

Australian government exploits hostage-taking to escalate “war on terror”

By Mike Head
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Twice in less than a week, Australian’s political and media establishment has inflated events involving mentally disturbed young men into major “terrorist attacks.”

Last Wednesday night saw the extraordinary police handling of an incident involving a mentally ill trainee chef on a Malaysia Airlines flight from Melbourne airport. It generated media headlines and images of para-military police, toting semi-automatic rifles and wearing helmets and body armour, storming the plane. Police later conceded that the man’s actions were not terrorist-related at all.

This Monday, the terrorist scare campaign intensified when a deranged and drug-addicted former Somali refugee killed a man and took a hostage in the Melbourne suburb of Brighton. Before any of the facts were known, the media and the federal and state governments declared that his actions were a terrorist attack, even though Yacqub Khayre phoned a TV station to claim to be acting for both Al Qaeda and Islamic State, two rival organisations that are at war with each other. About 20 minutes later, Khayre was shot and killed by police commandos.

Over the past 24 hours, information has emerged further contradicting the depiction of Khayre as a terrorist. Instead, while many questions remain unanswered, the evidence points to a deeply troubled young man with a long history of “ice” addiction and alcohol abuse, being preyed upon by both Islamic fundamentalists and police-intelligence agencies, which targeted him a potential undercover informant.

Khayre, who arrived in Australia as a child in 1991, fleeing the conflict in Somalia, had been known to the police since at least 2007. As a 19-year-old, he was convicted of more than 40 offences, including burglary, aggravated burglary, theft, unlawful assault and drug possession. Later that year, he was convicted of armed robbery offences, while on bail. Altogether, he was sentenced to three years’ jail, but the prison terms were suspended and he was released on probation in unclear circumstances.

Less than two years later, Khayre was charged with involvement in an alleged conspiracy to make a futile

suicide attack on the Holsworthy army base in Sydney. He was held in a “super-maximum” security prison, often in solitary confinement, between August 2009 and December 2010, only to be acquitted by a jury. According to the evidence at the trial, the “plot” was concocted by a police undercover agent who entrapped a number of young men. Three of the accused were convicted and sentenced to 18 years’ imprisonment, but Khayre was found not guilty by the jury. It became clear that he had fled Somalia after supposedly being sent back there to seek an Islamic “fatwah” for the attack.

Secret US diplomatic cables previously published by WikiLeaks demonstrate that in August 2009, senior Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Victorian state police officers proposed grooming Khayre, while in prison, as a police informant to generate more “terrorism” cases.

In an assessment provided to Michael Thurston, the US consul-general in Melbourne, two senior officers, AFP counter-terrorism coordinator Damien Appleby and Victoria Police detective inspector Andrew Gutske characterised Khayre “as a ‘weakling’ who struggled with the harsh day-to-day life in Somalia ... The AFP believes that Khayre may be turned while in prison to serve as an informant in related cases.”

Throughout the media barrage over the past day about the “terrorist threat,” no explanation has been provided for this briefing of the US consulate, nor for the proposed ‘grooming.’ There has been no statement that Khayre’s recruitment did not proceed.

Reportedly, however, Khayre was placed in a prison “deradicalisation” program in 2009. These programs, run by the police and Islamic clerics, are another means of enlisting informants, who can be threatened with further prosecution if they fail to cooperate.

It seems that Khayre’s incarceration worsened his drug and mental health problems. In 2012, he was arrested during an “ice”-affected violent home invasion. He pleaded guilty to aggravated burglary, theft, intentionally causing injury, recklessly causing injury and giving a false name, and was

sentenced to five years in prison, with a non-parole period of three years.

That non-parole period was later extended until last November because Khayre twice, in 2014 and 2015, tried to set prison facilities alight.

Despite the obvious questions raised by the attempted police cultivation of Khayre, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, the police-intelligence authorities and the corporate media have flooded the airways with sensationalist declarations of heightened terrorist dangers and called for yet more expansions of police powers and resources.

Turnbull, who heads a fragile and unstable government, has been particularly aggressive. He demanded to know why Khayre was on parole and outlined draconian proposals that could mean barring parole to anyone vaguely accused of having a “terrorist background” or “violent record.”

The prime minister called a media conference yesterday morning, flanked by Acting AFP Commissioner Mike Phelan, to immediately link Khayre’s actions to the latest attacks in London, where evidence has also emerged that the British security agencies were well aware of the activities of the perpetrators.

Seeking to stampede public opinion, Turnbull declared: “The events in Brighton in Melbourne last night, coming so soon after the attack in London, have shocked all Australians. This terrorist attack by a known criminal, a man who was only recently released on parole, is a shocking, cowardly crime... and it underlines the need for us to be constantly vigilant, never to be deterred, always defiant, in the face of Islamist terrorism.”

As well as insisting on unprecedented parole laws, Turnbull called on state premiers and territory chief ministers, who are due to meet tomorrow, to further boost police powers. He boasted that he secured their support, last year, for a “post-sentence detention regime” whereby prisoners convicted of “serious” offences can be kept in prison, potentially for life, even after their sentences have expired.

This legislation, which went through the federal parliament last December with Labor’s backing, was part of the eighth package of “anti-terrorism” laws imposed since 2014, mostly since Turnbull ousted Tony Abbott as prime minister in September 2015. That was on top of more than 60 laws introduced under the banner of the “war on terrorism” by Coalition and Labor governments since 2002. Turnbull’s government is about to go further, releasing a report advocating greater powers to call out the military to deal with “domestic violence.”

At his media conference, Turnbull also sought to drum up public support for expanding Australia’s protracted military

involvement in the US-led wars in the Middle East, which have killed millions of people, devastated entire societies and created the breeding grounds for Islamic fundamentalists to recruit disturbed and disaffected young people around the world.

“In the field, the Australian Defence Force is taking the fight up to and destroying ISIL with our allies and partners,” Turnbull asserted.

This is a bipartisan offensive. Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews declared yesterday he would give the police chiefs whatever extra resources they requested. Already, last December, his government announced it would boost police numbers by 20 percent, or 3,100 police officers, in the next four years. At the same time, it introduced legislation to ban parole for people convicted of “serious” crimes. Yesterday, Andrews bragged of having the toughest parole laws in the country, but Turnbull still insisted they were too weak.

Like their counterparts in Britain, across Europe and in the US, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike are seizing on alleged terrorist attacks to justify erecting a police-state framework in the face of the rising class tensions generated by widening inequality and attacks on welfare, essential social programs and working class living standards.

These measures are accompanied by the intensified witch-hunting of Muslims, to divide the working class along communal and ethnic lines, and create the ideological conditions for escalating Australian participation in the catastrophic wars provoked by the US in the Middle East.

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