

Intelligence agency involved in latest Australian “terror” scare

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Accompanied by lurid media headlines about a “New Year’s Eve terror plot,” police arrested a 20-year-old young man from a Somali family last Monday, claiming he had planned to carry out a “massacre” in Melbourne’s Federation Square during this year’s New Year’s Eve celebrations.

Every aspect of this affair is dubious and points to efforts being made to launch another terrorist scare campaign to divert attention away from the political turmoil engulfing the federal government and parliament.

Long before Ali Khalif Shire Ali faced a court, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s government joined the police authorities in issuing prejudicial declarations that make it impossible for him to receive a fair trial.

Police alleged that Ali was an “Islamic State” sympathiser and had attempted to obtain an automatic weapon in order to “shoot and kill as many people as he could.” Victoria Police Deputy Commissioner Shane Patton said Ali had not accessed a gun at any stage, but had “face to face interactions” about obtaining one.

Patton told a press conference on November 28 that Ali had attempted to obtain instructions from an Al Qaeda web site on how to launch a terrorist attack. Without presenting any evidence, Patton declared that “the potential of the attack was catastrophic” and “horrendous.”

Federal Justice Minister Michael Keenan wasted no time in politically exploiting the arrest. He said the “fact” that the Christmas—New Year period was a target “reminds us of the depravity of terrorists.”

It then emerged that the police and intelligence agencies had kept Ali under surveillance for two years after the teenager rejected demands by the federal political spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), to become an

informer in the Islamic community.

Police told the media that Ali had been charged over actions taken in March, April and June. No explanation was provided as to why the police decided to arrest him now.

A police-intelligence operation against Ali reportedly intensified last December. Operation San Jose—a joint ASIO, Australian Federal Police and Victoria Police procedure—was evidently launched after Ali was questioned at an apparently routine traffic stop late last December.

As well as the unexplained timing of the arrest, ASIO’s involvement raises questions about the long record of the police and intelligence agencies seeking to recruit and manipulate vulnerable young men. This includes using undercover operatives to entrap them into trying to purchase weapons or making comments that can then be depicted as a terrorist plot.

In late 2015, Ali told a conference that ASIO had attempted to recruit him as an informant when he was 18 years old. He said ASIO agents persistently phoned him, followed him to university and visited his family’s house multiple times, when his parents were not there.

Ali said the agents offered him money for information but he refused. “I know their tricks and whatever you say to them they will use as evidence against you,” he said. The teenager said he was targeted because ASIO thought he was “young and naïve.”

The young man has been charged with vague counts of “acts in preparation to commit a terrorist attack” and “collecting documents to facilitate a terrorist act.” Under the draconian terrorism laws introduced since 2002, the first charge requires no proof of any specific terrorist plan, just “a” possible terrorist act. The second charge was reportedly based on Ali accessing material

online. Both charges carry a life sentence. Denied bail, the young man has been detained pending a hearing next March 2018.

Among the other incongruities in the case, Ali was allegedly in possession of an Al Qaeda guidebook, although police describe him as a sympathiser with rival group Islamic State.

Media outlets, which were on the scene during police raids related to the arrest, reported that a computer and other “evidence,” including a “large-framed picture” were seized. In a slur against working-class Melbourne residents, Fairfax Media described Meadow Heights, where Ali lived, as part of “a belt of suburbs in the north-west long linked to violent extremism.”

There is a record of governments, police and the media using so-called terror plots to justify the introduction, or use, of wide-ranging anti-democratic measures. That includes alleged plans to attack ASIO offices, military bases, Anzac Day ceremonies and major sporting events, organise implausible airplane bombings and conduct street murders and beheadings.

Many of these cases, including the Lindt café siege in Sydney in December 2015, have involved disoriented or mentally-ill individuals who have been in direct contact with ASIO.

For the past 16 years, governments—Liberal-National and Labor alike—have seized upon alleged terrorist plots to introduce barrages of terrorism laws that overturn basic legal and democratic rights.

At last month’s Council of Australian Governments meeting, federal and state governments unanimously agreed to another package. It will introduce wide-ranging powers of arrest and detention without charge, and adopt real-time face recognition technology to enable the police and intelligence agencies to identify individuals instantly.

The latest “massacre” plot is being promoted under conditions in which the Turnbull government is in deep crisis and increasingly unravelling, facing deepening hostility among wide layers of the population.



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