

How Can the Healing Begin?

Islamophobia, Anti-Semitism
& Social Cohesion after Bondi



Aftab Malik



FOREWORD BY
Terence Lovat



OCCASIONAL
PAPER 1







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The OSECI Occasional papers deliver piercing, evidence-driven insights into contemporary Islamophobia and its ripple effects across society and Muslim Australian communities. Grounded in rigorous research, the series is indispensable for policymakers and engaged readers who demand clarity, accountability and impact. They offer sharp analysis, real-world implications and a compelling call to action for a more inclusive Australia.

“Thoughtful, articulate.”

– GIRIDHARAN SIVARAMAN

Australian Human Rights Race Discrimination Commissioner

“This is a thoughtful and timely reflection on one of the most difficult challenges facing contemporary Australia. The Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia writes with clarity, restraint and moral seriousness about the pressures that test social cohesion in moments of crisis. Without minimising the reality of hatred in its different forms, he reminds us that a plural society depends on our capacity to hold competing fears and loyalties in view at the same time. This essay is an important contribution to a more mature and grounded public conversation that resists simplification and recognises that, even where understanding is possible, deep differences may endure, requiring the patient work of sustaining a shared civic life.”

– DR PETER KURTI

Director of Culture, Prosperity & Civil Society program, Centre for Independent Studies

“This contribution, from Australia’s Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia, is worthy of the office. It speaks clearly and knowledgeably. It shirks nothing. It refuses to succumb to the cheap tribalism or crass zero-sum logic that dominates our public discussions of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. It proceeds from genuine moral seriousness, rather than one that wields moral language opportunistically for predetermined political ends. The result issues the kind of challenge to any sincere reader that so many other contributions in this area don’t: to choose principle over partisanship; to live by our moral lights, rather than use them as rhetoric to blind each other and ourselves.”

– WALEED ALY

Columnist, broadcaster, author, academic

“This is a wonderfully thoughtful contribution - displaying the very best features of Islam’s long, venerated intellectual history. As such, it repudiates both the ‘ignorant few’ who seek to hijack Islam for their own ‘ugly’ purposes and those who condemn Islam (and all Muslims) for a commitment to violent extremism which is rejected by the vast majority of Muslims, and that their faith actually forbids. Finally, there is hope for a better future - for all. It is a hope that, from within our divided communities, we find in the apparent stranger something of ourselves, united by the joys and sorrows that define our common humanity.”

– DR SIMON LONGSTAFF AO

Executive Director, The Ethics Centre

“This is a thoughtful and humane reflection on one of the hardest questions facing contemporary Australia: how to begin healing after violence. Bringing philosophical and ethical clarity to a deeply contested space, the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia shows that rebuilding trust requires something much harder to achieve than condemnation. It demands effortful, ongoing conversation, openness, understanding, courage and a shared commitment to recognising one another’s humanity.”

– DANIEL D. HUTTO

Senior Professor of Philosophical Psychology,
Head of the School of Liberal Arts, University of Wollongong

“In a time marked by increasing division and uncertainty, the need for principled and balanced voices has never been greater. In this essay, the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia offers a thoughtful and courageous reflection on Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and the broader challenges to social cohesion in Australia. This work is distinguished by its moral clarity, intellectual honesty and commitment to justice. It calls upon us not only to confront prejudice in all its forms, but to uphold the shared values of dignity, respect and compassion that bind our diverse communities together. In doing so, it echoes a timeless ethical imperative: to stand firmly for justice and mutual understanding, even when it is difficult.

I commend this essay as a meaningful contribution to our national discourse. It will serve as a valuable resource for educators, leaders and all those committed to nurturing a more just, cohesive and harmonious society.”

– **ABDULLAH KHAN OAM**

President, Islamic Schools Association of Australia (ISAA)

“This occasional paper thoughtfully addresses Islamophobia while deepening our understanding of Islam, which can play a meaningful role in the broader process of healing, especially in the wake of events that fracture social trust. By acknowledging the pain caused by violence, such as the ongoing war in Gaza, the 2025 Bondi terror attack, alongside the distress linked to rising Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, the Special Envoy creates space for empathy rather than division. Through a measured and evidence-based approach that avoids generalisation and recognises multiple perspectives, the paper focuses on shared humanity, complexity and accountability. It encourages readers to move beyond fear and prejudice. The paper is more than mere commentary. It is an important step towards restoring social cohesion and reminding communities that even following deep strain, understanding and compassion are possible foundations for healing and rebuilding.

The paper demonstrates that healing starts when the drivers of division are addressed directly allowing trust to be built over time. The Special Envoy insightfully frames healing as a gradual collective process rather than a single moment of resolution.”

– **DR BULENT (HASS) DELLAL AO**

Chair, Australian Multicultural Foundation

“This occasional paper written by the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia is a timely and important contribution to one of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary Australia: how we preserve social cohesion while confronting hatred, extremism, and fear in all its forms. Drawing on deep moral reflection, intellectual honesty, and an informed understanding of both the Islamic tradition and Australian public life, Aftab Malik calls for a response grounded not in reactionary rhetoric or collective blame, but in justice, knowledge, compassion, and civic responsibility.

At a time when public discourse is increasingly polarised, this essay reminds us that healing can only begin when we resist simplistic narratives, uphold the dignity of all communities, and commit ourselves to constructive engagement and mutual understanding. It is a thoughtful and much-needed contribution to Australia’s ongoing conversation about belonging, pluralism, and our shared future.”

– **PROFESSOR MEHMET ÖZALP**

Executive Director, ISRA (Islamic Sciences and Research Academy)
and Head of School, Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation, Charles Sturt University

“In his typical, thoughtful fashion, the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia, Aftab Malik, has written a clear-eyed and deeply researched paper that asks difficult questions of us all as Australians. Malik’s paper is generous in spirit and invites conversation. One does not need to agree with all that he has written to engage with the discussion that he opens about how we think about intersecting and overlapping forms of hatred, discrimination and violence. At times provocative, but always with a spirit of generosity and care, the Special Envoy asks us to think about the ways Islamophobia manifests in Australian society, teaches us about Islam and its denunciation of extremism, and shows the disconnect between those that commit acts of violence in the name of Islam and their ignorance of Islamic values and philosophy.

Crucially, in a time when our communities are divided and public discourse is increasingly acrimonious, Malik highlights the intersection between different forms of discrimination, particularly between Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. With a deep knowledge of his own faith tradition, and humility and curiosity about Judaism, Malik encourages us to see our common humanity and what brings us together as faith and cultural communities. I hope readers will take up the Special Envoy’s challenge to open more conversations, more dialogue, more generous disagreement, and to see and treat one another with increased empathy.”

– DAVID SLUCKI

Director of the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, and the
Loti Smorgon Associate Professor of Contemporary Jewish Life and Culture, Monash University

“Australia’s prosperity has been well served by the people, from all over the world, who have chosen to be Australians, as well as refugees and people seeking asylum, who do not get to choose, but are accepted by the generosity of the Australian people. As a nation, we have always punched above our weight, to ensure we are all proud of this place that we call home. Nevertheless, events around the world impact us, our collective decisions, our emotions and our hope for the future. We are confronted with choices and options on how to embrace these challenges and achieve clarity to move forward together.

That is why I am grateful and inspired by the approach presented in this essay by the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia, Aftab Malik. His approach focuses on people, the heart and the soul of each of us. Our hearts and souls hold knowledge, wisdom and commitment to Australia, but also nuances, history, and for many, never to be forgotten pain. Through listening, healing and seeing each other as people first and foremost, I am inspired and optimistic that this approach will move Australia to a much more inclusive, equitable and prosperous society.”

– VIVIENNE NGUYEN AM

Chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission

“This is an intelligent, balanced, and forward-looking analysis of an urgent and complex issue. It avoids simplification and generalisation, and opens the way for a more serious, genuine, and constructive discussion among all Australians.”

– PROFESSOR MOHAMAD ABDALLA AM

Founding Director, Centre for Islamic Thought and Education (CITE), Adelaide University

HOW CAN THE HEALING BEGIN?



Australia Reacts To Mass Shooting At Bondi Beach: People visit Bondi Pavilion to lay flowers in tribute to the victims of a terrorist attack yesterday, on December 15, 2025 in Sydney, Australia.

Photo by: Izhar Khan/Getty Images

How Can the Healing Begin?

Islamophobia, Anti-Semitism
& Social Cohesion after Bondi



Aftab Malik



FOREWORD BY
Terence Lovat

Cover photo: Former Senior Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins of Emanuel Synagogue, and Bilal Rauf of the Australian National Imams Council, embracing. Hyde Park, Sydney 15 December, 2025
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“Peaceful division, debate and protest are foundational to a vibrant democracy and oftentimes demonstrate our common humanity and our concern for others and the collective good. Instances of violence, racism and notably in the current climate, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, however, demonstrate the opposite, a lack of humanity, the marginalisation of communities and an erosion of common bonds.”

– SCANLON FOUNDATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Mapping Social Cohesion 2025

“I tell you what, I’ve got no time for the radical Islam. Their religion concerns me because of what it says in the Qur’an. They hate Westerners, and that’s what it’s all about. You know, you say, ‘Oh well, there’s good Muslims out there.’ Well, I’m sorry, how can you tell me there are good Muslims.”

