

# Australia: Questions about Bondi terrorist attack remain unanswered

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More than two months since the December 14 terrorist attack on a Jewish gathering at Sydney's Bondi Beach, in which two Islamic State-inspired gunmen murdered 15 people, questions about how the atrocity was able to be perpetrated remain entirely unanswered.

There has been no convincing explanation as to how the assailants, father and son Sajid and Naveed Akram, were able to plan the atrocity, assemble an arsenal of high-powered weaponry and perpetrate their crime without state intervention. The younger attacker, who survived, had been on the radar of the authorities as an associate of a convicted Islamic State terrorist, and it appears that the father, who was shot dead by police, was also known.

The Bondi atrocity, the most deadly terrorist attack on Australian soil, has dominated political and media discussion since it occurred. The crime has been invoked by Labor governments, federal and state, to implement unprecedented measures, ranging from police powers to ban all protests to new provisions for organisations and political parties to be illegalised on the vague grounds that they promote "hate speech."

But despite its centrality to political life, the attack itself is increasingly remote in the official discussion. It is invoked in passing to justify sweeping attacks on the democratic rights of millions of people, without reference to the background, political identity or connections of the perpetrators themselves.

There are two basic reasons for that contradiction.

Firstly, the attack has been seized upon by the ruling elite and its political representatives, above all the Labor governments, to crackdown on the mass movement against the Israeli genocide in Gaza, which had no connection whatsoever with the Bondi atrocity. Secondly, information that has emerged about the perpetrators raises grave questions about the role of state and federal authorities, particularly the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic spy agency.

On the night of the attack, government and police officials stated that Naveed Akram had at one stage come to the attention of ASIO, but suggested that he had been only of peripheral interest.

It was later admitted that the younger attacker had in fact been investigated by the spy agency for six months in 2019, over his close relationship with Isaac El Matari. The previous year El Matari had returned to Australia, having been jailed for nine months in Lebanon for attempting to join Islamic State.

El Matari allegedly sought to develop a base of support for Islamic State in Sydney. Arrested in 2019 and convicted of terror offenses two years later, he was accused of having discussed among other things the possibility of mass casualty terrorist attacks at famous landmarks in Sydney. By this point, Islamic State had carried out multiple mass

atrocities in Western capitals and Sunni Islamic extremism had been listed by ASIO as the greatest terrorist threat for the best part of twenty years.

All of that would be enough to cast questions over ASIO's claim that it discontinued surveillance of Naveed Akram in 2019 having concluded he was not a threat. But further doubts were raised by a rare exception to the general media disinterest, an investigation by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) "Four Corners" program that aired earlier this month.

The program was substantially based on the claims of "Marcus," an individual who asserts that in 2019 he was directed by ASIO to infiltrate a small Sunni extremist milieu in Sydney centred on street proselytizing and a prayer circle headed by Wissam Haddad.

Marcus told the program that he began warning ASIO that the younger Akram was a supporter of Islamic State in 2019. During the month of Ramadan in that year, Marcus claimed that Naveed Akram had attended a small religious retreat with El Matari and others of his associates.

Marcus claimed that during the retreat Akram had been "brainwashed." During those 10 nights, Naveed was exposed to material of ISIS, including clips, videos, magazines from the Philippines, from Afghanistan, from some parts in Syria and Iraq," he stated. The ABC stated that while it was able to verify that the retreat had occurred, it could not independently confirm Marcus' description of its extremist content.

Significantly, Marcus also claimed that Sajid Akram, the older attacker, was an Islamic State supporter at the time. Marcus said he thought the father was "even more extremist" than the son, and that after El Matari's arrest he had justified the latter's terrorist plans in a discussion with the ASIO agent.

That Sajid Akram was involved with the same extremist milieu as his son was confirmed by an individual known as Ye Ye, a close associate of Haddad. As per the ABC, "Ye Ye told 'Four Corners' he bonded with Sajid Akram over their interest in the early lectures of Anwar al-Awlaki, the US-born Al Qaeda cleric killed in a US drone strike in 2011." According to Ye Ye, it was Sajid Akram who introduced his son to the hardline religious circle.

Sajid Akram was also interviewed by ASIO in 2019, during which he reportedly gave an undertaking to keep his son away from extremism. But based on the statements of both Marcus and Ye Ye, it appears that the father was himself an extremist. If he was open in his views with Marcus, it is difficult to understand how ASIO would have simply accepted such an undertaking.

Marcus' statements cannot be accepted uncritically. As a former informant, he is part of a murky world of intelligence operations,

centred on deception. And the circumstances of his falling out with ASIO remain unclear.

