

# Australia: Political cover-up over Sydney siege continues

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The first eight-day session of a planned year-long inquest by the New South Wales Coroners Court into last December's Sydney siege began on May 25, focussing entirely on the background and history of the hostage taker, Man Horan Monis.

The evidence presented demonstrated beyond any doubt that Monis was not a "terrorist" acting on behalf of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but a mentally unstable and disoriented individual. At the same time, critical questions about his relations with the police and intelligence agencies were deliberately avoided.

Armed with a shotgun, Monis took over the Lindt café in Martin Place on the morning of December 15. The Australian government, with the full support of the media and opposition parties, transformed what was a terrible, but nevertheless relatively straightforward, police matter, into a full-blown national "terrorist" crisis. Hundreds of police sealed off central Sydney, evacuating thousands of people, and many more officers were mobilised in Sydney suburbs and other cities.

No serious attempt was made to negotiate with Monis, who was well known to the police and intelligence agencies. His limited demands and identity were not made public. The protracted stand-off ended tragically when heavily-armed paramilitary police stormed the café at about 2 a.m. on December 16, leaving Monis and two hostages—barrister Katrina Dawson and café manager Tori Johnson—dead.

Just last week, Prime Minister Tony Abbott continued to peddle the lie that the siege was the work of ISIS. He told a counter-terrorism conference in Sydney that ISIS was seeking world domination. "The tentacles of the death cult have extended even here, as we discovered to our cost with the Martin Place siege last December," he declared.

The purpose of this fiction is to justify the massive police mobilisation last December, defend the commitment of Australian troops to a new war in Iraq and Syria, and further inflate the "terrorist threat" as the pretext for a raft of new anti-democratic laws.

However, as the detailed presentation made by lawyers Jeremy Gormly and Sophie Callan, who are assisting Coroner Michael Barnes, confirmed, Monis had no connections with ISIS or any other Islamist terror group. His belated conversion

from Shiite to Sunni Islam and his declaration of allegiance to ISIS, were the product of a troubled and erratic individual, "prone to grandiose claims" and whose life was in a deep crisis.

After arriving in Australia in 1996 and seeking asylum, Monis worked as a carpet salesman, became a security guard, postured as a Shiite cleric, and ran a clairvoyant and spiritual healing business. He was treated for depression in 2005, schizophrenia in 2010 and other psychological problems in 2011. At one point, he even attempted to join the Rebels motorcycle gang, which eventually rejected his membership, describing him as "weird."

Monis had many encounters with police and security agencies. In 2009, he was arrested on a charge of sending "offensive" letters to the families of Australian soldiers, an offence to which he eventually pled guilty in September 2013, after taking his case all the way to the High Court. A month later he was charged with being an accessory to the murder of his ex-wife. In 2014, Monis was charged with over 40 counts of indecent and sexual assault in relation to the customers of his spiritual healing business.

Gormly stated that in the months leading up to the siege, Monis was "a man spiralling downwards." He ran out of money, had no friends in the Islamic community, and faced multiple court cases that could result in lengthy prison sentences. However, as far as Gormly was concerned, what triggered the siege is an unfathomable, psychological mystery that will never be solved, because the perpetrator is dead.

Such a conclusion is based on a glaring omission. While the inquest dealt in considerable detail with aspects of Monis's life, no examination was made of his relations with the police and spy agencies, particularly the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

There is a long record of the security services in the United States, Australia and elsewhere exploiting confused and unstable individuals for various purposes, including the manufacture of "terrorist scares." Yet none of the obvious questions was asked, let alone answered.

Monis claimed that he worked for Iranian intelligence while in Iran, and was then recruited by the CIA on a business trip to Romania and flown to Washington to meet top officials. He

contacted ASIO on numerous occasions, offering to provide information on various terrorist activities, including 9/11 and possible suicide attacks in Australia.

Monis was the subject of four ASIO security assessments and separate inquiries by state and federal police. The first ASIO investigation found that he posed a “possible risk to national security” and opposed him being given a protection visa. Yet, a year later, without explanation, the decision was reversed and he was granted a visa in 2000.

Similarly, ASIO investigated Monis after he launched a web site opposing Australian military involvement in the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. ASIO concluded that although Monis used inflammatory language, he was unlikely to engage in violent attacks. Separately, NSW Police and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) also found no indication of an imminent threat.

The hands-off approach to Monis became far more evident in the weeks leading up to the Sydney siege.

In September, the Abbott government raised the terrorist alert level from medium to high, signifying that the risk of an attack is likely, but without a specific plot being identified.

Just a week later, 800 police and ASIO agents conducted early morning raids on 15 homes in 12 Sydney suburbs on the basis of tenuous evidence of a phone call from an ISIS member in the Middle East to one young man, allegedly telling him to carry out a high-profile murder. Lurid media headlines proclaimed an ISIS plot to carry out a beheading in central Sydney—claims later found to be false. A sword seized in the raids turned out to be plastic.

Further terror scares followed, conveniently timed to coincide with the dispatch of Australian military forces to the Middle East and a battery of draconian new anti-terror laws. Yet, in this climate of deliberately heightened tension, with the government, intelligence agencies and police on high alert, Monis’s declarations of support for ISIS were brushed aside.

The Abbott government is directly implicated. Monis wrote to Attorney-General George Brandis on October 9, wanting to know about the legality of writing to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Brandis claims that his department assessed Monis as posing no danger and sent a routine reply, advising him to seek legal advice elsewhere.

The government, clearly sensitive to the implication of ignoring the letter, sought to cover its tracks. Under pressure, Brandis and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop claimed that the letter was referred to a federal-NSW investigation into the Sydney siege, which decided that it was of no significance. As it later turned out, the letter was not referred to the inquiry and no such determination was made.

The letter to Brandis was not the only red flag. On November 17, a month before the Lindt café siege, Monis declared on his site that he had converted from Shiite to Sunni Islam and pledged his allegiance to the Caliph—a reference to al-Baghdadi. Between December 9 and 12, the National Security Hotline

received 18 calls and emails drawing attention to Monis’ Facebook page. Yet no ASIO and AFP alerts were issued.

The least plausible explanation is that this was an “intelligence failure”—the product of a lack of resources. Over the past decade and a half, successive Liberal-National and Labor governments have vastly expanded the resources and powers of ASIO and the AFP. Far more likely, and more sinister, is the involvement of the security agencies, directly or indirectly.

The anti-terror raids in September did not have the desired impact. Only one of those detained was charged with a terrorist-related offence and, after the sword was exposed as plastic, the headlines of a “beheading in Sydney” were laughable.

It is quite possible that the intelligence agencies turned a blind eye to Monis’s activities, or even deliberately wound him up, in the hope that he would create an incident that could be exploited to boost the “war on terror.” If that were the case, the outcome could be counted “a success.” The Sydney siege made headlines around the world and was used by US Secretary of State John Kerry to justify the US military intervention in Iraq and Syria.

One can predict in advance that none of these issues will be canvassed, let alone thoroughly investigated. That would puncture the concocted official story portraying the siege as a “national terrorist crisis” and could well expose government ministers and top intelligence officials to legal action.

Coroner Barnes has already ruled that segments of the year-long inquiry will be held behind closed doors. Counsel Gormly explained that any examination of the Australian security agencies’ monitoring of Monis could “compromise” national security. “It may be that some of Your Honour’s findings can never be publicly exposed,” he said.

*The authors also recommends:*

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