– SENATOR PAULINE HANSON

Interview with *Sky News*, February 2026

“Those who migrate from liberal democracies have a greater likelihood of subscribing to Australian values compared to those migrating from places ruled by fundamentalists, extremists and dictators. In that vein, the Gazan cohort of 1,700 people here on visas presents a high-risk to our nation. That cohort must be re-assessed entirely with far greater scrutiny.”

– THE HON ANGUS TAYLOR

Leader, Liberal Party of Australia,

Address to the Menzies Research Centre, April 2026

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FOREWORD

EXTREMISM COMES IN many forms as can its victim profile at any given time, an especially important consideration in the wake of the Bondi terror attack, an event perpetrated by an allegedly ISIS-inspired father and son targeting the Sydney Jewish community on 14 December 2025. Only weeks later, a potentially worse terror attack was narrowly avoided in Perth, this one clearly aimed at First Nations people and their supporters. A month later, a “mass terror attack” was thwarted by police (again in Perth) – it aimed to target mosques, police and parliament. Meanwhile, the persistent threats made to Australia’s largest Islamic community in Lakemba, Sydney, along with the recorded 740 per cent increase in Islamophobic incidents in the weeks immediately following on from Bondi, betray the signal vulnerability of Australia’s Muslims at the present time, victims of “the strongest form of racist antipathy that we have in Australia”, according to research findings.

It can be difficult to find the right tone and balance in pointing to these wider realities at a time when emotions are running high and a particular community is in the news for falling victim to an horrific moment like Bondi.

Nonetheless, the cause of long-term social cohesion necessitates more than outpouring of emotion and anger at an isolated incident. It requires the cool head of seeing the bigger picture of social fracture and the ease with which any peoples can become its victims.

Aftab Malik, the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia, achieves that tone and balance, displaying the utmost sensitivity to the suffering of the Jewish community, over time and as a particular result of Bondi, but also pointing to the bigger issues that threaten social cohesion and the especial vulnerability of the Australian Muslim community at the present time.

As he illustrates with unusual prescience, the rise in Islamophobia referred to above relates to a measure of blameworthiness in the public eye for harbouring extremism of the ISIS kind, while at the same time, the reality is that the primary victims of ISIS worldwide have been overwhelmingly Muslims. This odd, and largely unappreciated, reality can only result in a profound sense of confusion and vulnerability for Muslims, who potentially feel misunderstood on all sides.

Of the many informative strands of the Special Envoy's occasional paper, arguably the most important is where he uncovers the clear prohibition of extremism to be found in Islam's sacred sources, including in the strongest possible words attributed to the Prophet himself. This evidence makes it clear that those who perpetrate extremism in the name of Islam are at best "novice" Muslims who know little about its core beliefs, or at worst rogue elements that deliberately and mischievously employ Muslim motifs to give their extremism the appearance of divine endorsement.

Either way, one of the imperatives for any society influenced by these elements is to work to develop adequately informed education, social media and political commentary that honour the source-verified beliefs of Islam, rather than perpetuating those of novice and rogue elements.

As the Special Envoy points out, the ease with which our media and even political leaders have lain blame for Bondi on "Islamic ideology" and, more worryingly, on "Islam" *per se* shows how far we have yet to go in shoring up the foundations necessary to social cohesion.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

MANY AUSTRALIANS REMAIN unaware of the deep and enduring relationship that has existed between Muslim communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

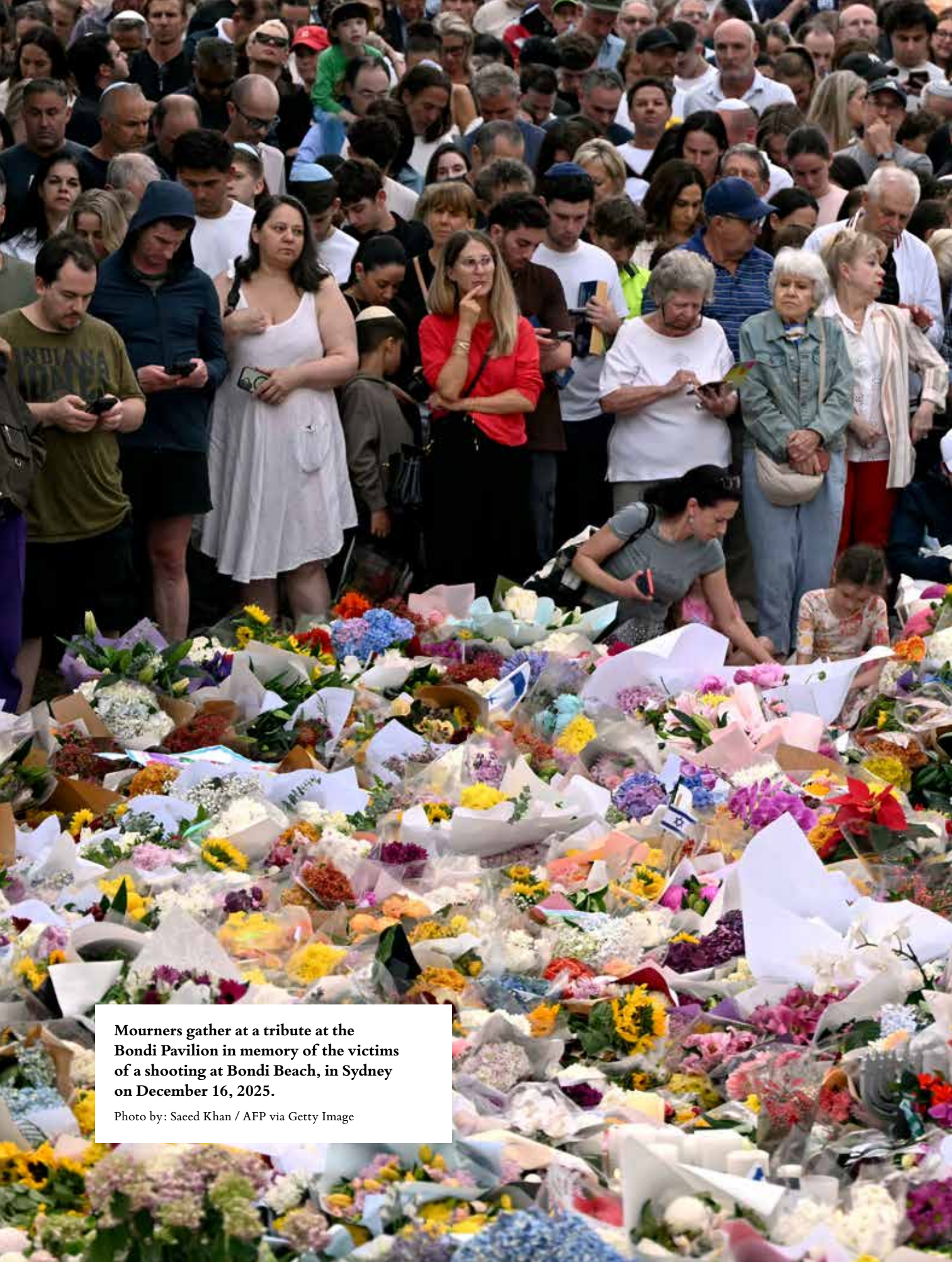
Historical evidence reveals Muslim Macassan traders from Indonesia journeyed regularly to Arnhem Land from *at least* the mid-1600s, long before the arrival of Europeans.¹

This longstanding engagement was not one of conflict or threat, but of profound mutual connection and respect.² Initially rooted in trade, this relationship blossomed to include intermarriage³ and the exchange of language and tradition, with words from Muslim prayers woven into Yolgnu people's spirituality, songs and rituals.⁴

In the late 19th century, Aboriginal–Muslim relations grew with the arrival of Cameleers, who transported goods and opened up transport routes across the centre of the country. These relations were built on mutual respect, cultural and religious exchange, and were strengthened by shared values.⁵

The enduring and reciprocal, yet often overlooked, relationship between Muslim and Aboriginal communities deserves recognition. This shared history of material, social, and spiritual exchange echoes in the present, creating space for enduring respect, generosity and openness.

In acknowledging this shared history, I wish to pay my deepest respects to the traditional owners and custodians of Country throughout Australia. I honour their Elders, past, present and emerging, whose knowledge, cultural authority and wisdom continues to guide us.



Mourners gather at a tribute at the Bondi Pavilion in memory of the victims of a shooting at Bondi Beach, in Sydney on December 16, 2025.

Photo by: Saeed Khan / AFP via Getty Image



PART I

Bondi: The spectre of ISIS



FOR MOST, IT is hard to understand the trauma that the Jewish Australian community has endured. Numbness, grief, pain, fear – these are all but words. But try to understand we must.

Following the Bondi attack, I sat and listened in horror as details emerged from the torrent of bullets that rained down on those who had gathered to celebrate Chanukah at Bondi Beach on 14 December 2025. I felt nauseous. The details were graphic; this is something no one should have to hear, let alone witness.

Writing not long after the event, Julia Baird pointed out that in our struggle to find ways to support the Jewish community, perhaps we should be quiet and listen.⁶ As I listened, I learned that it is part of the Jewish tradition to speak only if the mourner has spoken first. Often, presence is more important than words.

I don't know any Australian who hasn't expressed solidarity with the Jewish community as they continue to battle their panoply of bitter emotions. It was right and proper that the nation focused on dignifying the dead and supporting the bereaved and injured.

While many remain in a state of anger and grief due to the devastating consequences of the actions of Sajid and Naveed Akram,⁷ I have sought to understand the ripple effects of their heinous deeds and the challenges that now confront us all.



What causes religious extremism?

