

Sydney siege ends in violent police assault

Mike Head
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A 16-hour police siege of an inner Sydney café culminated in a full-scale assault by para-military commandos just after 2 a.m., leaving two hostages dead, as well as the lone hostage-taker. The bloody outcome also left many unanswered questions about the entire incident, including the fatal decision to storm the building.

Police and security officials kept reporters far away from the scene throughout the siege, making it impossible to view what happened, but long-distance footage showed heavily-armed units storming the building, firing stun grenades and semi-automatic weapons. Just minutes earlier, at least 5 of the 17 hostages fled the building, as did 5 last night.

Soon after the siege was ended, Prime Minister Tony Abbott issued a statement commending the “courage and professionalism” of the police and other emergency services involved.

Yet the official justifications offered for sending in commandos, resulting in three deaths, were full of contradictions.

New South Wales Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione initially told the media that the police charged into the building after hearing shots fired inside, but when questioned by reporters, did not repeat that claim. Instead, he said, “everyone might now second guess as to what has actually occurred in the last hours,” while insisting that the police “saved many lives.”

It also remains unclear, according to Scipione, whether the two fatally-shot victims, Katrina Dawson, 34, and Tori Johnson, 38, were killed by the police or the hostage-taker. Following the confrontation, at least three other people were taken to hospital, including a woman who was shot in the shoulder. A police officer received a non-life-threatening gunshot wound to his face.

While sensational media headlines proclaimed that “Islamic State terrorism” had arrived in Australia, the

police and intelligence agencies closely monitored the sole hostage-taker, a self-proclaimed cleric Man Haron Monis, for years and knew he had no actual links to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Monis, 50, clearly a deeply-troubled individual, had a long history of being harassed and kept under surveillance by the police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). He had staged numerous one-man protests outside courts in Sydney, alleging victimisation by ASIO and the police, and torture in prisons. Monis was also on bail, under strict daily reporting conditions, on a series of police charges.

Last Friday, as police were aware, Monis lost a bid to appeal again to the High Court against his earlier conviction on charges of sending allegedly “offensive letters” in the mail to the families of Australian soldiers killed during the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. His former lawyer, Manny Conditis, described Monis as an isolated figure. “This is a one-off random individual,” Conditis said. “It’s not a concerted terrorism event or act. It’s a damaged-goods individual who’s done something outrageous.”

Monis, who only this week claimed on his web site to have converted from Shiite Islam to Sunni, did not fit the much-hyped media and government profile of a young “lone wolf” supposedly attracted to join ISIS.

Nevertheless, the siege was seized upon by the federal and state governments, and the police, intelligence and military agencies, to activate “counter-terrorism” and “emergency” protocols. A massive operation was launched, using the siege as a pretext to test out plans for martial law-style responses to social or political disturbances.

Sydney was flooded with police, central city blocks were locked down, and thousands of office workers were either evacuated or ordered to remain inside their buildings for hours. In visible displays of force, police were mobilised onto the streets in working class

suburbs, and in other states, including Victoria and Queensland.

Under “counter-terrorism” protocols, other police-military operations would have been activated. According to the *Australian* newspaper, security authorities locked down Parliament House in Canberra and security was stepped up at public buildings, embassies and military bases.

Abbott today stepped up his government’s efforts to convert the siege into a major terrorist incident. Making his sixth media appearance or announcement since the siege commenced, he said the National Security Committee of Cabinet would be convened, for the third time in 24 hours.

Abbott told reporters that Australia suffered a “brush with terrorism,” yet admitted that Monis was well known to police and intelligence authorities, had a long history of mental ill-health and was not connected to ISIS. In a bid to justify the massive security operation, Abbott said Monis “sought to cloak his actions with the symbolism of the ISIL death cult.” This is the language that Abbott has repeatedly used to justify joining the US-led war in Iraq and Syria.

Abbott’s statement was immediately followed by another display of unity within the parliamentary elite. Despite all the murky circumstances, Labor and the Greens rushed to reiterate their solidarity with the government and the security forces, as they did yesterday.

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten declared: “We owe our full gratitude to our police and security agencies for their bravery, service and sacrifice... The Prime Minister and I are partners when it comes to keeping Australians safe.” Greens acting leader Adam Bandt said: “We commend the courage and professionalism of the police and other emergency services involved.”

Media magnate Rupert Murdoch set the tone for his outlets’ inflammatory coverage, issuing two tweets this morning. He directly linked the Sydney siege to the “war on terrorism,” which has become a vehicle for endless war abroad and continuous escalation of the powers and resources of the security apparatus at home. “AUST gets wake-call with Sydney terror,” said the first post, followed by “AUST, UK and US likely to catch most plots. Lone Wolves are the frightening danger.”

Accordingly, the tabloid *Sydney Daily Telegraph*

declared, as a matter of fact: “This was an attack by the Islamic State. This was a lone wolf attack by a supporter or sympathiser of the evil Islamic terror group that had waged war with humanity.” Its editorial insisted: “We are now in the front line of a terror conflict.”

This terrorist scare-mongering was not confined to the Murdoch media, however. The coverage by the government-financed Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the one-time “liberal” Fairfax Media was indistinguishable.

Under the headline, “Terror Hits Home,” the *Sydney Morning Herald* led its main story with “a man brandishing a gun and an Islamic flag.” While admitting that Monis’s motivations remained unknown, the newspaper’s editorial declared that further measures were needed to strengthen the powers of the state, at the expense of basic legal rights. “The balance between extra vigilance and our long fought for democratic rights needs to be adjusted after incidents such as this,” it stated.

Entirely pushed off the front pages, and barely mentioned on television and radio, was the Abbott government’s mid-year budget review, released yesterday, which revealed a rapidly deepening economic crisis confronting Australian capitalism, alongside stepped-up spending, totalling more than \$1.3 billion, on the Middle East war, the military and the intelligence apparatus.



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