Australia: Police with military weapons start patrolling NSW streets

Mike Head
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Under conditions of rising social discontent in Australia and globally, the state Labor government in New South Wales (NSW) is spearheading an unprecedented turn in policing operations, featuring officers carrying visible military-grade long-arms on daily patrols for the first time in Australian history.

This month, Premier Chris Minns's government began taking the militarisation of policing to a new level, deploying its newly-established Armed Response Command (ARC) to patrol prominent public places in Sydney, including potential protest locations near the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House.

Officers are also cruising in purpose-built vehicles—BMW X5s and Toyota LandCruisers—fitted with technology to receive intelligence information from the command's operations centre. Established at an initial cost of $94.3 million, the command is expected to comprise 250 officers by the end of 2027, with 28 civilian staff members.

This historic turn is clearly designed to create a threatening political climate, normalising the presence of heavily-armed police squads on the streets, with their weapons on visible display.

ARC officers are armed with shortened versions of the semi-automatic Australian Combat Assault Rifle, developed primarily for use in wartime battle. Measuring over 70cm long and with a range of more than 500 metres, they can fire 50 rounds per minute, raising the spectre of lethal shootings.

This is part of a wider response, brought forward amid explosive mass struggles by students and workers across Europe against war, re-militarisation, the soaring cost of living and the deteriorating conditions in schools and social services.

Minns has personally boasted of, and identified himself with, the new force. "The security challenges facing our state have changed, and our policing model needs to change with them," Minns said when unveiling the ARC in early October, claiming it was targeting violent threats.

Last Sunday, NSW Police Minister Yasmin Catley made a more revealing statement. She refused to rule out the ARC being deployed at protests. "If they're required to be there because of the heightened risk, they will be," she said. Catley claimed that police would make those decisions, but her green light for the use of the ARC at demonstrations itself indicates government pre-approval.

Catley added that the Minns government would "absolutely not" introduce regulation to define when and where ARC officers could be deployed. The government has rejected calls by Amnesty International to publish accessible rules governing when and where the ARC combat assault rifles can be fired.

Alongside the federal Albanese Labor government, the Minns government has a repressive record. It has been in the forefront of ramming through far-reaching anti-democratic measures, such as banning so-called "hate speech," outlawing protests in declared zones and boosting police powers to issue "move on" orders and carry out searches and arrests.

Like Labor's other police-state measures, the government and the corporate media have presented the ARC as simply a reaction to last December's terrorist attack at Sydney's Bondi Beach, where two alleged Islamic State gunmen killed 15 people at a Jewish community festival. But this cannot explain the large-scale mobilisation of heavily-armed police on the streets.

Moreover, many unanswered questions remain about how the two accused Bondi Beach perpetrators, a father and son, were able to carry out a reactionary atrocity despite being well known to the police and intelligence agencies.

The government's intent is to intimidate—and potentially use lethal force against—demonstrations or other eruptions of opposition, not individual gunmen. That includes not only the continuing demonstrations against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and the occupied West Bank of Palestine, but any unrest, as in Europe, or rallies by striking workers.

NSW police commissioner Mal Lanyon last month declared that the ARC would have a dual purpose, that of deterring people who "incite hatred or cause fear," as well as those "who wish to commit harm."

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This is line with the efforts of the political and media establishment to conflate opposition to the genocide in Palestine to antisemitism and to accuse Gaza demonstrations of causing fear in the Jewish population, even though the protests have been joined by many Jewish people who denounce the Israeli regime.

Over the past three years, the anti-genocide protests in Australia have been among the largest per capita in the world. In August 2025, 300,000 people took part in a march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge despite intensive attempts by Minns and the police to ban it.

After four decades of increasingly militarised policing in all Australian states and territories, primarily involving para-military riot and "tactical response" squads, the ARC represents a sharp further shift in police operations, designed to establish an intimidating presence on the streets.

Rather than acting as a "flying squad" or an on-call SWAT team, the ARC represents Labor's adoption of US and European-style policing operations where military-grade firepower is a permanent open fixture in civilian areas, often backed by heavily-armed troops.

Already, over the past decade, existing units, such as Victoria's Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) and Public Order Response Team (PORT), have had access to military-grade, semi-automatic rifles. They are often deployed to visible positions outside designated major public events, but with their military-style weaponry mostly kept inside their vehicles.

In 2017, the previous Liberal-National government in NSW armed the Public Order and Riot Squad (PORS) with Colt M4 carbines. That was the first time in NSW history that such a squad was equipped with military-grade rifles.

Labor's establishment of the ARC represents a doubling down by the Minns government on its already violent response to demonstrations.

In June last year, a large contingent of police, including the riot squad, set upon pro-Palestinian protesters in Sydney outside a factory listed as participant in Lockheed Martin's construction of F-35 fighter jets, which the Israeli military has used to drop bombs on Gaza. Several participants were bashed, with one—former Greens election candidate Hannah Thomas—facing the possible loss of her sight in one eye as a result.

On February 9 this year, the Minns government authorised a violent police operation in Sydney against a peaceful protest opposing a visit to Australia by Israeli president and war criminal Isaac Herzog. A deployment involving hundreds of police culminated in cops indiscriminately pepper-spraying, bashing and charging at the demonstrators.

Widely-viewed footage on social media showed multiple assaults perpetrated by the police. Pre-dawn police raids were then conducted on the homes of alleged protest participants, charging them with offences such as refusing to obey police orders to disperse, affray, and assaulting or hindering police.

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had invited Herzog despite a United Nations inquiry finding that the Israeli president incited genocide in Gaza. That was a measure of the Labor government's commitment to the US-Israeli war offensives and US militarism globally.

The introduction of the para-military ARC, alongside the far-reaching laws and measures imposed under the banner of combatting antisemitism, is another warning of the repression to which the Labor governments, as well as their Liberal-National counterparts, will resort, not only to threaten anti-genocide protests but to suppress opposition to war and militarism more broadly.

Over the past two decades, Labor also has backed legislation to enable the military to be called out to combat domestic unrest or alleged threats to designated infrastructure, giving soldiers unprecedented peacetime powers, including to use lethal force, detain civilians, issue directives and search people and premises. That is in line with the deployment of troops against demonstrators internationally, most recently in France and the US.

The strengthening of the police and intelligence apparatuses, alongside the military, will be directed against the working-class discontent and political disaffection that is brewing as the burdens of war are imposed on working people, via the soaring cost of living and cuts to essential disability, health, education and other social programs, while billions of dollars are poured into the military in preparation for war.



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