12 July 2009

Dr Hussein Tahiri and Dr Gaetano Ilardi
Counter Terrorism Unit
Victoria Police
P.O. Box 415
MELBOURNE VIC 3005

Dear Dr Tahiri and Dr Ilardi

I write on behalf of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV), the peak body of Victorian Jewry, regarding Victoria Police's 'Lexicon of Terror' project. You already are acquainted with our correspondence on this issue with then Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon (6 November 2008 and 23 December 2008) and with Assistant Commissioner Stephen Fontana (20 July 2009). You also conducted an interview with JCCV executive director Geoffrey Zygier on 12 June 2009. I thank you for the opportunity to provide further material.

The tragic reality of modern life is that literally a day no longer passes without a terrorist attack somewhere in the world. Recent terrorist events, particularly last month's bombings of Jakarta hotels which killed Australians as well as persons of other nationalities, and last week's allegations of a plot to attack the Holsworthy Army Base, bring danger closer to home and make the need for action even more pressing.

The JCCV is far from alone in regarding contemporary terrorism as the greatest immediate danger facing the Western world and its values today. While some are reluctant to say so – and Muslim theology and the directives of its religious leaders are sometimes contradictory – it is an inescapable fact that this terrorism is almost entirely carried out by persons purporting to act in the name of Islam.

That the Australian Government recognises this is apparent. To take one proof, as of May 2009 it had proscribed seventeen terrorist organisations. All except one are Islamist in nature (and even the secular exception, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has utilised Sunni Islamic beliefs to mobilise support).

*The voice of Victorian Jewry*

As part of a strategy to combat extremism, Victoria Police with the support of the Federal Government, has undertaken this project looking at the 'Lexicon of Terror'. While this project is still in progress, comments made by Assistant Commissioner Fontana and Australia's Attorney General Robert McClelland, suggest that the 'Lexicon of Terror' project will likely recommend that the language around terror be sanitised, avoiding all possible reference to Muslims in the belief that this will reduce their alienation and hence their radicalisation.

In the JCCV's opinion – and that of many learned experts on terror – this would be an ill-considered and likely counter-productive outcome. There is widespread disagreement on what makes a terrorist. Mooted causes include indoctrination, alienation, poverty, anger at the West for its military action against Islamic countries, hatred of the West for its values, doctrinal differences, individual pathology, personal tragedy and more. For every theory there are both exceptions to the rule and countering views, hence making both proactive and reactive approaches all the more difficult.

However one fact almost always emerges from the uncertainty about what motivates terrorist behaviour. Whatever the true reason may be, it is invariably couched in theological language, at its simplest "I commit this act because it is Allah's will".

Western governments and other institutions cannot counter this belief, certainly not in Islamic countries, nor in the West where faith-based schools and home teaching can facilitate hatred of the host society.

Only Muslims themselves with the requisite will and inclination can turn the tide in the war against terror. However they can not and will not do so if they do not acknowledge that they have this power. And a 'Lexicon of Terror' that infantilises and absolves Muslims of responsibility by creating a generic, overly careful and politically correct language will doom us all to failure.

The various elements that constitute the terrorist movement proudly proclaim Islamism as their motivator. If Government, its institutions, the media and other moulders of opinion, and most importantly, the mainstream Muslim community do not take them at their word and clearly state that a particular interpretation of Islam lies at the root of terror (and that there are alternatives), then it will be impossible to move followers of Islam to a more moderate view of the world.

The Victorian Jewish community believes that the real clash in today's world is not between civilisations as some contend, but within each civilisation or religion, a clash between the forces of extremism and those of moderation and acceptance of diversity. We must give the moderates the tools to fight the former. While this means clearly recognising that moderate and mainstream Muslims are both in the majority and are allies of democrats in this war, this must be done without denying the motivation and actions of the minority who give Islam and Muslims a bad name. In short, the application of a form of censorship to the way in which terrorist acts are reported or referred, so that the underlying motivation for such acts is in effect

denied, will not achieve the desired outcomes. It is far more important that we all work together to empower the moderate Muslim community to speak out against the perpetrators of these acts.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Please note that I would be very pleased to discuss this with you in person; feel free to contact me via the JCCV office if you wish to do so. Finally I have attached for your information a recent article, 'Muslims must tackle theology of hate' by Professor Abdullah Saeed (The Australian, 7 August 2009) which both eloquently states the case for the Muslim majority assuming responsibility for its own situation and nominates practical ways to do so.

Yours truly

John Searle
President


Cc: The Hon Robert McClelland MP
Chief Commissioner Simon Overland
Assistant Commissioner Stephen Fontana

Muslims must tackle theology of hate
The Australian August 07, 2009

EVENTS of the past decade have shown that small groups of militant extremist Muslims have a remarkable ability to create havoc in much of the world: killing, suicide bombing and destruction in the name of Islam.