For the past quarter-century, much has been written about why Muslim extremism and radicalism occur. Some have argued that an inherent cultural disposition⁸ towards violence exists within Islam. Others point to a history of Western funding and support for terrorists and extremists in the Middle East⁹ and foreign policy¹⁰ as culprits. Others see radicalism as a means to compel democratic countries to abandon their occupation of foreign lands,¹¹ and view it as a political response¹² to neo-colonialisation, capitalism, liberalism and democracy. Others still look to the complex dynamics between globalisation, Westernisation, the challenges experienced by Muslims living as minorities in the West and the erosion of authoritative Islam.¹³



“Extremists are doomed”

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD

Some have debated the role of religion in radicalisation,¹⁴ while others question if religion actually causes violence.¹⁵ Some argue that radicalism occurs when there is a sense of injustice¹⁶ and humiliation;¹⁷ others have described it as a “generational nihilistic radicalized youth revolt”.¹⁸ And then there are those who point to “alienation” and “social exclusion”¹⁹ as factors that drive radicalisation.

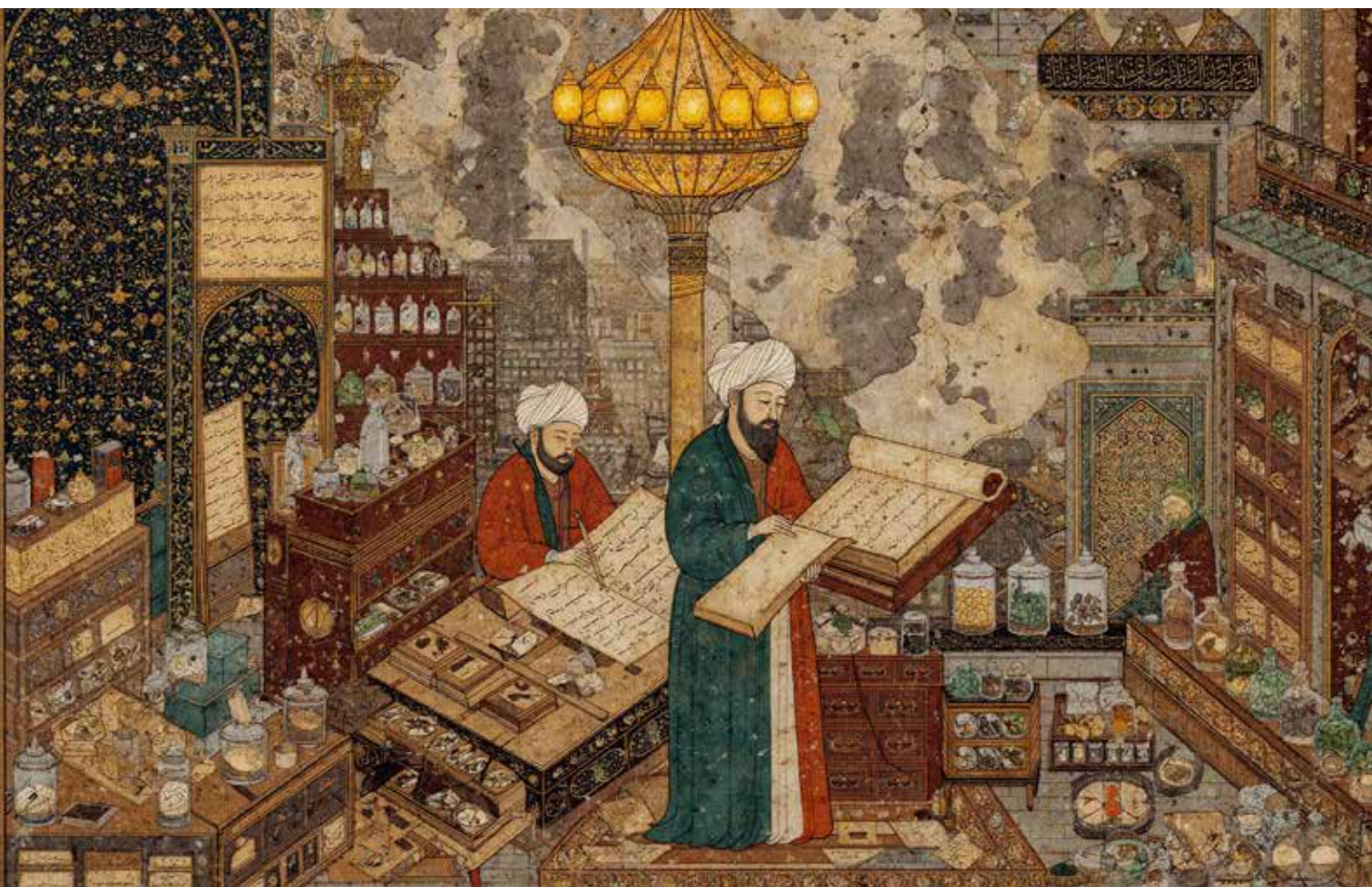
What is clear is that there is no one reason why radicalism occurs. This much has been reaffirmed by a range of Australian think tanks, researchers and academics.²⁰

The ignorance of extremists

While academics and researchers deliberate and debate over the issues, Muslim religious scholars too have weighed in, offering their thoughts on the matter.²¹ They are clear and unequivocal. They state that there is nothing in Islamic law that justifies terrorism,²² let alone killing civilians.²³ “Extremists are doomed,” said the Prophet Muhammad.²⁴ That’s a clear warning, if there ever was one.

Time after time, ordinary Muslims have had to bear the full wrath of the consequences of the actions of the Kharijites – the earliest schismatic violent extremists that were rejected by Islam.²⁵ The Prophet Muhammad referred to them as being “the worst of mankind”²⁶ and “dim-witted”²⁷ (ironically, Salah Abdelsalam, one of the two perpetrators of the Paris 2015 terror attack, was described by his lawyer as “dim-witted” and “a little moron”²⁸). They professed outward piety but were toxic extremists. They were defined by their bloodlust, making them not only un-Islamic, but also *anti*-Islamic. Today, they are called al-Qa’ida and ISIS.

ISIS, like the Kharijites, overwhelmingly fought and killed Muslims. The Kharijites’ victims included some of the closest people to the Prophet Muhammad, because the Kharijites believed they were *not Muslim enough*. Today, they target everyday Muslims and scholars who condemn them for the same reason. ISIS place Muslims in a double bind: not only are Muslims blamed for terrorism, but they themselves have been the primary victims of it.²⁹



It has been repeatedly demonstrated that the recruits who join ISIS are religiously illiterate.³⁰ Some argue that many of them are MINOs – Muslim in name only – and while they may be able to recite a few passages from the Qur'an in broken Arabic, that is their extent of “knowledge” about Islam. They have no understanding of theology, history, logic, virtue ethics and morals, and have no grasp of the most basic elements required of a student of Islam. Whatever their level of understanding about Islam might be, it will always be warped: a betrayal of normative ethics and behaviour.³¹ This will almost certainly be true of Naveed Akram.³²



Some argue that radicalism occurs when there is a sense of injustice and humiliation; others have described it as a “generational nihilistic radicalized youth revolt”



Like most of their ilk, these recruits are unable to strike a balance between belief and practice, between intellect and revelation. And yet, they carry out acts of terror in the name of the very faith of which they know so little.

Nearly 17 years ago, a “sophisticated”³³ analysis by Britain’s domestic counterintelligence and security agency, MI5, concluded that Muslims who carry out acts of terror were “religious novices”, that they did not come from religious households nor were they particularly observant. In fact, many of those recruited to ISIS often had criminal backgrounds,³⁴ drank alcohol, smoked cannabis,³⁵ used illegal hallucinogenic substances,³⁶ were unlikely to have read the Qur’an,³⁷ had extremely low literacy about Islam³⁸ and had mental health issues.³⁹

After having the opportunity to interview a number of captured members of ISIS, Lydia Wilson, a research fellow at the Centre for Resolution of Intractable Conflict (CRIC) at Oxford University, observed that they were “woefully ignorant about Islam”.⁴⁰



*[ISIS recruits] carry out acts of
terror in the name of the very faith of
which they know so little.*



In 2012, a UK House of Commons Home Affairs Committee inquiry into radicalisation likewise noted: “Genuine theology also appeared to play a very limited role.”⁴¹ In fact, contrary to popular perception, there are clear indications that the Islamic faith actually inoculates against extremism.⁴² This was established as far back in 2008, when MI5 found “there is evidence that a well-established religious identity *actually protects against* violent radicalisation” [emphasis added].⁴³

Too few people understand how important knowledge about Islam is for observant Muslims. In his book *Knowledge Triumphant*, Franz Rosenthal argued at length that one of defining characteristics of Islamic civilisation has been knowledge (*‘ilm*).⁴⁴ Medieval Muslim scholars wrote volumes stressing the importance

and merits of pursuing knowledge. Such was the importance of knowledge, and being associated with it, that the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim ...”⁴⁵ and “The angels will lower their wings in their great pleasure with one who seeks knowledge ...”⁴⁶ This emphasis on inculcating a culture of knowledge gave rise to the famous saying of a companion of the Prophet Muhammad: “Be a scholar, or a student of knowledge, or a helper of the two, or a lover of the three.”⁴⁷

This pursuit of “knowledge” is normative;⁴⁸ it is lived by the masses and transmitted across generations. And it is utterly alien to the fringe, repudiated, distorted ideology of the extremists.⁴⁹

A member of the Khabour Guards (MNK) Assyrian Syrian militia, walks in the ruins of the Assyrian Church of the Virgin Mary, which was previously destroyed by Islamic State (IS) group fighters, in the village of Tal Nasri on November 15, 2019.

