

Unanswered questions about the Sydney siege

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All the circumstances surrounding the 16-hour police siege of a Sydney café continue to be shrouded in an extraordinary level of secrecy by the Australian government, New South Wales state government, police and government agencies and the mainstream media. It ended tragically in the early hours of Tuesday morning with three people dead—two innocent hostages and the hostage-taker—when police commandos stormed the building.

Many disturbing questions remain unanswered, not least of which is why Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his government, with the backing of the opposition Labor Party and the Greens, seized on the incident and immediately elevated it into a major national crisis and an international “terrorist” event. The hostage-taker had just entered the Lindt café in Sydney’s central business district at 9.45 a.m. on Monday, yet by about 10 a.m. the cabinet national security committee had met and in conjunction with the state government and police had activated extensive counter-terrorism protocols.

A massive police operation immediately swung into action involving the deployment of thousands of police in Sydney, the Australian capital Canberra and other major cities. The blocks surrounding the café in Martin Place were locked down, many buildings elsewhere in central Sydney were evacuated or sealed, and the police presence heightened elsewhere. In the state of Queensland, the police commissioner ordered every available officer into the streets.

From the outset, federal and state governments and the police maintained a complete monopoly over all information related to the siege. Even though much of the media—TV, radio and the press—had switched to continuous live coverage of the events, there was little to report except the anodyne and uninformative statements of a handful of police and government spokespersons.

No information was provided about the negotiations underway with the police and the hostage-taker, his identity, his demands, the number and condition of the hostages. When the hostage-taker or hostages contacted the media, the police called for the information to be withheld and the media complied. The police requested that Channel Seven, which had studios opposite the café, take their cameras off air, and it fell into line. The police also gathered together the family members of the hostages, ostensibly to offer them support, but in reality to control another possible source of information.

This virtually total blackout on information, even as the media focussed its entire attention on the siege, only served to heighten the sense of national crisis, uncertainty and hysteria. Actual information was replaced by endless speculation by so-called counter-terrorist experts about the meaning of an Islamic flag

placed in the café window, connections to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the extent of the “terrorist” threat, as well as praise for the actions of the police and government. At the same time, the blackout ensured that the actual police operations were carried out behind a wall of secrecy.

It is only at 1 a.m. on Tuesday—some 15 hours after the siege began—that the Australian media released the name of the hostage-taker, Man Haron Monis, an Iranian refugee and self-styled cleric who had no connection to ISIS, Al Qaeda or any other terrorist organisation. Far from there being an extensive terrorist plot that threatened the nation, the siege was the work of a mentally unstable individual who was well known to the police and intelligence agencies. All of this was known early on in the siege by police, yet deliberately withheld.

At a press conference yesterday, Prime Minister Abbott praised the “professionalism” and “commitment” of the police, then claimed that Monis was not on the “watch list” of any police or intelligence agency. “We were asking ourselves around the National Security Committee of the Cabinet today—how can someone who has had such a long and chequered history not be on the appropriate watch lists and how can someone like that be entirely at large in the community?” he said.

The claim is simply not credible. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and the police have known Monis since he arrived from Iran in 1996, applied for and later was granted political asylum. He came to the attention of the national media in 2007 when he wrote letters to the families of Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan, critical of the US occupation. He was charged and convicted of sending “offensive” material through the post. In recent years, Monis has held numerous one-man protests outside Sydney courts, seeking publicity for his allegations of victimisation and torture at the hands of ASIO and the police. He was on bail on charges of sexual assault and being an accomplice to murder, and required to report to police daily.

Monis was also very active on the Internet, maintaining a web site and Facebook postings. On November 17, he publicly announced his conversion from Shia to Sunni Islam and pledged allegiance to the “Caliph.” Once Monday’s siege began, his web site was shut down at the request of security authorities, along with other Internet sites and social media.

Abbott’s statement is a transparent attempt to turn the media debate to demands for further anti-democratic security laws and a further boosting of the security apparatus. Already, calls are being made for tougher bail conditions. At the same time, Abbott is seeking to divert attention from the many unanswered questions that remain about the siege and the actions of governments and the

police.

How could Monis enter Martin Place carrying a bag with a shotgun?