To the extent that there was discussion of supporting Islamic State and terrorism in the circles to which Marcus belonged, he himself had to present as an extremist, and now he no longer has the legal or political shield of being on ASIO's books. That may explain why, while stating that he had warned ASIO of Naveed Akram, he shared their 2019 assessment that he was not at that time a terror threat.

ASIO's response to the "Four Corners" program, however, which consisted of simultaneously questioning the veracity of Marcus' claims and issuing legal threats to the ABC, seemed decidedly to be a case of they do protest too much.

In any event, Marcus' presence, as an ASIO informant, in the tiny extremist Islamist milieu in which the Akrams circulated, testifies to the extent to which that milieu is not only surveilled by the intelligence agencies, but at times even directed or controlled by them. Marcus, originally from the Middle East, claims to have led prayer groups and other activities within the network while he was working with ASIO.

Wissam Haddad, who Marcus and others allege is at the head of the extremist network, has had antagonistic relations with much of the Islamic community for years. In the wake of the attack, two unnamed Muslim leaders told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that they had previously expressed their frustration to the police that Haddad had not been prosecuted for any serious crimes. They claimed that a senior police official responded that he was a "honey pot," i.e., someone who wittingly or unwittingly served as a point of attraction for other terrorists who could then be monitored by the authorities.

The ABC reported that according to its sources, in 2020, ASIO shared information about Naveed Akram with the Joint Counter Terrorism Team, comprising the Australian Federal Police and other agencies. In the same year New South Wales Police "interviewed the teenager and added him to an intelligence database, the Known Entity Management System (KEMS), which tracks people who could go on to become terrorists." Akram was supposedly removed from the KEMS sometime before the Bondi attack, but there is no public indication of when that occurred.

It was the very same year, 2020, that Sajid Akram applied for a firearms license. The granting of that license, by the NSW authorities, dragged on for three years, a circumstance that officials have ascribed to logjams.

In comments to the *Australian* in December, independent NSW MP Phil Donato, a former police prosecutor and licensed firearms holder, "I've never in my experience heard of someone waiting three years for an approval to be granted by the firearms registry. It begs the question—what was the reason for the delay? I don't accept it was a backlog of applications or being understaffed at the registry."

It should also be noted that the NSW Police have far-reaching powers to deny a gun license. According to the latest figures, reported by the *Guardian* last year, there are 8,717 people in the state who are subject to a Firearm Prohibition Order (FPO). That draconian power enables state authorities not only to ban an individual from purchasing guns, but also to conduct warrantless searches at any time to ensure they are not in possession of a firearm.

Given their background, the Akrams, by logic, would have been more likely to land on the FPO list than the registered gun owners' list.

In September 2023, upon receiving the license and completing a 28-day "cooling off" period, Sajid Akram immediately purchased

three shotguns. According to experts, the simultaneous purchase of identical weapons should have automatically triggered a review by the NSW gun authorities, but for reasons that have also not been explained, that did not occur.

But nothing has been explained. To the extent that there is any official explanation for the ease with which the Akrams assembled their arsenal and carried out their attack, it is put down to "failures to connect the dots," the fact that they supposedly went "off the radar" and other vague and unconvincing assertions.

One explanation, that had at least the semblance of a ring of truth to it, was provided by an unnamed intelligence source to the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) last December. The AFR characterized the source as saying, "When the risk of antisemitic attacks increased after the October 7 massacre in Israel, the former official said that ASIO likely focused on individuals linked with pro-Palestinian organisations rather than Islamic State, which had lost control of its Middle East territory by 2019."

Stripped of the biased framing, fraudulently associating opponents of the Israeli genocide in Gaza with antisemitism, that is a suggestion that ASIO was focussing on spying on and disrupting anti-war activists, rather than monitoring Islamic State supporters.

There is also the question of the relationship between western intelligence agencies and Islamic State itself. The organisation was spawned by a US-led intervention into Syria beginning in 2011, when the CIA funnelled billions in cash and weaponry to Islamist militias fighting the Iranian- and Russian-linked government of Bashar Al-Assad. The US was in a de facto alliance with the group that would become the Islamic State, only beginning operations against it when it crossed back into Iraq, threatening Washington's control over oil resources.

The current Syrian regime is the end product of the regime-change operation. Its leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, an Al Qaeda terrorist who previously had a US bounty on his head, has been feted in Washington and has moved to normalise ties with Israel.

That is a reminder that in foreign policy, reactionary Islamist forces have frequently been used as the direct or de facto instruments of US imperialism and its allies. Domestically, their activities, often conducted under the eye of the intelligence agencies, have been invoked to crackdown on democratic rights and to legitimise further militarism.



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