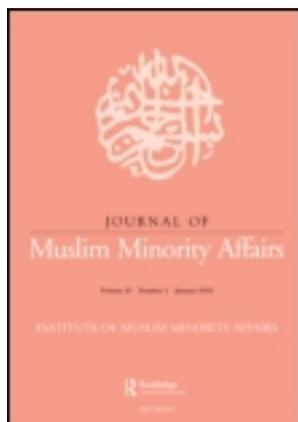


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Investing in Mentoring and Educational Initiatives: The Limits of De-Radicalisation Programmes in Australia

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH

Abstract

The Australian Government has tried to counter the threat of Islamic extremism by investing in mentoring and educational initiatives. Fearful of the potential for “home-grown” extremism, especially after the July 2005 London attacks, the Australian authorities seek to counter the narrow-minded narrative of extremism by sponsoring “moderate Islam”. This approach is aimed at presenting a counter-ideology to Islamism, and has had some success. But it neglects the broader context of Muslim experience which is marked by socio-economic under-privilege and political alienation. These experiences marginalise Australian Muslims and make them vulnerable to extremist ideas. This pattern is most evident among the youth, whose sense of self is still in flux. Furthermore, the state’s sponsorship of “moderate Islam” puts Australia on a questionable path as it chips away at the principle of the separation of state and religion and makes moderate Muslims vulnerable to accusation of “betraying” Islam by the more radical elements in the Muslim community. This paper argues that efforts by the Australian Government to counter radicalisation are hindered by a range of political, cultural and socio-economic factors and analyses these factors in the light of historical, ethnic, cultural and social conditions relevant to the Muslim community in Australia.

Introduction

Australia has not experienced Islamic terrorism on its soil. But the changing political landscape following September 11/2001 have made a direct impact on Australian national psyche. Islam became a national problem that needed to be contained and managed. The London bombing of 7 July 2005, perpetrated by British Muslims, signalled a new and even more dangerous development. Islamic terrorism was no longer a threat from outside, but a threat from within. For the Australian government, responding to the threat of “home-grown terrorism” and managing local Muslims gained significant urgency. But the record of the Australian government’s response to this new challenge has been mixed. The adoption of anti-terror laws was largely seen by Australian Muslim communities and civil society organisations as targeting one community unfairly. This led to a degree of Muslim alienation. On the other hand, various government departments have made an effort to establish a working relationship with Muslim community organisations in order to prevent acts of terror. The Victorian Police Department, for example, has been at the forefront of engaging with various Islamic organisations, aiming to prevent radicalisation and ideally countering it.

Various Australian initiatives to counter radicalisation share an important starting point and operate within a certain conceptual framework. The underlying assumption is that radical Muslims have a narrow and often inaccurate understanding of Islam and its principles. As a result the great majority of programmes conducted in Australia have a strong emphasis on religious education. Muslim radicals, often under-educated youth, are presented with Islamic scholarship that prohibits violence. It is hoped that this “education” in Islamic scholarship will deter them from further radicalisation, and ideally facilitate de-radicalisation. The success of this approach, however, has been limited because it fails to take into account the full array of factors that contribute to radicalisation.

The Australian Muslim population suffers from an endemic socio-economic disadvantage. They feel targeted unfairly by the media and government policies. They feel their belief system and the value system to be subjected to ridicule and derision, and labelled “un-Australian”. They feel alienated from Australian foreign policy-making which dove-tails the USA in relation to Iraq and Afghanistan. Muslims feel powerless to affect policy shifts. The above combination, of socio-economic under-development, social and cultural isolation and a sense of political disempowerment, has contributed to Muslim alienation.

This paper argues that efforts by the Australian Government to counter radicalisation are hindered by a range of political, cultural and socio-economic factors.

