Australia's ASIO surveillance chief declares "unprecedented" security threats

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Mike Burgess, the director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the country's domestic political spy agency, this week gave his seventh annual threat assessment address, again ratcheting up headline-grabbing claims of unparalleled multiple "national security" dangers.

Before Burgess's inaugural such address in 2020, ASIO directors-general rarely spoke beyond closed-door briefings. Now, with the Albanese Labor government's blessing, the ASIO boss has increasingly become a prominent political figure.

In a speech typically full of unsubstantiated assertions, Burgess declared: "[W]e face an unprecedented number of threats, with an unprecedented cumulative level of harm."

Notably, Burgess specified "far-left activists" as a key part of the security threat. He deliberately bracketed them with neo-Nazis and other far-right elements as dangers to "social cohesion" under conditions of global fracturing, the breakdown of strategic alliances, economic instability and social and political "grievances."

The presentation was clearly designed to create an atmosphere to justify further crackdowns on dissent, free speech and basic democratic rights, as well the Labor government's boosting of ASIO's powers, funding and resources.

Without the slightest shred of evidence, for example, Burgess claimed that ASIO, working with its police and intelligence partners, had "foiled 31 major terrorism plots" since 2014, including a seemingly staggering 14 since last December's apparently Islamic State-inspired killings of 15 people at Sydney's Bondi Beach.

That would amount to two or three major terrorist plots shut down every month since December, all apparently without the public's knowledge. Burgess provided no details.

In part, Burgess's speech sought to shut down any more examination of the unanswered questions surrounding ASIO's role in the Bondi terrorist attack, just after Burgess recently revealed that the younger attacker, Naveed Akram, had been on an ASIO security threat list in 2022, some three years later than ASIO and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese initially claimed.

Burgess insisted that ASIO had allocated sufficient resources to terrorism operations, saying: "The number of ASIO officers working on our counter-terrorism mission in 2025 was almost double the number in 2005. Almost double."

That only raises further questions about ASIO's seeming failure to detect or prevent the Bondi massacre. This cannot be explained by a lack of resources. In fact, since the Albanese government took office in 2022, it has increased ASIO's budget by almost 50 percent, from $716.9 million in 2021–22 to over a billion dollars—$1.081 billion—in its latest budget for 2026–27.

Burgess declared that even a "vast army" of ASIO case officers and surveillance officers might not be sufficient "to find an individual who's been radicalised online and uses encrypted communications."

Long before any evidence emerged about ASIO's role, the federal and New South Wales Labor governments immediately seized upon the Bondi shootings to blame protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza for the atrocity. They introduced "hate speech" laws potentially criminalising condemnations of Zionism and imperialist war, and providing for the outlawing of groups or even political parties that allegedly support such views.

Burgess revealed that he was in discussion with the Labor government about changing the country's terrorism alert system to elevate the current level above "probable" so that a higher degree of alarm could be generated without specifying that a specific attack was expected.

While Burgess focussed attention on the alleged terrorism danger, his speech had wider political targets, particularly left-wing activity. He alleged that the media was providing insufficient coverage to "far-left activists" subjecting "Australian companies" with perceived links to Israel to "repeated acts of vandalism and arson."

This is part of a continuing campaign, backed by the Labor governments, to conflate anti-genocide protests with terrorism, antisemitism and far-right outfits to justify the crackdown on dissent. "Neo-Nazis are antisemitic. Islamic extremism is antisemitic," Burgess declared. "Anarchists and revolutionary groups can be antisemitic."

Burgess gave a glimpse of the real concerns within the police-intelligence apparatus of the ruling capitalist class and its governments about the rise of political disaffection in response to war and declining working-class living and working conditions.

"Conflict in the Middle East contributes to these dynamics, fuelling frustrations and anger," Burgess stated. "The impacts could become even more profound if there are further economic shocks or shortages."

At the same time, Burgess did his best to back the US-Israeli war on Iran, and the Albanese government's support and participation in it, which has included sending a war command plane, missiles

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and SAS troops to a US-connected military base in the United Arab Emirates.