Photo by: Delil Souleiman/AFP via Getty Images



Islam's prohibition of extremism

The Prophet Muhammad consistently warned believers not to go to extremes in their faith. For example: "And beware of going to extremes in religious matters, for those who came before you were destroyed because of going to extremes in religious matters."⁵⁰ In fact, the Prophet Muhammad explicitly said that an extremist would be denied his intercession on the Day of Judgement.⁵¹ That is as catastrophic as it gets for an observant Muslim, for it results in the loss of a means to alleviate divine retribution.

The ISIS extremists care little for learning or erudition, and their actions prove the point entirely. They disappear the moral constraints of the Islamic faith and thus allow themselves to use religious language to pursue an ideology of hate.

The Arabic word at issue is *ghuluw*. Its meanings revolve around the idea of going beyond a proscribed limit. It suggests the act of exceeding reasonable bounds, of exaggerating, of going beyond appropriate measures. Edward Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* describes a person of *ghuluw* as someone "who acted, or behaved with forced harshness, strictness, or rigour in religion, so that he exceeded the proper, due, or common limit".⁵² It has been said that *ghuluw* is what is prohibited when God says, "but do not transgress in them, or My wrath will befall you. And whoever My wrath befalls is certainly doomed" (Qur'an 20:81).



The Qur'an insists that Muslims should protect monasteries, churches and synagogues from any assault (Qur'an 22:40).⁵³ Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad warned Muslims of coming days of "indiscriminate violence" and ordered them to have no part in it.⁵⁴ At the heart of this moral imperative lies the commitment to human dignity summarised in the Qur'an: "whoever takes a life – unless as a punishment for murder or mischief in the land – it will be as if they killed all of humanity; and whoever saves a life, it will be as if they saved all of humanity" (Qur'an 5:32). Ahmed Al Ahmed, who intervened⁵⁵ to stop one of the Bondi gunmen, knew this very well.⁵⁶

Specifically, the Prophet Muhammad called out violent extremists: "They shall call to the Book of God, though *they do not belong to it*" [emphasis added].⁵⁷ This is why I made a submission to the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor (INSLM) in August 2025, arguing that "religion" be removed from the definition of terrorism – *not* because Muslims, like any other individual from different faiths and none, are unable to commit acts of terror, but because what motivates them is a perverse ideology wrapped in religious garb.⁵⁸ It isn't religion. This isn't a matter of "semantic politeness",⁵⁹ but what Muslims worldwide actually believe,⁶⁰ and what Australian Muslims confirm:⁶¹ there is no justification to kill civilians.

The Bondi terror attack materialised the concerns raised in my INSLM submission – namely, that there are people who conflate Islam with terrorism, and this has consequences for social cohesion. This was made abundantly clear from the plethora of messages that littered social media following the Bondi terror attack:

“The common denominator in both Gaza and Bondi? Islam”

—

“Islam and Nazism is the Same [sic] ideology”

—

“There will be no peace until you can irradiate [sic] Islam from society.”

—

“The world is FINALLY learning that Antichrist pedophile [sic] Islam brainwashes it’s [sic] followers & turns them into hate zombies, racists, rapists, women abusers, child molesters, k*llers, terrorists & liars among other evil practices Islam encourages Muslim to engage in like camel urine drinking.”

—

“Every massacre is motivated by Islam, which is a cult religion and a breeding ground for countless terrorists. Make no mistake, we are at War against Islam.”

—

“There are no good muslims [sic]. They’re all diabolic.”



**Islamic theologian with Quran (1902).
Osman Hamdi Bey (Turkish, 1842-1910).**

(Photo by Buyenlarge/Getty Images)



“From every succeeding generation its upright folk shall carry this knowledge in turn. They shall repeal from it the distortions of the extremists, the misinterpretations of the ignorant, and the pretences of the liars.”

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD

This rabid ideology that some understand to be Islam has been rejected time and time again by Muslim Australians⁶² and Muslim religious leaders around the world.⁶³

The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said that there will continue to be a group of knowledgeable people from his community who will challenge these extremists: “From every succeeding generation its upright folk shall carry this knowledge in turn. They shall repeal from it the distortions of the extremists, the misinterpretations of the ignorant, and the pretences of the liars.”⁶⁴ This has been carried out faithfully by Muslim scholars,⁶⁵ yet somehow many people still believe that Muslims make excuses for the acts of these terrorists.

On this point, it should be noted that Muslim leaders in Sydney refused to perform the funeral prayer of Sajid Akram.⁶⁶ This refusal was an utter repudiation on the part of the leaders of the Australian Muslim community. Its moral significance cannot be understated.

The ugliness of ignorance, the centrality of beauty

Hate preachers are usually outliers. They operate on the fringes, outside of mainstream Islamic institutions. They tend to be authoritarian ideological amateurs. They are often self-taught and don't possess the skills necessary to understand the technical debates and theological developments of Islamic orthodoxy. In fact, they tend to see this normative heritage as a form of rebellion against God, and consequently either ignore or demean it, thus abolishing foundational jurisprudential, theological, philosophical, and ethical principles that have guided Muslims for over a millennium. They remain ignorant of the set of normative principles and methodologies that generate understanding (*fiqh*) and are guilty of identity theft – masquerading as custodians of a sacred tradition while possessing no *bona fide* credentials.

As a result, it is often the case with such individuals that they selectively read Islamic texts, misunderstand sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*) and end up contradicting Prophetic custom (*Sunna*). The Muslim sages of old warned that “fools” would be quick to quote *hadith*,⁶⁷ which are best left to specialists to explain.⁶⁸ Wider society hears their sermons on YouTube and people either panic or are deeply perturbed. This then gives rise to social anxiety towards Muslim Australians, further fomenting Islamophobic hate towards them.

The Muslim sages also warned believers about their sources of Islamic understanding, often repeating in one form or another: “Look carefully from whom you take this knowledge, for this knowledge is the religion.”⁶⁹ Which is to say, if you take your religion from idiots, you – and, by extension, the society in which you live – will be in trouble.



**Mohamed Zakariya at his Desk where
he Produces Islamic Calligraphy at his
House in Arlington Virginia.**

Photo by: Saeed Khan / AFP via Getty Image



This epistemic catastrophe has resulted in what the English theologian Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad describes as “poorly-schooled Muslims”⁷⁰ with “monomaniac cognitive frames”⁷¹ who find “gratification in ferocious interpretations and vengeful politics”.⁷² The Prophet Muhammad foreshadowed such individuals, calling them “ignorant”. He said that they will be asked questions about Islam by fellow co-religionists, and they will respond “without knowledge”. Because of their lack of understanding, they are not only lost but lead others astray.⁷³

Through their warped understanding, these autodidacts believe that narrowness and rigidity is synonymous with piety, that outrage and rejection represent the default primordial state, demanded by God. In doing so, not only do they scoff at the true, but they neglect the beautiful and the good.⁷⁴ In *The Heart of Islam*, the eminent philosopher and theologian Seyyed Hossein Nasr reminds Muslims: “There has never been an authentic expression of Islam without beauty”⁷⁵ – that is, the manifestation of *ihsan*, the third dimension of Islam.⁷⁶

Ihsan means beautification or doing the beautiful. Rather than being people of beauty – “for God loves the beautiful”⁷⁷ as the Prophet Muhammad said – the extremist espouses ugliness. This not only causes distress to most of their co-religionists; it also leaves many demoralised. For this cohort emboldens Islamophobes who view the extremists themselves as normative expressions of Islam. They are the ones who drive media narratives and dominate public discourse on Islam and Muslim Australians, thereby perpetuating fear, mistrust and hate.

In contrast to ugliness, Nasr describes those Muslims who embody *ihsan* as “fully aware of the centrality of the qualities of compassion and love, peace and beauty”. He further explains that, by embodying *ihsan*, Muslims are “able to see with the inner eye the verse written on the Divine Throne (of God), ‘Verily My Mercy and Compassion precedes My Wrath’”.⁷⁸ Simply stated, mercy and compassion are fundamental to the life of a believer.





PART II

Post-Bondi: The Islamophobic backlash



Permission to hate

NO OTHER RELIGIOUS community experiences as much negative sentiment from the public as Muslim Australians. The most recent *Mapping Social Cohesion* report by the Scanlon Foundation shows that 35 per cent of Australians hold negative attitudes toward Muslims, up from 27 per cent in 2023. By comparison, negative attitudes toward Jews have also risen – from 9 per cent in 2023 to 15 per cent in 2025 – but the scale of anti-Muslim sentiment remains unprecedented and deeply troubling.⁷⁹

A person holds a placard stating, “Islam is incompatible with the West” during the anti-immigration ‘Put Australia First’ rally at Prince Alfred Park in Sydney on December 21, 2025, one week after the Bondi Beach mass shooting.

Photo by: George Chan / AFP via Getty Images

Whenever heinous attacks like the one at Bondi occur, these negative attitudes are on full public display. They centre on insisting that terrorists don't pervert Islam but that Islam itself is what motivates these *hostis humani generis* (enemies of all humanity):

“They [Muslims] are all violent.”

—

“It's quite simple, we don't want those who practice Islam in our country”

—

“[Islam] needs to be wiped from this world. There is no place for [it] on this plant [sic]”

—

“Take your warmongering paedophile religion and f**k off out of this country. Islam is the sickness of the world and needs to be eliminated.”

