

The hypocrisy of the attack on the ABC

Murdoch's Australian media put Zaky Mallah "up in lights"

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For the past 10 days, the Abbott government and Murdoch-owned media have denounced the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) for inviting Zaky Mallah, a man acquitted by a jury of terrorism offences in 2005, to participate in the audience of the live-to-air "Q&A" current affairs program on June 22.

Government ministers and the Murdoch outlets have painted Mallah as a "terrorist sympathiser" and "extremist." The ABC has been accused of "sedition," "terrorist recruitment" and "betrayal" for allowing him to point to the government's anti-democratic policies and treatment of Muslims as a factor in why some people have travelled to the Middle East to join Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

On this week's "Q&A," Paul Kelly, the editor-at-large of Murdoch's flagship publication, the *Australian*, asserted that "media organisations have got to be very careful about who they put up in lights, about who they give a platform to."

The reactionary motives at the heart of the campaign against the ABC are underscored by the fact that the Murdoch press, and the *Australian* in particular, repeatedly gave Mallah a "platform" when it suited their agenda.

From 2011, the US and its allies, including Australia, sought to utilise the services of Islamic extremists to pursue regime-change operations against the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi and the Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian regime headed by Bashir al-Assad.

Mallah was promoted by the *Australian* due to his connections with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In order to cover up the fact the US was also sponsoring Al Qaeda-linked forces in Syria, Mallah was used by the

media to portray the FSA "rebels" as fighters for "freedom" and "democracy."

On September 20, 2012, the *Australian* ran an extensive interview with Mallah headlined, "Rebel urges Muslims to wage a jihad of peace." It reported on Mallah's visit to Syria in 2012—for which the Australian authorities granted him a passport—and the time he spent with the FSA.

Far from denouncing Mallah as a "security threat", "extremist" or "terrorist sympathiser," the *Australian* reported: "At 29, Mr Mallah says he is a different man to the 20-year-old who made a jihad-style video after being refused a passport to travel to Lebanon... He served two years in jail for making threats, but was acquitted of planning a terrorist act in 2005."

Mallah, the *Australian* stated, "realised how misguided his anger toward Australian society had been." For his part, Mallah glorified Australia as a beacon of "freedom" and condemned Muslims in the country for "causing so much trouble."

Throughout the interview, the *Australian* promoted Mallah's depiction of the Syrian rebellion as a struggle for "democracy." It quoted him urging people to "go to Syria" and "spend a few weeks on the frontline." Embedded in the *Australian* online article, to this day, is a video made by Mallah when he accompanied fighters into combat. The footage ends with him praising the killing of a Syrian government soldier by the sniper he filmed.

Commentator Chris Graham, in an article on the *New Matilda* web site, drew attention to other examples of the *Australian* providing a "platform" for Mallah to encourage Muslims to travel to Syria and perform "humanitarian work" to support the anti-Assad

rebellion.

On October 31, 2012, after Australian citizen Roger Abbas was killed while aiding the anti-Assad forces, the *Australian* quoted Mallah writing on Facebook: “For the many brothers heading up to Syria in the weeks to come, go and don’t look back. A bullet of a sniper is a ticket to paradise.”

On January 3, 2013, the *Australian* again quoted Mallah advising Muslims to go to Syria. “There is a high chance that you will die,” he stated. “If that means death, then so be it. To die as a martyr is a great thing in our religion.”

Graham noted that between 2005 and June 29 this year, Mallah was the subject of 473 print or online stories, comments and letters. Some 134 appeared before his “Q&A” appearance. Of those, the Murdoch-owned News Corporation media published 40, the Australian Associated Press ran 30, Fairfax Media 23 and the ABC just 12.

Mallah’s treatment epitomises how the establishment media shamelessly accommodates itself to shifts in the Australian government’s foreign policy and domestic political agenda.

In 2003, the police and intelligence agencies exploited Mallah’s anger over the Iraq war to manufacture a “terrorist” scare, seeking to justify Australia’s military involvement in the illegal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. An undercover police officer, posing as a journalist, offered him \$3,000 to record an inflammatory video in which he threatened intelligence officials. It was a classic entrapment operation. The media gave frenzied coverage to his arrest and allegations that he had plotted a major terrorist attack in Australia. In 2005, however, a jury threw out the charges, accepting that he had no intent to carry out his threats.

By 2012, yesterday’s “terrorist” had become the advocate in Australia for the Syrian “freedom fighters” serving as a US proxy army. Nothing was done to prevent Australian Muslims, including Mallah, going to Syria to assist them.

In 2015, the Murdoch media has again transformed Mallah into a “terrorist sympathiser.” According to Prime Minister Tony Abbott, “heads should roll” at the ABC for allowing him to speak on “Q&A.”

Mallah’s presence in the “Q&A” audience was entirely appropriate, regardless of his political views.

He was falsely charged with terrorism and exonerated by a jury. His question—what would have happened to him if legislation existed in 2003 giving the immigration minister the power to strip people charged with terrorism of their Australian citizenship—raised critical issues.

It pointed to the immense threat to fundamental democratic rights posed by the government’s plans, backed by the Labor Party, to ram such legislation through parliament. The threat was only highlighted when the government’s representative, Steve Ciobo, contemptuously told Mallah that he would be “pleased” to see him—an innocent man—stripped of his citizenship and expelled from the country.

Mallah’s anger at this statement prompted his warning to Ciobo that the treatment of Muslims was a factor in people joining extremist organisations overseas.

The outpouring against “Q&A” and the ABC is an attack on freedom of speech. It is aimed at intensifying the stultifying atmosphere of media conformity with the political establishment. The ABC and the rest of the mass media already impose strict censorship against views that challenge the government’s justifications for war and its promotion of Australian nationalism. If the establishment parties had their way, no aspect of government policy would be subjected to exposure or criticism.

The Murdoch-owned media is serving as the attack dog for Abbott’s campaign against the ABC not only because its owners and editors agree with the government’s agenda. News Corporation also has commercial motives in curbing the ABC from competing against it, particularly in the expanding digital media platforms.

As Paul Kelly’s performance on “Q&A” demonstrated this week, the Murdoch media will resort to blatant hypocrisy to realise its ends.



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