Burgess doubled down on previous accusations by ASIO and the Albanese government that Iran was responsible for the fire-bombing of the Adass Israel Synagogue in Melbourne in December 2024 and Lewis' Continental Kitchen in Sydney last October. Albanese expelled Iran's ambassador last year on the basis of ASIO's unsubstantiated allegations.

In his speech, the ASIO chief declared these were acts of state-sponsored terrorism, as well as "criminal arson, foreign interference, the promotion of communal violence and politically motivated violence."

Yet Burgess's statements were also full of contradictions. He insisted that the attacks were orchestrated by Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp leaders "using a complex chain of proxies including Australian-based criminals." Burgess provided no names or details, despite dramatically "confirming" that a former Australian resident living in Iraq had directed the Adass synagogue attack, only to be thrown into prison in Iraq after his "Iranian backers lost their enthusiasm," supposedly due to secret pressure from Australian authorities.

Burgess said no one had died in the two attacks, but he was worried that "one day an Australian will be killed at the hands of a foreign government here in Australia." As intended, that generated corporate media headlines about foreign plots to assassinate Australians.

Burgess's charges actually expose the hysterical media and government claims of rampant local antisemitism being responsible for such attacks, which have been used to try to demonise the mass opposition to the Gaza genocide and Labor's complicity in it.

Significantly, the other primary security threat nominated by Burgess were unnamed foreign intelligence services targeting Australia's military capabilities and AUKUS, the multi-billion-dollar pact with the US and UK for submarines and other weaponry and basing arrangements for a war against China.

The ASIO boss concluded his address with threatening political comments, saying "concurrent, cascading, and compounding threats" could be categorised as "threats to our way of life." He said protesters must consider how they protested, and journalists even had to "consider how you report the news."

The speech amounted to another attempt to insist on the passage of Labor's legislation, suddenly introduced after the 2025 election, to extend and expand ASIO's compulsory interrogation powers.

ASIO was first handed unprecedented powers to forcibly question people in 2003, nominally to protect the population against terrorism, as part of the "war on terrorism." Under Labor's legislation, currently before the Senate, these powers will be broadened to cover four war-related fields: "sabotage," "promoting communal violence," "attacking defence facilities" and "threatening border security."

These headings have the potential to cover anti-war, anti-genocide, pro-refugee and other political dissent. This is police-state legislation. It overturns the right to silence and the presumption of innocence. If anyone interrogated fails to comply or hand over material, or provides "misleading" information, they face up to five years' imprisonment. They also face five years' jail if they tell anyone, except an ASIO-vetted lawyer, over the next two years what has happened to them, thus helping to keep ASIO's operations shielded from public scrutiny.

Even before the "war on terrorism," ASIO had a vast array of powers to tap phones, install listening devices in offices and homes, intercept telecommunications, open people's mail, monitor online discussion, break into computer files and databases, seize computers and use personal tracking devices. Since then, at least 130 pieces of legislation have expanded ASIO's powers, including a wide-ranging definition of terrorism, questioning and detention without trial, executive power to proscribe organisations and secrecy provisions for terrorist trials.

ASIO has a long history, dating back to its establishment by the Chifley Labor government in 1949, of bugging, infiltrating and orchestrating witch-hunts and frame-ups, often directed against socialists and left-wing groups. In the "war on terrorism" its many victims included a Gold Coast doctor, Mohamed Haneef, whose prosecution was only dropped in 2007 after it was proven that the police and ASIO had made false allegations against him about planning mass terrorism acts.

ASIO is a key instrument of political repression, intimately involved in the preparations for wider US-led wars, including against China. Along with all the other Australian intelligence agencies, it works closely with their US counterparts, including through the global US-led "Five Eyes" surveillance and data-swapping system, together with the UK, Canada and New Zealand.

Burgess's speech is another warning of the moves, currently led by the Labor government, to suppress opposition as capitalism plunges into war, intensifying the attacks on social spending, working-class conditions and fundamental democratic rights.

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