

Australian stripped of citizenship, setting dangerous precedent

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Sometime earlier this year, alleged Islamic State fighter Khaled Sharrouf became the first Australian to be stripped of citizenship under legislation that the Coalition government pushed through parliament, with the Labor Party's assistance, at the end of 2015. There was no official announcement, just a leak to Murdoch's *Australian*.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton declined to comment, but his office confirmed that a citizenship was revoked. Dutton reportedly declared Sharrouf's citizenship void on the advice of a secret panel of intelligence officers, police, bureaucrats and lawyers known as the Citizenship Loss Board.

"National security sources familiar with the move say the decision to target Sharrouf was based on his demonstrated association with Islamic State, a terrorist organisation he joined in 2014," the *Australian* reported. In other words, the decision was made on the basis of unreliable intelligence reports. Last year, the intelligence agencies wrongly reported that Sharrouf was one of a number of Australians killed by a US bombing strike in Mosul.

Via this legislation, governments can revoke the citizenships, and therefore basic civil and political rights, by ministerial decree, without any trial or judicial process. These powers go far beyond supposed "terrorist suspects." They can be used against a range of people deemed to be opponents of the political, corporate and military establishment.

Until 2015, no one's citizenship could be revoked, unless it was obtained by proven fraud. Now, the government can unilaterally cancel citizenships in three ways.

First, a person is deemed to "renounce by conduct" their citizenship if the immigration minister is "satisfied" that they participated in certain terrorist-

linked or "hostile activity" overseas. Second, an individual "ceases" to be a citizen by "fighting for" or "being in the service of" (an undefined term) any organisation listed by the government as terrorist. Third, a person "ceases" to be a citizen if jailed for more than six years for any of a long list of terrorism and politically-motivated offences, including "advocating terrorism," assisting an "enemy" of Australia, and leaking security information.

Because of the sweeping definition of terrorism in the post-9/11 laws, a person could lose their citizenship, for example, for supporting the right of individuals, whether in Syria or any other country, to resist a US-led invasion.

For now, these powers have been confined to Australia's more than six million dual citizens—about a quarter of the population—but there have been calls within the Liberal-National Coalition government to extend the measures to all citizens.

By initially targeting Sharrouf, who is reputed to be in Syria or Iraq, the government is continuing a pattern of using individuals who have been demonised by the media to set precedents that threaten the legal and democratic rights of far broader sections of the population.

Sharrouf came to prominence in August 2014, just as the Coalition government confronted widespread opposition to its proposed laws to retain on-line metadata for two years. The corporate media published a gruesome front-page picture, purportedly taken from Sharrouf's Twitter account, allegedly showing one of his young sons holding the head of a decapitated Syrian soldier. Whatever the exact circumstances of the photo, its broadcast by the media served to whip up anti-Islamic sentiment and beat back opposition to the legislation.

There was no mention in the media barrage of the fact that Islamic State is largely a creation of the US itself and its wars in the Middle East. The conflict in Iraq and Syria, and all its atrocities, which have forced millions of refugees to flee Syria, is the outcome of the drive by the US 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 and Persian Gulf regimes, turned to Islamic fundamentalist elements to carry out their objectives. In Syria, these forces have been directly funded and backed by Washington and its allies. Having helped create Islamic State, the imperialist powers exploited its existence to justify further military interventions in Libya, Iraq and Syria and deeper attacks on democratic rights at home.

Amid the denunciations of Sharrouf, there was no reference to 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 worsening levels of unemployment, poor educational and social facilities and constant police harassment. These conditions often also trigger mental health problems. Sharrouf, 35, who grew up in western Sydney as the son of Lebanese migrants, was diagnosed as a schizophrenic in 2002.

The shocking severed-head image was splashed throughout the media again last February when the government refused to allow into Australia Sharrouf's six young children and grandchildren after Sharrouf's wife, Tara Nettleton, died. The children, all of whom are Australian citizens, were trapped in the Islamic State-held Syrian city of Raqqa, which is being bombarded by the US and its allies, including Australia. As a result of the voiding of Sharrouf's citizenship, their fate is even more perilous.

Sharrouf left Australia in 2013 after completing an almost four-year prison term on vague charges of involvement in an alleged terrorist conspiracy led by a Melbourne cleric, Abdul Nacer Benbrika. The Benbrika-related trials, conducted in both Melbourne and Sydney, largely relied on evidence by police provocateurs and undercover infiltrators, who incited unstable young men. The defendants were convicted under sweeping provisions, introduced since 2002, that

require no proof any specific terrorist target or plot, just vague discussions about "a" possible terrorist act.

The Labor Party was quick to solidarise with the government's decision on Sharrouf. Mark Dreyfus, the shadow attorney-general, said the legislation was written to strike the right balance between security and citizens' rights. "We trust this power will continue to be used in sparing and prudent fashion," Dreyfus said in a statement.

In reality, Labor, no less than the Coalition, is responsible for laws that allow citizens to be stripped of fundamental democratic rights, including to vote, on the basis of untested allegations by intelligence agents and ministerial fiats. This is part of the endless "war on terror," launched in 2001, that is establishing police state-style laws and powers that will be used more widely as social unrest grows and opposition develops to the escalating turn to war by the US and its partners.



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