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Islam in Australia in 2015: an Australian Muslim perspective

a presentation to the Institute on 31 March 2015 by

Captain Mona Shindy, CSC, RAN

Chief of Navy's Strategic Advisor on Islamic Cultural Affairs



Islam is a religion based on submission to the will and laws of God, under which a woman is equal to a man and the killing of innocent people is a sin. Terrorism is an abhorrent act. It has nothing to do with Islam. A 'victim mentality' is evident in Australian Islamic society and is fodder for terrorist recruiters. Attempts to break the terrorist cycle must involve communication, education and equity. Real change in these areas must now occur in Australia's relations with its Muslim community.

Key words: Islam; Muslim; terrorism; jihad; women; hijab; Australia.

Islam and Muslims

'Islam' is an Arabic word meaning 'submission', *i.e.* submission to the will and laws of God. The religion is based on 'Five Pillars': declaration of the oneness of God; prayer five times a day; fasting during Ramadan; charity; and pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime. The laws or commandments of God cover matters such as no killing, stealing, lying, adultery or gambling. They also include such things as kindness to parents and neighbours, manners, the seeking of knowledge, and the protection of the weak or oppressed whoever they may be and regardless of the religion they follow. Islam is a way of life and it is based on the principles of kindness, education, patience, integrity, healthy living, fairness, honesty, justice, compassion and mercy.

'Muslim' is an Arabic word meaning someone who has 'submitted' to the laws or commandments of God. 'Allah' is the name of God used by Christians, Muslims and Jews in the Middle East. A Muslim believes in creation and humanity coming from Adam and Eve. A Muslim also believes in all God's prophets (*e.g.* Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus and Mohamed) and the messages they came with.

Mohamed is considered the last of God's prophets having relayed the Quran as the final guidance from God. The Torah and the Bible are considered guidance from God that preceded the Quran. Muslims believe that God will judge all his creation on the 'Day of Judgment' when this world ends and the souls will go either to Heaven or Hell. Muslims believe that it is the Prophet Jesus who will return to earth before the Day of Judgement comes.

Islam teaches that the killing of innocent people is a sin. Why then have Muslims been linked to terrorism? Terrorism is an unjustifiable, abhorrent act that has nothing to do with Islam. The extremist behaviour of groups purporting to be Muslims has been overplayed by the media for years constantly linking terrorist behaviours to Islam, *e.g.* use of the description 'Islamist', rather than separatist or militant. Of course, such groups claiming authority for their actions under a banner of 'Islam' has not helped, but it is not legitimate to associate the politically-driven behaviours of unsavoury individuals or groups with the teachings of a religion they claim to follow. Extremist groups have emanated from many religious communities over the years. Well-known examples include many of the atrocities in World Wars I and II, such as

Hitler and the extermination of the Jews; and the long-standing conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland.

'Jihad' is an Arabic word meaning 'struggle'. Big or main jihad is a spiritual struggle to resist the temptations of this world; to be righteous and follow God's path. Small or less-required (hopefully) jihad is armed struggle in the way of God. This is for the protection of the weak or oppressed whoever they may be and whatever religion they follow. Armed jihad is defence against aggression and oppression. Jihad has nothing to do with killing non-Muslims or converting people to Islam.

The Position of Women in Islam

Women are highly respected and protected under the requirements of Islam. The Prophet Mohamed, when asked by a follower who it was that he must most obey, care for and respect, replied three times: "Your mother". A mother is like a school. Educate and prepare her well and she will raise a righteous and prosperous community.

A woman is equal to a man. God favours no sex or race over another. A person's status with God comes only through their piety and adherence to God's laws or commandments. A woman has every right to work and travel freely without any man's permission. A husband, though, should not ask or expect his wife to work or contribute financially to the family – that is his duty – but she can contribute if she so wishes. A man/husband has no rights over a woman's money. He is obliged to provide for his wife and children from head to toe. Islam teaches men/husbands: "The best among you is he who is good to his wife ... Treat your wife with kindness".

