Governments, media internationally respond to the Sydney siege

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The reaction of governments and the media in the US and internationally to Monday's hostage crisis in the centre of Sydney highlights what is now a well-practiced modus operandi in the "war on terror." Incidents and events that in and of themselves might be terrible and shocking are seized on, ripped from their context and inflated into national and international crises in a bid to shift public opinion behind an agenda of war and militarism.

Less than an hour after a disturbed gunman took 17 people hostage in the Lindt cafe, Prime Minister Tony Abbott convened the cabinet's National Security Committee and launched counter-terrorism operations in Sydney and other major cities. The hostage-taker Man Haron Monis, an Iranian refugee, was well known to police and intelligence agencies as a mentally unstable individual. Despite displaying an Islamic flag in the cafe window, he had no connection to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al Qaeda or their affiliates.

What could have been treated as a serious but relatively straightforward police matter was turned into a massive security operation and presented as a city and a nation under "terrorist" siege. No attempt was made to negotiate with Monis, who wanted to air his longstanding grievances. The 16-hour stand-off ended tragically with the death of two innocent people and the hostage-taker after paramilitary police stormed the cafe.

From the outset, the Abbott government acted in concert with the US and other allies in the "war on terror." US President Barack Obama was briefed by his top counter-terrorism adviser, as were other international leaders. Australian Associated Press reported that New York police "ramped up security at landmarks including the Empire State Building, Wall Street, Columbus Circle and Times Square, as well as the Australian consulate."

Speaking in London on Tuesday, US Secretary of State John Kerry offered "whatever appropriate assistance we can," including to "hold accountable anyone and everyone responsible for this act of terror." He conflated the actions of the isolated hostage-taker in Sydney with the terrorist attack on a public school in Pakistan in order to justify US actions "to help solve the challenges of the Middle East and other places of extremism and of terrorist activity"—in other words, the new US-led war in Iraq and Syria, as well as the ongoing drone attacks across the region.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper denounced the siege as "a barbaric act of depravity on innocent civilians who were merely going about their daily routine." Just two months ago, Harper seized on the killing of a soldier in Ottawa by a disturbed individual to generate an atmosphere of national crisis, lock down much of the downtown areas and drive government policy further to the right. In the wake of the Ottawa attack, Harper pledged that his government would "redouble" its efforts to work with allies to deny terrorists "safe haven" anywhere in the world.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, along with his New Zealand counterpart John Key, used the hostage-taking in Sydney to warn that "lone wolf" terrorist incidents "could just as well happen here in the UK or in Europe." As well as feeding into the propaganda for the war in the Middle East, public fears are being stoked up of "lone wolf" attacks—that is, the criminal acts of isolated individuals—to justify sweeping new police powers.

Political leaders in Japan, the Netherlands, Ukraine, Singapore and Malaysia sent similar messages of solidarity with the Australian government.

The ability of governments to shamelessly exploit the

Sydney siege depended on a servile media, which, in Australia, was crucial in fuelling fear and hysteria that the country was under "terrorist" attack. Just as journalists are now routinely embedded with the military in foreign wars, the Australian press and television took their instructions from the police and security agencies, which deliberately kept the public in the dark.

The wall-to-wall coverage in Australia was matched by CNN, Fox News, MSNBC and other 24-hour news channels. When heavily-armed police stormed the Lindt cafe in the early hours of Tuesday morning, the scene was beamed live around the world. The web sites of major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *Le Monde* and the British-based *Times*, featured photos of hostages running for their lives.

While some newspapers hesitated to characterise the events as a terrorist act, most framed the hostage-taking as another attack by "global terrorism." The British-based *Daily Mirror*, for instance, featured a headline, "Jihadi hostage bloodbath," while the *Times* declared that "a radical Muslim cleric [had] subjected Australia to 16 hours of terror."

The absence of criticism highlights the role of the media as a propaganda arm of government policies. The one exception—a biting critique by British comedian and author Russell Brand of the actions of the Abbott government and the Murdoch media in particular—only underscored the general rule. Brand pointed out: "Terrorism is continually used as a tool to control the domestic population. I'm not saying there aren't a lot of dangerous people out there, I'm saying a lot of those people are in government."

The *Wall Street Journal* made the underlying agenda explicit in an editorial entitled "Terror in Sydney" which presented the Sydney siege as an ISIS plot. "The long reach of Islamist terror hit another Western city on Monday with a siege in downtown Sydney and we should expect more like it as Islamic State (ISIS) tries to mobilise adherents across the world," it warned.

Having hailed Australia as "America's staunchest ally in fighting terrorism, deploying troops to Afghanistan, Iraq and now Iraq again," the editorial concluded that the war in the Middle East had to be accelerated because "ISIS successes in the Middle East could motivate [Islamic] radicals everywhere... The real lesson is that preventing ISIS from taking Baghdad—then destroying the group—is a matter of basic security for Sydney, New York and the rest of the civilised world."

In reality, the new US-led war in the Middle East has nothing more to do with "fighting global terrorism" than the occupation of Iraq more than a decade ago was about ending the threat of weapons of mass destruction. Then, as now, the aim of US imperialism is to secure its strategic domination over the energy-rich Middle East in order to shore up its global hegemony.

The criminal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were justified by lies designed to whip fears and hysteria about a world under siege from Al Qaeda terrorists and Iraqi nuclear and chemical weapons. Those propaganda methods have now become standard operating procedure. Falsehoods, half-truths and the demonisation of intended targets are the means by which a thoroughly reactionary agenda of war abroad and police-state measures at home is being advanced. The hostage siege in a Sydney cafe is the latest tragedy to be exploited for these ends.