

# Australia: Two highly-politicised arrests of “foreign fighters”

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Two arrests over the past week on “foreign fighter” charges have shed further light on sweeping provisions in Australia’s “counter-terrorism” laws and how they are being politically exploited by the media and political establishment.

One man was arrested for allegedly attempting to join Kurdish forces fighting against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in northern Iraq, while another was detained on accusations of aiding ISIS in Syria. Both face serious charges that could see them jailed for many years—up to 20 years in one case, and for life in the other.

Although the two arrests relate to alleged involvement on apparently conflicting sides in the US-led military interventions throughout the Middle East, both serve definite political purposes bound up with the fraudulent “war on terrorism.”

The timing of the arrest of a Melbourne man, Jamie Williams, for trying to join Kurdish militia raises a number of questions. To say the least, his jailing coincided with a shift in US policy to back a Turkish assault on the Kurdish forces that up until recently were regarded as a US ally in the war against ISIS.

Williams was stopped at Melbourne airport on December 28 last year—seven months ago. He was prevented from leaving the country and his passport was seized, but no charges were laid.

At that time, other Australians were known to have joined Kurdish militias, which had borne the brunt of battles against ISIS in northern Iraq. Questioned by authorities, Williams reportedly admitted he was planning to travel to the northern Iraqi city of Sulaymaniyah to fight with the Kurdish forces.

Three months later, according to the official account, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) executed a warrant on Williams’ house and seized his mobile phone and a

computer.

Suddenly, this week, police arrested him at his house on a charge of preparing to “enter a foreign country with the intention of engaging in a hostile activity in that or any other foreign country.”

This vague offence, in section 119.4(1) of the federal Criminal Code, is one of the many unprecedented charges introduced in the “Foreign Fighters Bill,” imposing the severest penalties possible under the law just for seeking to travel to certain areas of the world. The maximum penalty for this offence is life imprisonment.

Williams has been remanded in custody until his next hearing in October. His lawyer indicated he would make a bail application, but bail is available only in “exceptional circumstances” under the anti-terrorism laws introduced since 2002.

Last week, in exchange for the Turkish government’s participation in the war against ISIS—including the use of strategic Turkish air bases by US war planes—the Obama administration gave the go-ahead for Turkish attacks on Kurdish organisations. Up until then, these organisations had been in part supported militarily by the US.

The main target of the Turkish bombardments over the past week has not been ISIS, but the Kurdish separatist guerrilla movement, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), and its Syrian branch, the PYD/YPG (People’s Protection Units).

For Washington and its allies, including Australia, the US-Turkey deal sets the stage for a major escalation of the Western-backed war for regime change against Syria that has already devastated Syria since its onset in 2011.

In the other arrest, an Australian nurse who says he was forced by ISIS to work as a medic in Syria did not

apply for bail when he appeared in a Melbourne court on Monday, charged with supporting a terrorist group.

Adam Brookman voluntarily returned to Australia from Turkey last week. He told the media he escaped from Syria after winning ISIS members' trust by working for them in a hospital controlled by the group at al-Bab in Aleppo province.

Brookman was charged with performing services to help someone "engage in a hostile activity in a foreign country." He was also charged with "supporting" a terrorist organisation, namely ISIS. The charges carry maximum prison sentences of 20 years and 15 years respectively.

The nurse was remanded in custody until November 16, while prosecutors compile a case against him. His lawyer Rob Stary said Brookman would not apply for bail, although Stary said police did not consider the Muslim convert and father of five a threat in Australia.

Brookman's fate might depend on whether he provides information about ISIS to the police and intelligence agencies. An AFP spokesman told the media that Brookman's return was being "carefully managed" by Australian authorities and their international partners.

In a sign of high-level political involvement, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop personally backed the arrest. "Mr Brookman is obviously a person of interest to our law enforcement and intelligence agencies," she said.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government pushed the "Foreign Fighters Bill" and three other packages of far-reaching "anti-terrorism" legislation through parliament late last year and early this year. Each was backed by the opposition Labor Party, and accompanied by lurid terrorist scare campaigns and the largest police raids in Australia's history on homes in Sydney and Melbourne.

Most recently, in March, it passed legislation with bipartisan support compelling telecommunications providers to retain all their Internet and phone data for two years, so that it can be searched by the intelligence and security agencies.

The "foreign fighter" arrests serve to bolster the campaign to whip up fears of "home-grown" terrorism in order to justify further assaults on basic legal and democratic rights.

When federal parliament resumes the week after next, the government and Labor will seek to push through

unprecedented legislation to arbitrarily strip citizenship from people accused of involvement in a wide range of anti-government or "terrorist"-related activity. The government has already foreshadowed further moves to extend these powers to cover sole Australian citizens, not just those with dual citizenship.

The Abbott government has also tabled a bill to force Internet and phone providers to notify the police and intelligence services of any changes they plan to make to their security settings. This is another move to ensure that the political spy agencies can monitor all smart phone and social media use without any protection by encryption or other privacy programs.

Under the pretext of protecting the public from terrorism, the political establishment is adopting measures of a police-state character that will be used more broadly against the working class.

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