

Melbourne airport incident raises questions about Australian “terrorism” scare campaigns

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The extraordinary police handling of an incident involving a mentally disturbed young man on a Malaysia Airlines flight from Melbourne airport on Wednesday night again points to the atmosphere of terrorist scares being whipped up by the political and media establishment.

By their actions, the police transformed what could have been a relatively minor, albeit frightening episode, into another major terrorist operation. It generated media headlines and images of para-military police, toting semi-automatic rifles and wearing helmets and body armour, storming the plane.

The incident began about eight minutes after MH128 to Kuala Lumpur took off, just before 11.30 pm. A young man allegedly rushed to the cockpit door, brandishing a suspicious object and threatening to blow up the plane. He was quickly tackled and subdued by passengers, while the flight was instructed to return to Melbourne.

Terrified passengers on board flight MH128 were forced to wait 90 minutes before tactical response officers burst into the plane. Nearly two hours earlier, a number of passengers had themselves restrained and shackled the man.

Several passengers had the young man pinned to the floor between a row of seats. Yet police delayed entering the plane, despite distraught passengers calling the triple-0 emergency line to plead with them to come on board. Passengers were originally assured that police would be on hand within 10 minutes.

Melbourne’s Tullamarine airport, Australia’s second busiest, was shut down for hours, disrupting flights throughout Thursday morning.

Then, the police conceded that the incident was not terrorist-related at all. The young man was revealed to be Manodh Marks, 25, a Sri Lankan trainee chef in Australia,

who had only been released from a psychiatric ward earlier on Wednesday.

The object Marks carried turned out to be a harmless Bluetooth speaker. Victoria Police Superintendent Tony Langdon said: “It was quite quickly ascertained it wasn’t an explosive device.” It was a piece of equipment that “everybody would be carrying around on a daily basis.”

Angry passengers condemned the police response. “We rang triple-0 to say ‘Get us out of this flight’,” Melbourne mother Priya Shanmuganathan, who was travelling to London with her husband and two young children, told the *Australian*. “Is it safe? Is it not a bomb? Is it contained? There was just no information whatsoever. We were just sitting there like sitting ducks.”

Andrew Leoncelli, one of the passengers who restrained Marks, told Channel Seven’s “Sunrise” program yesterday he was “extremely concerned” about the wait. “We didn’t know what it [the device] was and didn’t know how long they [the police] were going to be,” he said. “We just had a lot of uncertainty, it’s not great.”

Another passenger involved, Scott Lodge, told reporters people were “on edge, anxious, nervous, worried ... Eventually Team SWAT come rolling in with the biggest guns ever, the full works, heads down.”

Lawyer Dan Toner, who also intervened, said: “Honestly, if he were a real terrorist we would have been toast. You see this huge ring of police and firefighters in this perimeter all around the plane, all these flashing lights and personnel just standing around and doing nothing at all, while we’re just sitting there wondering what on earth was going on.”

Another passenger, Stan Young, pointed to an obvious contradiction in the police action. “If there was a bomb on that plane we should have been evacuated from it,” he said. “Instead we sat there for an hour and a half.”

Indeed, if the police thought a bomb might be aboard the fully fuel-laden aircraft, the passengers and crew were left in dire danger.

Alternatively, if the Bluetooth speaker was no threat, police had no need to storm the aircraft. It would have been sufficient for a couple of officers to board the plane, perhaps accompanied by a psychiatrist and a medical team, to take Marks away for treatment.

Dismissing the passengers' outrage, Victorian state Premier Daniel Andrews immediately sprang to the defence of the police. Far from waiting for any investigation, let alone calling for an inquiry, he declared: "It would have been certainly worse if police had rushed in and potentially made a bad situation much, much worse."

Andrews's response was in line with the record of the Labor Party, both at state and federal levels, in initiating or supporting every escalation of the powers and resources placed in the hands of the police and intelligence agencies under the cover of the "war on terrorism" since 2001.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull did his best to exploit the police operation to justify further ratcheting up police powers. While telling federal parliament the incident was "not currently being treated as terrorism-related," he said Australia's "comprehensive and strong" transport security measures were being continually reviewed.

Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton defiantly described the police operation as a success. He claimed the delay was due to police investigating who was on board, the potential for terrorism and the possibility of another device or devices. Even though Marks was "essentially trussed up," Ashton said, "counter-terrorism response protocols kicked in at that point."

By the end of yesterday, a discrepancy emerged in the police timeline of the incident. Ashton initially said it took about 20 minutes for Special Operations Group officers to arrive on the scene. According to the latest Victoria Police timeline, it took 44 minutes—more than twice as long.

Many unanswered questions remain. One thing seems clear, however. Even after the passengers had subdued the obviously distressed young man, his actions were designated as a terrorist incident.

This atmosphere of terrorist alert continued for hours after the police commandos burst into the aircraft. Exhausted passengers were isolated, searched and detained for questioning all night. The last of them were finally released just before midday yesterday, nearly 13

hours after their ordeal began.

Instead of being treated as a mentally-ill patient, Marks has been charged with two serious federal offences that could see him jailed for 20 years—threatening to destroy, kill or injure a person on an aircraft and recklessly threatening to detonate an explosive device.

Marks did not appear in court yesterday. "He does have concerns for his safety in custody," defence lawyer Tess Dunsford told the magistrate, saying her client suffers from a psychiatric illness and would not be applying for bail.

The MH128 operation is the latest in a long line of incidents that the police and intelligence agencies, backed by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, have elevated into terrorist emergencies. The incident came less than a week after the release of the coroner's report into the December 2014 Sydney café siege.

The report covered over all the critical questions about that globally-publicised event, which was triggered by a mentally-disturbed individual, who had long been under close surveillance by police and intelligence agencies. Above all, the report said nothing about how the federal and state governments seized upon the siege to activate a major "counter-terrorism" operation.

The underlying purpose of all these operations is 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, especially in the Middle East.



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