

Australian police carry out another anti-terror raid

Peter Symonds
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A raid by Australian police in Sydney on Tuesday, resulting in the arrest of two young men as terrorist suspects, has been immediately seized upon by the state and federal governments, as well as the establishment media, to fuel a climate of fear and uncertainty. The police have provided scant details of the operation, and those that have been provided should be treated with suspicion.

The two men—Mohammad Kiad, 25, from Kuwait and Omar al-Kutobi, 24, who moved to Australia from Iraq in 2009—were living in the western Sydney suburb of Fairfield in a modified garage. Police claim that they began monitoring the pair on Tuesday morning acting on an undisclosed tip-off. The two men bought a hunting knife from a military supplies shop at 3 p.m. and heavily-armed police swooped on the Fairfield property an hour later.

New South Wales Deputy Police Commissioner Catherine Burn alleged yesterday that “the men were potentially going to harm someone, maybe even kill someone.” She said that police had seized a machete, a hunting knife, a home-made flag representing the proscribed terrorist organisation IS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] and a video depicting a man talking about carrying out an attack.”

Burn claimed on the basis of the video that an attack was imminent. “We will allege that both of these men were preparing to do this act today [Tuesday].” She released no details from the video, which was reportedly in Arabic, but insisted that the “intent is clear.” Both men have been refused bail.

It is worth recalling the outcome of the massive police raids that took place in Sydney last September. More than 800 state and federal police and Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) officers stormed 15 premises and detained 17 people, leading to

lurid claims that a public beheading, on the orders of ISIS, was about to be carried out in Sydney. The allegations were based on an intercepted phone conversation and the seizure of a sword.

The police later admitted that the word “behead” had not been used in the phone discussion. The sword turned out to be plastic. Of those detained, only one was actually charged with “conspiring to act in preparation for, or plan, a terrorist act or acts”—an extraordinarily sweeping and vague charge.

The raids, however, had served their political purpose—to justify the escalating US-led military intervention in Iraq and Syria, and Australian involvement in it, as well as a raft of draconian new anti-terror legislation that was rapidly pushed through the Australian parliament.

In December, the Abbott government, along with the entire media and political establishment, elevated a hostage standoff at a Sydney café involving a disturbed and unstable individual into a major national crisis. Thousands of heavily armed police flooded central Sydney in what was a dress rehearsal for the lockdown of a city. The siege was used to justify the massive build-up of the police and security apparatus and expansion of police state powers over the past decade under the banner of the “war on terror.”

Tuesday’s arrests served similar political ends. Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared that the threat of terrorism was “a serious issue” and warned that it could “get worse before it gets better.” For Abbott, the raid was a useful diversion from the continuing crisis surrounding his government after Monday’s leadership challenge, as well as a justification for further anti-terror laws.

Abbott played the war on terror card in his National Press Club speech on February 2 aimed at shoring up

his leadership. He called for sweeping new legislation to make it an offense to “justify terrorism,” going beyond existing laws that illegalise organisations that “advocate terrorism.” While Abbott targeted the Islamist group Hizb-ut-Tahrir, such laws could be applied very widely to anyone who, for instance, explains that the roots of organisations such as ISIS are in the criminal wars of US imperialism in the Middle East.

During a visit last Thursday to the Australian Federal Police (AFP) headquarters, Abbott pressed for the passage of legislation which will require that Internet service providers retain the metadata for all Internet activity for two years. The law would provide the means for police and intelligence agencies to spy on the email, social media and Internet surfing of the entire Australian population.

The metadata legislation, which has provoked widespread opposition, is currently being examined by a parliamentary committee which is due to report at the end of February. “As soon as that report comes down,” Abbott said, “the government wants the parliament to deal with it, because we know ... there are a whole range of people ... who want to do us harm.”

The police raid on Tuesday will undoubtedly be used as a further pretext for pushing through the legislation, with the support of the opposition Labor Party and the Greens, which have voted for previous anti-democratic laws on terrorism.

The spectre of so-called “lone wolf” attacks is already widely raised in the media following police claims that the arrested men, Kiad and al-Kutobi, had no known associations with Australian citizens who have gone to the Middle East to fight for Islamist organisations. This will be exploited to justify even greater surveillance powers.

AFP Deputy Commissioner Michael Phelan declared yesterday that there was now “a new paradigm” of terrorism—low level, simple attacks that unfold quickly. “Police forces, whether they be state or federal, or our intelligence agencies need to be nimble to adjust to the threat and work out what our tactics are at a particular time.”

Federal Attorney-General George Brandis used this week’s incident to justify anti-democratic measures that were rammed through after the September police raids. He claimed that the arrests on Tuesday “may not

have been possible under the old law but it was made possible by the reforms which this Senate passed when it passed the Foreign Fighters Act.”

Among its many other draconian measures, the Foreign Fighters Act increases the AFP’s already arbitrary arrest powers by allowing a police officer to detain anyone he or she “reasonably suspects” of having committed a crime. This is a far looser legal standard than the previous “reasonably believes.” The change enables police to act on all manner of rumour, suspicion and prejudice and raises the question of what was known about Kiad and al-Kutobi before they were arrested.



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