

Australian authorities issue another bogus “terror” alert

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The Australian Federal Police this week raised the national terrorism threat level for police across the country to “high,” indicating that an attack on officers is now purportedly “likely.” Tuesday’s heightening of the alert was accompanied by a fresh round of lurid media speculation about terrorism and public warnings of more aggressive police operations.

The episode has all the hallmarks of yet another politically motivated diversion. Last September, the Liberal-National government elevated the terrorist alert ranking for the general public from “medium” to “high,” signifying that an attack was deemed not just “possible” but “likely.” Prime Minister Tony Abbott nevertheless admitted there was “no specific intelligence of particular plots.”

Abbott’s government used the alert to justify Australian imperialism’s involvement in the US-led military operations in Iraq and Syria, while pledging to look for further ways to bolster the police-intelligence apparatus as part of the never-ending “war on terror.” With the Labor Party and Greens endorsing the terror scare, Abbott’s tub-thumping on “national security” provided the government with a welcome diversion from the intense anger among working people to its austerity cuts to healthcare, education and other basic services.

Since September, the political and media establishment has sought to maintain a drumbeat for war and reaction. Numerous police raids have been conducted, including the coordinated mobilisation of 800 state police, federal police and Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) officers in Sydney and Brisbane on September 18. The media later buried revelations pointing to the concocted character of the raids, including the police seizure of a sword that turned out to be plastic.

On September 23, Victorian police killed 17-year-old Numan Haider, who allegedly attacked them with a knife after they arranged to meet him to discuss their search of his parent’s house. On December 15, a disoriented individual with close ties to the police and state apparatus and no links to any terrorist organisation, Man Haron Monis, was killed together with two of the hostages he had held in an inner Sydney café. The Abbott government transformed the hostage crisis into a national terrorist emergency, involving the lockdown of central Sydney and the mobilisation of police across the country.

The police alert was elevated amid an ongoing campaign to exploit the *Charlie Hebdo* killings in France to intensify hysteria about domestic terrorism and justify the assertion that Australia and Western countries are under attack by Islamic extremism. It followed an alleged plot in Belgium to kill police officers and the heightening of the British police alert level a week earlier.

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) statement on the elevation of the threat level raised more questions than it answered. It asserted that the decision was “a result of intelligence information and discussions with our partners.” The AFP continued: “Recent events in France, Canada and Australia serve as a sobering reminder of the risks associated with policing. While relatively small, there are increasing numbers of Australians who are connected with or inspired by overseas terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), with the intent and capability to conduct an attack against police.”

The AFP’s statement clearly implied that it had new intelligence indicating that Australian police were being targeted by domestic terrorists. However, at press conferences following the announcement, state and

territory police commissioners admitted that they had no such information.

Queensland Police Commissioner Ian Stewart stated: “There has been no one specific incident that has occurred in Australia which has triggered the reassessment to the higher level.” South Australian Assistant Police Commissioner Bryan Fahy said the alert was “based on an accumulation of events—both nationally and globally—rather than any specific threat.”

In other words, there is no basis for the official assessment that a terrorist attack on police officers is now “likely.”

This fact did not deter the media from hyping up the latest sordid episode in the “war on terror.” The *Australian*’s blaring headline was typical: “Targets of Terror: Police on Code Red.” Television news networks featured similar claims of the new “threat.”

More than 50,000 officers nationally were ordered to prepare and arm themselves accordingly. In Victoria, police were instructed to “fully kit up” with loaded guns, capsicum spray and batons when they appear in public, “even for short trips.” The state’s police commissioner warned Protective Services Officers—poorly trained security guards on Melbourne’s train lines—to “be vigilant, and pay extra attention to their own safety and security.”

New South Wales acting Police Commissioner Catherine Burn told officers “to remain vigilant at all times, whether that is on duty or off duty” and obey a directive issued last November to always carry their weapons. Tasmania is accelerating the issuing of stab-resistant and bulletproof body armour to its police force.

Queensland Police Commissioner Stewart issued the most ominous public statements. After taking the unprecedented step of personally writing a letter to the state’s 11,500 police and their families, Stewart declared that he had “asked police officers and staff to be hyper-vigilant” and to adopt “the same posture we took for G20 [leaders summit].”

Stewart warned that “people can expect that level of intensity when police go about their duties,” adding that officers would be “on edge” due to the raised terror threat. He said he would be “sympathetic” to any request by police officers for permission to wear personal body armour and carry weapons when off-duty.

A wave of police violence can be expected. There was a spike in police shootings following last September’s increase in the general terror alert. Queensland police, who were mobilised for a massive security operation for the G20 summit in Brisbane during November, have shot five people in highly questionable circumstances since September. Four of the shootings were fatal.

The Queensland police commissioner’s statements amount to an endorsement in advance of more “shoot to kill” incidents. They underscore one of the central purposes of the “war on terror”—to justify a vast build-up of the state’s repressive apparatus as social inequality and class tensions escalate. As in the United States and across Europe, the police in Australia are being developed into a heavily armed, paramilitary force. They are being conditioned to view sections of the population—particularly working class youth—with suspicion and hostility, and to respond to any incident with potentially lethal aggression.



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