

Australian police and media fuel anti-Islamic witch hunt to justify arrests of teenagers on flimsy “terrorism” charges

Mike Head
26 April 2024

A foul campaign has been launched by the *Australian* and other Murdoch media outlets, evidently assisted by selective leaks from the police and intelligence agencies, to demonise Muslim teenagers and whip up an Islamic terrorism scare campaign.

Today’s *Australian* splashed over its front page “exclusive” stories, based on prejudicial police information. One article witch-hunted the seven boys, as young as 14, arrested last Wednesday in huge police raids in Sydney’s working-class western suburbs on serious “terrorism” charges despite the police admitting they had no evidence of a terrorist plot or plan.

Another inflammatory article claimed that the 16-year-old boy who allegedly stabbed an Assyrian Christian priest at a suburban Sydney church on April 15, “-idolises” former Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, because the boy had a photograph of bin Laden on his social media profile—at least according to the police leaks.

Noting what “appears to be a major security breach,” the newspaper also reported that the names, addresses and other personal details of the teenagers arrested on Wednesday as supposed “associates” of the boy were being shared across WhatsApp groups, already triggering an anti-Muslim retaliation attack.

“A page from Wednesday’s police warrants has started circulating, including the colour, make and licence plate of five cars, one of which has since been vandalised,” the *Australian* stated.

The newspaper also broadcast “extraordinary” CCTV footage of one of the arrested boys, aged 16, allegedly throwing stones and another object at a liquor bottle shop attendant earlier this week.

The publication of such material, violates sub judice laws, and makes impossible any fair trial of the teenagers.

This has all the hallmarks of a coordinated campaign,

emanating from the highest echelons of the police-intelligence apparatus, and politically backed by the Albanese Labor government, to stir up anti-Islamic sentiment. It is part of an attempt to tarnish and suppress the intense opposition in the working class to the government’s support for the worsening Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Within hours of the stabbing at the church, the police and intelligence chiefs, with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s personal involvement, initiated an official declaration of a “terrorist” incident—before even speaking to the accused boy, who has a documented history of mental health problems. By doing so, they activated police-state powers, including to search and seize, arrest and detain without charge and conduct intensive surveillance.

Albanese then quickly convened a meeting of the “National Cabinet” security committee. This body, which consists of key government ministers, the police, intelligence and military chiefs and top officials, set the police raids in motion, spearheaded by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic political spy agency.

More than 400 police and ASIO officers were mobilised to storm into at least 13 homes in southwestern Sydney suburbs that have significant Middle Eastern populations, causing widespread shock and anger. This offensive is still continuing. A 15-year-old boy was arrested last night and charged “with conspiring to prepare a terrorist act.”

The media witch hunt is, in the first instance, a bid to justify the raids and arrests, all conducted on similar vague and flimsy charges. Far from any evidence of specific plans, locations, times or targets for “a terrorist act,” the AFP said investigations had revealed a

“network” who shared a “violent extremist ideology.”

Clearly, this accusation was directed at identification with Islamic belief. The only cited “evidence” against the boys consisted of belonging to a social media chat group. In the case of the 14-year-old, it soon became known that his “crime” was to passively receive online material.

The flimsy nature of such charges points to the political timing of Wednesday’s police raids. They began just before ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess and AFP Chief Commissioner Reece Kershaw made a joint appearance at the National Press Club to declare a heightening danger of “Sunni Islamic violent extremism.” Burgess claimed there was a 50 percent chance that someone would plan or conduct such an act of terrorism in the next 12 months.

Under the terrorism laws, imposed with Labor’s support by the previous Liberal-National government in 2002, charges such as “conspiracy,” “preparation” and “possession” of material can be laid and prosecuted without any proof of concrete plots.

And by defining terrorism in terms that include religious ideology, the laws have been used, in repeated high-profile cases over the past two decades, to essentially imprison people for their beliefs. In many cases, the only evidence of terrorist intent has been based on loose talk provoked by undercover police or ASIO agents.

Prominent Islamic leaders called a media conference in Sydney yesterday to denounce the “questionable law enforcement tactics” involved in the teenagers’ arrests, made without any specific terrorist evidence. They said the arrests had caused alarm and outrage in their communities. This clearly reflects widespread anger.

The Islamic organisations called for changes to the terrorism laws, saying they “target specific communities” by focussing on religious belief. That call was immediately opposed by police representatives and New South Wales (NSW) Labor Premier Chris Minns.

In an earlier statement, the Islamic Council of NSW said: “Many in the Muslim community have expressed their concern that if you are an Australian Muslim, even with a formal mental health diagnosis, you will be subjected to a different application of the law compared to other Australians.”

At the same time, another large police operation across western Sydney is targeting 50 men and teenagers accused of participating in clashes with the police outside the church after the April 15 stabbing. During what the police classified as a “riot,” people in the crowd, evidently supporters of the right-wing priest, Bishop Mar

Mari Emmanuel, demanded vigilante-style revenge against the boy.

These widespread police operations point to the Labor governments and the police-intelligence apparatus exploiting the April 15 events to inflame communal tensions and activate far-reaching police powers, both as a means of sowing toxic divisions in the working class and of intimidating and suppressing unrest.

This is happening under conditions of intensifying disaffection among workers and young people with the Albanese government’s support for the US-backed genocide in Gaza and its commitment to the wider war drive of US imperialism against Iran, Russia and China, combined with a deepening cost-of-living and social crisis in working-class areas.

Once again, but even more than before, the “war on terror,” declared by the US and its allies in 2001 to justify the barbaric pre-planned invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, is being used to blackguard and suppress domestic discontent.

Like the Biden administration in the US, the Labor governments have slandered as “antisemitic” the mass opposition to the Gaza genocide, including the student encampments that are now developing in Australia in solidarity with those spreading across the US.

Far from being antisemitic, the protests are anti-genocide and anti-Zionist, with many Jewish students taking part, calling for their universities to divest from corporations engaged in the genocide.

Labor leaders have previously threatened to outlaw Gaza genocide protests. They are now inciting communal tensions and stoking fears of terrorism to seek to create the conditions for police repression, as in the US.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact