

Renovating Muslim Australia/Australian Muslim Youth

2 x Radio Documentaries

Broadcast: *Background Briefing* ABC Radio National , 17th Dec 2006,
11th Dec 2005

Producer/Writer: Tom Morton

1. Research Background

These two documentaries applied the methodologies of investigative journalism to a complex and sensitive social issue, the pressure for generational change within the leadership of Australia's Muslim communities. Broadcast on the day of the Cronulla riots, and one year later, they explore developing debates within those communities in a period of heightened social tension and media scrutiny. Both documentaries ask the research questions: Who is empowered to speak for Australian Muslims in the media and in political fora? Who is excluded? What new voices and constituencies are emerging?

2. Research Contribution

The journalist developed and built on a network of community contacts in south-western Sydney over a period of a year. Both documentaries present original interviews wide range of voices from within Muslim communities previously unheard in the Australian public sphere. This on-the-ground, practice-based research enabled a depth of reporting and analysis not possible in normal news reporting.

3. Research Significance

The first documentary *Australian Muslim Youth* developed new insights into issues of cultural identity, representation and voice amongst young Australian Muslims. The second documentary *Renovating Muslim Australia* presents a critical analysis of media reporting of controversial issues in Muslim communities, from within those communities themselves.

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AUSTRALIAN MUSLIM YOUTH

show transcript

Broadcast: Sunday 11 December 2005 9:00AM

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[Music: Tha Brothahood]

Tom Morton: That's Tha Brothahood; they're young, they're Australian, and they're Muslim. Hi there, I'm Tom Morton, welcome to Background Briefing on ABC Radio National. And today, Muslim youth are stepping up to the microphone.

In Europe, North America, the Middle East and Asia, there's an intense battle of ideas going on about what it means to be a Muslim in a modern, globalising world. The same battle is happening here, and Australian Muslim youth are on the frontline.

Waleed Aly: Wider Australian society recognise the fact, and the Muslim community now recognises the fact I think, that debate and disagreement within a community is actually a sign of its strength, The Muslim community now recognises the fact that debate and disagreement within a community is actually a sign of its strength and a sign of its comfort within itself that is prepared to engage with itself in that way, and prepare to tolerate disagreement. I think that view is becoming really far more prominent now.

Tom Morton: As we'll hear, some young Muslim leaders are saying that it's time for change in their communities, for Australian Muslims to become less defensive, and more willing to talk openly about issues like extremism and terrorism.

Others are grappling with questions of identity, and the need to create positive role models for young Muslims.

Feda Abdo: One idea that came out actually was this idea of being able to celebrate Islam and have Muslim pride, not in a showing-off type of way but be proud of who you are. And it was suggested that we should have an Australian Muslim idol in a sort of different way; so not just about the singing and the dancing and all of that, but about just showcasing some talent in a variety of ways and all these sorts of things.

Tom Morton: The man busting the rhymes for Tha Brothahood is MC Hesh. MC Hesh was one of the young Muslims from all across Australia who gathered in Sydney last weekend for a national Muslim youth summit.

MC Hesh: They call me MC Hesh, got three other boys in the group, we're called Tha Brothahood, in other words, Boys of Deen, and yes, we've been rapping for a good few years now, and we're pretty well recognised in Melbourne and hopefully trying to get our name out in Sydney and all of Australia, basically voicing our opinions on us as being Australian Muslims. And I'll just give you a quick rundown of something that we do.

Australia is where we're raised,

Islam is our religion and the law we praise

As Burmese blood runs through my veins,

I'm ripping up the rhymes like a hurricane.

Tom Morton: So you're getting a good response from other Muslim youth?

MC Hesh: Yes, we are. Like, it's good because like we were at a performance last week at a school and the kids came up to us and they're like oh you know, at least we don't have to all just listen to Eminem or someone, and we could actually look at role models like you guys to you know be able to show us a good proper way to live as an Australian Muslim in this country. So yes, we get some good feedback on it.

Tom Morton: MC Hesh, his full name is Hesham Habibullah, was born and raised in Dandenong in Melbourne, and he barracks for Hawthorn. Hesh says there's no contradiction for him between being a Muslim, and being an Aussie.

MC Hesh: I did have my times of getting hung up on it, and a lot of my mates did as well, where you get confused. Are you Australian, are you whatever you're from? Are you Muslim? So what happens is, it's more confusion, which leads to anger, and a lot of young people in general, not saying all, but a lot of them in general, what they do is when they can't solve a problem logically, they do react emotionally. So something that what we have to do is really sort of counsel our youth to be able to get them to think straight and to think logically, and rationally, to be able to come to a good ground.

Tom Morton: Can you be a bit more specific? To think straight and think logically about what kinds of issues?

MC Hesh: For example, beating your chest about something is not going to get anywhere, so by you thinking OK, this is not going to work, but me trying to do something such as OK, I'm going to go to my local government Council and voice my

opinions there, and tell them Look, this is what I'm upset about, what can we do? It's not a thing where it's going to happen straight away but it's a gradual thing. As Bruce Springsteen says, he says, 'You can't start a fire without a spark'.

Tom Morton: So you get inspiration from The Man as well?

MC Hesh: I appreciate all types of music, and yes, that's what I mean, like everyone thinks that oh, we're Muslims; but my favourite music group is ACDC.

Feda Abdo: Islam is like the water; it takes the colour and the shape of the river in which it flows, Islam is like the water; it takes the colour and the shape of the river in which it flows. and this metaphor I think is really symbolic of what Islam is, and that it's by no means incompatible with any nationality, with any country, with any region, it is just able to be moulded in order to fit the society in which you live.

Tom Morton: Feda Abdo, from the Muslim Women's Association in Lakemba, Sydney.

Feda Abdo: It is critical for young Australian Muslims to be active participants of mainstream Australian society. We don't have to ignore the fact that we're Muslim when we're participating in society. If a law student is wanting to seek employment at a high profile law firm, they shouldn't feel embarrassed that they're a Muslim, that they can go proudly and attend the interview or whatever it is and maybe acknowledge the fact that they're an Australian Muslim, that they're there to support mainstream Australian society and part of mainstream Australian society is the Muslim community.

Tom Morton: The idea of a National Muslim Youth Summit was first floated by the Australian Multicultural Foundation. The Federal Department of Multicultural Affairs got behind it.

And for the delegates at the Summit, it's a sign that the Federal government is starting to listen to the concerns of Muslim youth.

The Summit itself was closed to the media, but there was a press conference at the end of the day.

Here's Iktimal Hage-Ali, Chair of the government's Muslim Youth sub-group, speaking at the press conference.

Iktimal Hage-Ali: I think young Muslim people are tired of being perceived as 'the others'. They're tired of being rejected, but I think that today's summit reiterated the enormous contribution young Muslim people do. We had a room of 66 leaders, 66 young people who are special and who have done so much in their respected communities who are here to make a difference, who have not sat on their hands and said, 'I'm gonna sit back and watch things deteriorate for my community and do nothing'. They've stepped up and said, 'Look, these are the issues, but we're not here to talk about the issues again and again. We're here to talk about solutions.' And that's what's been put forward today.

Tom Morton: Some of the solutions put forward by the young leaders at the Summit were about building bridges between Muslims and non-Muslims. There were calls for anti-discrimination campaigns on television, along the lines of the TV campaigns against domestic violence, and for more recruitment of Muslims by the police.

The delegates also wanted to see more Muslims trained to work in the media, and more information for young people in plain language about the federal government's anti-terrorism laws.

It's perhaps not surprising that the Summit went out of its way to put a positive, practical face on its final communiqué.

Many young Muslims feel that they and their communities are under intense scrutiny, especially since the arrests in Melbourne and Sydney four weeks ago.

Belal Assad: My name is Belal Assad, I'm active amongst the Muslim Youth in Victoria. I'm a teacher at Werribee Islamic College, give public speeches to the students and to the common Muslim youth, try to direct them and counsel them with issues, answer their questions, give them some of my experience which I've had in this country.

Tom Morton: How would you say that the Muslim youth that you talk to and work with, are feeling at the moment?

Belal Assad: The Muslim youth want to express the truth about Islam, but at the moment, they feel that Islam, their way of life, has been misconceived, misunderstood, and they feel that there are people out there who are distorting this information, this religion. So when they watch it, or they see it, or they hear people talking about it, they find how dramatically wrong they are about this faith and about our way of life. We've been taught that this is a multicultural country for everybody and that we should feel a part of it. Now we're feeling less a part of it, unfortunately. And this is frustrating the Muslim community and making them feel like OK, we're silenced, the wrong stuff is said about us, people are going against us, we feel guilty, we feel alienated, we thought that we were Australians, we've been taught that this is a multicultural country for everybody and that we should feel a part of it. Now we're feeling less a part of it, unfortunately.

Tom Morton: Belal Assad says that the Muslim youth he works with are boiling inside. Other young Muslims talk about a siege mentality in their communities. But there are many different voices and different perceptions of what life's like now for young Australian Muslims.

Mustapha Kara-Ali is 28, an engineer, and a member of the Prime Minister's Muslim Community Reference group. I caught up with him at the end of last weekend's Youth Summit.

Mustapha Kara-Ali: This under-siege mentality is not the common story that you'd hear from people. Some young people approached me and they said, 'Look, we don't even understand why the Muslim community is being treated as if it's a special case, as if there's some problem, and they're saying 'Look, the majority of people, most of us are not even aware of these issues that are being raised in the media, we're not even - we don't know what to be an isolationist or a participant in society means, because we just go about our lives, living it normally, and in that sense, most young people are not aware of these rifts, and these undercurrents.

Nasya Bahfen: Sometimes when I hear on the radio or see on television, people referring to the Muslim community as if it's a homogenous bloc, sometimes I want to throw something at the television, because I know from my experience with Muslims that it's simply not true that there is one community, there's actually several communities.

Tom Morton: Nasya Bahfen. Nasya is 25, she's an Associate Lecturer in Management and Marketing at Deakin University, and a Project Officer of the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria.

Nasya says there's no such thing as a representative Muslim voice which speaks for all Australian Muslims.

Nasya Bahfen: Unfortunately, Muslims in Australia are quite divided; they're divided along nationalistic lines, they're divided along theological lines; sometimes I think there's very, very few things that bind us, even though Islamic teachings are that Muslims are supposed to be unified, but the reality is in Australia, in the Australian context, Muslims are certainly a very diverse set of communities. So it is definitely a problem trying to get the 'Muslim voice'. Even within sub-sections of the community, for example, Muslim Youth, or the Lebanese Muslim community, you'll find people have differing opinions, much less to speak of the whole of the community.

Tom Morton: As another young Muslim said to me, 'If you put three Muslims in a room together, you'll have four different opinions.' There are 300,000 Muslims in Australia, so that's a lot of opinions.

What you're hearing today is only a snapshot of the vigorous, often heated debates that young Australian Muslims are having amongst themselves. But I think it's fair to say there's consensus on one thing at least: if there is a problem with extremism or terrorism amongst Muslim youth in Australia, then the solution to that problem is also with the youth.

Young Muslims believe it's high time for reform within their own communities, and that that reform can only come with generational change.

At a café in the Sydney suburb of Auburn, freelance journalist Mansour Razaghi and I got talking to a group of young men who were having a cup of coffee after they'd finished work.

The young men were weary about talking to us at first, but before long they were cracking jokes.

Young man: Yes, he's the owner of the store.

Tom Morton: I'm Tom Morton from ABC Radio National.

Young man: He's from al-Qa'eda.

Tom Morton: 'Meet the café owner, he's from al-Qa'eda', he said. And they told some curious passers-by who were looking at our microphone, that we were from ASIO.

One of the young men runs a cement rendering business in south-west Sydney. He's of Lebanese background and grew up here in Auburn. Auburn now has the highest concentration of Muslim Australians of any suburb in the country.

Do you want to introduce yourself on tape? No, that's OK. So you were saying that you don't feel that the leadership is representing you much, yes? And why not?

Young man: The reason is because they've got their old ideology from overseas. Most of these leaders here, they don't connect with the young people, what the young people want in Australia.

Tom Morton: What do you mean, they don't connect?

Young man: Because the old immigrants, they weren't born here or raised here, and I don't think they know exactly what happens physically on the streets, to understand what young Muslim people want in Australia.

Irfan Yusuf: If you look at the people that the government is currently talking to, they're not really representative of Muslim reality, and a lot of these leaders, I don't know, maybe think we're not orthodox enough, or maybe they think we don't fit their mold of what a Muslim should be, because I guess a lot of them think that they expect a Muslim has to have a migrant background, or a lot of them are very reluctant to pass on the mantle to the next generation.

Tom Morton: Irfan Yusuf. He's a Sydney lawyer, the author of several blogs, and occasional columnist for The Daily Telegraph in Sydney. Irfan is not alone in his view that the older generation of Muslim leaders should pass the mantle to youth.

Mustapha Kara-Ali: Young Muslims are not being represented in these big organisations that are meant to be reflective of sentiment from the grass roots. Young Muslims are not being represented in these big organisations that are meant to be reflective of sentiment from the grass roots. And I thought there was a definite communication gap and a definite generational gap, if you like.

Tom Morton: It's a gulf which is both cultural and linguistic, between an older generation of Muslim migrants born overseas and their children who've grown up in Australia and speak English as their first language.

Mustapha Kara-Ali: Now the problem remains that as we speak there is a definite communication gap which is partly to do with the fact that younger people growing up in Australia have a certain cultural understanding about Australian life, which they then blend it with Islamic teachings, or the Islamic understanding. And then when you merge the two, you get a concept of Islam Australia, which is sometimes foreign to people that have not interacted much with Australian society within the migrant community, a lot of whom still find it difficult to speak English.

Tom Morton: The national peak body which represents Muslims in Australia is AFIC, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils.

Dr Ameer Ali is the President of AFIC, and he says that they're listening to the criticisms of Muslim Youth.

Anya Ali: It would be naïve on my part if I dismissed the criticism. I agree with what the criticism is. Listening to the younger people, listening to their voices and also discussing with them is not part of the tradition of the Muslim culture, that has been brought into this country and it is now outdated. So therefore I can understand the disgruntlement of these youngsters. The time has come because 30% of the Muslim population is between 15 and 29 years old. And 50% of the population, roughly 50%, are women. So there's two sectors in the Muslim community: the youngsters and the women. They have to come under the AFIC umbrella and AFIC should open the doors for them, and I am trying my level best to bring them together. God willing, change will take place.

Mustapha Kara-Ali: AFIC has not played its role. I mean, they've provided a structure to sell lamb and livestock overseas and to run a Halal industry, and to play turf wars within the community; they've done that. But what cultural message did they go out to the Australian community with, what cultural message did they carry through when they delivered speeches to non-Muslims? It is this which is driving frustration and anxiety in the Muslim community, and the young Muslim community. I don't wish Dr Ameer Ali to be calling us youngsters, it's not about youngsters or women, these are not fringe secondary issues, these are at the crux of this debate.

Tom Morton: Mustapha says that the older generation of Muslim leaders have been 'hard on the outside, and soft on the inside'. By that he means that they've been too defensive in their dealings with non-Muslim society; and too soft on extremist elements in their own communities.

Mustapha says it's time to turn that approach around.

Mustapha Kara-Ali: I personally believe that sometimes as a Muslim community we carry the victim mentality, we carry the defensive mentality. I'm personally a pro-active person, and I'm into the pro-active approach of being out there, promoting the cause, you know, doing the dhawa work that we want to do out there. But unfortunately, in the '90s, that wasn't the approach. But hopefully, through this young leadership we're hoping to form, we want to in fact carry the alternative, we want to carry the opposite approach which is very hard on the inside, in terms of standing up strong for issues, and yet maintaining that very soft cover, an approachable cover.

Tom Morton: Perhaps one sign that Muslim Australia is getting softer on the outside and harder on the inside, is the reaction to the recent arrests.

Morris Lemma: ...a series of co-ordinated raids in Sydney. I'm advised that as a result of ongoing investigations, intelligence was received that a group was making arrangements to stockpile chemicals and other materials capable of making explosives. I've been further advised that police believe the group was planning a terrorist attack in Australia.

Tom Morton: New South Wales Premier, Morris Lemma, speaking on the morning that 17 men of Muslim background were arrested by police in Sydney and Melbourne. The arrests have shocked both the Muslim and non-Muslim community. And one young Muslim who's spoken out publicly about the arrests is Waleed Aly. He's on the Executive Committee of the Islamic Council of Victoria, and he's also a lawyer with a large Melbourne corporate law firm. We met up on his lunch-hour, in a bush square in central Melbourne.

Waleed Aly says that he welcomed the news of the arrests because claims that there could be home-grown terrorists amongst Australia's Muslim communities could finally be tested in court.

