

Turnbull government expands Australian military powers at home and abroad

Our correspondent
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Among the first acts of the Turnbull government, following its near defeat in the July 2 election, are twin moves to widen the military's powers to kill civilians in Iraq and Syria, and to make it easier to call out the SAS and other armed forces to suppress domestic unrest.

Neither of these measures, both announced in the first sitting week of the new parliament, was mentioned during the election campaign, despite clearly being in preparation for months. Their simultaneous unveiling underscores the close connection between the escalating militarism abroad and police-military repression at home to combat opposition to war and austerity.

Over the past 15 years, the SAS has spearheaded the Australian involvement in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, specialising in night-time raids on homes, in which civilians have been killed. During the same period, two SAS contingents have been established for domestic interventions—Tactical Assault Group (TAG)-East, based in Sydney, and TAG-West, based in Perth.

Both moves were unveiled on the false pretext of fighting terrorism, just like the involvement in the predatory US-led wars in the Middle East and every previous wave of legislation overturning basic legal and democratic rights. The real aim of the current war is to overturn the regime of Syrian President Assad and secure US control over the Middle East after the catastrophes created by the earlier invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Delivering a “national security statement” to parliament, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared that his government would ensure Australian forces could kill anyone considered to be a Daesh (Islamic State) facilitator or supporter. “We must target Daesh at

its base,” Turnbull told parliament. “And with lethal force. No exceptions.”

Turnbull spoke dismissively of removing a “legal anomaly,” but what is proposed is giving a green light to kill civilians. This involves amending the Australian Criminal Code, which makes it a war crime for someone to kill a person who is “not taking an active part in the hostilities.”

Scrapping that provision would enable the government to alter the military's rules of engagement (ROE) to authorise the bombing or shooting of any alleged IS supporters, including in buildings or homes far removed from any fighting. Turnbull claimed that the ROEs would not permit the killing of civilians, but these rules are kept a closely-guarded secret, preventing any public scrutiny.

Turnbull said the change would bring Australia into line with its “coalition partners” in Iraq and Syria. This would clear the way for Australian jets and troops to murder people as indiscriminately as the US forces, whose air war alone has killed more than 500 civilians in the past two years, according to tallies kept by Amnesty International.

Australia currently has more than 400 military personnel in the Middle East, whose roles were also recently expanded to allow troops to join ground operations beyond a training base in Baghdad.

Underscoring the bipartisan support for US-led wars, opposition Labor Party leader Bill Shorten immediately gave support in-principle to the change, saying “the security of our nation is a bigger and more important question” than any “political differences.”

Defence Minister Marise Payne said the government also wanted to streamline the domestic military call-out laws. This would enable it to more swiftly deploy the SAS and other troops to suppress any unrest triggered

by stepped-up involvement in US militarism and harsh austerity measures.

“We are conducting a review of the legislative framework that supports ADF domestic security operations,” Payne said. She claimed that terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, Ankara and “elsewhere around the world” had changed the “security environment.”

For weeks, the Murdoch media has led a push for the SAS to be able to be more quickly mobilised, on the pretext of responding to incidents like the December 2014 Sydney café siege. The government seized on that incident, which involved a mentally deranged individual, to declare a “terrorist” emergency, and placed SAS units on high alert, but left the police in charge of the operation.

Calling out the military onto the streets overturns a centuries-old principle, derived from the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in Britain, against the use of the armed forces to kill civilians domestically.

Call-out laws were first introduced, with no public debate, in 2000, under the guise of protecting the Sydney Olympics. They were expanded in 2006, on the excuse of shielding the Melbourne Commonwealth Games. As a result, in an “emergency,” two government ministers or the armed forces chief can already mobilise the troops.

Now, however, the government and the corporate media insist that these procedures take too long—a figure of seven hours has been bandied about—to deal with a sudden threat.

Once deployed, the military has authoritarian powers. Soldiers can take over buildings, detain people, search premises and confiscate possessions. Military personnel can also use lethal force, issue commands to civilians, interrogate them and seize documents.

To trigger these powers, the government only has to declare undefined “domestic violence” or a supposed threat to “Commonwealth interests” or “critical infrastructure.” These terms can cover any social unrest. They go well beyond combating terrorism, which has also been defined in sweeping terms, with the potential to cover many forms of political or industrial protest.

Although the government’s review is not due to be completed until early next year, discussions have been taking place secretly for months between police,

military and intelligence chiefs. According to a report in the *Australian*: “Police forces from around the country, as well as the Australian Defence Force, strongly support the reforms, making it highly likely the military will play a greater role in responding to future terrorist attacks.”

In a column supporting the shift, Paul Maley wrote in the *Australian*: “The army’s job is killing. It’s grim and it’s ugly, but sweep away all the modern roles it now performs and its primary function hasn’t changed.” The newspaper’s August 30 editorial endorsed the call, declaring: “Seven hours is a luxury we no longer have.”

Until now, the military call-out powers have not been invoked officially. However, international political and sporting events—from the 2000 Sydney Olympics to the 2007 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Sydney and the G20 summit in Brisbane—have been accompanied by displays of military might and huge police mobilisations. Constant “counter-terrorism” exercises have also been conducted in major cities, featuring military helicopters and special forces troops.

These operations have been testing grounds for methods of mass surveillance and military and police repression that will be directed against mounting social and political discontent.



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