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The Sydney siege

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Without providing any justification, the Australian government yesterday seized on an isolated incident involving a deeply disturbed individual in the Sydney central business district to activate the entire “counter-terrorism” apparatus and impose a state of siege in the centre of the country’s largest city—with tragic consequences.

What would ordinarily have been dealt with as a serious, but relatively straightforward, police matter—an armed gunman taking hostages in a city café—was escalated into a major national crisis by the intervention of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, with the full support of the opposition Labor Party and the Greens, state governments and the entire media.

Abbott delivered not just one, but two, addresses to the nation, promising the government and police in the state of New South Wales (NSW) the full support of all federal agencies—police, military and intelligence. Hundreds of police, including heavily-armed paramilitary police from the Tactical Assault Team, poured into central Sydney. Buildings kilometres from the scene were locked down, transport was rerouted and police patrols were stepped up, including in Sydney suburbs, Canberra—the national capital—and other Australian cities.

No rational reason has been offered for this massive police operation. Police determined relatively quickly that the hostage-taker was Man Haron Monis, an Iranian refugee well-known to police. He had no connection to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al Qaeda or any other

Islamic extremist organisation. He was a troubled individual, with a history of erratic actions, on bail for alleged involvement in the murder of his ex-wife.

Likewise, no coherent explanation has been given for the decision to storm the café in the early hours of this morning. The NSW police commissioner initially declared that officers charged into the building in response to shots heard inside, then declined to repeat his statement. The outcome is that the hostage-taker is dead, along with two innocent people—the café manager and a mother of three—and four others are injured.

From the outset, Abbott's intervention, far from calming the situation to enable a peaceful resolution, deliberately fuelled a climate of uncertainty and fear. Amid a police blackout of what was actually taking place, the media went into overdrive, seizing on a black flag with an Arabic inscription to endlessly speculate on "terrorist" connections. TV stations shut down normal programming to provide continuous coverage of the events unfolding at the Lindt café.

The only purpose of this hysteria is to depict Australia as being a nation under siege and inflate the bogus "war on terror." Abbott seized on the incident to manufacture a wartime atmosphere that will be exploited to justify a further escalation of the Australian involvement in US military operations—in the Middle East in particular—and police-state measures at home. Throughout the past year, Canberra has been in the forefront of the US confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, the new war in Iraq and Syria, and the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" and military build-up against China.

In September, police mounted the largest-ever "anti-terrorist" operation, involving more than 800 police commandos and intelligence agents in pre-dawn raids in Sydney and Brisbane. Family homes were ransacked, women and children terrorised and 15 people dragged off for interrogation. Only one person was charged with a terrorist-related offence, on highly dubious grounds.

The Abbott government latched onto the lurid claims of a plot to behead Australian citizens to justify the dispatch of military forces to Iraq and push through a new raft of anti-democratic, counter-terrorism laws. US Secretary of State John Kerry quickly seized on the supposed plot as the pretext for the US war in the Middle East, falsely telling a congressional committee that ISIS supporters had planned an "extravaganza of brutality in Australia."

The Australian government's actions yesterday and today are in line with the international modus operandi utilised to justify criminal wars of aggression and the build-up of the domestic police-military apparatus. The pattern was set with the 9/11 attacks, which the Bush administration exploited to declare the "war on terror" and launch invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, along with US allies such as Australia.

In April last year, an entire American city, Boston, was placed under virtual martial law following the explosion of two bombs near the finish line of the Boston marathon. The population was ordered to remain indoors while heavily-armed police and National Guard troops, backed by armoured vehicles and helicopter gunships, occupied the streets and conducted warrantless house-to-house searches.

This October, the Canadian government responded to the killing of a soldier near the parliament building in Ottawa by locking down much of the downtown area, closing off streets and confining thousands of government workers, shoppers and tourists. Again, the actions of an isolated and disturbed individual were exploited to create a climate of fear to effect a rightward shift in foreign and domestic policy, including Canada's involvement in US war in the Middle East.

The Abbott government is operating from the same playbook. Confronting a rapidly deepening economic crisis, it is seeking to project sharpening social tensions outward by functioning as the point man for the US war drive in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. At the same time, it mounted the Sydney siege as a dress rehearsal for the massive police operations that will in the future be directed against the working class.