

Terrorist plot allegedly prevented in Australia

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Australian authorities are claiming that the detention of four men on Saturday disrupted a plot to place an “improvised explosive device” on an international flight. Throughout Sunday and into today, airports around the country were plunged into turmoil by ramped-up security and luggage inspection. Heavily-armed police have been deployed at other prominent locations.

Police raids were carried out on five homes—four in Sydney’s working-class southwestern suburbs of Punchbowl, Wiley Park and Lakemba, and one in the inner-city suburb of Surry Hills. In Lakemba, an entire apartment complex was locked down.

The detained men are reported to be a father and son from two related families of Lebanese background. At least one of the families migrated to Australia in the 1970s. Despite no charges being laid, the four have already been named in the media. One man, reportedly aged in his 50s, suffered head injuries during the raids. Another, in his 30s, was hauled away wearing nothing but a towel around his waist.

The raids were initiated after Australian intelligence allegedly received information from an unspecified international counterpart.

Conflicting reports have asserted both that the men were “totally unknown” to police, and that they had come under scrutiny during previous “anti-terror” operations. Since 2014 alone, 31 such police operations have taken place across Australia, resulting in 70 people being charged with various offences under the country’s sweeping terrorism legislation.

Police applied in court on Sunday to invoke one of the draconian special powers that they have been given in the supposed “war on terrorism”—to detain the accused without charges for 24 hours for interrogation. By Sunday night, another court had reportedly extended the detention to seven days.

Police commanders have indicated they expect more

people to be detained for questioning—without charges.

The political establishment and mass media is presenting the guilt of the four men as beyond question. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared before a press conference on Sunday morning that there was “plot to bring down a plane.” He asserted the detentions of the men was “an example of the way in which terrorist plots are uncovered and disrupted due to the extraordinary intelligence services we have and their fine cooperation they have with our police and security agencies.”

Rupert Murdoch-owned publications have already labelled the men as “jihadists” and presented them as linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Al Qaeda. Media outlets are alternatively claiming that the plot involved inserting a bomb in a metal meat grinder and trying to bring it onto an aircraft as carry-on luggage, or fabricating a device that would release a “toxic, sulfur-based gas” and kill all on board.

The *Sydney Daily Telegraph* is now reporting, as further evidence of a plot, that a sticky note was found in a bin upon which someone had written down the flight number of an international flight between Sydney and Jakarta, Indonesia.

In the face of murky and some seemingly fanciful allegations, it is necessary for people to keep a grip on their critical faculties and their adherence to the fundamental democratic principle: innocent until proven guilty.

Federal Police Commissioner Andrew Colvin admitted to journalists yesterday: “We don’t have a great deal of information on the specific attack—the location, the date or time. However, we are investigating information indicating the aviation industry was potentially a target of that attack.”

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has reported only being told by police that “items” had been found in Surry Hills, which “could” have been

used to manufacture a bomb. Beyond a conventional kitchen meat grinder and a mincer to make sausages, no such “items” have been identified.

Time and again, both in Australia and internationally, purported terrorist conspiracies have been revealed to have involved a significant degree of state provocation, entrapment and exaggeration.

In one of the most dramatic cases in Australia—a purported plan in 2009 to attack a military barracks in Sydney—an undercover police agent played the critical role in encouraging a group of men to talk about committing such an act. No actual preparations had been made to carry it out.

Similarly, in 2008, a police agent provided Muslim cleric Abdul Nacer Benbrika with ammonium nitrate and showed him how to cause it to detonate. Again, there was no actual plan to carry out a terrorist action. Benbrika and six others were nevertheless convicted to lengthy prison terms.

Even earlier, in 2004, a police agent posing as a journalist offered Zeky “Zak” Mallah, a troubled 18-year-old, \$5,000 to record a video threatening to carry out a suicide attack. The video provided the evidence he was planning an act of terrorism. A jury eventually refused to convict him on the most serious charges.

The political context in which the alleged terrorist plot has been exposed provides even more reason to submit every claim by the authorities to the most critical scrutiny.

Under conditions of immense hostility toward the establishment over social inequality and falling living standards, the Turnbull government is seeking to shore up support by posturing as a “strongman” on national security, and distract the population with fear-mongering over the danger of terrorism.

In just the past three weeks, Turnbull has flagged or announced a series of draconian policies.

* He has asserted his government will seek to enact legislation that compels internet companies such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, Facebook and Google to give Australian agencies the necessary means to decrypt encrypted information they carry.

* His government has announced legislation to revamp the “military call-out” powers, lifting restrictions on the use of the armed forces against civilians.

* On July 18, Turnbull declared the establishment of a new “Home Affairs” super-ministry on the pretext it would assist combat terrorist threats. It will have overall control of the federal police and intelligence forces, the immigration department and “border protection” force.

* He then announced a new US-style Office of National Intelligence, headed by a Director-General of National Intelligence, is being created in the prime minister’s office to take control of an expanded network of internal and external surveillance agencies.

The alleged airline plot is already being used to justify these policies and denounce criticism of them. The *Australian*, the flagship publication of the Murdoch media, published an opinion piece today entitled “Clear and present danger.” It was authored by Jacinta Carroll, the head of the Counter Terrorism Policy Centre at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

Carroll argues the latest incident proves that the inability of the police to read encrypted communications “must stop.” She declares that it demonstrates the need for a “Home Affairs portfolio and reshaping of the national intelligence community.” She suggests that further “legislative development”—that is, even more draconian laws and police powers—may be necessary in the future.

Such assertions underscore that the need for the utmost vigilance in defence of democratic rights has never been greater.



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