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**Presentation to
Government officials**

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Acknowledgment

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land where we gather today and recognise that this land has always been under their custodianship. I pay my respect to Elders past and present and to emerging community leaders. I also extend respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

Introduction

As experts and leaders in your own fields I'm sure that you are aware of the various socio, economic, political and religious factors that can lead to violent extremism. Whilst I don't wish to discuss these factors it is inevitable that I refer to them as part of my presentation. It is instructive to note at the outset that despite having spent millions on counter-terrorism measures the 2015 Review of Australia's Counter-Terrorism Machinery report concludes that:

All of the terrorism-related metrics are worsening: known numbers of foreign fighters, sympathisers and supporters, serious investigations. We are not 'winning' on any front (p.iv).¹

Given the limited time I have with you, I shall limit my presentation to an insider's perspective on how best to engage the Australian Muslim community in the fight against

¹ Australian Government, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (January 2015). *Review of Australia's Counter-Terrorism Machinery*. Commonwealth of Australia.

the menace of violent radicalisation and terrorism, which has caused heartache and devastation to all of us.

I speak as a Muslim who loves his faith and community, an academic who is very familiar with the literature, a leader who knows his community very well, and an Australian who loves this country and its people, and who, since 9/11 has been engaged extensively in building bridges of understanding.

I speak with passion about these issues because they affect me as a human being who happens to be an Australian Muslim.

To be fair to my community, and having their best interest at heart, I have consulted with them and sought their views during the process of writing this presentation. Therefore, the views that I will express not only reflect my own beliefs and sentiments, but of the community members and leaders that I have consulted.

Islam, extremism and Australian Muslims

At the outset, it must also be remembered that Islam and Muslims' presence in Australia predates British settlement by about 200 years. Muslims first came to Australia in the 1650s with the Makassans of Indonesia. For more than 400 years Muslims have had positive contact with this country, and it was not until the last decade or so that the threat of violent extremism emerged.

If Islam is a violent and extremist religion, and Muslims are inherently extremists, then why didn't the threat of terrorism arise in the previous 400 years in Australia?

That is not to say that extremism and violent extremism among some Muslims does not exist. The facts are overwhelming and cannot be denied.

The existence of an extremist and puritanical manifestation of Islam is not surprising. All religions have suffered and continue to suffer at one time or another from this and Islam is not an exception.

In the first century of Islam extremist known as the Khawarij killed a large number of Muslims and non-Muslims and were responsible for the murder of the prophet's cousin and companion, Caliph Ali bin Abi Talib (d.661). Interestingly, the descendants of the Khawarij exist today in Oman and Algeria, but after centuries of bloodshed, they have become moderates, if not pacifists. Other extremist groups such as the Assassins (*Hashāshīn*) also existed at some point in time, and their descendants learned moderation and continue to live in Iraq and North Africa in small numbers.²

Historically, whenever violent extremism emerged among Muslims it was always been seen as an aberration and an exception to the norm. And the lesson learnt from Islamic history is that extremist groups are rejected from main stream Islam, they are marginalised, and become known as a heretical aberration to the Islamic message.³

Historically, the Muslim moderate mainstream prevailed against many extremist and violent groups and orientations.

One of the most important reasons for this is the influence of traditional Islamic institutions, and credible scholarship that acted to marginalise extremist creeds. This is an important point to remember and any attempt at combating violent extremism must consider a long term strategy of assisting the Australian Muslim community establish their own Islamic educational institutions that are able to engage with text and context. I will come back to this point later.

² See Khaled Abou El Fadl (2014) *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Sharia in the Modern World*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. P. 214.

³ Ibid

Independent or semi-independent religious institutions of high standing no longer exist in the Muslim world (and there are none in the Western world) and this is an essential problem that needs to be discussed at length some other time.

It should not be surprising to hear that extremist interpretations have always been seen as an aberration in Islam. For example, the norm in Islam, as is stipulated by the primary and secondary texts is that people of Scriptures, that is Christians and Jews, their Churches, crucifixes and property must be protected. This protection was guaranteed by legal documents established during the time of Prophet Muhammad and subsequent leaders.

For example, the Dean of classical Muslim historians, Al-Tabari, records the "Covenant of `Umar, the second Caliph of Islam, a document addressed to the Christian people of the city of Jerusalem, which was conquered in the year 636 C.E. The document states:

This is the assurance of safety which the servant of God `Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, has granted to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and the healthy of the city, and for all the rituals that belong to their religion. Their churches will not be occupied [by Muslims] and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their crosses, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted.⁴

Therefore, mainstream Islam and its scholars should be seen as the solution to, and not the problem of, violent extremism and terrorism.

Muslim scholars are best equipped to deconstruct the claims of extremists and their ideologies. They must be included in the solution and not seen as part of the problem.

⁴ Tarikh At-Tabari, Vol.4, P. 449.

Proposal 1:

- (a) As a long term strategy, it is necessary for Australian Muslim to establish their own Australian educational Institute to train scholar, leaders and Imams who speak the English language fluently and understand the text and the socio, economic and political context of Australia. It makes sense that a portion of the hundreds of millions of dollars spent of CVE measures are invested in this way.

The community as a valuable partner

The community should be viewed as a partner and one valuable asset in the fight against extremism and terrorism.

The 2015 Review of Australia's Counter-Terrorism Machinery report emphatically concluded that the 'community is key' to the long term solution⁵.

The importance of the community's cooperation in mitigating the risks of terrorism was recognised by the Australian government counter terrorism white paper stating that the community is a "critical partner in protecting Australia from terrorism, and a valuable source of information regarding terrorist-related activity."⁶

Therefore, there is a need to work smarter not harder with Muslim community. It is important, however, not to expect the community to police their own members, but to win their hearts and minds.

The war on terror has had a tremendous negative backlash against local Muslim communities in Australia. In their recent 2015 research project, Dr Adrian Cherney and Dr Tina Murphy reminded us that 'this has generated not only a sense of being under siege, but

⁵ Australian Government, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (January 2015). *Review of Australia's Counter-Terrorism Machinery*. Commonwealth of Australia, p.v.

⁶ Murphy et al, 2015.

also Muslim hostility towards counterterrorism policing and laws. The consequence is that this can engender a general unwillingness to cooperate with authorities in efforts to address terrorism and radicalisation.⁷

Hence, it is prudent to reconsider the way authorities and government has engaged with Imams, leaders and the youth.

For example, in most cases when advice is sought individual Imams or leaders are approached in private and in 'confidence'. While this can be effective in small selected cases it has its problems. These include the marginalisation and alienation of these Imams from their communities.

Individual Imams are often informed that meetings with them are confidential, which makes the situation more complicated. Imams are an integral part of their communities and often need to consult with trusted members of their communities about important matters, especially those that are related to extremist and violent radicalisation.

Proposal 2:

- (a) A more effective approach is to work with community leaders and Imams as partners and not informants. Thus, it would be wiser to ask the Muslim communities to form **their own advisory group** that is made up of one representative of each Islamic organisation. The spokespeople of this advisory group would **meet** with government departments and law enforcement authorities to discuss matters of mutual interest. This approach can help foster trust between community and police, or other government agencies. (It is surprising that the idea of a Muslim advisory group is missing in the recommendations of the 2015 Review of Australia's Counter-Terrorism Machinery, despite recognising that the 'community is key').

⁷ Kristina Murphy, Adrian Cherney and Julie Barkworth, (March 2015) *Avoiding Community Backlash in the fight against terrorism: Research report*. This research was funded by the Australian Research Council (Grant No. DP130100392).

- (b) Given the importance of Imams and leaders, it is recommended that funding is made available for training them in counselling with a focus on how to deal with people with extremist beliefs.
- (c) Continue and expand the use of Community Liaison Officers (PLOs). We are aware that the NSW and QLD Police Force's Counter Radicalisation Strategy involved a community engagement initiative that used community liaison officers, mostly working with Sydney Muslim communities. Recent research shows that 'this community engagement initiative had direct contact with the community, it was public, and it involved aspects of partnership and relations of depth. For these reasons, the initiative was within the community policing paradigm. There was strong community awareness of the programme, and a majority saw it as successful.'⁸ I know that QLD PLOs have also been doing an excellent job but we need more of them.

A shift in media and political rhetoric is needed

The 2015 Review of Australia's Counter-Terrorism Machinery report highlights a vision that seeks 'to reduce the risk of home-grown terrorism by strengthening Australia's resilience to radicalisation and assisting individuals to disengage from violent extremist influence and beliefs.' To achieve this vision the report recommends few measures that are important but not sufficient.

A serious failure in these recommendations, and previous ones, is the continual denial of the impact of media and political rhetoric in the radicalisation process.

The 2015 research by Murphy and Cherney demonstrated that Australian Muslims expressed a strong sense of being under siege due to social and political responses surrounding terrorism. Furthermore, Muslims felt under constant attack and scrutiny both

⁸ Kevin Mark Dunn, Rosalie Atie, Michael Kennedy, Jan A. Ali, John O'Reilly & Lindsay Rogerson (2015): Can you use community policing for counter terrorism? Evidence from NSW, Australia, *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal*, DOI: [10.1080/15614263.2015.1015126](https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2015.1015126)

politically and in the media, with all Muslims stigmatised and labelled as a potential terrorist threat. This was seen as having the consequence of them feeling they needed to constantly defend their religion against criticism it condoned terrorism.