Muslims in Australia

Islam in Australia is still a new religion but it has been growing as a result of migration, high birth rate among Muslim Australians and conversion to Islam. These three factors have put the share of the Muslim population in Australia on an upward trajectory. In 1947 the number of Muslims was negligible and did not register on the national census. By 1971 Muslim numbers grew to the very modest 22,000 or less than 0.2% of the total population. The 1970s, however, was an important decade for Muslims in Australia. The Australian government had up to this point imposed racial restrictions on migration to Australia. The White Australia Policy barred migration from the Middle East and Asia. By the mid-1970s, however, the Gough Whitlam government (1972–1975) made a significant change and dropped the White Australia Policy. This shift in policy coincided with a series of upheavals in the Middle East which resulted in large population movements. The civil war in Lebanon in the 1970s was the first to generate demand for entry into Australia. This was soon followed by the Iran–Iraq war, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the international community’s war on Iraq. These upheavals resulted in significant dislocation of the local population, some of whom found their way to Australia. As a result, by the late 1990s the Muslim population had established itself as a sizable minority. This number has been growing steadily: 201,000 at the time of the 1996 census, 281,600 in 2001, 340,000 in 2006 and 476,300 in 2011. At the present time Muslims make up 2.2% of Australia’s total population, nearly on par with Buddhists who make up 2.5% of the population.

Muslim Australians are mostly concentrated in major metropolitan centres; Sydney and Melbourne are home to significant Muslim communities. According to the last national Census (2011) 208,148 Muslims live in Greater Sydney, constituting 4.7% of the city’s population. Greater Melbourne boasts the second largest concentration of Muslims: 144,651 or 3.6% of the city’s population. Together they constitute 74% of

the total population of Muslims in Australia. This congregation in Australia's two largest cities, however, is not evenly spread. Some parts of Sydney and Melbourne have recorded a significant concentration of Muslim residents. For example, the 2011 census registered nearly 15% of the population in Hume (Greater Melbourne) as Muslim. This is more than six times the national average. This proportion is even higher in the New South Wales suburbs of Bankstown (26.2%) and Auburn (42%). It is noteworthy that these localities are also characterised by low income levels and high rates of unemployment.

In the post-September 11 era, questions are being asked about the place of Islam in Australia. The London bombings of 7 July 2005, the first successful suicide attack on Western European soil carried out by four British-born men, catapulted into the public spotlight questions about the capacity of Muslims to integrate into secular, liberal democracies. Questions such as: Is there something intrinsic in Islam or the way Muslims practice their faith that makes it difficult for them to adapt to life in the West? To what extent do connections to the ancestral homelands affect loyalty to the countries of residence? Are Western nations such as Australia merely temporary countries of residence for Muslim migrants and children of migrants, who otherwise long for a return to their true homelands? The underlying question that is being asked is no longer simply about Muslims' capacity to integrate, but whether Muslims living in Western countries, such as the UK and Australia, are a fifth column for global *jihad*.¹

The jingoistic approach to the role of Muslims in the West is blatantly Islamophobic, masquerading as scholarly. Authors such as Bruce Thornton, Bruce Bawer, Bat Ye'or, and Melanie Phillips have produced books that share a common thread: Muslims have no desire to integrate in the West and it is only a matter of time before they turn against their host states. In other words, Muslims are a ticking bomb.²

In contrast, a growing body of academic literature starts from the point that not all Muslims are terrorists, and proceeds to investigate the underlying causes of extremism. An important point, noted below, relates to unfulfilled expectations. From this point of view, it is not simply the experience of poverty, unemployment and deprivation that causes alienation and extremism, although they may well contribute to it, but a sense that one's aspirations and expectations are not being fulfilled; a sense that the *system* does not allow an individual or a group of individuals to excel. It is this perception of blocked progress that plays a significant role in alienating the affected group from the social and political system which appears indifferent, or worse hostile, to them. In addition to this individual sense of alienation, is it the community experience of migration—complete with all the usual migrant challenges of acclimation—that helps generate group solidarity and a sense of common purpose in the affected group, often based on a victimhood mentality.

Farhad Khosrokhavar has argued that a shared sense of discrimination based on ethnicity, race or religion is a powerful push to drive a wedge between the affected community and the rest of society. In his recent research publication, Khosrokhavar has complemented his earlier studies on the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on Muslim communities, and emphasises the significance of a shared experience of marginalisation for making Muslims vulnerable to the process of radicalisation.³ In other words, the shared experience of discrimination undermines the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the affected community and makes radical ideas that challenge the system seem acceptable.⁴ The process of de-legitimisation of the state, Martha Crenshaw argued in her seminal work, is a key factor in the rise of political extremists and

Table 1. Country of birth for Australian Muslims.

2001 census		2006 census		2011 census	
Australia	36.4%	Australia	37.9%	Australia	37.6%
Lebanon	10.4%	Lebanon	8.9%	Lebanon	7.1%
Turkey	8.3%	Turkey	6.8%	Pakistan	5.6%
Afghanistan	3.5%	Afghanistan	4.7%	Afghanistan	5.5%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.5%	Pakistan	4.1%	Turkey	5.3%
Pakistan	3.3%	Bangladesh	3.9%	Bangladesh	5.0%
Indonesia	2.9%	Iraq	2.9%	Iraq	3.3%
Iraq	2.8%	Indonesia	2.5%	Iran	2.7%
Bangladesh	2.7%	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2.2%	Indonesia	2.6%
Iran	2.3%	Iran	2.1%	India	2.1%
Other	23.9%	Other	24.0%	Other	23.2%

terrorism.⁵ Subsequent research has pointed to a gradual de-legitimisation of the state commensurate with the sense of discrimination felt by Muslim communities.

Ethnic Heritage

It is instructive to note that Islam in Australia is fast evolving from being the religion of migrants to the religion of Australian-born believers. The share of Australian-born Muslims has grown substantially, overtaking those born in Lebanon and Turkey. The latter ethnic groups have traditionally constituted the largest Muslim groups in the ethnically mixed Muslim population in Australia. But the growth of second- and third-generation Muslims has made a qualitative impact on the nature of Islam in Australia. Second- and third-generation Turks and Lebanese in Australia have lived in this country all their lives. They know no other country than Australia. This often means their first language is English; they have a much closer association with Australian culture than the country of their forefathers (Table 1).

At the same time, second- and third-generation Muslims in Australia maintain an emotional affiliation with the birth country of their parents and grandparents. This emotional connection is reinforced in family gatherings, community events and ultimately visits to these countries. For most, this is very natural. Being born and raised in Australia and pursuing a fulfilling life in this country does not detract from a sense of connection to their ancestral land, even a sense of nostalgia for a land they have actually not lived on.

This may seem contradictory, but for the great majority of Muslims this is perfectly natural. The practical reconciliation of competing feelings is a common experience for migrants. The British, the Italians and the Greeks have had very similar emotional attractions. The tension between these emotional demands has been resolved by accepting the reality of life. Migrants have a point of reference in the past and a point of reference in the future. They do not wish to forget where they have come from. They have a sense of pride in their country of origin, its culture, language and religion, and wish to transmit that emotional heritage to subsequent generations. They also hold significant hope and expectation for their future in Australia. They value the opportunities they find for their material and emotional well-being in this country and respect Australia for these. Respecting Australian law and behaving as responsible citizens does not detract from their ethnic and religious identity. The

two points of reference may not meet. But migrants (including second and third generations) act as the connecting link. This role helps define migrant communities and reconcile competing emotional demands.

The problem for the Muslim population, however, is that major political and geo-strategic turbulence in the Muslim world is imposing the past onto the present. Events beyond Australia's shores and beyond the control of Australian Muslims have elevated the Muslim emotional connection with their countries of origin and their ethnic kin into an issue of political and security significance. As a consequence, what might have been a common issue of navigating competing emotional demands has turned, in the eyes of some critics (especially on the right side of politics), into a case of divided loyalties. This makes the Muslims' place in Australia precarious and subject to extraordinary attention.

National Action Plan

In 2005 the Australian Government under Prime Minister John Howard convened the Muslim Community Reference Group for advice on how best to respond to the threat of "home-grown" terrorism. This Group consisted of some well-established Muslim community leaders and a number of younger Muslims to capture the diversity of the Australian Muslim population. The recommendations of this Group have had a lasting impact on how the Australian Government deals with its Muslim population, focusing on three key areas of prevention: youth issues, education (including Islamic education for *imams*) and inter-faith/inter-cultural relations.

One of the first acts of the Muslim Reference Group was to seek an overview of Islamic studies at Australian universities. This study found that, while many universities offered subjects in Islamic studies, in most cases the offerings lacked cohesion. This was noted as a pedagogical drawback. This shortcoming was compounded in relation to the needs of *imams* and other religious leaders. It was evident that no Australian university contributed to religious education and the training of local *imams*. The assumption that Australia was in need of its own *imam*-training programme informed the subsequent proposal to establish a national body for Islamic studies.

The need for such a national body to train local Australian *imams* was self-evident to members of the Muslim Reference Group and the Howard Government. In the absence of locally trained and qualified Muslim leaders, the Australian Muslim community relied on the service and leadership of "imported" *imams*. For the Turkish community, this is a carefully managed process. The Turkish government sends qualified *imams* to serve the Turkish community in Australia, in the same way it posts diplomats to various parts of the world. Turkish *imams* draw their salary from the Turkish Government and are expected to return to Turkey following the completion of their post in Australia.⁶ But non-Turkish Muslims in Australia have a more ad hoc approach to the appointment of *imams*. Islamic scholars from various parts of the Arab world, primarily Egypt, arrive in Australia to serve as *imams* due to informal and personal relations with members of the Muslim community. Local Islamic associations hire and sack their *imams*. While this *imam*-appointment process gives it a democratic quality, it also makes such *imams* dependent on the generosity of the community and relevant mosque committees for their livelihood.⁷

Many observers have noted that "imported" *imams* had little relevance for many young Australian Muslims, who are born and bred in Australia. These *imams* often lack the necessary English-language proficiency and firm knowledge of the Australian culture

and society to speak to Muslim youth who know no other country than Australia. This disconnect with the Australian context, while gradually repaired over time, is a significant drawback for Muslim *imams*. This concern was shared by the Australian Government which closely monitored the European projects establish indigenous *imam*-training institutes.⁸

Faced with the same problem of “imported” *imams* for their much larger Muslim populations, many European states had also moved towards establishing local training for Muslim leaders. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France and the Netherlands have all funded *imam*-training projects at universities. The French project was the most ambitious as it funded the Catholic Institute of Paris, which has traditionally been committed to the training of Catholic priests, to train Muslim *imams*. It was launched in 2008, under the leadership of the French sociologist of religion Olivier Bobineau, and with support from the Office of Religious Affairs of the Interior Ministry. But the programme has been unimpressive in its impact. The completion and graduation rate has been very low. According to *Le Monde* in 2011, “out of the 60 who have passed through the course since the launch four years ago, only 9 got their certificates in 2011”. In 2011 only 14 people registered for the 40 available places, and not all are expected to complete the programme. Consequently, the Catholic Institute has downgraded available places for subsequent years.

The above experience was not confined to France. A report produced by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue for the European Policy Planners’ Network on Countering Polarisation and Radicalisation found that institutional and social barriers undermined the success of *Imam*-training programmes in Europe. Religious expectations about the quality of teaching, political distrust and peer pressure were identified as critical factors that weakened the appeal of these initiatives for local Muslims.⁹ Most significant of all, as noted by Brigitte Johanson, the question of legitimacy was a major concern.¹⁰ *Imam*-training initiatives by European governments have seemed like state intervention to promote an obedient and controlled version of Islam as Islamic orthodoxy, leaving the whole project with a serious legitimacy deficit in the eyes of the Muslim population.¹¹

The same factors apply to the Australian experiment. Following a set of recommendations made by the Muslim Reference Group a National Action Plan was developed to build social cohesion, harmony and security. A major element of this National Action Plan was the establishment of a national centre for Islamic studies at a leading Australian university. On 16 July 2006 the Australian Minister for Education, Science and Training and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs made a joint statement about a \$8 million commitment to establish a world-class Islamic studies centre over four years.

In January 2007, following an open competition by leading Australian universities, The University of Melbourne in consortium with the Griffith University and the University of Western Sydney were selected to host the new National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies (NCEIS). The NCEIS project envisaged close community involvement in the development of the curriculum to address the gaps identified in previous reports and discussed by the Muslim Reference Group. The Australian Government did not explicitly ask for *Imam* training, but there was a clear expectation that NCEIS would make a direct contribution to *imam* training and education.

In reality, NCEIS was in no position to satisfy the expectation for *imam* training. NCEIS could not operate outside the university framework which explicitly or implicitly

promotes a critical examination of conventional wisdom and doctrine. Instead the NCEIS consortium promoted a scholarly study of Islam and Islamic civilisation at undergraduate and post-graduate levels. The subjects taught cover a range of topics, from the Quran and Hadith to Islamic civilisations, to the media treatment of Islam and Muslims, to the politics of the Middle East.¹² At the present time all three members of the NCEIS consortium offer a major in Islamic studies as part of their respective Bachelor of Arts. The University of Melbourne also offered a revamped Master of Islamic Studies by coursework. No prior knowledge of Islam was expected of students which allowed for many non-Muslim Australian students to enrol in Islamic studies. Consequently a large portion of the student body has been non-Muslims. While this may be an important service to the Australian society by providing education to the public on a largely misunderstood religion, the intended target group has remained largely outside the reach of NCEIS.

An important problem faced by NCEIS has been an image issue. The fact that the Australian federal government funded the establishment of the centre undermined its credibility in the eyes of some sectors of the Muslim population in Australia. This was due to an established history of distrust and cynicism. Australian Muslims have been at the receiving end of Islamophobia and bias. This experience has generally reinforced the view that the Australian government, similar to other governments in the West, pursues an anti-Islamic agenda. The Australian government's military commitments to the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have often been cited as evidence of this agenda. Consequently, conspiracy theories and a mentality of victimhood are rife among large sections of the Muslim population. This is especially true of the politically marginalised Muslim youth attracted to the ideology of Jihad as a form of resistance against dominant (Judea-Christian) culture.

The Australian branch of Hizb-ut-Tahrir has capitalised on this section of the Muslim community and targets the marginalised youth in its pseudo-educational activities. In Hizb-ut-Tahrir's Manichean worldview, any organisation that operates within the Australian system of government, which it dismisses as illegitimate and unworthy of Muslim allegiance, is part of the problem.¹³ In this worldview, NCEIS is by extension part of the system that subjugates Muslims and deserves nothing but disdain. This was explicitly evident in a 2010 conference. The conference poster identified a number of actors and values that Hizb-ut-Tahrir regarded as promoting Islam, and a mirror image of actors and values that fight Islam in the West. The poster placed NCEIS next to the Australian Federal Police, occupation of Iraq and imperialism, clearly representing the centre as part of a system that fights Islam (see poster at: <http://loganswarning.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Khalifah-Conference-Oz-729x1024.jpg>).

While Hizb-ut-Tahrir's depiction of NCEIS is certainly extreme, it highlighted a nagging suspicion among many Muslims as to the rationale of this centre.

Government Measures against Radicalisation

The policy recommendations of the Muslim Reference Group have continued to inform the Australian Government. The Labour Government that came to office after the electoral defeat of the Liberal-National coalition maintained the high level of investment in measures to prevent radicalisation. The two key areas of youth and education, and to some extent inter-cultural/inter-faith relations, have continued to provide focus for government funding.

In 2010 the Australian Attorney-General Department developed the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Taskforce. One of its first measures was to commission a report. This key report titled *Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review*, released by the Australian Government Defence Department, pointed to a number of issues around radicalisation. Foremost among these were the gaps between university centres of research and scholarship and government departments that were charged with forming and implementing policies on the threat of Islamic radicalism. The CVE report recommended investing in research and scholarship into various factors that contribute to violence and also building mechanisms for government agencies to benefit from this expertise.¹⁴ This was an important addition to earlier approaches as it acknowledged the value of research and scholarship on the factors that facilitated extremism and violence.

The CVE had at its disposal Aust\$9.7 million over 4 years to address issues of domestic violent extremism.¹⁵ The CVE commenced two grant schemes: Building Community Resilience Youth Mentoring Programme and Building Community Resilience. According to the Attorney-General Department in 2011 just over Aust\$1.1million was allocated to seven projects and a further two projects for the following financial year. Most youth programmes involve a mentoring aspect, often matching youth from at-risk communities with successful role models and also training them in useful social and political skills. The rationale is that the capacity to engage constructively with the political system and the media will help give Muslim youth a sense of purpose, and hope that they can affect change. This sense of hope and purpose is expected to steer them away from extremism which is generally assumed to feed on frustration and a deep distrust of the system.

The Building Community Resilience scheme aims to support community projects that build resilience against violent extremism. The bulk of CVE funds have been devoted to this scheme with a total of 50 projects with a value of more than Aust\$7 million in the 2011–2013 period.¹⁶ Under this programme grants of Aust\$5000 to Aust\$100,000 were awarded to a range of local initiatives. This scheme identifies three areas of concern:

- Offering communities the skills and resources to actively address intolerance and discourage violent extremism.
- Supporting candidates vulnerable to extremism.
- Providing education about participation in political debate.

Funded projects under this scheme have a strong commitment to youth education, both in Islamic scholarship and also in generic leadership skills.¹⁷ Among some of the promising projects was *Sharing Humanity* run by the Lebanese Muslim Association in Sydney. It selected 10 Muslim men and 10 Muslim women to participate in a leadership programme that included education on Islamic scholarship in order to equip the participants with a counter-narrative to the extremist interpretation of Islamic texts. The project commenced in 2011 and aims to:

... work to build understanding and equip Muslims with the theological fundamentals that counter extremist ideologies, dispel misconceptions and develop their role as citizens, leaders and positive role models so that they can become “leaders” for mainstream Islam and assert their Australian identity.

A similar project focusing on educating at-risk Muslim youth was initiated by the Australian Multicultural Foundation. This project was aptly named *Peer to Peer: Building Capacity and Resilience*, and aimed to:

... engage with ten Muslim youth who have been identified by Imams, community leaders and Muslim Youth Leaders as being at risk of radicalisation. Through the program, and with the support of Imams and Muslim Youth Leaders as mentors, these young people will develop an understanding of their religious identity through true principles of Islam—as opposed to violent extremist ideology. The participants will receive training to develop their skills, self-esteem and knowledge to enable them to engage in volunteer activity within both their local and the broader community.

As the above two samples indicate, countering the Jihadi interpretation of Islam is considered as an important step in undermining extremism. It is not surprising, therefore, that Australian security agencies have also moved into this territory. In this respect the security services are moving beyond the traditional role of responding to criminal acts, by adopting measures to prevent acts of extremism. The Police Department in Victoria has demonstrated a strong commitment to crime prevention through community outreach programmes among Muslims which are designed to address some of the stigma attached to talking to the police and include strategies for countering terrorism. In 2011 VicPolice partnered with the Australian Federal Police, Australian Multicultural Foundation and the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) to work with prisoners convicted of terrorism. According to VicPolice's annual report the Community Integration Support Programme:

...is directed at Victorian-based Muslim offenders for terrorism related offences. The program provides Islamic awareness sessions to prisoners; re-integration support for those who are nearing release from prison; religious support and mentoring; and post-release, re-integration individual and group social support including family support where appropriate. Continued participation in the program is mandated as part of released prisoners' parole conditions.¹⁸

A front-page report in the state daily, *The Age*, captured the essence of this counter-terrorism initiative. The programme is aimed at challenging radical ideas and correcting distorted views on jihad among convicted terrorists.¹⁹

Educating those at risk of extremism is generally viewed by relevant government agencies as an important way to prevent or reverse the process of Islamic radicalisation. Australian agencies are learning from the experience of other states and note the value of former jihadis in mounting a challenge to the core belief system of Islamic extremism. Former jihadis, such as Al-Sayyid Imam Abdul-Aziz al-Sharif, have written extensively on the flaws of al-Qaeda. The former author who goes by the pen name of Al-Fadl has published two books in Arabic, excerpts of which were also published in a newspaper, challenging Zawaheri's interpretation of the concept of *jihad*, especially in relation to violence against civilians.

Such publications have significant weight in challenging extremism ideology and their claim to Islamic authenticity. Former jihadi authors use a terminology and vocabulary that is familiar to radical extremists and in many ways confirm the radical interpretation of the relationship between Islam and the West. This relationship is depicted as antagonistic and hurtful to Muslims. Al-Fadl for example makes no effort to put a positive spin on the American policy towards the Middle East and

Israel. On the contrary, his publications carry a pronounced message against the USA and the West. This writing reiterates the conspiratorist view of history that blames the West for holding the Muslim world back through colonialism and imperialism, a worldview that appeals to the jihadi mindset.

The difference between the former jihadi and current jihadi perspectives is not so much about the worldview, but how the problems of the Muslim world may be addressed. Former jihadis refute the legitimacy of violence against civilians by referring to Islamic text and Prophetic Traditions. Given their credentials as former jihadis, their word carries weight among young jihadis of today. While other Islamic scholars may be dismissed by fresh recruits to the cause of *jihad* for their quietism and lack of revolutionary credentials, former jihadis are much harder to ignore. Consequently such counter-extremist literature have the potential to make an impact on at-risk groups and steer some young jihadis away from acts of violence.

Education, be it public or targeted, is generally viewed as the appropriate antidote to extremism because the latter is assumed to be based on ignorance and selective reading of Islam. This approach has some success. But this counter-extremist strategy ignores the broader context within which young Australian Muslims are radicalised.

Political Alienation

One of the key issues raised by Australian Muslims is the apparent disconnect between their interests and government policies. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Australia's foreign policy-making. A recent survey found that the large majority of Muslims view Australia's policy in the Middle East to be misguided and detrimental to their interests. Australia's military commitment to the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq is seen by Australian Muslims as part of a global strategy against Muslims, one that is led by the USA.²⁰ The fact that the invasion of Afghanistan, which was a direct consequence of the September 11 attacks on the USA and enjoyed the support of the international community (including Muslim states), was very different to the invasion of Iraq, makes no difference here. The emotional affiliation and solidarity with Muslims outside Australia's borders play a key role in the way Australian Muslims relate to Australian foreign policy. This disconnect with the process of policy-making has alienated many Muslims from the political system and given rise to a view that their voices are ignored by those in power.

The consequent withdrawal from the political process and the belief that Muslims are not welcome in Australia are also evident in the predominant view that the media runs a systematic anti-Islam agenda. A study commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, focusing on young Muslim attitudes in Melbourne and Sydney, noted a palpable sense of alienation from the Australian political system and the media.²¹ This sense of alienation has been reinforced in the wake of the Howard Government's insistence that Australian values were distinct and somewhat different from Islamic values.²² The "war of values" took place in the context of the Liberal party's blatant attempt to play on the fear factor to gain an edge over the Labour party in the opposition and win votes in Australia. But the impact of this political play was profound and significantly widened the emotional gap between Australian Muslims and the prevailing political system.

Political alienation is an important factor in steering young Australian Muslims towards radical ideas. Against this background of disconnect with the political system

and the sense that the Australian Government is pursuing an anti-Islamic agenda, the message of radical groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir gains some appeal.

Socio-Economic Marginalisation

Another important factor that tends to make Muslims susceptible to ideas of radicalism is their socio-economic marginalisation. Official data from the Australian Census point to a worrying discrepancy in terms of living standards and access to wealth among Muslims and non-Muslims. In a study of Census data, Riaz Hassan argues that in 2006 Muslim households were clustered in the low-income bracket, with 2% registering no income. This was twice the figure for non-Muslim Australians.²³ The 2011 national Census in Australia confirms the sustained gap between Muslims and non-Muslims, with more than 2% of Muslims registering no income while the national figures stood at 1.06%.²⁴ In terms of home ownership, an indicator of financial security and a foundation of the “Australian dream”, Muslims continue to register no more than 14%. Home ownership among non-Muslim Australians stood at 32% or a third of the population. Instead nearly 50% of Muslim households lived in rental accommodations, in comparison with the national average of 28.5%.²⁵

The figures for employment reinforce the above picture. While Australia’s unemployment rates in 2006 and 2011 have stood at just over 5%, Muslims were 2.5 times more likely to suffer unemployment, with 13.4% and 12.6%, respectively. These figures suggest that financial insecurity and poverty are a serious issue for Muslims. As Riaz Hassan observed in 2009, Australian Muslims suffer significant disadvantage on all key indicators of socio-economic welfare. And this unfortunate situation appears to be endemic as successive national censuses reveal a consistent pattern of poverty and socio-economic under-privilege.

Conclusion

There is an overwhelming consensus in Australia that education is the key to countering Islamic extremism. This view is shared by many scholars and policy-makers. Government sponsorship of research projects and the establishment of university centres such as the NCIES are based on the assumption that extremist ideas can be effectively challenged through better education in Islam. Indeed, if radical groups have a selective reading of Islam, a more balanced and contextualised reading would discredit them. Such an approach that emphasises the value of education in Islamic theology carries significant appeal to policy-makers in Australia. This approach has obvious merits, but suffers from critical limitations which undermine its effectiveness.

The educational approach as the panacea for Islamic extremism fails to account for its attractiveness which is related to a range of political and socio-economic factors. Political alienation and socio-economic marginalisation make young Muslims vulnerable to extremist ideas. Islamic extremism has a revolutionary appeal for young Muslims, which is rooted in its rejection of the status quo and desire to revamp the system. It rejects the system as unjust and suppressive. This revolutionary ideology does not need to be based on careful scholarship. In fact its appeal is due to the simplicity of its message. The selective reading of Islamic text is a side issue. The alienated and marginalised Muslim youth are already seeking an ideology to give meaning to their experience. Efforts to discredit this ideology do not affect the underlying experience of alienation.

And finally, the Australian system of government is based on the separation of religion and the state. Efforts to promote “right” Islamic scholarship deviate from that principle and open a series of questions regarding the role of the state in sponsoring a version of Islam that it deems more “compatible” with its system, and therefore more tolerable. Such intervention compromises the principle of state impartiality in religious affairs and has a mixed impact on the Muslim community. It makes sections of the Muslim community that benefit from state patronage vulnerable to accusations of following the government agenda, of betraying Islam and weakening Muslim unity. State sponsorship of what is often termed “moderate Islam” is risky for moderate Muslims as their credibility in the Muslim community becomes contested due to their association with the Australian Government. This association makes them vulnerable to the same kind of conspiracy theories that are rife among Australian Muslims due to the above-mentioned sense of political alienation from the Australian system of government.

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NOTES

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