The hijab is a head covering sanctioned in the Quran, which contains dress codes for both men and women. It is worn for reasons of modesty, piety, dignity, respect, and identity, and as a shield or protection when in public. It provides liberation from the sexualisation of women and the consequent issues that come with that – low self-esteem, poor body-image, and resulting health disorders. Mother Mary, a great role model, wore the hijab.

Are Muslim women oppressed? No way! That said, it is true that there are pockets around the world in some Islamic nations where women are wrongly treated.

The Muslim Experience in Contemporary Australia

In Australia, the media images of Muslims are, by far, more negative than positive. I know from first-hand experience that young Australian Muslims have often felt alienated, embarrassed, vilified and ridiculed by negative media messaging. It places these young adults and their families under great strain. Muslim Australians need the same opportunities as all their peers to enjoy satisfying lives and to feel included in and valued by the society in the country they love. The community must understand and respond to the challenges faced by its Muslim citizens – doing so is vital to community cohesion and respectful integration; and to reducing the risk of individuals falling into the ‘radicalisation trap’.

A prevailing ‘victim mentality’ is clearly evident in parts of Australian Islamic society. A sense of helplessness and fear of trying to integrate stifles some young Muslims who are convinced that Australian society rejects them because they are Muslim. As they see it, this often excludes a career in the service of the nation. It sometimes stimulates a strong mistrust in government’ and sometimes drives them to unsavoury elements on the fringes of Islamic society which have their own political or power-seeking objectives and actively seek to recruit impressionable people who are easily convinced that non-Muslims have an agenda against them. These terrorist recruiters create an argument for armed jihad, convincing members of the Islamic community that there are forces deliberately oppressing Muslims, killing Muslims, and implementing biased foreign policy where a different set of standards is used when dealing with some nations and not others.

Rane *et al.* (2011) document the results of various social empirical studies conducted on Muslim minorities living in the West. They found that “while many Muslims are critical of US foreign policy and believe that the USA is trying to divide Islam, they are opposed to attacks on American civilians”. In particular, they describe experiences of Muslims in the Australian education system, where the evidence gathered “uncovers a lack of cultural understanding, high degrees of discrimination and negative university and high school experiences that affected their perceptions of belonging, identity and citizenship”.

I personally find Western overplaying of the Sunni-Shiite rivalry to be unhelpful and often unwarranted. The media messaging seems determined at times to fuel flames. The bottom line is that commonalities between the sects significantly outweigh the differences which are in themselves not worthy of justifying division.

The most effective way to combat such undesirable influences is through constant communication and education, underpinned by transparent and defensible facts. Where legitimate grievances exist, people should be given the right to be heard and appropriately responded to; not ignored or silenced.

People who are genuinely disenfranchised, or simply believe they are being side-lined and alienated, need help to overcome the psychological impacts of their predicament through the creation of real opportunities, careers and avenues for integration and contribution. Young Muslims need

to feel and see that they belong in Australian society. They need to be given equal opportunities and be protected, mentally and physically, by their government to the same extent as every other Australian. This requires empathy and an understanding that standing in the shoes of an Australian Muslim in today's environment is not as simple or as easy as standing in shoes of a non-Muslim Australian.

Further, the Islamic community more broadly needs to better understand Australia's military involvement in overseas theatres; in particular within predominantly Islamic nations. For Muslims, this is not about a lack of allegiance to the country of which they are citizens, but rather an inherent concern they have for fellow humans they are told within the Quran they have a connection with as ‘brothers and sisters’ under the Umma or family of Islam.

The Extremist Issue

My view is that the complex extremist issue afflicting elements of the Muslim community needs to be addressed using a sophisticated multi-faceted approach that seeks to address issues that cause genuine grievances and feelings of disenfranchisement and victimisation among Muslims.

There is a need to change our approach. Lovat (2012) states “that among the most socially excluded communities in Australia today is the Muslim Community, and within that community Muslim women and Muslim youth are especially excluded”. He argues “that discourses and institutions that depict Islam and Muslims as the ‘enemy within’, ‘culturally incompatible’, that elements of Islam have an agenda hostile not only to Australia's values but also to the basic tenets of Western Civilisation, and that Muslim women are oppressed and subjugated, need to change substantially Successful social inclusion of Australian Muslims, requires a paradigm shift in the way we think, write and speak” about Muslims. Effort needs to be put into understanding the way in which Muslims view the world and themselves. Continuing to assess Muslim behaviour and lifestyle through a Western lens, shaped through Western historical experiences and understanding (which is very different to Islamic history and tradition), is fraught with danger and is perhaps the main reason for incorrect conclusions and views being reached.

The maturity and content of the debate needs to be lifted with frank discussions and true listening to grievances. The arrogant ‘I know best’ response needs to stop with an appreciation that diverse members of the Australian community, due to their different life experiences and understanding of their history, can see things very differently through a different lens of view.

The discussion needs to move from a simple, single-angled, tough-talk, mainly military response, to one that better explores the complex issues. Negative fear-mongering to sell newspapers and win cheap votes for politicians must be replaced with a more detailed and educated analysis of the root causes and triggers for this type of behaviour or phenomenon.

Root Causes and Triggers

There is a strong belief among some members of the Islamic world that certain Western governments and institutions have a specific agenda against them, treat them as ‘second class’, and act in ways and make decisions that compromise their freedom of speech and expression, human rights and civil liberties.

The *Charlie Hebdo* event in Paris on 7 January 2015 is a case in point. From an Islamic perspective, the French

¹ I cannot tell you how many conspiracy theories I have heard about Western nations propping up corrupt oppressive and autocratic regimes or militant groups in Islamic countries for the sole purpose of causing instability and inhibiting progress and advancement.

government appears to be saying it is acceptable to ridicule what others hold as sacred, and cause outrage within French Muslim society; but it is not acceptable for Muslim women to exercise similar freedom of expression (not hurting anyone by the way) by wearing the hijab at universities or schools.

The same argument holds true when governments seek to muzzle organisations that to them hold distasteful, radical views and use violent rhetoric. These groups, however, perceive such government actions as double standards. Censorship forces these groups underground, where they are even less able to be monitored or understood, exacerbating the very problems the governments wish to solve. When, however, freedom of speech moves into the realm of incitement or harassment, limits need to be set. I believe this is no more complicated than the message many children get from their parents or at school about the inappropriateness of bullying and harassment.

Another example of double standards is the world's reluctance or inability to enforce the 1948 United Nations resolution regarding the Israeli-occupied territories of Palestine; but its willingness to take prompt and decisive action against other nations such as Iraq, even in the absence of a United Nations mandate.

Heazle, Griffiths and Conley (2009) recount the struggles of many Muslim nations after gaining their independence from European colonial occupation. Although some have succeeded in achieving democracy to varying degrees (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia) while still maintaining their Islamic identity, many still struggle under systems of authoritarian rule originally established by the previous Western colonialists. The recent 'Arab Spring' demonstrates how difficult it is for citizens to replace autocratic regimes. The authors explain that: "*democratic principles of consultation (shura), consensus (ijma) and electoral process (bay'a) are all inherent in the Islamic tradition and sacred text*". It, therefore, is frustrating to much of the Islamic world when factors such as orientalism and occidentalism, international conflict, and perceptions of an Islamic threat, lead Western liberal democracies to view Islam in the same way as do scholars who advocate the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. Such a view excludes the more widely held conclusion that Islam and democracy are compatible and that Islamic democracy is practicable.

Such examples speak to the real grievances some Muslim communities have and fuel the arguments made by the extremist recruiters that there is an international agenda against Islam and wilful oppression of Muslims.

Terrorism

Terrorism has been the spark for recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan, al-Qaida, a politically-driven group/movement having issues with United States foreign policy, was targeted in Afghanistan as it had training camps there. Al-Qaida makes arguments for armed jihad, reasoning that United States foreign policy and activities oppress the innocent. They have succeeded in recruiting some impressionable, easily-led Muslims that way. Still, as already explained, the use of terrorism (the killing of innocent people) cannot be justified via Islam.

Other fighters in Afghanistan have a different motivation. They consider themselves to be freedom fighters, defending their land against an invading force. So differences in perspective, or lenses of view, perpetuate a vicious cycle of attacks and retaliation.

In Iraq, the justification for the United States' invasion was

based on the argument that Saddam, originally a friend of the West, was now dangerous and unpredictable; a dictator, a violator of his own people's human rights, a harbourer of terrorists, and an imminent danger to the world as he held weapons of mass destruction. Not all these assertions were ultimately found to be true. This really is what terrorist recruiters use to argue that there is a Western agenda against others and that there exists intentional oppression for Western gain. They argue that Western attitudes to regimes change when they no longer align with 'Western expectations'. So information and facts, and especially how they are communicated and interpreted, affect how people view reality.

Breaking the Terrorist Cycle

Any attempts to break the terrorist cycle must involve communication, education and equity. International government responses have been simplistic and ineffective; and there are arguably double standards and hypocrisy in both international and national policies in world institutions and governments. There is also a need to understand why elements of the Muslim community are vulnerable to extremism and radicalisation. Islam calls Muslims to jihad to stop oppression. So once the idea of Muslim 'oppression' is planted in the minds of at-risk individuals, it is easier to move them to extremist actions.

The same needs to happen with addressing terrorism. We need to move on more quickly from a single approach of talking tough and broadly bombing regions where we believe extremists operate. I am not sure there is often any real clarity as to who exactly is the enemy. As such, working on preventative strategies gives the best likelihood of long-term success. Security, jobs, income to support families, and stability to grow and educate populations, are the key ingredients to preventing the explosive, desperate reaction to despair that is extremism.

We need to educate Muslims better also, about the proper and complete adherence to all teachings of their faith. This will solicit a different response from the vulnerable and also assist them in taking responsibility for their actions and response to their frustrations, rather than becoming fixated on blaming others. The issue is double edged, with some Muslims being equally responsible for shifting blame, engaging in divisive rhetoric about non-Muslims and promoting an 'us, the believers' and 'them, the disbelievers' division.

We need to educate and inform government responses in light of Islamic perceptions, values and certain aspects of doctrine. Issues that, it could be argued, oppress people who are vulnerable or marginalised also must be addressed. This can include winning 'hearts and minds' through effectively communicating the value-add of Australian government policies and delivering new approaches that generate different views about the impact on human rights, and the value-add of Western foreign policy and military operations for affected communities. It is vital, though, that there be fairness and equity for all – no double standards.

It is also important that, in the public rhetoric, terrorism and Islam are de-linked. Constant negative media reporting on apparent Muslim behaviour provides ammunition for terrorist recruiters enabling them to convince impressionable Muslims that there is an agenda against them and their religion – again, supporting a call for armed jihad.

Indeed, the word 'Islam' needs to be removed from reporting on ISIS/ISIL or Daesh. The barbaric nature and

ideology of these groups has nothing to do with Islam and we should work to limit their appeal to vulnerable Muslims, preventing the use and advertising of 'Islam' in their name. This would also limit the adverse impact they are having on the reputation and quality of life of the true peaceful Muslim majority. This must be coupled with frank, fearless, fair, respectful and honest debate addressing the root causes of grievances with a view to arresting the vicious cycle.

There is a need to stop talking **about** Muslims and start talking **to/with** them. There is also a need to bolster international aid and support to displaced communities fleeing war-torn zones; and for better advertising of the positive contributions Australian military operations are having abroad in the areas of peacekeeping and nation rebuilding.

Tangible and practical strategies should include the provision of government assistance to the Australian Muslim community:

- to develop more English speaking religious leaders (Imams) to service the needs and spiritual guidance of Muslim youth;²
- to create funded employment opportunities for appropriately qualified Imams;³
- to provide more mosques, with appropriately qualified Imams – this would reduce the promotion of unsavoury ideologies by uneducated do-gooders in makeshift community halls used for gatherings and prayer where no proper Islamic religious services exist; and
- by addressing raised grievances or giving plausible, defensible and non-discriminatory reasons why they cannot be addressed – open and frank dialogue is needed in order to build understanding, respect and trust.

Government education of the Australian community by promoting inclusion and mutual respect also would help in balancing and smoothing out polarised perceptions and beliefs.

Conclusion

In the present era, we need strong government and community leaders who are more strategic in their approach to Muslims; and who focus strongly on peacemaking and promoting social cohesion. They need to implement strategies that adequately support the needs of all citizens and that celebrate the contribution of all as part of the 'Australian identity'.

Mainstream Muslims need to be supported and protected. The promulgation of negative views of Muslims increases prejudice, fear and uncertainty. This can lead to disadvantage, including reduced employment prospects,

²There has been much political comment of late about Islamic spiritual leaders in Australia being 'ineffective' in curbing the extremist threat. The main challenge the community faces is that most of the youth are unable to understand the religious explanations from Arabic-speaking sheikhs and Imams who are often disconnected culturally, socially and generationally from the youth. Through the provision of programmes to develop young English speaking Imams and continued support to Islamic schools with properly qualified teachers, much can be done to assist Muslim youth choose the correct practice of their faith. Social media and 'Imam Google' (the instruments of terrorists and extremists) have filled the knowledge void for some, resulting in them falling prey to abhorrent ideologies faking an association with Islam.

³The recent appointment of an Islamic chaplain in the NSW Police Force and work to progress the employment of an Islamic chaplain within the military are positive examples.

vilification and victimisation; and these provide ammunition for terrorist recruiters.

Muslim victimisation and disenfranchisement, real or perceived, puts the Muslim community under great strain. It erodes its confidence and self-esteem, and promotes a victim mentality, leading parts of the community to withdraw from the wider society. Indeed, segments of the Muslim community in Australia now struggle to integrate, to effectively communicate their true nature, and to reach their full potential. This, in turn, has impacted on the mental health of some within the Muslim community, and is a social phenomenon which needs serious and empathetic attention. Effective strategies are needed to address it.

In short, real change can and must occur in Australia's relations with its Muslim citizens. It will need strong leadership, a change in the dialogue, better exploration of grievances and community challenges, and implementation of a national education programme promoting understanding and inclusion.

The Author: Mona Shindy is the most senior Muslim in the Royal Australian Navy. She is Director, Littoral Warfare and Maritime Support, in the Capability Development Group, Navy Office; and is also the Chief of Navy's Strategic Adviser on Islamic Cultural Affairs. In her latter role, she helps create a better understanding among Defence personnel of the Islamic faith, traditions and cultural sensitivities, work for which she was awarded a Conspicuous Service Cross in 2015. She was born in Egypt in 1968 and migrated to Australia with her family aged three. She joined the Navy in 1989 as an engineering undergraduate and became an electrical engineer. She has served in HMA Ships *Canberra*, *Kanimbla*, *Sydney* and *Melbourne*, and saw active service during the IRAQ conflict in 2003. Between sea postings, she has completed many technically challenging shore postings within the Defence Materiel Organisation (DMO), Fleet Command, and Navy Systems Command, including Head of the Systems Engineering Group at the Combat Data Systems Centre, Deputy Director of the RAN Test Evaluation and Analysis Authority, representing DMO and RAN in Washington DC, and FFG (guided missile frigate) System Programme Office Director. She is married with three children. [Photo of Captain Shindy: Department of Defence]

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