

Turnbull government defends reported killing of Australian children in Syria

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According to unsubstantiated reports, the country's intelligence agencies helped target an alleged Australian Islamic State (IS) fighter and two of his sons, who were killed by a US airstrike in Syria this month.

If the reports are true, the government has facilitated the targeted assassination of a man who was an Australian citizen until earlier this year, when it arbitrarily revoked his citizenship, and two children who remained Australian citizens.

On August 17, the *Australian* reported that the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), the country's equivalent of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), supplied information for a US bombing attack in Syria that was believed to have killed Khaled Sharrouf, 36, and two of his sons, Abdullah, 12, and Zaraqawi, 11.

If proven, this would be the first known case of Australian citizens being assassinated with the Australian government's approval since the "war on terrorism" was launched in 2001. The Turnbull government set another precedent when it stripped Sharrouf of his Australian citizenship, making him the first victim of new laws to cancel citizenships by executive decree.

The *Australian* said it was told that ASIS supplied the information to locate Sharrouf to the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, which also includes Britain, Canada and New Zealand. An unnamed "government source" said an airstrike on vehicles outside the Syrian city of Raqqa, under the supervision of the US Joint Operations Command, had killed Sharrouf. His two boys were reportedly in the same car.

According to the reports, it is unclear whether the military and intelligence authorities knew Sharrouf's sons were also in the car. But there was obviously a known risk that the boys would be with him.

The government's complicity is indicated by the fact that intelligence chiefs reportedly briefed Prime Minister

Malcolm Turnbull on the killings before a cabinet national security committee meeting on August 15.

Government ministers were cautious in public about confirming whether Sharrouf was killed, with similar reports in 2015 proving to be wrong. However, Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton refused to deny that the government was informed in advance that the strike was to occur.

In an August 16 doorstep interview outside Parliament House, a journalist asked Dutton: "Did you know that it was going to happen, this strike?" Dutton stated: "I think it's prudent to wait for further information—but obviously we receive briefings and information in relation to activities and to the activities of our own efforts in the Middle East as well."

Dutton welcomed Sharrouf's death and warned that others faced the same fate. "Nobody would mourn his loss," Dutton declared, "and the fact is that if people make a decision to go to the Middle East or anywhere else to engage with ISIS in a fight against countries like ours, then frankly they deserve the outcome that perhaps has met Sharrouf."

Defence Minister Marise Payne was asked about the US-led military forces' rules of engagement in situations involving children. She flatly stated that children are sometimes killed. Payne said: "We take every care to ensure that those who are not part of the direct [terrorist] activity are not caught up in those processes. From time to time they will be."

Payne acknowledged that Australia and other countries had the power to "red flag" coalition airstrikes. In other words, the government could have vetoed the decision to kill Sharrouf—also knowing the risk to his children—but did not do so.

The future for Sharrouf's daughters Zaynab, 16, and Hoda, 15, and one surviving son, Humzeh, 7, whose mother Tara Nettleton was also killed in Syria in 2015, is

now doubly unclear. All three are Australian citizens, but the Liberal-National government previously refused to permit them to return to Australia, despite their entitlement to do so as citizens.

Dutton and other ministers blamed Sharrouf and his deceased wife for the deaths of the two boys. “Nobody would want to see any children die, but the fact is that Sharrouf and his wife took their children into a war zone and if they have been killed; well what other outcome would they expect?” Dutton said.

The truth is that in February 2016, the government rejected pleas to assist the children, plus a baby, Zaynab’s child, to re-enter Australia after Nettleton’s death. Earlier, in May 2015, following reports that Sharrouf was killed, the government dismissed an application by Nettleton for her and her children to return home. Thus, the government bears a direct responsibility for the plight of these children.

It is quite possible that Sharrouf and his sons were targeted via tracking performed at the US-Australian satellite surveillance base at Pine Gap. Leaked US National Security Agency (NSA) documents confirm that one of Pine Gap’s prime functions is to gather actionable “real-time” targeting for US military strikes across Eurasia and Africa.

Last September, the government cleared the way for such pinpoint assassinations. It announced it would alter the Australian Defence Force’s rules of engagement to authorise the bombing or shooting of any alleged IS supporters, including in buildings or homes far removed from any fighting.

Delivering a “national security statement” to parliament, Turnbull declared that his government would ensure Australian forces could kill anyone considered to be an IS facilitator or supporter. “And with lethal force,” he said. “No exceptions.”

This involves amending the Australian Criminal Code, which makes it a war crime to kill someone “not taking an active part in the hostilities.” Turnbull said the change would bring Australia into line with its “coalition partners” in Iraq and Syria, whose air war alone has killed nearly 5,000 civilians in the past two years, according to tallies kept by Airwars.

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

By targeting Sharrouf, the government is continuing a

pattern of using individuals who have been demonised by the media as “notorious terrorists” to set precedents that threaten the legal and democratic rights of far broader sections of the population.

In August 2014, 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 photograph, its broadcast served to whip up anti-Islamic sentiment.

In all the media witch hunting of Sharrouf, there has been no mention of the fact that IS largely a creation of the US itself and its predatory wars in the Middle East, which seek to establish Washington’s hegemony over the strategic, resource-rich region and the entire Eurasian landmass, where the US confronts Russia and China.

Nor is there any reference to the deteriorating economic and social conditions that provide fertile ground for recruitment of vulnerable youth by Islamists. In Australia’s working-class suburbs, young people face worsening levels of unemployment, poor educational and social facilities and constant police harassment. These conditions often also trigger mental health problems. Sharrouf, who grew up in western Sydney as the son of Lebanese migrants, was diagnosed as a schizophrenic in 2002.

Sharrouf left Australia in 2013 after completing a prison term on vague charges of involvement in an alleged terrorist conspiracy led by a Melbourne cleric, Abdul Nacer Benbrika. The trial relied on evidence by police provocateurs and undercover infiltrators, who incited unstable young men. Sharrouf and others were convicted under sweeping provisions that require no proof any specific terrorist target or plot, just discussions about “a” possible terrorist act.

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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