

# Australia: Police lockdown as Sydney siege continues

By Mike Head  
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A police siege of a Sydney city cafe today, in which a man was reportedly holding hostages, has been used to set in motion a massive police operation, locking down parts of the city's CBD, amid sensational media claims of Islamic terrorism.

The state and federal governments carefully avoided describing the incident as a terrorist attack. Yet far-reaching security protocols have been activated in the CBD as well as elsewhere in Sydney and other Australian cities.

The only indication of any Islamic connection was a black flag inscribed with Arabic text, briefly displayed in the cafe window. According to various experts, the flag is not related to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and displays an Islamic creed that appears throughout Islamic communities, including on the Saudi Arabian flag.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott twice convened meetings of the National Security Committee of cabinet and gave two nationally-televised addresses. In his first, he declared: "We have to appreciate that, even in a society such as ours, there are people who would wish to do us harm." In his second, he said the person involved claimed "political motivation," but gave no detail.

The New South Wales (NSW) state government and its police commanders stated there was no confirmation that the incident was terrorist-related. Nevertheless, they deployed heavily-armed para-military units, flooded Sydney streets with police and imposed a sweeping lockdown. Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione said "hundreds and hundreds" of police were involved.

Questions surround the origins of the siege, which began at a Lindt cafe in Sydney's central Martin Place at about 9.45 this morning. The *Guardian* reported that

a woman outside the cafe saw a man carrying a sports bag with what appeared to be a gun inside. She informed police, who approached the man, who then entered the cafe.

Within minutes, a police Tactical Assault Team entered the building with gas masks and guns drawn, carrying M4 automatic rifles. Several city streets were blockaded off, major buildings were evacuated, and thousands of office workers, even two kilometres away, were ordered to stay inside their buildings, and keep away from the windows. Some train services were halted, and people were told to leave the city by bus because bombs might be planted in the subway system.

The Sydney Opera House was evacuated and surrounded by barricades, with a police helicopter circling overhead, after a false report that a suspicious package was sighted. All public schools within a one-kilometre radius of the CBD were placed in "lockout" mode, which prevented anyone from entering the schools or children leaving. The parliament building was evacuated, together with law courts, the NSW Art Gallery and the State Library.

Hundreds of police were mobilised throughout the city, and many more were deployed to create a visible police presence in working-class suburbs across the metropolitan area, including in Fairfield and Cabramatta, which are about 30 kilometres from the CBD.

Large numbers of police were also called out onto the streets in other states, including neighbouring Victoria and Queensland, where the police chief claimed to have information that explosive devices were involved in the Sydney siege.

Just before 4 p.m., NSW Deputy Commissioner Catherine Burn said the police had activated Counter Terrorism protocols, under the direction of the Counter

Terrorism and Security Command, which coordinates federal and state police and military units. “We’ve set up our command and control protocols,” she announced, while still not confirming any terrorist connection.

Long before any facts were known, sections of the mass media, notably the Murdoch publications, linked the incident to terrorism. A special edition of the tabloid *Daily Telegraph* was headlined: “Death Cult CBD attack” with an accompanying “The instant we changed forever.” Without providing a shred of evidence, it declared that ISIS was responsible. “IS takes 13 hostages,” it claimed.

Another news.com.au web site headline declared: “Martin Place long identified as a terrorist target.” The article recalled sensational police and media claims in September of an Islamist plot to behead someone in a public place, possibly Martin Place. The alleged plot provided the pretext for the largest police raids ever conducted in Australia on September 18, which featured the seizure of a ceremonial sword—later revealed to be plastic.

Unsubstantiated links to terrorism were echoed around the world. The BBC, for example, connected the siege to “Australia’s terror threat timeline.”

The Australian government’s allies in the “war on terrorism” and the US-led war in Iraq and Syria did not wait for any evidence either. A White House official said Lisa Monaco, President Barack Obama’s counter-terrorism advisor, had spoken to Obama about the events in Sydney. Canada’s and New Zealand’s prime ministers sent messages of support to the Abbott government.

Both the Labor Party and the Greens rushed to underscore the unity of the parliamentary establishment behind the government and the police operation. Labor Leader Bill Shorten offered Abbott “the Opposition’s full support at this time,” adding, “we are one when it comes to keeping Australians safe.” Greens acting leader Adam Bandt said his party’s thoughts were “with the police and security forces managing” this “terrifying situation.”

As this article was posted, the circumstances surrounding the siege and its likely outcome remained unclear. Five people have emerged from the café. The police have confirmed that negotiations are underway with an armed person inside but have refused to

provide details or indicate how many hostages are involved.

However, the massive operation has provided another glimpse, following the police-military operation at last month’s G20 summit in Brisbane, of the police-state measures being prepared in Australia, with the unanimous backing of all the parliamentary parties, under the guise of dealing with terrorists. The media scaremongering is aimed at conditioning the public to the rolling out of such police lockdowns.

The real target is the mounting social and political disaffection in the working class with the deepening assault on living standards and preparations for war. Today, while the public was bombarded with terrorist scares, the Abbott government also handed down its mid-year economic review, outlining further social spending and job cuts to impose the burden of a deepening economic downturn on working people.

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