—

“Deport all Muslims is more important than anything else to protect our democracy and children's future generations.”

I have written elsewhere of the problems that arise when our politicians use words such as “radical extremist Islamic hatred”.⁸⁰ Many simply hear “Islamic hatred”, which then justifies in their minds a “rational” fear of Islam.

This then leads to some politicians, social media influencers and members of the public appearing to dismiss charges of Islamophobia as little more than an attempt to deflect reasonable suspicion of Muslims – highlighted, once again, by the plethora of statements posted on social media:

“... it's not islamophobia,
it's islamo awareness [sic]”

—

“This is not islamophobia [sic], what do you expect people are going to do ...”

—

“It's not a phobia, it's pattern recognition”

—

“Im [sic] not phobic,
I identify as Islam aware.”

—

“So common sense is being
labelled as discrimination now?”

—

“Muslims playbook, we butcher you first then gaslight our way to victim hood, go rot you oxygen thieves, you deserve every ounce of hatred you get.”

The responses to the Bondi terrorist attack were no exception. This tragedy was rapidly instrumentalised by a range of actors to propel a resurgence of Islamophobia. Across mainstream media, political discourse and online spaces, the “permission to hate”⁸¹ resulted in a surge of anti-Muslim sentiment – a staggering 740 per cent increase in reported incidents⁸² in the fortnight following the Bondi attack.

The anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic tropes that resurface time and time again, online and across some sections of the media, revolve around four key tenets:

- **Islam is culturally incompatible with Australian values** – Muslims don’t belong in Australia.
- **Islam is violent** – to be Muslim is to be a terrorist, or support terrorism.
- **Muslims are a threat** – Muslims seek to impose Sharia on Australia.
- **Islam is monolithic** – all Muslims are the same and should be held responsible for one another.

Scholars who study Islamophobia have long identified mainstream media as producing “polarizing, and negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims that exacerbates the Islamophobic political climate in which Muslims must navigate”.⁸³ In the case of the Bondi tragedy, some reporting exacerbated Islamophobia in two ways: by deploying “naming hierarchies” for the perpetrators over the hero; and by conflating the attacks with pro-Palestinian protests.⁸⁴

Three characters with a Muslim identity were central to media reports: the two perpetrators, Sajid and Navid Akram, and the hero, Ahmed Al Ahmed. On the one hand, the media tended to frame the actions of the former as connected to their Islamic faith, thereby (intentionally or not) identifying the problem as being bound up with Islam itself. On the other hand, the bravery of Ahmed Al Ahmed, who tackled and disarmed one of the gunmen, was widely reported, yet his Muslim identity was “erased” in some mainstream media reports⁸⁵ and treated with suspicion on many digital platforms.⁸⁶

In other words, it was easy enough to know how to represent a “Muslim terrorist”, but many media reports were uncertain how to portray a “Muslim hero”. This selective framing aligns with the broader legacy of media reporting over the last twenty-five years. According to research from the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2021, 86 per cent of Muslim respondents agreed that the Australian media paints an unfair picture of them.⁸⁷

The Bondi terrorist attack was also conflated with pro-Palestinian demonstrations, which had the effect of drawing a causal connection between legitimate political dissent and a murderous atrocity. While these dynamics did not transpire across all mainstream media, the reporting from a number of outlets cultivated an environment of fear and hostility toward Muslims.

The politics of suspicion

Political speech likewise transformed a moment of national mourning into one of heightened fear, suspicion and securitisation. Some political actors actively reshaped the 14 December attack with a xenophobic narrative around “immigration failure”⁸⁸ and “failed multiculturalism”.⁸⁹ This focus on the actions of two individuals as somehow revealing an inherent flaw in a specific cultural demographic effectively moved the conversation beyond politics into the realm of existential threat.

We have witnessed two distinct rhetorical strategies among political actors. First, there is the “selective outrage” whereby concern over Islamophobia was dismissed as a mere “distraction” in discussions surrounding the call for a royal commission. This effectively signals to Muslim Australians that, despite the sharp increase of Islamophobia and very real threats they experienced both before and after Bondi, their safety is secondary. It says their grief and their fears are not to be taken seriously.

Second, there is the decision to enact this divisive rhetoric⁹⁰ in the form of performative policing and heavy-handed legislation. Take the arrest of the seven young Muslim men between the ages of 19 and 24 – who have been called “the Liverpool seven”⁹¹ in some circles. They were all released the following day, without charge, but many Muslims I spoke to were frustrated and anxious, telling me that the “dramatic” arrests simply reinforced the idea that Muslims are suspects. Others believed that the arrests were “performative” to let the public know that the police are tough and serious about terrorism. No one is denying that police must investigate credible leads, but they all feared that they, as Muslim Australians, would now have to endure the public backlash.

Counter-terrorism raids may erode trust between Muslim communities and police, while fanning public anxiety about terrorism, Muslims and Islam. This ultimately adds to prejudice and discrimination against Muslims. The police must understand this.



“We cannot afford to return to the days of suspicion, profiling, guilt by association, securitisation and surveillance, when Muslims felt they had to continually prove their innocence and reassure others that they pose no threat.”

Community leaders already tell me that, at such a volatile time, trust is at an all-time low. We cannot afford to return to the days of suspicion, profiling, guilt by association, securitisation and surveillance, when Muslims felt they had to continually prove their innocence and reassure others that they pose no threat. Muslim Australians find this exhausting and distressing. They should not have to carry the collective responsibility for acts of terror carried out by criminals.



prisoner

TERRORIST

MUSLIM

RADICAL

EVIL

virus

Al Qaeda

FANATICS

Fundamentalist
Taliban

SADDAM

War

WITIC

MILITANT

9/11

Social media as a hate-accelérant

Then there is the tsunami of anti-Islamic hate on social media that was unleashed following the Bondi terrorist attack – pouring fuel onto the fire of Islamophobia in online spaces, which had already been raging well before 14 December 2015.⁹²

Platforms like X and Telegram functioned as high-velocity conduits for Islamophobic narratives, and amplifiers of misinformation and disinformation. We repeatedly saw unrelated footage being repurposed by users and promoted to fan the flames of hostility. Perhaps the most egregious example was the viral “celebration” hoax, in which videos of fireworks in Sydney’s south-western suburbs were framed as “Islamists” celebrating the Bondi massacre.⁹³ By the time fact checkers confirmed the footage was from a pre-scheduled Christmas carol event hosted by the Rotary Club in Padstow, the narrative had already achieved its goal.

In another instance, an innocent Pakistani business owner was forced into hiding after being falsely identified online as one of the Bondi gunmen.⁹⁴ Not long after, an online agitator called for a further iteration of the 2005 Cronulla Riots⁹⁵ – during which a manufactured “moral panic” convinced 5,000 rioters they were protecting national values by attacking those of Middle Eastern appearance – and was arrested for inciting racist violence before it could take place.⁹⁶

Such rhetoric creates a kind of permission structure⁹⁷ within which Muslims can be targeted, othered and attacked in the name of “defending Australia”.⁹⁸ It is thus hardly surprising that, in the wake of the Bondi attack, we have seen the desecration of the Narellan cemetery,⁹⁹ women in hijabs harassed¹⁰⁰ and Muslim institutions vandalised.¹⁰¹ In the first fortnight following Bondi alone, 126 specific incidents of Islamophobic hate were recorded.¹⁰²

Social Media Warning Label

Image: Adam Zygdis, Cagle Cartoons
via CartoonStock.com





Members of Auckland’s Muslim community come together in prayer before the remembrance service at Eden Park on March 29, 2019 in Auckland, New Zealand. The attack is the worst mass shooting in New Zealand’s history.

Photo by: Phil Walter/Getty Images

From 9/11 to Christchurch

It is imperative that in combating extremism, hate and anti-Semitism, we don’t unwittingly nurture a fertile environment for the same kind of anti-Muslim hate that became endemic following the 9/11 terror attacks.

Few “outsiders” truly comprehend the effect that the 9/11 terror attacks had on at least two generations of Muslim Australians – something that I tried to highlight in my *National Response to Islamophobia* report.¹⁰³ The most catastrophic consequence of brewing anti-Muslim hatred transpired in the 2019 Christchurch attack,¹⁰⁴ which served as a grim reminder of the cost of leaving Islamophobia unaddressed.

The murder of 51 worshippers by an *Australian* gunman was not an isolated outburst of violence, but the materialisation of a globalised far-right ecosystem that integrated fascism, neo-Nazism and “great replacement” conspiracy theories into a singular, violent worldview.¹⁰⁵

As we contend with what took place in Bondi, the Christchurch attack against Muslim worshippers at the hands of an Australian terrorist offers a chilling parallel – both involve the failure to protect religious communities under threat of violence. The mosque attacks proved that there is “no safe space from Islamophobia”.¹⁰⁶ When anti-Semitism or Islamophobia are permitted to fester, it is only a matter of time before harmful discourses migrate from digital forums to the physical desecration of sites of worship and the murder of citizens in public spaces.



HERZOG

is a

WAR

CRIMINAL

Also, your
invitation
shames us all

WAR
CRIMINALS
NOT
WELCOME



PART III

The Palestinian quandary



The moral passions of pro-Palestinian marches

THE BONDI ATTACK also forces us to address the nexus between the safety of the Jewish Australian community and the freedom of the pro-Palestinian marches.

