

Australia: One year after the Sydney siege, the cover-up continues

By Richard Phillips and Peter Symonds
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December 15 marked one year since the Sydney siege, which is now routinely exploited along with 9/11 in the United States, the London bombings and the recent attacks in Paris and as justification for the bogus “war on terror”—that is, war abroad and the destruction of basic democratic rights at home.

The anniversary was marked in Martin Place in central Sydney by a series of speeches by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and others aimed at politically chloroforming the population and blocking any critical examination of what happened on the day.

The siege at the Lindt café was not a “terrorist attack” but the act of a mentally unstable individual. Man Haron Monis, a 50-year-old Iranian man, who was well known to police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), took over the café at gunpoint and held 18 staff and customers hostage.

The government and police response was out of all proportion to what was taking place. Within half an hour, the cabinet national security committee had met in Canberra, and, in collaboration with New South Wales (NSW) government and police, set in motion a huge counter-terrorism operation. Police, including snipers and heavily-armed paramilitary units, flooded central Sydney and blocked off a large area around café. Buildings kilometres from Martin Place were evacuated and sealed off. The police presence was heightened not only in the suburbs of Sydney, but in other major cities.

Significantly Prime Minister Tony Abbott did not initially declare the siege to be a terrorist attack but said that police were responding to “a reported hostage taking situation.” Nevertheless, the media, which functioned throughout day as an adjunct of state apparatus, did not question the necessity of the massive police response underway.

The entire police operation was shrouded in secrecy. Monis’s demands—for an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) flag, recognition that his siege was an ISIS “terrorist” attack, and an on-air conversation with Abbott—were known but suppressed by a compliant media. Offers by Muslim leaders, who knew Monis, to enter the café and defuse the standoff were rejected.

Monis had a long history of aberrant behaviour. He came to Australia in 1996 from Iran, postured as a Shiite cleric, sent insensitive letters to the families of dead Australian soldiers,

was caught up in sexual assault charges arising from a spiritual healing business that he had run, and was accused of being an accessory to the murder of his estranged wife. His actions had more the character of desperate attention-seeking, than of an ISIS fanatic.

The police actions created a psychological pressure cooker inside the café. Monis became increasingly erratic and frantic as his demands were not met, no negotiations took place and a number of his hostages escaped. Sixteen hours after the confrontation began, early on the morning of December 16, paramilitary police stormed the café after a shot was heard inside. Café manager Tori Johnson had been shot by Monis. In the hail of gunfire that followed, Monis and a hostage Katrina Dawson, a lawyer, were killed by police bullets.

Over the past year, three separate investigations—by the NSW police, the Australian Federal Police and a joint federal-state review—have proven to be political cover-ups. Far from exposing the role of the police and intelligence agencies in the siege, governments, state and federal, have used the reports to justify boosting police powers in the name of “fighting terrorism.”

A NSW Coroner’s Court inquest currently underway is no different. It began its hearings in May and is not expected to issue its findings until mid-2016. The first segment dealt with Monis’s personal background, including his mental health, and confirmed that he was a highly unstable individual. The second examined why he had been released on bail on the charges that he faced—a line of inquiry that will be used as a pretext for tougher bail conditions.

The third segment, dealing with the actions of ASIO, was the most sensitive because of Monis’s numerous contacts with the intelligence agency. While the inquest and media focussed on whether or not there had been an “intelligence failure,” the real question is what were the relations between Monis and ASIO and why the intelligence agency chose to ignore the many warning signs. It is not credible that ASIO simply made a mistake.

The timing of the “terrorist attack” was politically convenient. It came in the wake of the dispatch of Australian military forces to the US-led war in the Middle East and a battery of new anti-terror legislation. A previous “terrorist”

scare in September, which involved 800 police and ASIO agents in early morning raids in Sydney, had fallen flat. Lurid claims of a planned beheading turned out to be based on the seizure of a plastic sword.

The inquest hearings into ASIO were, not surprisingly, cloaked in secrecy, all in the name of “protecting national security.” Nevertheless, the limited public overview given by the counsel assisting the coroner, Jeremy Gormly, including Monis’s offers to act as an ASIO informer, raises more questions than it answers.

* Between 1996 and 2000, Monis was the subject of four ASIO assessments—in October 1996 in relation to his application for a business visa, in November 1996 after the organisation received “some potentially adverse information about Mr Monis,” in July 1998 in relation to his application for a protection visa which recommended against its approval, and in November 1999 which reversed its decision on the protection visa.

Gormly provided no explanation as to why ASIO had assessed Monis in 1998 as posing “an indirect, and possibly a direct, risk to national security” then in 1999 as posing no risk or threat. Monis was granted a protection visa in 2000 and citizenship in 2004.

* Monis claimed to have worked for Iranian intelligence in Iran, and to have been recruited by the CIA during a business trip to Romania. According to Gormly, he approached ASIO on at least five separate occasions to offer information, which the organisation supposedly assessed as worthless.

* In February 2007, Monis explicitly “offered to become a source for ASIO and provided a three-page ‘plan’ outlining the offer.” At the same meeting with ASIO agents, he explained that he was going to change his name, become a teacher of Islam in order to steer Muslim youth away from terrorism, and to help achieve this “he intended to temper his pro-Western views.” ASIO, according to Gormly, declined the offer.

* Nevertheless, Monis did adopt a less pro-Western posture. In April 2008, ASIO began another investigation into his “inflammatory public statements” but concluded by the end of the year that Monis posed no threat to national security. In 2009, Monis was arrested and convicted on a charge of sending “offensive letters” to the families of Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan. Yet ASIO did not alter its assessment over the next five years. This is particularly remarkable given Monis’s increasingly strident anti-Western posturing on the Internet in the lead-up to the Sydney siege.

* In September 2014, the government had raised its terrorist alert level and exploited the Sydney police raids to whip up a climate of fear. On November 17, Monis publicly announced his conversion from Shiite to Sunni Islam and pledged his allegiance to the “Caliph”—a possible reference to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

ASIO received a stream of at least 18 emails and hotline calls

in December warning about Monis’s Facebook statements, yet concluded, just days before his takeover of the Lindt café, that “the posts did not indicate a desire or intent to engage in terrorism or politically motivated violence.”

The least likely explanation for ASIO’s inaction is an “intelligence failure” due to incompetence or the lack of resources. After all, just months before, ASIO officers had participated in the Sydney police raids which were based on one phone call from an alleged terrorist in the Middle East to one of those targeted.

It is more probable that ASIO had been exploiting Monis as one of its sources and potential agent provocateur within the Muslim community and was determined to maintain relations with this highly unstable individual. Once the Sydney siege was underway, ASIO made no apparent attempt to defuse the situation. From its standpoint, the outcome of the siege ensured that any embarrassing details died with Monis.

The Lindt café siege is of a piece with virtually every other “terrorist” incident in Australia and internationally over the past decade and a half. From the September 11 terror attacks in the US in 2001, through to last month’s suicide attacks in Paris, those involved were known to intelligence and police agencies and allowed to do their work.

In its Perspective published on December 16, the WSWS concluded: “The sharpest of warnings should be drawn. State and federal governments, with the full backing of the opposition Labor Party and the Greens, exploited the Sydney siege as a giant dress rehearsal for the type of police-state measures that will be imposed in the future, in time of war or social upheaval. Above all, such operations will be directed against the working class.”

That is why great efforts are being made to ensure that there is no public scrutiny of the role of the state apparatus, particularly of the intelligence agencies, in the tragic events in the Lindt café a year ago.

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