That the number of these militant extremists is small is not a good reason for the majority of Muslims to remain silent.

The ideology of these small groups has become widespread at a global level and unless the silent majority in Muslim societies wakes up to the threat these militant extremists pose to their societies, their religion and to the world, there is a danger that militant extremism could become the norm in some Muslim societies.

Countering the ideology of militant extremists from 9/11 to the recent Jakarta bombings, Muslim religious leaders, theologians, academics, journalists and others have labelled such actions as anti-Islamic.

Australia, home to about 400,000 Muslims, has become a target of militant extremists, as a series of arrests this week has demonstrated. The law-abiding silent majority of Muslim Australians faces a particularly important task, now more than ever: to counter the threat of militant extremism and the hate-filled ideology of the extremists, and to save the younger generation of Muslims from this ideology.

This does not mean that Muslim Australians are somehow responsible for the acts of militant extremists; clearly they are not, and law-abiding Muslims should not be held responsible for the criminal acts of those who call themselves Muslim.

There are several things mainstream Muslim Australians can do. Condemning the violence in the strongest terms is naturally the starting point, but it should not be the end of the story. Mainstream Muslims have to actively counter the claims of these militant extremists, just as Muslims in the past have done so at different points throughout the history of Islam, and in doing so helped to keep the militant extremists at the margins of society.

Mainstream Muslim Australians need to recognise that Koranic verses and the sayings of the prophet Mohammed can be misused and twisted to justify the most terrible acts. Unfortunately, all religious texts are not mathematical in their precision and are open to all forms of interpretation. Therefore, to counter the militants' arguments, it is important to show that the views and interpretations of the militants ought to be rejected because they are un-Islamic and go against mainstream Muslim thinking and practice.

The silent majority should strengthen its campaign of undermining the militancy and hatred advocated by the extremists. This campaign should begin at Friday sermons, in mosques, at homes, through lesson at Muslim weekend and day schools, in study

circles and youth camps. This is no doubt happening but more needs to be done in view of the present situation.

There needs to be a strong and clear message that killing innocent people, be they Muslims or non-Muslims, is a grave sin and is prohibited in the strongest terms in the Koran and in keeping with Mohammed's deeds.

More broadly, there needs to be an emphasis that Islam teaches compassion and love rather than hate. Unless the theology of hate is challenged, it is likely to become the standard interpretation of their faith for many disaffected young Muslims.

It is important that mainstream Muslims stop -- where that happens -- berating the West for its supposed moral failings and preaching that Muslims cannot be fully Muslim in Australia if they are actively involved in Australian society as full citizens.

Australia is not a perfect society, but neither is any other society. It is not mutually exclusive to be a good practising Muslim and an Australian. That certain vices contrary to Islamic teaching -- such as gambling, pornography or brothels -- exist in Australian society is no reason to label Australia un-Islamic. These vices also exist in all Muslim societies. No one forces any Muslim to indulge in any of these vices.

The freedoms that exist here are a part of Australian society's fundamental values and should be seen as a plus from a Muslim point of view. Such freedoms can be used to bolster one's faith.

Many Muslims find that these freedoms allow them to live in Australia as practising Muslims in a way that is not possible in many Muslim-majority countries, where religious freedom is often curtailed, even for Muslims. In essence, Australian values and Islamic teachings on the question of freedom are not so vastly different. Both are based on ideas such as human dignity, justice, equity and egalitarianism.

The basis of some hate-filled literature is that non-Muslims are kuffar (unbelievers) and therefore do not deserve to be treated with respect. Such views are rightly rejected by mainstream Muslims. But rejection is not enough. They need to promote the Koranic teaching that all human beings, whatever their faith, deserve to be honoured as the children of Adam. It needs to be stressed that non-Muslims and Muslims are brothers and sisters within the human family. The Koran tells us that God never wanted to convert all human beings to one religion. Had he so desired, he could have done so. All human beings are free to accept or reject a religion, as the Koran consistently teaches.

The Koran also teaches that debates with non-Muslims about faith should be conducted with the utmost courtesy and dignity.

Respect, courtesy and compassion are repeatedly emphasised in the Koran and these injunctions are in line with the idea that Islam is a universal faith that attempts to contribute to human dignity.

It is important to deal with militant extremism at the ideological-theological level as a matter of urgency. Mere condemnation is insufficient. Sitting on the fence will not help either.

Muslim Australians and their religious leaders can play a crucial role in dealing with the theology of hatred and violence.

Security agencies can protect us from the violence of the militant extremists but, unless the ideological-theological component is effectively tackled, they will continue to pose a threat for a very long time to come.

The last thing Muslim Australians need is a continuous flow of news about possible terrorist threats emerging from within the Australian Muslim community.

Abdullah Saeed is the director of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne.