

Australian government announces “review” of Sydney siege

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The Australian government and the New South Wales (NSW) state government have announced that they will conduct a joint review into Monday’s hostage crisis at the Lindt Chocolate Café in Sydney’s Martin Place. The review’s terms of reference make clear that it is a reactionary effort to divert away from the central questions posed by events that resulted in the death of two innocent people and the hostage-taker, 50-year-old Man Haron Monis.

The starting point of the review, which will be carried out by senior public servants, will be to examine the circumstances under which Monis, a refugee from Iran, was allowed to settle in Australia in 1996. It will examine how he obtained a firearm and why he was able to claim unemployment benefits for over 10 years.

The review will question why he was not placed on a house arrest “control order” because of his well known opposition to Australia’s involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Monis had been charged in 2007 with sending “offensive” letters to the families of Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan. The review will question why courts granted him bail after he was charged earlier in the year with still unproven allegations that he was an accessory to the murder of his ex-wife and committed a number of sexual assaults. It will also examine why he qualified to receive legal aid.

The focus on Monis is aimed at suppressing any critical examination of the response of the government and the state apparatus to the hostage situation. No explanation has been given as to why a police matter in one city, involving a lone gunman, was elevated by the Abbott government and the security agencies to the status of a national counter-terrorism emergency.

In unprecedented scenes, hundreds of heavily armed police were mobilised to lock down central Sydney.

The NSW parliament building and the Opera House were evacuated. Police were deployed at the airport and at train stations and public buildings in working class suburbs, kilometres away from the city. Police were mobilised in all other major Australian cities and an elite police squad was stationed outside the Australian consulate in New York.

Every aspect of the mobilisation and related media coverage was calculated to generate fear and alarm and manufacture the false perception that the country was under a major terrorist attack by an “enemy within.” Meetings of the National Security Committee of the Cabinet, national addresses by Abbott, pledges of unity by the Labor Party and Green opposition, and statements of “support” from the US and other countries were used to amplify the war atmosphere.

These extraordinary developments can be understood only in the context of the commitment of the entire Australian political establishment to escalating US-led military operations and diplomatic intrigues around the world. Throughout 2014, the Abbott government, with the full backing of the Labor opposition, has boosted Australia’s role as a key partner in the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and Washington’s military build-up against China in Asia by joining in Washington’s renewed military intervention in the Middle East and its provocations against Russia in Europe.

For well over a decade, the so-called “war on terror” has been used as the justification for wholesale attacks on democratic rights and a massive expansion of the intelligence and security apparatus. The edifice of a police state has been established in Australia to politically intimidate and suppress opposition. At the same time, efforts are being made to promote paranoia about terrorism and encourage nationalism and patriotism in an effort to generate a social base for a

militarist foreign policy. The state propaganda campaigns have become ever more frantic and reckless as class tensions have risen due to a sharp deterioration in economic conditions and growing social inequality.

Monday's events came less than three months after the Abbott government raised Australia's terrorist alert to "high" and carried out the largest-ever police raids in Sydney purportedly to prevent Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) sympathisers kidnapping and beheading someone. The terror alert and the raids, however, provoked widespread public suspicion, as they were carried out just days after Australian jets and troops were sent back to Iraq.

Only one person was charged, on the basis of vague and dubious evidence. A sword confiscated by police turned out to be a Shiite plastic ornament.

The subsequent police killing in Melbourne of 17-year-old Numan Haider, who allegedly attacked two officers with a knife after his home was searched, also generated considerable disquiet.

The Abbott government immediately seized on the hostage crisis Monday morning to heighten public fears and exploit the situation to promote the bogus "war on terror." It also appears that actions were taken at the highest level of government and the security apparatus to ensure that the siege did not end peacefully. At a press conference yesterday, Tony Abbott admitted that a decision was made not to meet any of Monis's demands or to seriously negotiate with him.

Monis did not harm any of his hostages after he seized them at 9.45 a.m. Instead, he conveyed offers to release most of them if he was given an ISIS flag, if his actions were described by the media as an ISIS operation, and if Abbott spoke with him. Abbott told journalists that he was advised by the police not to have any contact with the hostage-taker. He provided no explanation and he faced no further questions.

Monis's other demands were also ignored. Abbott and the police refused to directly link his actions with ISIS, referring to them only as "politically motivated." The media completely collaborated with the government to suppress Monis's name and background and to block the attempts he made through social media to publicise his demands.

According to media accounts of surviving hostages, Monis grew increasingly agitated throughout the day. Instead of negotiations that could have led to a peaceful

conclusion, the crisis was left to drag on into the night. It ended with the police storming of the café at 2 a.m. on Tuesday and an exchange of gunfire that left three people dead and five wounded. The police have still not provided an official explanation of what took place prior to the assault, why it was necessary to kill Monis, or how many of the deaths and injuries were caused by their actions.

Announcing the review yesterday, Abbott left little doubt that the death of two innocent hostages will be exploited to justify further increases in the size, funding and powers of the intelligence agencies and the police and a dramatic escalation of attacks on civil liberties. Abbott ominously asserted that there were "certainly hundreds of people" in Australia whose views meant they "are at the least of potential interest to our security services."



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