

Australian “terrorist weapon” was a modified fly swatter

By Mike Head
1 June 2018

On Wednesday, the case against a man detained by Australian police for eight days last year over an alleged terrorist plot to blow up a plane collapsed in spectacular fashion. Police finally admitted in court that the “prohibited weapon” he was charged with possessing was an electrified fly swatter.

Khaled Merhi, 40, a spray painter, was one of four men arrested in Sydney last July over an alleged conspiracy to destroy an Etihad plane bound for the Middle East with an improvised bomb, said to be hidden in a metal meat grinder.

The belated police admission, followed by a magistrate’s dismissal of the charge against Merhi, raises further questions about the supposed bomb plot, the timing of last year’s arrests and the political agenda behind the entire “war on terror.”

Heavily-armed “counter-terrorism” police raided Merhi’s home and violently arrested him, even after he drew their attention to his homemade device. He explained to the police from the outset that he modified the fly swatter, made from a tennis racquet handle, an old mobile phone battery and two metal prongs, to light his gas stove and barbecue.

Merhi was not charged with any terrorism-related offences, but suffered a gash to the face and a back injury in the police raid, and was imprisoned for more than a week.

At the time, the police described his device as a Taser, and charged him with possessing or using a weapon without a permit. But they acknowledged in court on Wednesday that it emitted 300 times less voltage than a police Taser.

“This was an improvised fly swatter,” police prosecutor Sergeant Amin Assaad told Magistrate Jacqueline Milledge. The magistrate then dismissed the charge against Merhi but excused the police violence

and his imprisonment. She told Merhi that in police raids involving potentially serious offences there are “sadly casualties like you.”

Milledge said: “You showed them where [the device] was. It does appear you were cooperative. There’s always a downside when there’s such significant police involvement, the by-product you found yourself being physically damaged by that.”

Merhi’s brother was also arrested during the police raids but later released without charge. The two other arrested men, brothers Khaled Khayat, 49, and Mahmoud Khayat, 32, remain behind bars after pleading not guilty to two vague charges each of “planning or preparing” to commit “a terrorist act.”

Last July, government leaders and police chiefs made sensational claims about the four arrests and the alleged bombing plot, feeding media headlines such as “ISIS sent bomb parts for terror plot” and “Terror at the terminal.”

Australian Federal Police (AFP) Deputy Commissioner Mike Phelan told a press conference: “This is one of the most sophisticated plots that has ever been attempted on Australian soil.”

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull congratulated “our intelligence, security and police services for their outstanding work in disrupting the terrorist plot to bring down an aeroplane.”

Turnbull said the “terrorist plot” proved the necessity for the far-reaching restructuring of the police and intelligence apparatus that he had unveiled the previous week. He vowed to take “relentless” measures to bolster the “security” agencies.

This indicated that the arrests were timed for political purposes.

The alleged plot was far-fetched. Supposedly, the two brothers tried to smuggle a bomb, encased in a meat

grinder, onto a plane at Sydney airport. “A senior Islamic State operative” had already sent the bomb, made from “military grade explosive,” via the post from Turkey.

Exactly how the men planned to get a metal meat grinder through the airport’s strict metal detection system was not explained. According to the police, the men “failed” in that plot, and a controller then directed them to construct an “improvised chemical dispersion device” to release “highly toxic hydrogen sulphide.”

There is no record of this compound, better known as rotten egg gas, ever being used for a terrorist purpose. It can be lethal, but only in very high concentrations in small, enclosed locations, not large aircraft.

The Khayat brothers were charged under section 101.6 of the federal Criminal Code, which allows suspects to be convicted even if their acts are “not done in preparation for, or planning, a specific terrorist act.” Many provisions were introduced into the “counter-terrorism” laws in 2005 so that the police need produce no evidence of any actual “terrorist” plot or its location, target, method or timing.

This is not the first time that police allegations of a “weapon” have proven false. In October 2014, media reports revealed that an inscribed “Arabic sword” seized during the country’s largest-ever police raids the previous month was actually a plastic ornament. The media had sensationally portrayed the symbolic decoration as an instrument for a planned ISIS public beheading of a random person.

Despite these exposures of some of the terrorist scare campaigns, the boosting of the powers and resources of the intelligence and surveillance apparatus under the guise of fighting terrorism since 2001 is being intensified.

The restructuring unveiled by Turnbull last year included the creation of a Home Affairs super-ministry to take centralised control over a range of police and domestic spy agencies, including the AFP, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the Border Force, and the establishment of a new over-arching Office of National Intelligence in the prime minister’s office.

This week, Attorney-General Christian Porter foreshadowed yet another strengthening of the “security” apparatus. He announced “the most significant review of intelligence legislation in more

than 40 years.”

The review will be conducted by Dennis Richardson, a central figure in Australia’s intelligence-military establishment, with close links to its US counterpart. Over the past 20 years, Richardson has served the ruling elite as ASIO director-general, head of both the Foreign Affairs and Defence Departments, and ambassador to the United States.

Unnamed figures in the “national security community” have told media outlets they expect the review to result in wider electronic surveillance powers, increased information-sharing with police agencies and permission for the overseas spy agencies, such as the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) and the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), to monitor Australian citizens.

None of this is about protecting the population from terrorism. Instead, a police-state framework is being erected to suppress rising social and political discontent, and intensifying popular concern about Australia’s close involvement in plans for more US-led wars, including against North Korea and China.

Both Turnbull’s announcement last year, and Porter’s this week, said they were implementing the recommendations of an intelligence report handed to the government last July. It warned of declining US geo-strategic power and deepening political disaffection, saying that “heightened tensions and instabilities” were exacerbating “a growing sense of insecurity and alienation.”

Behind the constant terrorist scare campaigns, these are the real fears animating the ruling class and its military-intelligence apparatus.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>