

Australian government to share intelligence with Iranian regime

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The visit by Australia's foreign minister Julie Bishop to Iran last weekend, the first in more than a decade, again highlights the role of Australia as a diplomatic point man for the United States in international affairs.

Having marched in lockstep with Washington in its diplomatic confrontation, crippling sanctions and war threats against Tehran over the past decade, Bishop's mission was to feel out the possibilities for greater collaboration with Iran in securing US economic and strategic interests in the Middle East and beyond.

Bishop's trip took place as Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif published an op-ed comment in Monday's *New York Times* effectively offering Iran's services as a junior partner to US imperialism in the Middle East—the role that it played prior to the 1979 revolution that overthrew the dictatorial rule of Shah Reza Pahlavi. The comment comes in the wake of an international framework agreement to end the decade-long standoff over Iran's nuclear programs.

Bishop's main achievement was to secure an unprecedented “informal” intelligence-sharing arrangement with Iran that would include information gathered in Iraq in the war against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The US and its allies are already in a de facto alliance with Iran in propping up the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad against the Sunni extremist militias that seized large parts of the north and west of the country last year.

Justifying the intelligence arrangement with Tehran, Bishop declared the ISIS was the “most significant global threat at present” and had changed the geostrategic and political landscape in the Middle East in a way that no one envisaged. “And now the conversation we are having about how to cooperate to defeat this common enemy is not a conversation I thought we would be having,” she said.

The abrupt about-face by the Australian government simply echoes moves in the same direction by Washington. Having branded Iran as part of an “axis of evil” in 2002, the US is now seeking to finalise a nuclear deal as a step towards a possible wider rapprochement. Far from being a step towards peace, the US moves are in preparation for wider wars not only in the Middle East but Russia and China.

While providing few details of the intelligence-sharing arrangement, Bishop was optimistic that it would have major benefits, including to track down Australian citizens fighting with ISIS. “They [Iranians] are very present in Iraq. The Revolutionary Guard is on the ground, they are working with security forces. They are carrying out operations in Tikrit and elsewhere, they are all over the place,” she enthused.

These remarks highlight the utter cynicism with which the US and allies such as Australia exploit “human rights” issues. Just a year ago, Washington and Canberra were denouncing Iran, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp in particular, for propping up the Syrian “dictator,” President Bashar al Assad, while ISIS was part of the US-backed “democratic revolution” to overthrow Assad.

The new attitude was summed up by Peter Jennings, head of the government-backed Australian Strategic Policy Institute, who is well connected in military and intelligence circles. He explained in the *Australian* that it would be absurd to refuse to take intelligence from Iran just because it commits human rights violations.

“The only sensible response is to say we will do it and start a process of cooperation, and we will know in good time if anything useful for us or for them comes out of it,” Jennings declared. He also made clear that “highly classified Australian [intelligence] product” was not going “to be shoved over to the Iranians.”

The Australian government's contempt for democratic rights was underscored by Bishop's efforts to secure a deal to return Iranian refugees in Australia to Iran where they will face possible persecution and jail.

Former intelligence analyst and "independent" parliamentarian Andrew Wilkie was more strident in his criticism. He branded the Iranian regime as the "most ruthless and untrustworthy in the world" and declared that Australia was "dancing with the devil" by concluding an agreement with a country that used torture to extract information.

Wilkie's comments reflect the continued opposition of sections of the US Congress, as well as Israel and other US allies in the Middle East, to any deal with Iran over its nuclear programs and other issues. That is likely why the Obama administration was content to allow Australia to proceed and absorb any public criticism.

The response in Washington to Bishop's announcement has been notably low-key. US State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf simply repeated that the US was not coordinating with Iran on the ISIS threat and was "trying to get a little more information" on the intelligence-sharing arrangement.

The *Australian's* defence editor Brendan Nicholson noted yesterday that Bishop would keep "the Americans fully apprised of what is happening." He pointed out: "It is likely that the Americans will look favourably on additional sources of information which they, like Australia, can weigh and accept or reject."

In reality, the US intelligence apparatus undoubtedly knew about the intelligence sharing deal well in advance and gave it the green light. The proposal was first mooted last year and discussed in October when Bishop met Iranian foreign minister Zarif. American spy agencies will gain access to any Iranian intelligence data handed to their Australian counterparts through the so-called Five Eyes sky network.

While she has been touting the benefits of the new arrangement for Australian intelligence, Bishop has been silent on what Tehran is expecting in return. When asked if Australian citizens fighting with ISIS could be placed at risk, she said she would not comment on "a matter of deep intelligence operational issues." In reality, the Australian government has already given the green light to the US military to assassinate its citizens

through drone strikes.

Bishop did refer to the deranged hostage-taker in the Sydney siege, Iranian refugee Man Haron Monis—a hint that information could be exchanged on the activities of other Iranian refugees in Australia. Such actions could have severe consequences for Iranian political exiles and their families from a regime that is notorious for brutally suppressing its opponents especially leftists and socialists.

With the proviso that an international nuclear agreement is finalised, Bishop made clear that her visit was just the first step in opening up closer economic and political relations with Iran. Australia would "very much value further dialogue," she told Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.



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