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Illegitimate: When Moderate Muslims Speak Out

[Anne Aly](#) | [Volume 17](#) | [Issue 5](#) | [October 2014](#) | ['illegitimate'](#)

It is now almost 15 years since the world witnessed one of modern history's most devastating terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001. Despite all its promises, the so called 'War on Terror' failed to combat a growing tide of violent extremism. 11 years after the US led offensive on Iraq in 2003, the rise of terrorism by non-state actors in the Arab world presents a significant concern to international security and world peace. Since 2001 Australian Muslims have consistently been called upon to openly reject terrorism committed by a minority of Muslims who adhere to an extreme interpretation of Islamic doctrine that justifies attacks on civilians both in the Arab world and abroad.

The responsibility placed on Australian Muslims to actively reject terrorism comes from both official channels through government funded programs under the banner of counter terrorism and countering violent extremism and the public through the popular media. Yet, Muslims in Australia who do speak out against religiously motivated non-state terrorism find themselves in an impossible bind. They are expected to speak out as representatives of a fragmented, heterogeneous and diverse mix of communities and ideologies. Often, when they do speak out, they are viewed with suspicion and presumed to be 'apologists for Islam' whose claim to tolerance and the peaceful nature of Islamic doctrine purposefully ignores its true nature. Such responses render these spokespersons illegitimate- both as representatives of Muslim communities and as Australian citizens.

The question "Why don't moderate Muslims speak out against terrorism?" is often raised in the popular media in response to attacks against Western interests by jihadi groups. On 15 August 2014 an article in the *Daily Telegraph* by well-known conservative journalist Piers Akerman raised the question in relation to the Australian government's announcement of increased powers for law enforcement agencies to deal with the issue of returned foreign fighters who had joined the Islamic State's conflict in Iraq and Syria. The article, titled "It's Time for Muslim Leaders to Speak Up" reiterated much of the construction

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of the silent Muslim majority that has pervaded the Australian popular media since 2001. Akerman states: "They [the Australian government] should be making it clear to Australian Muslims that they expect their leaders to speak out more vehemently against those who groom terrorists from the among the young and stupidly impressionable in their communities". While he continues by acknowledging that Muslims in Australia are diverse in ethnicity and religious views and that the vast majority of Muslims do not support terrorism, he concludes by stating that "the few are costing the majority of Australians millions in security and those who enjoy leadership titles must accept that some responsibility attaches to their position or they should abdicate in favour of individuals who are prepared to consent to the obligations inherent in their station" (Piers Akerman). The same sentiments were expressed by Pia Ackerman in the Australian who wrote that "AUSTRALIA'S Muslim leaders need to speak out against Islamic State terrorists or risk losing their credibility and ability to reach young men attracted to the extremists' cause" (Pia Akerman).

Other responses in the popular media present a different argument. In an article titled "The Moderate Muslims Are Talking If Only You Will Listen", David Penberthy of the *Herald Sun* cites examples of Muslim Australians who are speaking out including the case of prominent Sydney GP Jamal Rifi whose condemnation of terrorist activities in the Arab world has earned him death threats from members of the Islamic State (Penberthy).

Yet, as Penberthy rightly acknowledges the questions "where are the moderates? Where are the decent Muslims? Are there any? Why aren't they speaking out?" are still the most salient questions being asked of Muslims in the public sphere. For Australian Muslims at least, they are questions that pervade their everyday lives. It is these questions for example that leads Muslim women who wear the tradition head covering or hijab to challenge media representations of themselves as complicit actors in terrorism by acting as alternative sources of truth for curious co-workers and members of the broader community (see Aly, *A Study*).

Muslim women who do not wear the hijab can face even more barriers to speaking out because they do not pass the test of 'legitimate' Muslims: those who fit the stereotype of the angry bearded male and the oppressed female shrouded in black. This author, who has in the past written about extremist interpretations of Islam, has faced condemnation from anti-Islamic groups who questioned her authenticity as a Muslim. By speaking out as a Muslim against the violent actions of some Muslims in other parts of the world, I was being accused of misinformed. Ironically, those who are vehemently anti-Islamic espouse the very same ideological world view and interpretations of Islamic doctrine as those Muslims they claim to oppose. Both groups rely on an extreme and minority version of Islam that de-legitimises more

mainstream, nuanced interpretations and both groups claim legitimacy to the truth that Islam can only ever be violent, aggressive and oppositional.

It is not just in the public and media discourses that Muslims who speak out against terrorism face being branded illegitimate. The policy response to home-grown terrorism — acts of violence carried out by Australian citizens within Australia — has, albeit inadvertently, created the conditions through which Muslims must verify their legitimate claims to being Australian by participating in the governments' program of counter terrorism.

In the wake of the 2005 London bombings, the Prime Minister met with selected representatives from Muslim communities to discuss the development of a Muslim Community Reference Group. The Group was charged with assisting the Australian Government by acting as an advisory group and by working with Muslim communities "promote harmony, mutual understanding and Australian values and to challenge violence, ignorance and rigid thinking". This was iterated through a Statement of Principles that committed members of Muslim communities to pursue "moderate' Islam (Prime Minister, "Meeting"). The very need for a Muslim summit and for the development of a Statement of Principles (later endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments, COAG), sends a lucid message to the Australian public that not only are Australian Muslims responsible for terrorism but that they also have the capacity to prevent or minimise the threat of an attack in Australia.

In 2005, the policy response to terrorism took its first step towards linking the social harmony agenda to the securitisation of the state in the form of the National Action Plan to Build Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security. The stated purpose of the National Action Plan (NAP) notably conflated national security with social cohesion and harmony and clearly indicated an understanding that violent extremism could be addressed through programs designed to reinforce Australian values, social harmony, interfaith understanding and tolerance: "The purpose of this National Action Plan (NAP) is to reinforce social cohesion, harmony and support the national security imperative in Australia by addressing extremism, the promotion of violence and intolerance..." (Commonwealth of Australia, *National Action Plan*).

Between 2005 and 2010, the National Action Plan provided funding for 83 community based projects deemed to meet the Plan's criteria of addressing extremism and the promotion of violence. Of the 83 projects funded, 33 were undertaken by associations that identified as Muslim or Islamic (some applicants received funding for more than one project or in more than one round). The remaining 50 organisations funded included universities and vocational training organisations (4), multicultural social services or migrant resource centres (14), interfaith groups (3), local councils (4), ethnic

organisations (specifically African, East African, Afghan, Hazara, Arabic and Pakistani), sporting clubs (4) and miscellaneous social clubs and service providers.

The kinds of projects that were funded were predominantly aimed at Muslim communities, most notably youth and women, and the provision of services, programs, education, information and dialogue. Sixty five of the projects funded were explicitly aimed at Muslim communities and identified their target groups variously as: 'African Muslim'; 'Muslim youth'; 'Muslim women'; 'at risk Muslims'; 'young Muslims'; 'Iraqi Muslims'; 'Lebanese Muslims' and 'young Muslim men from Arabic speaking backgrounds'. Seven projects were described as involving 'interfaith' elements, though a further 13 projects described some form of interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim communities and groups through activities such as sport, dialogue, fashion parades, workshops, art and craft programs, music workshops. 29 projects involved some form of leadership training for Muslims: youth, women and young men. Overall, the range of projects funded under the National Action Plan in the five years of its operation reflect a policy approach that specifically identifies Muslim communities (including ethno specific and new and emerging Muslim communities) as the primary target of Australia's broader security strategy.

The National Action Plan was succeeded by the Building Community Resilience (BCR) Program. Despite the positive steps taken in attempting to move the BCR program away from the social harmony policy agenda, it continued to reflect an underlying preoccupation with the assumptions of its predecessor. Between 2011- 2013 it funded 51 community based projects. Of these, 7 projects were undertaken by Islamic or Muslim associations. Ten of the projects specifically target Muslims or Muslim communities, with 6 of these being Muslim youth leadership and/or mentoring programs. The remaining 4 Muslim focussed projects include a project designed to encourage Muslim youth to build positive connections with the broader community, the development of a Common Curriculum Framework for teaching Islamic Studies in Australian Islamic primary and secondary schools, a project to address misconceptions about Islam and promote cultural understanding and the production of a DVD for schools to address misperceptions about Muslims. Notably, only one project specifically targets white supremacist violent extremism.

The Australian governments' progressive policy approach to countering violent extremism at home has disproportionately focussed on the Australian Muslim communities. In an environment where Muslims are viewed with suspicion and as having the primary responsibility as both perpetrators and gatekeepers of terroristic ideologies, Muslims in diaspora communities have been forced to make legitimate claims to their innocence. In order to do this they are required to

reaffirm their commitment to Australian values, not just by speaking out against terrorism but also by participating in programs that are based on false assumptions about the nature of Muslim citizenship in Australia and the premise that Muslim Australians are, both individually and collectively, opposed to such values by virtue of their religious affiliation.

In 2014 and in response to growing concerns about the number of Australians travelling to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside the Islamic State, the government made a bold move by declaring its intention to overhaul existing terror laws. The new laws would reverse the onus of proof on those who travelled to certain countries deemed to be terrorist hotspots to prove that they were not partaking in armed conflict or terrorist training. They would also give more powers to law enforcement and surveillance agencies by lowering the threshold of arrest without a warrant. The announcement of the new laws by the Prime Minister coincided with the news that the Government would abandon its controversial plans to drop section 18c from the Racial Discrimination Act which makes it unlawful to "offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of people" because of their race or ethnicity" (Aston). The announcement was made under the guise of a press conference on terror laws and inferred that the back down on the Racial Discrimination Act reforms were a measure to win over the Muslim communities cooperation on the new terror laws. Referring to a somewhat curious notion of "team Australia", the Prime Minister stated "I want to work with the communities of our country as team Australia here" (Aston). "Team Australia" has since become the Government's narrative frame for garnering public support for its proposed new terrorism laws. Echoing his predecessor John Howard, whose narrative of Australian values pervaded much of the political discourse during his term in office, Prime Minister Abbott stated in a radio interview that "everyone has got to put this country, its interests, its values and its people first, and you don't migrate to this country unless you want to join our team". He followed this statement by emphasising that "What we need to do is to encourage the moderate mainstream to speak out" (Cox).

Shortly after the release of a horrific image on social media showing Australian jihadists proudly flaunting the severed heads of their victims, the Australian government reacted with an even bolder move to introduce legislation that would see the government cancelling the welfare payments of persons "identified by national security agencies as being involved in extremist conduct." According to the Government the reforms would "enable the Department of Human Services to cancel a person's welfare payment if it receives advice that a person has been assessed as a serious threat to Australia's national security."(Prime Minister of Australia) The move was criticised by several groups including academics who argued that it would not only alienate the

already disenfranchised Muslim communities, but could also result in greater radicalisation (Ireland). In response to the raft of new measures perceived to be targeting Muslim communities, Australian Muslims took measured steps to voice their opposition through written statements and media releases stating that, among other things:

These proposals come in the same style as those which have preceded [sic] since the Howard era. An alleged threat is blown out of all proportion as the pretext, further "tightening" of the laws is claimed necessary and rushed through, without proper national debate or community consultation. The reality of the alleged threat is also exposed by the lack of correspondence between the official 'terror threat' level, which has remained the same since 2001, and the hysterical rhetoric from government ministers. (*ABC News*, "Australian Muslims")

Australian Muslim leaders also boycotted government meetings including a planned meeting with the Prime Minister to discuss the new laws. The Prime Minister promptly branded the boycott "foolish" (*ABC News*, "Tony Abbott") yet refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the claims made in the media statements and messages by Muslim organisations that prompted the boycotts.

As Australian Muslims continue to grapple with ways to legitimize their claims to citizenship, the developing discourse on national security and terrorism continues to define them as the objects of terror. Notably, the media discourse is showing some signs of accommodating the views of Muslim Australians who have found some space in the public sphere. Recent media reporting on terror activities in the Middle East has given some consideration to the voices of Muslim leaders who openly oppose violent extremism. Yet Muslims in Australia are still battling for legitimacy. Those who speak out against the hijacking of their religion by a minority who espouse a rigid and uncompromising ideology in order to justify violence often find themselves the subjects of intense scrutiny. From within their communities they are seen to be mouth pieces for an unfair and unjust government agenda that targets Muslims as objects of fear. From outside their communities they are seen to be apologists for Islam whose authenticity should be questioned if not denied. Attempts by Muslim Australians to have their voices heard through political practices that define the very nature of democracy including peaceful demonstrations, boycotts and written statements have not been taken seriously. As a result, Muslim voices in Australia are deemed illegitimate regardless of the forms or platforms through which they seek to be heard.

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