Australian inquest into Sydney siege whitewashes unanswered questions

Mike Head
25 May 2017

The New South Wales (NSW) Coroner's findings and recommendations on the December 2014 Sydney café siege, released yesterday, have left unanswered all the critical questions about the globally-publicised event.

The Lindt café siege, which ended with the deaths of two hostages, café manager Tori Johnson and lawyer Katrina Dawson, as well as the hostage-taker, Man Haron Monis, had remarkable parallels with similar incidents labeled as "terrorist" around the world, including this week's Manchester bombing.

First and foremost, it was perpetrated by a mentally-disturbed individual, who had long been under close surveillance by police and intelligence agencies

Secondly, as the coroner's report admits, Monis, who claimed to be acting in the name of ISIS, had no links to any terrorist group. He was, according to the coroner, a "delusional" and "obsessional" man, with a history of psychiatric examinations for mental health problems. Far from a secretive "terrorist," he had conducted public protests since 2000, usually railing against Australia's prominent role in criminal US-led wars throughout the Middle East.

Moreover, Monis had been known by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the country's primary political surveillance agency, since at least 1996. As confirmed by the coroner's report, ASIO assisted the Iranian-born man to obtain a refugee visa in 2000, after he claimed to have had high-level contact with the CIA. Later, despite facing serious criminal charges, including conspiracy to murder, Monis was, extraordinarily, released on bail.

Significantly, the coroner's report is heavily redacted, on the grounds of "national security," which means that no public scrutiny of police and ASIO connections with Monis is possible. At the same time, members of the public, even the families of the hostages, were excluded from those closed-door sessions of the inquest that reviewed ASIO's role. A classified version of the chapter on ASIO is being kept secret. The published version concedes that: "Monis remained on ASIO's radar and was susceptible to ASIO scrutiny if and when required."

According to the coroner's report, ASIO's responses to Monis were "proportionate," even after Monis wrote to senior politicians, including Attorney-General George Brandis, asking how to contact ISIS and announced, via social media, his allegiance to ISIS. Likewise excused was ASIO's "failure to review" efforts by members of the public to raise alarms about Monis's conduct. Between December 9 and 12 alone, 18 calls were made to the National Security Hotline to report Monis's on-line postings, only to be brushed off by ASIO.

These and many other apparent "flaws" in police and ASIO responses are implausibly attributed to "mistakes," such as "logging deficiencies" or "lack of communications."

Likewise, the inquest report leaves unexplained misleading official statements, made during the siege, by police commanders and then NSW Premier Mike Baird, that "world class" negotiators were engaged with Monis.

In reality, there were no direct talks with Monis. He refused to talk to the police, but made frantic offers, via the hostages themselves, to release some of his captives if he were given time on radio to explain his grievances, or to have an on-air conversation with Prime Minister Tony Abbott, or to be given an ISIS flag. Later, increasingly agitated by the rejection of his demands, Monis asked for the street lights outside the café to be turned off.

At least eight desperate phone calls, made by the hostages to a number they were told would connect with police negotiators, went unanswered. An "unknown" number of their calls were diverted to other police numbers.

None of Monis's limited demands, which were suppressed by the media under police orders, was

© World Socialist Web Site

negotiated. The police also rejected offers of mediation from people who knew Monis, including his previous lawyers and prominent Muslims.

The only justification offered by the inquest report is that the National Counter Terrorism Plan 2012, adopted up by all federal and state governments, prohibited "concessions to terrorists."

Despite it being "entirely appropriate" not to accede to Monis's demands, the coroner suggests that some of Monis's demands could have been explored, to ease his rising "anger and frustration." The coroner also concludes there was no evidence that Monis initially intended to kill any hostages.

All the evidence indicates that the lack of negotiations was not a mistake or due to incompetence, but a decision taken at top levels of the state apparatus and government. From the outset, the police Emergency Action plan was based on armed intervention in the event of "death or serious injury."

There is every indication that neither the state nor federal government wanted the siege to end quietly, with Monis simply arrested. Such an outcome would have called into question the large-scale "anti-terror" operation that had been immediately set in motion. It would also have led to a criminal trial, in which the unstable Monis could have revealed details of his ongoing relations with ASIO and the police.

Above all, the coroner's report covers up any examination of how and why the federal and state Liberal-National governments, backed by the Labor Party and the corporate media, exploited the café siege to proclaim that Australia had entered the "age of terrorism."

From the beginning, the 16-hour siege was carried out, not as a police operation to deal with a deranged individual, but as a nationwide terrorist emergency.

Within half an hour of the siege commencing, the federal government had convened its cabinet's national security committee, involving senior ministers, intelligence, police and military officials, which met a further two times during the course of the day. Police and military forces were mobilised across the country.

The coroner's report makes no examination of this high-level political involvement.

With the complicity of the media, the population was subjected to a barrage of newspaper, television and radio coverage, falsely portraying the incident as a full-scale terrorist attack. These lies were taken up around the word, notably by the Obama administration, whose secretary of state, John Kerry, declared the siege showed why the US was engaged militarily "in more places with more partners" than ever before.

As with other alleged terrorist attacks, the Sydney siege was used to stoke fears of terrorism, provide pretexts for the ever-greater expansion of police, spy and military powers and justify Australian involvement in escalating US-led military aggression.

The incident came at a critical political juncture. It followed the federal government's decision to send Australian military forces to the latest US-led war in the Middle East and the introduction of a swathe of new "anti-terrorist" laws, handing further unprecedented powers to the police and spy agencies.

Today, supposedly in response to the coroner's findings, the ruling class is demanding even greater police-state measures, including the power to mobilise troops onto the streets, as the British government has done under the cover of the Manchester bombing. As well, calls are being made for more explicit "shoot to kill" powers for police, harsh bail laws and more restrictive visa rules.

An editorial today in Murdoch's *Australian*, after embracing the report's line of a "cascading series of institutional and operational errors," seizes on the coroner's finding that the police waited too long before storming the café. Violent police action should not be a "last resort," it insisted.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has quickly foreshadowed the imminent release of a review into the country's already considerable military callout powers. Last week, he also indicated preparations to send more military forces to the Middle East, at the request of the Trump administration.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site