As I listened to members of the Jewish community, it became abundantly clear that most see these marches as calling for the destruction of the Jewish state – the one place on Earth they know was established to keep Jews safe from anti-Jewish hatred. It cannot be denied that among this vast, disparate group of Palestinian activists, there are those that have different agendas and aims. Some pro-Palestinian advocates may very well be anti-Semitic, but that is entirely different from saying that to be pro-Palestinian is to be anti-Semitic.

Reflecting on the “outpouring of sympathy” he received in the aftermath of Bondi, Rabbi Zalman Kastel wrote, “In fact, some of the most moving expressions of support to me were from Palestinians, with loved ones in Gaza, who despite all the harm that their kin have gone through, have been incredibly supportive.”¹⁰⁷

Pro-Palestinian protesters take part in a demonstration against Israeli President Isaac Herzog’s visit to Australia in Sydney on February 9, 2026.

Photo by: by Saeed Khan / AFP via Getty Images



As I listened to those who joined these marches, their reasons for doing so were clear. They spoke of “confusing” and “dark” times, of “unprecedented grief”. There was a general feeling of cynicism, anger, outrage and frustration. Many of those I spoke with don’t have any connection with Palestinians; they aren’t even Muslim. They believe protesting is the least that they can do. I lost count of the number of people who told me how they cried daily and grieved the death of children they had seen on their social media feeds. They told me they feel totally powerless to stop the carnage. Many others believe that Israel’s response to the 7 October 2023 terror attack was disproportionate and excessive, and that it is wrong to hold Hamas responsible for the tens of thousands of Gazan deaths caused by the Israeli Defence Forces.

This had all affected people in different ways. I met young protesters who had given up on the staples of teenage life – music, movies, shopping – and had reorganised their time around advocacy and activism for Palestine. Then there were those who want accountability for the deaths of their uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, children, friends and neighbours – none of whom were Hamas, I was repeatedly told. They simply had the misfortune of living in Gaza. Had the losses experienced by these protesters, their grief and trauma, been acknowledged earlier by our leaders, perhaps things would be different today. A little different at least. Who knows? Robert Manne summarised the problem well: “As a civilisation we have lost our way when we no longer consider every single human being as equally precious.”¹⁰⁸

Stigmatising Palestinian activism

The suggestion that those who join in these protests are either anti-Semitic or somehow encouraging anti-Jewish violence has fuelled the widespread belief that there is a systematic effort to reduce the threshold of acceptable criticism of Israel. I discussed this in my *National Response to Islamophobia* report to the federal government.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, many fear that the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of anti-Semitism will be used to stigmatise and even criminalise peaceful protests against Israel’s actions in Gaza. Even Kenneth Stern, director of the Bard Center for the Study of Hate at Bard College and the lead drafter of the IHRA working definition, has expressed his concern that the definition isn’t being used for its intended purpose – namely, data collection on anti-Semitism – but to “stigmatise pro-Palestinian speech”.¹¹⁰

The right to protest is fundamental in liberal democracies,¹¹¹ but that does not give anyone the right to incite hatred and violence, or to be violent themselves. While I can appreciate the imperative behind temporarily suspending protests¹¹² in New South Wales after a terror attack, I can also acknowledge the concerns surrounding such action.¹¹³ It has been perceived to be another means to deny pro-Palestinian advocates a legitimate right of peaceful expression, and to curtail dissent. Indeed, the new anti-protest laws were later deemed “unconstitutional” by the Supreme Court of New South Wales.¹¹⁴

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue suit and tie, is speaking at a black podium. He is looking down at a book or paper on the podium. The background features large, ornate golden pipes and a blue curtain. The podium has a blue sign that reads "ADELAIDE WRITERS' WEEK 2025 1-6 MAR".

Over a year ago, I observed:

“[T]he frightening development in which it appears that Australian Palestinian existence is increasingly being framed in terms of extremism or anti-Semitism. This reductionist narrative denies Palestinians their moral agency, portraying them as caricatures of the archetypal threat within. Such a portrayal not only erases the complexity of Palestinian identity and experience but also serves to silence their voices in public discourse. This systematic marginalisation is a grave concern that undermines the principles of justice and equity, and only further entrenches divisions and polarisation. Our common sense is being suffocated by anxiety, as it is hyper-charged in an environment that feeds fear. Social cohesion is on fire, and no one wants to be an unwitting accelerant”.¹¹⁵

ADELAIDE
W
WRITERS'
W
WEEK 2025
1 – 6 MAR

Young relatives of 28-year-old Alaa Hamdan, who was killed earlier by Israeli fire during clashes along the Gaza border, mourn during his funeral in Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza strip on October 4, 2019.

Photo by: Mahmud Hams / AFP via Getty Images

This silencing and censorship of those speaking out against the unparalleled death and destruction in Gaza, and for Palestinian human rights, is ongoing. It has impacted students and professionals and those trying to report and seek justice for experiencing anti-Palestinian hate and racism.¹¹⁶

It is a mistake to conflate the “ISIS-inspired” terrorists behind the Bondi massacre¹¹⁷ with those ordinary Australians who are marching at the mainly secular pro-Palestinian rallies. No link has thus far been established connecting the Bondi gunmen to the pro-Palestine demonstrations.¹¹⁸ But even if some connection is found, the hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters should not be stigmatised or punished for the acts of terrorists.

All of this has far-reaching implications for the livelihoods, mental health, safety and security for Palestinians, their supporters, Arabs, Muslims, and those perceived to be from these communities. In addition, it is highly corrosive for social cohesion¹¹⁹ and erodes trust in our democratic institutions.



The consequences of watching death and destruction

We should ask ourselves: What are the human consequences of being exposed to so much grief, without any satisfying outlet? What does it do to one's psyche? In 2024, British counter-terrorism officials raised their concern that “outrage at Israel's actions and at alleged western inaction is feeding grievances that can be exploited by Islamist propaganda, pushing people to go and stage their own attacks or support those who want to”.¹²⁰

I was reminded that Shehzad Tanweer, one of the British suicide bombers involved in the 2005 London terror attacks, stated in his confessional video that the attacks on Britain

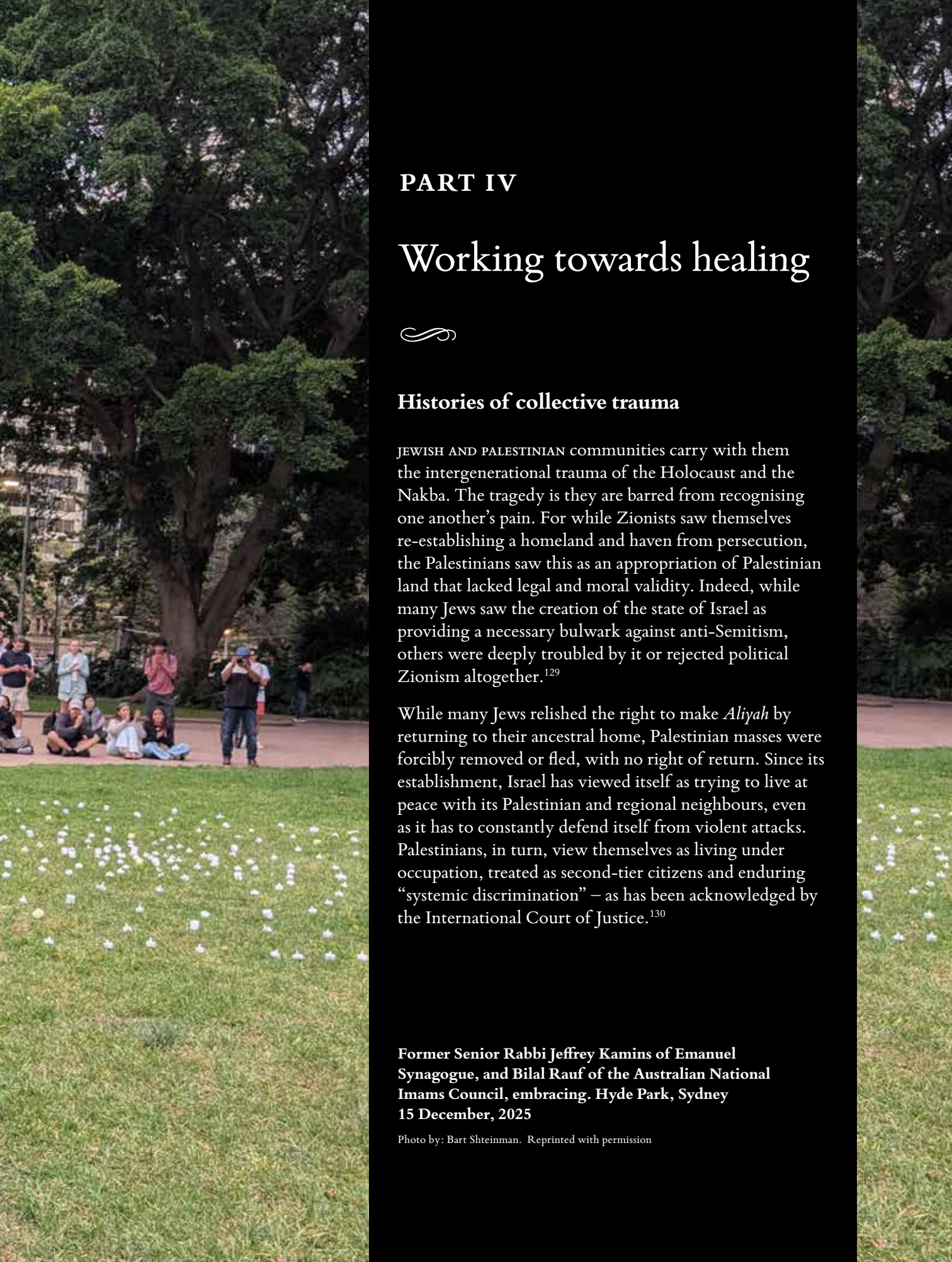


were justified because the West “continues to oppress our mothers, children, brothers and sisters in Palestine”.¹²¹ Two years earlier, Asif Mohammed Hanif blew himself up in a crowded bar in Tel Aviv. His accomplice, Omar Khan Sharif, recorded a video message, stating that “Muslims are being killed [in Israel] every day”.¹²² Revenge for a perceived injustice is a powerful motivator.¹²³ Macbeth knew well the inevitability of the cycles of violence when he said that “... blood will have blood”.¹²⁴

However, it goes without saying that *there is no justification* for the targeting and killing of civilians. In the 2020 *Islam in Australia* survey, Australian Muslims rejected violence and intolerance.¹²⁵

Successive social cohesion surveys conducted by the Scanlon Foundation have found that, despite experiencing very high levels of discrimination, Australian Muslims overwhelmingly say they “feel a high level of identification with Australia”.¹²⁶ Likewise, notwithstanding their criticisms of how they feel policed,¹²⁷ Muslim communities have nonetheless remained steadfast in providing information to the police to assist them in their efforts to thwart terrorists.¹²⁸





PART IV

Working towards healing



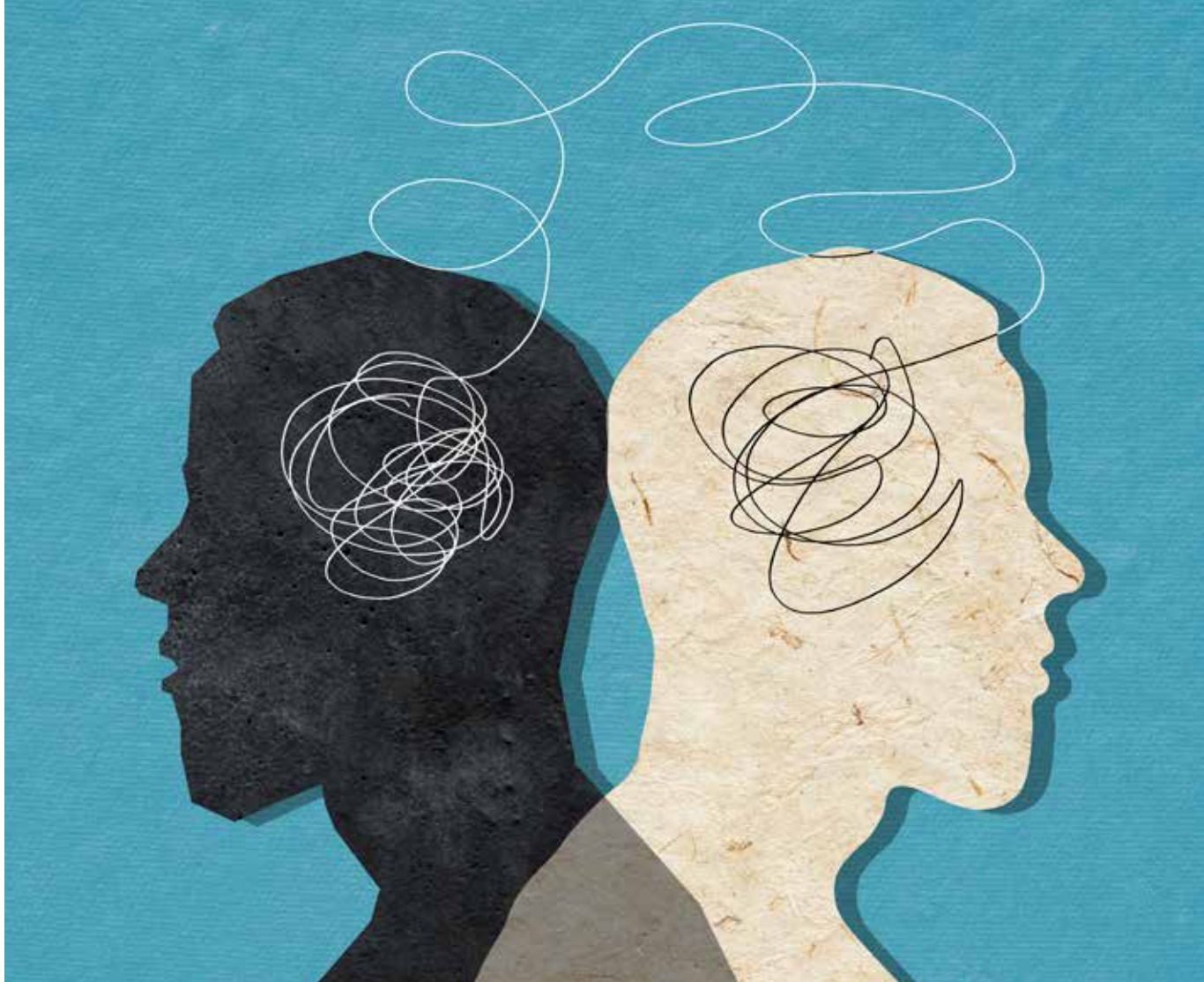
Histories of collective trauma

JEWISH AND PALESTINIAN communities carry with them the intergenerational trauma of the Holocaust and the Nakba. The tragedy is they are barred from recognising one another's pain. For while Zionists saw themselves re-establishing a homeland and haven from persecution, the Palestinians saw this as an appropriation of Palestinian land that lacked legal and moral validity. Indeed, while many Jews saw the creation of the state of Israel as providing a necessary bulwark against anti-Semitism, others were deeply troubled by it or rejected political Zionism altogether.¹²⁹

While many Jews relished the right to make *Aliyah* by returning to their ancestral home, Palestinian masses were forcibly removed or fled, with no right of return. Since its establishment, Israel has viewed itself as trying to live at peace with its Palestinian and regional neighbours, even as it has to constantly defend itself from violent attacks. Palestinians, in turn, view themselves as living under occupation, treated as second-tier citizens and enduring “systemic discrimination” – as has been acknowledged by the International Court of Justice.¹³⁰

**Former Senior Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins of Emanuel Synagogue, and Bilal Rauf of the Australian National Imams Council, embracing. Hyde Park, Sydney
15 December, 2025**

Photo by: Bart Shteinman. Reprinted with permission



The Hamas terror attack on 7 October 2023 represented the single deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust. Meanwhile, referring to the Netanyahu government's military response, the International Association of Genocide Scholars has concluded that "Israel's policies and actions in Gaza meet the legal definition of genocide in Article II of the United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)" and that "Israel's policies and actions in Gaza constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity as defined in international humanitarian law and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court".¹³¹

Finally, according to David Slucki, director of the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation at Monash University, while Zionism "signifies safety, continuity and belonging" for many Australian Jews, for Palestinians it means "displacement, inequality and the ongoing suffering of Palestinians".¹³²

The tragedy, as I say, is that these histories of pain and longing for safety have been seared into the collective memories of both Muslims and Jews living in Australia – but that neither group seems capable of recognising the other's trauma.

How healing can begin

While it can be hard to feel overly optimistic right now, it would be a mistake to resign ourselves to the belief nothing can be done. There is no quick fix that will address all the challenges and competing interests that threaten social cohesion, but perhaps there are actions we can take that might start a process of healing between Muslims and Jews in Australia. In Amanda Ripley's *High Conflict* and Paul Born's *Community Conversations*, there are a number of practical measures that could serve this goal.

Born recommends that we begin by creating a space “in order to know, understand, and trust one another” – in other words, to “learn together”.¹³³ This would require participants to suspend their immediate assumptions about one another: “We speak and listen through our assumptions. These assumptions are not easy to overcome.”¹³⁴ Our ability to learn from one another depends on our capacity to truly listen: “If we interpret everything someone says through our meaning, we cannot actually hear what the speaker is saying. Instead, we can only hear what we *think* he or she is saying. Basically, if we hear what we think someone is saying, we are really just hearing ourselves.”¹³⁵

As Ittay Flescher puts it in *The Holy and the Broken*, for hearing and healing to begin, the dehumanisation of one another must stop, along with the indifference shown towards each other's pain. Flescher cautions against consuming online content designed to polarise and instead working to nurture empathy. This entails recognising that suffering is universal; it isn't the sole preserve of one group.¹³⁶

Amanda Ripley suggests finding a good mediator that can get to the nub of the issue. Describing them as “firefighters of the conflict world”, Ripley charges mediators with excavating the “understory” of the conflict. “Blame almost always masks vulnerability,” she writes.¹³⁷ She thus recommends not ostracising individuals who show signs of moving away from conflict, however tempting it may be to “punish” them for “past mistakes”.¹³⁸ She advocates distancing ourselves from individuals who revel in conflict – the “fire starters”, as she describes them.¹³⁹ Time is important, so is space: allow people to reflect and think, to “calm down”. She reminds us that “the magic ratio for conflict resilience” is that people “need to have five positive interactions for every negative one”.¹⁴⁰ Hence, she suggests finding activities outside of conflict management that might hamper the speed with which conflict can arise and encourage everyday bonding.

