

In huge police raids, Australian teenagers arrested on vague “terrorism” charges

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24 April 2024

More than 400 heavily-armed police and intelligence agency officers stormed 13 homes in Sydney’s southwestern suburbs yesterday and arrested seven teenagers, as young as 14, on a range of vague terrorism-related accusations.

All the circumstances point to a politically-charged and timed police and intelligence operation, launched by the highest levels of the police-intelligence apparatus, with the direct backing of the Albanese Labor government.

The Joint Counter-Terrorism Team, which includes the New South Wales (NSW) state police, the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and the NSW Crime Commission, raided homes across the suburbs of Greenacre, Strathfield, Bankstown, Prestons, Casula, Lurnea, Rydalmere, Chester Hill and Punchbowl, which have significant Middle Eastern populations. A home in the regional town of Goulburn was also searched.

The raids—the largest for a decade—were conducted despite police admitting there was no evidence of any specific plans, locations, times or targets for a terrorist act. Instead, Australian Federal Police (AFP) Deputy Commissioner Krissy Barrett said investigations had revealed a “network” of people who share a “similar violent extremist ideology.”

This common “ideology” was not named, but clearly the accusation was directed at identification with Islamic belief.

These teenagers, aged from 14 to 17, were said to be in online contact with a 16-year-old boy who has been charged with stabbing a Christian priest in the Sydney suburb of Wakeley last week. That attack was quickly labelled by the NSW and federal Labor governments as a “terrorist” incident, with the boy now facing possible life imprisonment, despite evidence presented in court of his mental health problems.

This morning, police charged five of the young people arrested yesterday. Two 16-year-old boys were charged with “conspiring” to engage in any act in preparation for, or planning, “a terrorist act.” A 17-year-old was charged with that too, as well as carrying a knife in a public place. Two

boys, aged 17 and 14, were charged with possessing “violent extremist material online.” All were refused bail and were due to face a Children’s Court today.

The federal Labor government immediately hailed the police-ASIO operation. Treasurer Jim Chalmers said the counter-terrorism “activity” was connected to the ongoing investigation into the Wakeley incident. “I wanted to take this opportunity to salute the courage of the people involved, and to thank them for their professionalism as well,” he said.

Last week, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese boasted, in an interview on Sydney radio 2GB, that he was personally involved in the decision to issue a terrorist declaration within hours of the Wakeley church incident and to rapidly convene a meeting of the national cabinet security committee. That declaration activated sweeping police powers.

This declaration, made before anything was even known about the boy’s motives or mental health, was designed to whip up a scare campaign against alleged Islamic extremism, as governments have done repeatedly since 2001, when the “war on terror” was launched to justify the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yesterday’s raids were begun just before ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess and AFP Chief Commissioner Reece Kershaw made a high-profile joint appearance at the National Press Club to declare there was a heightening danger of terrorism being committed by Islamic youth.

Burgess said there was a “growing number of minors in the counter-terrorism caseload.” He said Sunni Islamic violent extremism remained ASIO’s principal concern and claimed there was a 50 percent chance that someone would plan or conduct an act of terrorism in the next 12 months.

Under the draconian terrorism laws introduced in 2002, terrorism is defined in extremely broad terms that can outlaw many forms of political activity, or even thoughts.

“A terrorist act” is one that threatens to harm anyone and intends to “coerce or influence” the public or any government by “intimidation” to advance a political, religious or ideological cause.

In 2005, the then Liberal-National government, backed by

both Labor and the Greens, extended the definition from “the terrorist act” to “a terrorist act,” thus removing the need to prove any specific plot or plan. That combined with far-reaching “conspiracy” offences, makes it possible to charge and convict people, like these teenagers, on the basis of loose talk or possession of online material.

Last week’s official terrorist declaration means that under the NSW Terrorism (Police Powers) Act, police can stop and search people and vehicles, demand the disclosure of people’s identities, enter and search premises and vehicles, or establish a cordon such as a roadblock around a target area—all without a warrant. Police can use “such force as is reasonably necessary” to exercise those powers.

The terrorism declaration also triggered the potential use of federal powers, including AFP stop, search and seizure powers without warrants, investigation questioning powers and the imposition of control orders and preventative detention orders, which are all forms of detention without trial. ASIO can activate search, seizure and surveillance powers, including computer hacking and telecommunications interception, as well as powers to detain people for questioning without charge.

The young people arrested in yesterday’s raids were all under “comprehensive surveillance” by the joint counter-terrorism command, NSW Police Deputy Commissioner David Hudson said. While he claimed that their communications constituted an immediate “threat” to the public, he provided no details of the threat, nor of the how long the police-ASIO operation had been underway against the boys.

Almost all the high-profile terrorism cases of the past two decades have involved extensive police entrapment by undercover agents posing as “militants” or convictions for vague talk, or both. A Melbourne Children’s Court transcript, belatedly released in February, revealed that the police and ASIO had used these methods against a vulnerable autistic 13-year-old boy who was charged with terrorism-related offences.

After the Wakeley church stabbing, another police operation was launched across Sydney’s working-class western suburbs to arrest teenagers and men accused of involvement in attacks on police after the incident. So far, seven people have been charged with riot-related offences, and police say the number charged could hit 50 as the operation continues.

The “riot” outside the church, which included calls for revenge against the boy who allegedly stabbed the priest, was evidently whipped up online by right-wing Christian groups. But the police crackdown is itself almost guaranteed to inflame communal tensions and agitate unstable and disoriented individuals, raising the danger of violent

incidents.

The federal and NSW Labor governments are resorting to police repression under conditions of intense opposition in the working class to the Albanese government’s support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza and its commitment to the wider war drive of US imperialism against Iran, Russia and China, combined with a worsening cost-of-living and social crisis.

The Labor governments have slandered the mass opposition to the Gaza genocide as antisemitic and at times threatened to outlaw protests, knowing this will only inflame tensions. They could now seize upon these events to seek to create the conditions to ban anti-genocide protests.

This is already happening with increasing ferocity in other countries whose governments are backing the Israeli mass murder, particularly the United States, where there is a massive police-state mobilisation, orchestrated by the Biden administration, against the protests spreading across university campuses, as well as in Germany and France, where violent police attacks have been made on Gaza events and demonstrations.

Prominent moves to make a similar link between opposition to the genocide and terrorism have been made in Australia already.

Last December, a call for the outlawing of protests was issued in the pages of the *Australian* by Peter Jennings, the former chief of the government-sponsored and US-linked Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Jennings accused governments of showing a “marked reluctance” to make a “concerted effort” to stop the protests, which he claimed were “enabling radicalisation.”

As the WSWS warned from the outset, the “war on terror,” launched to justify US-led imperialist war abroad, is also a domestic war on basic democratic rights. The explosion of militarism, accompanied by the pouring of billions of dollars into war spending, is incompatible with the right to free speech at home.

The false identification of opposition to genocide with antisemitism is aimed at criminalising any opposition to the barbaric crimes of imperialism and blocking the development of a broader movement against war, austerity and capitalism, above all, within the working class.



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