Martin Place, the location of major bank headquarters, including that of the Reserve Bank of Australia, the US Consulate and a television network, is one of the most monitored places in Australia, bristling with surveillance cameras. It was also the supposed site of an alleged ISIS plot to behead someone, a claim that became the pretext for Australia's largest ever para-military police "counter-terrorism" raids in September—raids that produced a solitary arrest on a vague and unspecified charge of "conspiring" to plan "a terrorist act."

Yet Monis apparently walked through Martin Place wearing a headband with Islamic inscriptions and carrying a sports bag with a shotgun. At least two witnesses reportedly observed him, including a woman who called the police. Within minutes of him entering the café, hundreds of police descended on the area and sealed it off.

Why were Monis's identity and demands suppressed?

Senior police officials provided no information about Monis or his demands and maintained a pall of secrecy over the entire negotiating process—supposedly to ensure the safety of the hostages and to ensure "a peaceful resolution."

Hostages have begun to disclose the phone calls and videos they recorded and sent, at Monis's behest, to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Radio 2GB and the Nine and Seven television networks. All refused to broadcast the material, complying with government and police requests. Some of the videos circulated on social media on Monday night before being removed by YouTube.

Following the end of the siege, the media has released Monis's demands, which were limited and not accompanied by violent threats. In fact, even the police acknowledged during Monday that no hostages had been harmed.

In exchange for an on-air live phone call with Abbott, Monis was prepared to release five hostages. In return for a public declaration from the government that his was an act of terror committed on behalf of ISIS, he was prepared to release two more. And for a black ISIS flag he was prepared to release a final prisoner.

No official explanation has been offered as to why no genuine negotiation took place with Monis or why his demands were suppressed. The desperation of the hostages was evident in a call—reported in today's *Sydney Morning Herald*—by Selina Win Pe to the *Daily Telegraph* in which she pleaded for Abbott to speak to Monis.

"He [Abbott] clearly doesn't give a shit because he hasn't called us since 9.45 this morning... Help us. Help to get Tony Abbott to call this gentleman... to send the fucking Islamic flag," she begged. But the pleas of Win Pe and other hostages were simply ignored.

Neither the government nor the police seemed to have the slightest intention over the 16 hours of siege of meeting even the most minimal of Monis's demands. The obvious question is why, and who made that decision? The rather chilling implication is that the government did not want a peaceful resolution.

Why was the decision made to storm the café?

Why did the siege culminate in a full-scale assault by para-

military commandos just after 2 a.m. yesterday? The media was kept far away from the scene, but long-distance footage showed heavily-armed units storming the building, firing stun grenades and semi-automatic weapons.

More than 36 hours after the event, the state and federal governments and police have made no official statement on why the café was stormed and what took place inside. Various unattributed accounts have been circulated in the media claiming that the police actions were prompted by a shot inside the café. But if that is the case, why has no official explanation been made? That is, unless a cover-up is being contrived.

Apart from costing two innocent lives, and injuring five other hostages, the bloody end meant that Monis did not live to give his account of events, or testify at a criminal trial.

Who killed the hostages?

It also remains unclear, according to New South Wales Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione, whether the two fatally shot hostages, Katrina Dawson, 34, and Tori Johnson, 38, were killed by the police or the hostage-taker.

Facing reporters' questions about the final moments inside the café, Scipione called for investigators to be given time to piece together the answers. "We need to find out what's happened here and inside that café," he said, adding: "It is not time to speculate or develop theories."

However, the silence itself suggests that police gunfire killed and wounded hostages. If Monis had shot a hostage, the police would not hesitate to make that known.

Instead, an internal police whitewash has been set in motion. Deputy Police Commissioner Catherine Burn later said homicide detectives would prepare a report for the state's coroner, with "independent oversight" from the police's own Professional Standards Command. She said the inquiry would take weeks and "possibly months."

None of these questions are being asked, let alone probed, by the establishment media which from the outset of the siege have been fully integrated into the massive police operation. The Abbott government seized on the incident and transformed it into a major national crisis in order to advance its own reactionary agenda of extending already far-reaching police powers and to justify its support for the US war drive, particularly in the Middle East.



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