Ripley insists that curiosity is good because it will lead to more questions being asked, and thus to active listening. But such listening this can only be done in a safe environment: “It is impossible to feel curious when you feel threatened.”¹⁴¹



“There is no quick fix that will address all the challenges and competing interests that threaten social cohesion.”

Common virtues and a shared history

In the wake of the 14 December 2025 terror attack at Bondi Beach, many within the Jewish community feel anxious and afraid *vis-à-vis* their Muslim fellow citizens. Many are not only wary of Muslim Australians' pro-Palestinian advocacy but also unsure of their intentions or "what [kind of] Islam" they profess. Conversely, many Muslims perceive most of the Jewish community as silent, or even justifying, the deaths of tens of thousands of Gazans, including women and children. They also view segments of the Jewish community as actively engaging to undermine and block Palestinian activism, which is often framed as a threat to themselves and social cohesion.

The state doesn't deal well with virtues, but faith communities do. Love, empathy and mercy, for example, aren't exact substitutes for cohesion, diversity and tolerance; they are deeper. And they are shared between Jewish and Muslim communities.



*"Against the backdrop of anger,
disinformation, conspiracy theories ...
we must resist forces that divide us."*

Love of God connects Muslims to love of His creation, as articulated by the thirteenth-century theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: "All of Islam can be reduced to two principles: devotion to the Creator and mercy towards God's creation."¹⁴² In distilling the message of the Torah to a questioner, one of the most renowned Talmudic sages, Rabbi Hillel, said, "Whatever is hateful and distasteful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go learn."¹⁴³

The relationship between Jews and Muslims in the premodern world wasn't always ideal. Assessments vary, but in his *Semites and Anti-Semites* even Bernard Lewis acknowledges that Jewish persecution in the Islamic world was rare and that "there is nothing in Islamic history to parallel the Spanish expulsion and Inquisition, the Russian pogroms, or the Nazi Holocaust".¹⁴⁴ It was not until the twentieth century that events set both communities on a collision course – from the establishment of the State of Israel to the rise of Islamist extremism.

Indeed, quite apart from the shared history Jews and Muslim through their "biological and spiritual father" Abraham,¹⁴⁵ there is also the history of Jewish flourishing in Muslim lands. As historian Jane Gerber chronicles, from the eighth to the fifteenth century Muslim Spain was home to a "large Jewish community noted for its richness and virtuosity".¹⁴⁶ Following their expulsion in 1492, many Sephardic Jews found refuge in the Ottoman Empire – where other persecuted Jews had already settled after fleeing places such as Bohemia, Hungary, France, Sicily and Salonika. In his *Cultures in Conflict*, Bernard Lewis reminds us that in 1992, Istanbul (one of the two "greatest centers of Ottoman Sephardic Jewry") celebrated the *arrival of Jews*¹⁴⁷ on the five-hundredth anniversary of the Alhambra Decree issued by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.¹⁴⁸

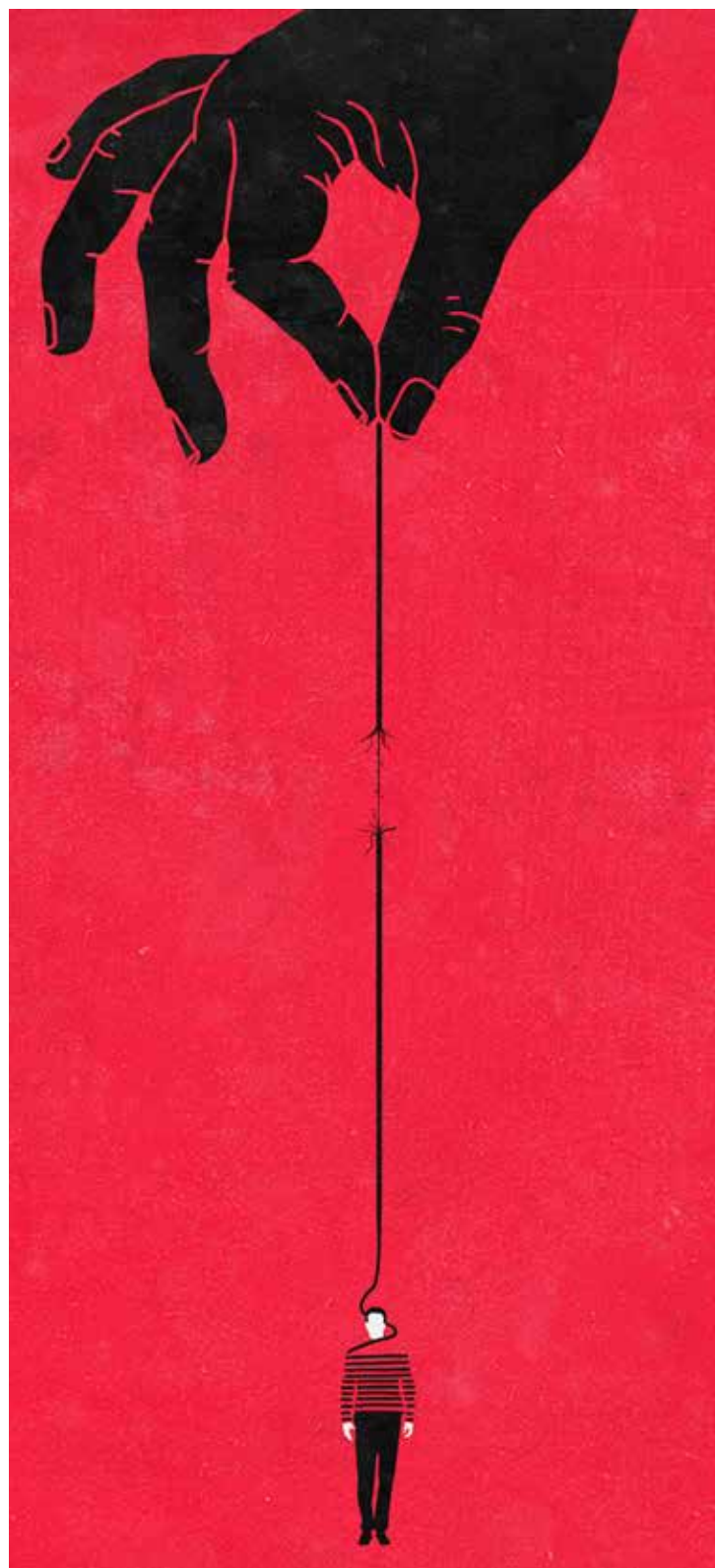
There are also the thousand years of history in Muslim Iraq, and Jewish communities in places such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Yemen and Iran. The interactions between these two faith communities – mediated through their profound theological and moral similarities – gave rise to advancements in knowledge and culture. In the twentieth century, Iranian,¹⁴⁹ French,¹⁵⁰ Albanian¹⁵¹ and Bosnian¹⁵² Muslims saved many Jews from the Nazis.¹⁵³

In addition to civic-minded organisations, perhaps we can also look to religious leaders from Jewish and Muslim communities to help reset relations. They might be key because, amid the bloodshed and loss, their faiths force them to consider the humanity of the “other”. In the words of Rabbi Kastel, the Jewish and Muslim communities need to work harder on healing division: “There are hard and honest conversations to be had. Difficult questions to ask, and uncomfortable answers to listen to, in order to build trust and deep respect between communities.”¹⁵⁴

The 14 December 2025 terror attack could be a watershed moment for Australia. Though a tragedy, it *could* bring a nation together. It *could* be a moment of change. But it will take both cool heads and warm hearts to get us there. It will require time, courage and persistence. However, the challenges to such efforts will be exacerbated and strained as international law is seen to be circumvented, ignored or disproportionately applied, and as tensions, conflict or violence in the Middle East rise. Additionally, any new domestic legislation that does not protect all communities from hatred and discrimination will confirm the growing scepticism and prove that there exists a hierarchy of hate in society.

Against the backdrop of anger, disinformation, conspiracy theories, confusion, anti-immigration rallies, racism, hatred of people based on their faith identities, dehumanisation and blame, we must resist the forces that divide us. We need wisdom, compassion, mercy, empathy and the moral courage to have tough conversations without demonising one another. We need to overcome feelings of hostility and fear. There can no longer be “you” and “me”.

There can only be us.



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AUSTRALIA'S SPECIAL ENVOY TO COMBAT ISLAMOPHOBIA



AFTAB MALIK IS Australia's first-ever Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia. He is also a designated UN Alliance of Civilisations' expert on global Muslim affairs and spent almost a decade working in the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet. His work bridges academic insight and policy practice, informing responses to hate, misinformation and structural discrimination at a national level.

Mr Malik led Australia's first government-backed conference on Islamophobia following the Christchurch attack on 15 March 2019, contributing to a shift in how institutions engage with anti-Muslim hate. His role as Special Envoy, dedicated to tackling Islamophobia, is one of the first of its kind globally. He recently marked the International Day to Combat Islamophobia (15 March) by addressing a global audience of diplomats at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Mr Malik has worked with senior global leaders, multilateral institutions and policymakers since the aftermath of September 11, bringing long-term perspective to some of the most complex questions around identity, security and public discourse. His work spans research, advisory and published commentary, positioning him as a key voice in contemporary debates on Islamophobia and global affairs. His message is clear: how societies speak about communities shapes policy, perception and lived reality – and changing that begins with informed, critical engagement.

Follow his work on the Office of the Special Envoy's Instagram account [@oseci.au](#) and at [www.oseci.gov.au](#).





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