

Australian government refuses to help children trapped in Syria

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The Coalition government in Canberra has made clear it will do nothing to assist six Australian children trapped in the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-held Syrian city of Raqqa, which is being bombarded by the US and its allies, including Australia.

Leading ministers have dismissed calls to help the children, aged eight months, 5, 10, 11, 13 and 14, return to Australia. Five are the orphans of two Australians, Khaled Sharrouf, a self-proclaimed ISIS fighter and his wife Tara Nettleton. The baby is their granddaughter, the child of their eldest daughter Zaynab.

The government bears a direct responsibility for the plight of these children. Last May, following reports that Sharrouf had been killed, the Liberal-National government, then led by Tony Abbott, rejected an application by Nettleton for her and her children to be permitted to return home.

Without any evidence of Nettleton, let alone her young children, committing any criminal offence, Abbott declared they would be shown “no leniency” because “crime is crime is crime.” Abbott insisted: “It is a crime, a very serious crime under Australian law, for people to go abroad and fight or assist terrorist organisations.”

If not for that refusal, Nettleton could still be alive. She died last September from medical complications stemming from an appendix operation, an outcome that could have been prevented had she received treatment in Australia. The residents of Raqqa reportedly face primitive hospital conditions, with inadequate medical supplies, as well as a food shortage and only intermittent electricity and water supplies.

On social media this week, former friends of Nettleton from Sydney’s Chester Hill High School

voiced anguish at the news of her death and posted photos of their early years at the school. Jade Koda posted: “R.I.P. TARA very sad!!! You deserved so much better! Although you chose a different life, I will remember you as the reckless funny teenage girls we were.”

There was no such compassion in Canberra. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said Australian authorities had “no capacity to provide consular assistance to the children.” She described them as “victims of their parents’ extremist ideology and reckless decision to travel to Syria.”

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton went further. He said the children would be “scarred” for life and therefore could pose a security risk. “Ultimately the government’s clear objective is to keep the Australian public safe, and we’d have to look at ... what they’ve been exposed to, whether or not later in life they’d pose a threat,” he told Sydney radio 2GB on Thursday.

The Labor Party’s foreign affairs spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek provided bipartisan support. She said the children had suffered a form of child abuse at the hands of their parents, and it was unlikely the government could do much to get them out of Syria.

For all the government’s claims to be fighting in Iraq and Syria for humanitarian motives—to protect the people of the Middle East from the atrocities of ISIS—its reaction to the fate of these children displays its true contempt for the millions of victims of the predatory US-led war in Iraq and Syria.

Toward the Nettleton children, the response is particularly vindictive. The family has been the subject of a protracted media-backed campaign to try to drum up public support for Australia’s involvement in the war and the accompanying “anti-terrorism” legislation overturning citizenship and other fundamental

democratic rights.

In August 2014, just as Abbott's government was confronting widespread opposition to its proposed metadata retention laws and other anti-terrorism measures, the corporate media published a gruesome front-page picture designed to whip up a new terrorism scare campaign.

Purportedly taken from Sharrouf's Twitter account, the image allegedly showed one of his young sons holding the head of a decapitated Syrian soldier in Raqqa. Whatever the exact circumstances of the photo, its broadcast throughout the media served a definite purpose—to whip up anti-Islamic sentiment and beat back opposition to the legislation.

The government's proposed measures—since passed with Labor's support—included requiring Internet service providers to retain data for two years so that intelligence agencies can trawl through it, reversing the onus of proof for Australians returning from overseas to require them to prove that their trip was for "legitimate" purposes, and broadening the definition of the offence of "advocating" a terrorist act.

The severed head photo also fed into the government's preparations to announce, in October 2014, its commitment of war planes and troops to join the US military campaign in Iraq. The deployment of six Australian F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter-bombers to conduct bombing missions in the region was immediately endorsed by Labor Party leader Bill Shorten.

Last May, when the government barred Nettelton and her children from returning to Australia, that decision was part of a stepped-up drive to stoke fears of terrorism as the government announced plans to arbitrarily cancel the citizenships of people alleged to have some connection to terrorism.

For all the government and media demonisation of Nettelton and her children, ISIS is largely a creation of US militarism itself. The war in Iraq and Syria, and all its atrocities, which have forced millions of refugees to flee Syria, is the outcome of the drive by US imperialism and its allies since 2011 to overturn the regime of Syrian President Assad. The real aim is to ensure US control over the Middle East and the entire Eurasian landmass, where the US confronts Russia and China.

The US and its partners, including the Saudi, Persian

Gulf and Turkish regimes, turned to extreme right-wing Islamic fundamentalist forces to carry out their objectives. In fact, when Syria first became a breeding ground for Islamist militia, including ISIS, these forces were funded and backed by Washington and its allies, and that remains so for many of the extremist outfits. Having helped create ISIS, the imperialist powers then exploited its existence to justify further military intervention in Iraq and Syria and attacks on democratic rights at home.

Amid the denunciations of Sharrouf and Nettelton—who met as teenagers at Chester Hill High—there is no mention of the economic and social conditions that provide fertile ground for recruitment of vulnerable youth by Islamists. In Australia's working-class suburbs, young people from Middle Eastern and other immigrant backgrounds face high levels of unemployment, poor educational and social facilities and constant police harassment.

As the economic situation deteriorates, these social conditions will only worsen. Turnbull's government and the political establishment as a whole are committed to a path of war, deep cuts to social spending and repressive police and surveillance powers. This is the agenda behind the callousness displayed toward Tara Nettelton and her children.



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