

Australian government seeks new military call-out powers

Mike Head
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The Australian government this week outlined plans for expanded powers to call out the armed forces to deal with domestic crises. The changes will mean that the full lethal force of the military can be mobilised to suppress protests and other civil disturbances.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced the sweeping changes on the pretext of dealing with “terrorist incidents,” seeking again to whip up fears of terrorist attacks. He staged his announcement at a Sydney army base, surrounded by masked commandos from an elite Tactical Assault Group, who displayed their deadly weaponry.

The proposals go far beyond combatting alleged terrorism. They will substantially extend the military call-out powers, which already can be triggered by the government declaring there is a threat of “domestic violence” or a danger to “Commonwealth interests” or “critical infrastructure.”

These vague and undefined terms can cover any major outbreak of social unrest. “Domestic violence”—a formulation in the Australian Constitution—can include protests outside parliaments, clashes with police or crippling industrial action. Terrorism itself has been defined since 2002 in far-reaching terms, with the potential to cover many kinds of political opposition or dissent.

Under the Defence Act, the government must currently assert that the supposed threat is beyond the capacity of a state or territory government and its police and other security forces. A state or territory government must request the military call-out.

Those limits will now be removed, although no details of the proposed legislation have yet been released. From media reports, the states and territories will be able to request a military call-out even if their police forces have the capacity to respond themselves.

“Under extraordinary circumstances,” the federal government would not need to wait for an invitation from a state or territory government to send in troops.

Already, in a “sudden and extraordinary emergency,” the prime minister or two other ministers can order a military call-out. In addition, standing orders can be issued for the activation of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) by the chief of the armed forces. Yet the government claims that these procedures are not “streamlined” enough.

Calling out the military onto the streets overturns a centuries-old principle, derived from the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in Britain, against the use of the armed forces to attack or kill civilians domestically. It might also be unconstitutional. Section 119 of the Constitution specifies that a state government must request a call-out to deal with “domestic violence.”

Other plans outlined by Turnbull and Defence Minister Marise Payne include:

- Special Air Service (SAS) and other Special Forces commandos will provide “specialised training” to state and territory law enforcement agencies.

- ADF units will be “pre-positioned” to assist police forces.

- The Defence Act will be amended to allow troops to support police in preventing suspects “from leaving the scene of an incident.”

Over the past 16 years, the Special Forces have spearheaded the Australian involvement in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, specialising in night-time raids on homes, in which innocent civilians have been killed. During the same period, two contingents

have been established for domestic interventions—Tactical Assault Group (TAG)-East, based in Sydney, and TAG-West, based in Perth.

These units were established on the pretext of fighting terrorism, just like the involvement in the predatory US-led wars in the Middle East and every previous wave of legislation overturning basic legal and democratic rights. The real aim of the “war on terrorism” has been to secure US control over the Middle East and justify the erection of a police-state apparatus at home.

Domestic call-out laws were first introduced, with no public debate, in 2000, under the guise of protecting the Sydney Olympics from terrorists. They were expanded in 2006, on the excuse of shielding the Melbourne Commonwealth Games, even though no terrorist threats were made to either event.

Once deployed, the military has authoritarian powers. Soldiers can take over buildings, detain people, search premises and confiscate possessions. Military personnel can also use lethal force, issue commands to civilians, interrogate them and seize documents. The ADF’s “shoot to kill” powers can be used with legal impunity—a defence of following “superior orders” was inserted in the Defence Act in 2006.

Over the past 10 months, the government and security officials have conducted a secretive review of the military call-out powers. No report of that review has been released because it could reveal the real political calculations behind the latest changes.

To justify the measures, Turnbull and his ministers have endlessly cited the December 2014 Sydney café siege, falsely labelling it a terrorist attack and claiming it demonstrated the need for the SAS to have the capacity to intervene with lethal force. The truth is that, like many similar incidents around the world, the café hostage-taking was perpetrated by a mentally-disturbed individual, who was long under close surveillance by police and intelligence agencies.

At his Sydney media conference, flanked by defence force chief, Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin, Turnbull declared that his only concern was to protect the Australian people. A prominent government parliamentarian, former SAS commander Andrew Hastie, was more blunt. “The most lethal means of statecraft resides with the ADF,” he told Fairfax Media.

The government has been assured of bipartisan

backing by the Labor Party, which itself boosted the military-intelligence apparatus when in office from 2007 to 2013. Shadow defence minister Richard Marles said he supported the proposals, while criticising Turnbull for “politicising” the military by using commandos as “props” for a media conference. Marles’s only concern was that people would “sniff” the stunt “from a mile away” and judge it accordingly.

The Australian population was last confronted by heavily-armed soldiers on the streets in 1978. The Fraser government seized upon the still-unexplained Sydney Hotel bomb incident to place 1,500 armed troops, with armoured personnel carriers and helicopters, along a major highway on Sydney’s outskirts and in the nearby town of Bowral.

This week’s announcement is part of an international turn. In May, the British government exploited the Manchester “terrorist” attack to deploy hundreds of soldiers, mainly in London. In 2015, the French government seized on a terrorist attack to mobilise 10,000 troops in Paris and imposed legislation to allow the military to search and detain persons without warrant, close down peaceful protests, harass people and commit assaults. Those emergency powers, since continued by President Emmanuel Macron, were used to issue 155 decrees prohibiting public assemblies between November 2015 and 5 May 2017, according to an Amnesty International report, including protests against regressive labour law measures.

Although no military call-out has occurred in Australia since 1978, major events—from the 2000 Sydney Olympics to the 2014 G20 summit in Brisbane—have been accompanied by displays of military might and huge police mobilisations.

Constant “counter-terrorism” exercises have also been conducted in major cities, featuring military helicopters and Special Forces troops. These operations have been testing grounds for methods of military repression that will be directed against mounting social and political discontent.



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