

Australia: Interim report provides no answers on Bondi terrorist attack

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An interim report released last Thursday by the Royal Commission ostensibly investigating the antisemitic December 14 terrorist attack at Sydney's Bondi Beach has not answered any of the questions about how the atrocity that claimed the lives of 15 people at a Hanukkah event occurred. Most starkly, any examination of the role of the federal policing and intelligence agencies has been publicly suppressed.

The Royal Commission will hold public hearings over the coming months before releasing a final report at the end of the year. It was established in January by the federal Labor government, after a ruling-class campaign involving virtually the entire corporate press, major business associations, the conservative Liberal-National Coalition, the anti-immigrant One Nation party and pro-Israel lobbyists.

The interim report underscores the real aim of the Commission, which is not to uncover the circumstances of the attack.

Instead, its purpose is to whitewash the security agencies, which failed to prevent the atrocity, and to blackguard mass opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza as antisemitism and akin to terrorism. The latter aim is reflected in the title of the Commission, which describes it not as an examination of the terrorist attack itself, but as an inquiry into "antisemitism and social cohesion."

The interim report is an exceptionally thin document. Including covers, it comprises just 159 pages. The first 19 are preliminaries, including an introduction, and the last 31 are a reproduction of the patent establishing the Commission and its terms of reference.

There is a substantial amount of filler in the little over 100 pages of substantive content. That includes a Wikipedia-style explanation of Hanukkah, and general descriptions of the role of various government and non-government organisations, from different branches of the police to the surf lifesaving agency, culled from their publicly accessible charters.

The report asserts a major growth of antisemitism since Israel began its genocidal onslaught on Gaza in October, 2023. But there is virtually no substantiation. The report is vague, but the clear intent is to conflate pro-Palestinian activities, such as protests which explicitly condemn antisemitism, with genuine anti-Jewish bigotry most horrifically expressed in the Bondi attack itself.

Chapter 5 is completely omitted from the publicly released report. It is described as being "concerned with Commonwealth and state intelligence and law enforcement agency activities in relation to the Bondi attack."

That is the chapter that would have touched on virtually all of the questions that have emerged since the attack.

Chief among them is the fact that the younger of the attackers, Naveed Akram, had been investigated for six months in 2019 by the

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). The probe was triggered by Akram's close association with Isaac El Matari, a supporter of the Islamic State organisation who was convicted of terrorist offences.

Akram was deemed by ASIO not to pose a threat, but the basis of that assessment, particularly in light of what he would subsequently carry out, has never been made public.

A February "Four Corners" program by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) featured the comments of a former ASIO informant, which raised more questions about ASIO's role. Going by the name of "Marcus," the whistleblower claimed that, on behalf of ASIO, he infiltrated a small Jihadist milieu that included El Matari. He stated that both of the Akrams had expressed support for the Islamic State and that he had passed that information on to his superiors.

If that is true, it makes even more unusual the already inexplicable ability of the Akrams to assemble an arsenal of high-powered weaponry. Sajid Akram applied for a gun license in New South Wales (NSW) in 2020, the same year the ASIO investigation of his son concluded. It was granted three years later. Sajid Akram's simultaneous purchase of several identical guns, upon receiving the license, should have triggered an alert to the NSW authorities, but it was not acted upon.

The Akrams were able to travel to "hotspot" locations, supposedly without any federal agency being aware. That included an almost month-long stay in Mindanao, an area of the Philippines that has been the scene of Islamist insurgencies, including one by the Islamic State. Last week, the ABC reported for the first time that "In the years before the attack, the Akrams travelled to Central Asia, where the influential Islamic State Khorasan Province branch operates."

While the entirety of Chapter 5 is suppressed, there is nothing anywhere else in the report about the Akrams, whose names do not appear.

In addition to the invocation of national security provisions protecting the intelligence agencies, the suppression is because Naveed Akram, who survived the attack, is being prosecuted on over 50 charges. Legal experts had warned that the rushed convening of the Royal Commission would render many of the circumstances and background to the attack off-limits due to sub justice. That is precisely what has occurred.

Those elements of the report that touch on federal agencies, even only in general terms, raise further questions. For instance, the report notes that from 2020–21 to 2024–25, funding for National Intelligence Community (NIC) agencies grew by 31 percent from \$10.9 billion to \$14.3 billion. Over that period, ASIO's budget skyrocketed by 37

percent.

However, the report states that, “Upon review of classified material, the Commission has observed that despite this overall increase, the proportion of funding allocated to counter-terrorism significantly declined across the NIC over the period from 2020 to 2025.”

The obvious question is, where was all of the funding going? Media coverage has suggested that the agencies were increasingly focused on “foreign interference,” code for the agencies’ murky espionage operations associated with Australia’s deepening role in US-led wars in the Middle East and preparations for a conflict with China.

Significantly, though, the period in which the Commission states that funding to terrorism-related investigations decreased, despite the soaring budgets of the NIC agencies, coincided with ASIO raising the terror threat level from “possible” to “probable” in August, 2024. The latter designation indicates there is a 50 percent chance of planning or execution of a terrorism incident. Why that apparently did not trigger an increase in funding for terrorism investigations is also not explained.

Two of the only concrete references to the federal agencies raised particularly troubling questions.

A section of the report notes that ASIO and Australian Federal Police officers have wide-ranging exemptions for civil and criminal liability when they are undercover. It further adds, “Rather than requiring agencies to disrupt the criminal activity or security matter when it is identified, the frameworks allow the activity to continue under controlled conditions, and authorise individuals to engage with the activity or matter undercover.”

It is clear that the activities of the Akrams, at least in the period of 2019–20, intersected with a small Jihadist milieu in Sydney that was not only subjected to intensive surveillance but had also been infiltrated by the agent known as “Marcus.” The inevitable question is whether they and others were permitted to conduct their activities without disruption, precisely along the lines outlined above.

The media has previously alleged that preacher Wissam Haddad is the leader of that network. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Muslim community leaders have claimed they were told by a senior NSW police officer that Haddad was a “honey pot,” i.e., someone who wittingly or unwittingly served as a point of attraction for other extremists who could then be monitored by the authorities.”

The other issue is posed by ASIO documents issued in the immediate lead-up to the attack. On October 3, ASIO issued an intelligence assessment about an attack on a Manchester synagogue the day before, by an Islamic State supporter. The assessment reportedly “noted an enduring threat to Jewish interests and that low sophistication attacks in crowded places remained the most likely scenario for a terrorist attack.”

Chillingly, given what would occur, it “concluded that Jewish holy days and significant dates represent an attractive target for extremists and that Yom Kippur was one of a number of significant dates ‘leading up to Hanukkah in December 2025.’”

Then, in its December 2 threat assessment for the holiday season, ASIO reportedly recalled the Manchester attack, and stated “events ‘such as those of an overtly religious nature, government affiliation or promotion of multiculturalism – may also be considered for targeting by violent extremists.’”

But its conclusion was that “[e]scalations in the Middle East conflict may resonate with individuals in Australia; however we assess it is more likely that responses to those escalations will be in the form of protest activity – including violent protest – rather than

acts of terrorism.”

The inescapable conclusion is that, even in the immediate wake of the Manchester attack, which foreshadowed the Bondi atrocity, the focus of ASIO was on peaceful pro-Palestinian protests, not the threat posed by potential Islamist terrorists.

That is also the impression given by the exceptionally lax police presence at the Bondi Hanukkah event itself. Despite the fact that it was in such a prominent and easily accessible location, NSW Police deployed only several beat cops, who were instructed merely to walk by every so often and that they could leave before the event concluded.

Under conditions where the political establishment, and the police, had been claiming unprecedented and rampant antisemitism over the preceding two years, that was inexplicable. But it makes sense, if one recalls that by “antisemitism,” they were primarily referring not to the real scourge of anti-Jewish bigotry, but to opposition to the genocide in Gaza. There is a sense that NSW Police determined there was no prospect of pro-Palestinian activism in the vicinity of Bondi on December 14, and so left the vulnerable Hanukkah celebration almost entirely undefended.

Notwithstanding the unanswered questions, the Labor government immediately declared it would accept all of the Commission’s 14 interim recommendations, including five that are entirely hidden from the public. It is almost certain that they centre on boosting the powers of the police and intelligence agencies and cracking down on popular opposition.

That was the immediate response of the ruling elite, led by the federal Labor government, to the Bondi attack. They invoked the atrocity to pass sweeping “hate speech” legislation, potentially outlawing strident condemnations of Zionism and imperialist war, and to illegalise organisations and even political parties on the same grounds. The NSW Labor administration rushed through laws that could be used to ban virtually all protests, which were later found by a court to be unconstitutional.

The Royal Commission is not a fact-finding exercise, but simply a different wing of the same onslaught on democratic rights, targeting opposition to the genocide in particular, and opposition to imperialist war generally.



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