over to an appearance by Brandis in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown, a largely immigrant area with many Muslim residents. Gaughan, the AFP’s counter-terrorism manager, was in the front row of the audience.

Amid a series of questions complaining that Muslims were being targeted and besieged by the government, police and the media, an audience member said his community remained “perplexed” by the police raids. He asked for assurances that the police would never “get it so wrong again.” He referred to “allegations of unnecessary force” by the police in an operation that produced only one arrest.

Gaughan’s response was aggressive. “We make no apologies for that,” he stated, referring to the large numbers of police involved. “The paradigm has changed,” he said, and “the community will see more of this where we’ll do a large number of execution of search warrants and probably only one or two arrests.”

The AFP commander also emphatically denied, without providing any evidence, that a sword seized in the raids, which the media portrayed as the potential “beheading” weapon, was in fact a plastic ceremonial sword.

Another member of the audience then objected that the “gung-ho approach” would only heighten feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation, particularly among the youth.

Brandis’s reply was just as belligerent as Gaughan’s. “Well, let’s get this straight,” he began. “The police Operation Appleby was not over the top and it was not overreach.” Brandis repeated the claim that the raids were based on “specific actionable intelligence that an individual was imminently about to commit a terrorist crime, an act of violence, an act of lethal violence.”

Apart from further prejudicing any prospect of Omarjan Azari receiving a fair trial, the attorney-general’s comments provided a justification for sweeping raids whenever the police and the spy agencies claim to have “intelligence” of even hypothetical terrorist planning.

Earlier, Gaughan also warned that once the government’s new legislation came into effect, “we’ll be able to utilise those” laws. These measures include banning travel to designated zones overseas without a “legitimate” excuse and new offences of “promoting” or otherwise “advocating” terrorism.

Police raids and arrests will soon be possible on even broader and more arbitrary grounds. The “promoting” terrorism provisions will allow the government to jail people and proscribe groups that voice opposition, including via social media, to the US-led military campaign in Iraq and Syria, or express sympathy for those resisting the renewed intervention.

Brandis also flatly dismissed objections to the new laws to jail people for up to 10 years for exposing undercover infiltrations of groups and provocations by Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) agents, and to compel Internet and phone companies to retain for two years all “metadata” of the communications between millions of people.

As well as introducing these and other police-state measures—all with the bipartisan backing of the Labor Party—the performance by Brandis and Gaughan demonstrates that the Abbott government is intent on whipping up the hostility felt in marginalised working

class communities, in order to create further justifications for invoking these laws.

This is part of a wider pattern. Over the past 15 years, the continuing wars, illegal drone assassinations and other crimes carried out by US imperialism and its allies from Afghanistan and Pakistan through to the Middle East, coupled with ongoing attacks on the democratic rights of Muslim populations domestically, have created fertile conditions for right-wing Islamist groups to recruit disoriented youth.

These young people also confront mass unemployment and worsening social conditions as the result of mounting industrial closures and government spending cuts. In Bankstown, even on understated official figures, the youth unemployment rate is around 20 percent, and the adult rate exceeds 10 percent.

None of this was mentioned during the “Q&A” broadcast, including by the selected members of the audience permitted to present brief, pre-approved, questions. There was not one reference to the underlying US agenda to assert unchallenged hegemony over the immense resources of the Middle East, or to the deepening corporate and government assault on the jobs and living standards of all working people.

As the US war drive intensifies, the attacks on basic democratic rights will not stop with Muslims. Backed by the entire political and media establishment, police state measures will be directed against all those who oppose the program of militarism and austerity being pursued by the ruling elites.



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