Certainly, a more balanced and objective media and political rhetoric will reduce discrimination and racism against Muslims, which in turn will reduce marginalisation and alienation of Muslims, especially the more vulnerable members of the community.

This is important because the impact of racism against Muslims not only socially excludes them from mainstream society but also results in feelings of stress, anger, distress and fear. Furthermore, Muslims may expend untold valuable energy on remaining ever vigilant, ready to respond to racism.

The effects of racism are not limited to the moments of a racist interaction but they are more insidious, long term and continuing.

In 2010, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission stated that the impact of racist attacks makes the victims 'desensitised' but other research shows that in the case of Muslims it is also exhausting and time-consuming.

It is counterintuitive to blame the entire Muslim community for the actions of a few. Equally, it is counterintuitive to ignore, marginalise, discredit, and humiliate the Australian Muslim community, its leaders and organisations. It is also counterintuitive to ignore the positive contributions that they have made to Australia generally and in the fight against extremism specifically. It is also unhelpful to ignore the tremendous social and psychological trauma they have experienced as a consequence of local or international terrorist events.

For example, the recent national security statement made by the Prime Minister Tony Abbott in which he stated: "I've often heard Western leaders describe Islam as a 'religion of peace'. I wish more Muslim leaders would say that more often, and mean it" is a case in point.

Procedural fairness is essential when dealing with the Australian Muslim community. In its most basic form, it means that respect and dignity would be accorded to the Islamic community that they would enjoy a degree of neutrality where matters that affect them are concerned, that they would be allowed to speak on their own behalf, and that decision makers should have their best interest at heart.⁹

This makes strategic sense if the government is serious about combating terrorism. A failure to follow the basic rules of procedural fairness will only serve to further marginalise those already marginalised, and will alienate those who have engaged with the government.

The Prime Minister's message only succeeded in creating deeper suspicion toward him and his government on the part of Muslims. His ill-advised statements fuelled anger, legitimated terrorists' claims that "the West" is against "Islam" and made it immeasurably more difficult for Muslim leaders to counter radical ideology.

The repercussions of the PM's comments were adequately summed up recently by the Sydney based Sheikh Charkwai who stated "The Muslim community has lost trust and feels completely abandoned by the Government. I have never seen it at a point so low."¹⁰

Therefore, we believe that the political and media rhetoric must shift if we are to minimise the threat of violent extremism.

Proposal 3:

- (a) We recommend that funding is made available for engagement strategies between local Muslim communities, journalists and editors of media outlets. Engagement with journalists and editors should focus on explaining Islam's stance on terrorism

⁹ Murphy and Cherney *op cit.*

¹⁰ Jason Om (2015). Muslim community establishes \$1 million television studio, the One Path Network, to counter mainstream media treatment of Islam

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-16/muslim-tv-studio-counters-mainstream-media-treatment-of-islam/6323814>

and violent extremism, and the negative repercussions against the community from biased reporting.

(b) Funding for strategic engagement with local Muslim communities and leading politicians is highly recommended in order to help them listen first hand from Muslims about their feelings, anger and frustrations. This will hopefully prevent politicians from using Islam and Muslims as a scapegoat for some political opportunism.

(c) A large scale community consultation project to develop 'Australian Muslim Communities Terms of Reference' (TOR)

○ Rationale:

- To empower the community by allowing it to foreground the terminology, language and discourse appropriate when referring to or engaging with the Australian Muslim community – rather than the community responding in a reactionary approach to poor, inaccurate, unhelpful or insulting rhetoric and language
- Provides a common language for engagement for improved relations based on respect

The need for a balanced approach to international conflicts

Another risk factor that is always ignored is the perceived injustice of western foreign policies towards Muslim countries. This is understood to create anti-Western sentiment and thereby provoke radicalisation.¹¹ A BBC's opinion poll of Muslims showed that the majority felt the 'war on terror' was actually a war on Islam. The British government also found in their independent studies that there was an apparent relationship between British foreign

¹¹ Awan, A. N. (2008). Antecedents of Islamic political radicalism among Muslim communities in Europe. *Political Science & Politics*, 41, 13-17; Veldhuis, T., & Staun, J. (2009). Islamist radicalisation: A root cause model: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael.

policy in the Middle East and growth of terror cells¹². The same is true for Australian foreign policy.

Australian Muslims believe that the Foreign Fighters Act, for example, is biased against Muslims only, especially when they know that some Australians fight with the Israeli Defence Force against Palestinians in the occupied territories. In 2012, the ABC reported that in the past four years, more than 400 Australian Jews have made the move to join the IDF and most of them have done compulsory military service.

In their 2015 research Murphy and Cherney asked Australian Muslim participants “what motivates individuals or groups to commit terrorist acts”. Overwhelmingly the answer was that the act of terrorism while condemned could not be divorced from broader events occurring overseas that fuelled resentment and frustration among Muslim populations and thus generated support for terrorism as a justifiable response in the eyes of some Muslims. These events included the Israel and Palestine conflict and the death of Palestinians due to what respondents regarded as Israeli aggression and unwillingness on the part of the international community to sanction Israel. Other motivating factors identified were the death of Muslims in wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and the lack of public and political outcry shown towards Muslim victims of overseas conflicts and government oppression compared to other religious or non-religious groups.

These sentiments are substantiated by other international research and must not be dismissed.

Proposal:

- (a) Honest and frank discussions with community, especially their youth, about the perceived double standards in the application of the Foreign Fighters Act.

¹² Townsend, M. (2006, 2 April). Official: Iraq war led to July bombings, *The Observer*. Retrieved from http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1745085,00.html

The importance of adequate educational programs

We agree with the 2015 Review of Australia's Counter-Terrorism Machinery report that recognises education as a key in building community resilience to violent extremism by equipping the communities with the skills and resources to understand and address extremism and reduce marginalisation.

We wish to add that such educational programs must be substantial, professional, contextual, and address the various issues that may lead to violent extremism or marginalisation from an Islamic perspective. These programs must be designed and delivered by qualified Muslim scholars and/or Imams who are conversant with the text and context, and have an excellent working relationship with their own communities.

We have started a 2 year program for young Muslims at the Kuraby Mosque and called it Applied Islam. This is a project that is not funded and the work is pro bona. I have designed this program with my colleague and PhD student Mr. Dylan Chown, who is an expert in Islamic education and the Principal of the Amanah Institute based at Kuraby Mosque.

Over 2 years students will be exposed to vigorous discussions on matters of faith, Islam's interconnectedness with the West, the Caliphate and the nature of Islamic governance, Islam and democracy, domestic violence, identity and a heavy emphasis on the application of universal principals such as justice, fairness and compassion.

Proposal:

- (a) Targeted funding to allow local Muslim communities' develop appropriate educational programs that suit their needs.

Funding for youth Safe Zones

The Muslim community lacks youth safe zones. This could include a sport centre that is governed by responsible community leaders and members can be a most effective way of engaging the youth positively. Ideally this sporting facility would have a café, small library, and a full-time care taker. The centre will be open for sporting activities and events, hold competitions, and organise structured educational programs delivered by reputable and trustworthy leaders, Imams, and others for the empowerment of youth. These centres would help young Muslims feel a sense of belonging.

Of course, community is unable to find such initiatives and would require government assistance.

Proposal: Funding for the establishment of youth safe zones in major states.

The need for preventative and rehabilitation programs

The above measures will be part of prevention. However, in the absence of sufficient preventative and intervention programs the community is filling the gap (pro bono) which is not sustainable.

More funding for preventative initiatives – strength based approach to enhancing community resilience, capacity and contribution.

The formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Centre is recommended for a number of reasons. The RRC's would follow a holistic approach and the core personnel of the RRG who will counsel Muslims will involve scholars, social workers, health workers, community workers, government. The religious scholars will be a crucial role in addressing the misinterpretations of several Islamic concepts and their interplay with contemporary issues such as jihad, democracy, the nature of Islamic governance and so on. If not addressed carefully extremist ideology is potentially dangerous as it will bring not only disharmony but more importantly loss of lives and property. The public and the community need to be

engaged to ensure greater understanding that these wrongful understanding do not represent Islam and mainstream Muslims.

Summary and Conclusion

Violent extremism is caused by a host of factors, which need to be considered collectively in order to arrive at appropriate solutions. Islam and the Muslim community must not be seen as the problem but an important part of the solution. The community is an important key in the fight against violent extremism and that is why it is crucial to apply a strength based approach to enhancing community resilience, capacity and contribution. This would ideally include:

1. A recognition that Islam and the Muslim community is part of the solution and not the problem
2. The community is a valuable partner
3. A shift in media and political rhetoric
4. The need for a balanced approach to international conflicts
5. The importance of adequate educational programs
6. Funding for youth Safe Zones
7. The need for preventative and rehabilitation programs