Waleed Aly: Now the whole process was moving away from a political one, where it was about politicians talking about terror briefings and some unspecified threat that we were never allowed to know about because of the secrecy of national security. And it moved from that to being something that was concrete and that was actually in the courts now. And that's really significant, because the courts in Australia are independent, as they are in all free societies, and so what that means is that it's no longer up to the government or the police to talk about the fact that these men are terrorists, they've actually got to prove that. And they'll have to demonstrate that the evidence they've gathered is strong enough to withstand all the examination that the defence is going to put it through, and the courts are going to make a decision based on evidence, not based on political

imperatives, that often decisions made by politicians are based on. So what I felt was, more than anything, was a sense of relief, I think that finally we were moving from a political phase to an independent, judicial one.

Tom Morton: Waleed Aly. Waleed's copped a lot of flak from some people in the Muslim community for welcoming the arrests in the national media, while others have strongly supported his statements.

One person who didn't agree with him, was Nasya Bahfen. She and Waleed Aly are friends and fellow activists in the Melbourne Muslim community.

Nasya Bahfen: It's extremely possible to have respect for someone and disagree vehemently with their views. I have a lot of respect for Waleed, but on this particular instance, I would disagree with him that the raids were welcome. It was almost a focus on spin, and it's not something that I accuse Waleed of personally, and it's not something that we can pin on any one particular person, but the State and the Federal leadership seem to be too quick to kow-tow and to acquiesce to the government's perspective on the necessity of these raids. I think there wasn't enough of a focus on the fact that these men could be innocent, until proven guilty. I think there wasn't enough of a push to maybe protect these men from prejudices that might turn up in the trial, thanks to the media coverage. That kind of thing. There wasn't a focus on our obligations to the wives and the families of the men who were charged, whether they were innocent or guilty. Their wives and children are still Muslims and they're still citizens, so there wasn't a focus on what we could be doing to help them. Or, if the current leadership was working to help them, they kept that from other Muslims.

Tom Morton: Nasya Bahfen says that the arrests confronted Muslim leaders, both young and old, with a difficult dilemma how to balance solidarity with fellow Muslims, with the need to speak out strongly against terrorism.

But Irfan Yusuf says that it's time for the Muslim leadership to get off the fence.

Irfan Yusuf: The average punter is wondering, 'Why aren't these people saying more?' You know, what have they got to hide? Or why are so quiet about it? Or why are they defensive? And especially when people start making defensive noises, they say 'Yes, look, we condemn terror, but...' No ifs or buts. I was very critical of the Federation of AFIC for taking 20 days to issue a letter or a press release. The same with the Islamic Council of New South Wales.

Tom Morton: This is after the London bombings, yes?

Irfan Yusuf: Yes. And I'm thinking, it took the Islamic Council of Victoria two hours. They just don't think it's important, and of course what happens now is that you see we're the ones who suffer the backlash. It's the Aussie Muslims who have to interact and who enjoy interacting with the mainstream, who have to suffer because of this, because we're the ones who cop the flak. We feel the need for (our elders) to be able to talk to mainstream Australia. And if they can't do that, well let us talk to mainstream Australia. I mean the question is, where the hell are we going to go? This is home. Sydney is home for me, you know, if they want to send me back home, they'll be sending me back to East Ryde or Canberra, I've got nowhere else to go. And I think a lot of our elders just don't realise how important it is and how much we feel the need for them to be able to talk to mainstream Australia. And if they can't do that, well let us talk to mainstream Australia.

Abdul: I challenge anyone in the world where they can stay in the Islamic religion, you have the right to be a suicide bomber, who gives you that right? I challenge anyone in the world who can say in our religion it says you have the right to destroy their own country where you live in, or their own community live in. If me personally, I am Muslim leader, once I harm this country personally, I hate the guy, because our God and our Prophet says, this is what people miss, this is what they say, this is what Prophets say. He goes The laws on the land, if they don't contradict with the Islamic law, they're like God's laws. If the Australian government comes and tells me I've got to drink alcohol or drink pork, I want to object those laws, but any other law that protects me and protects other, that is like God's words, that is like God's law, and you get obey them.

Tom Morton: All the young Muslims I spoke to for this program were clear on one point: there's no place in their religion for terrorism. But some of them say that they're deeply confused by what they read, hear and see. They're sceptical about the media and what they see as our hidden, or not-so-hidden, agendas. And they find it hard to believe that a true Muslim could murder in the name of Islam.

Belal Assad.

Belal Assad: We're in a maze, like everyone else. That's what people need to understand, we're in a maze like everyone else. These kinds of things, if they are true about these Muslims out there who are doing these certain extreme things, bombing innocent children and women, we reject that completely. We abhor it. Wherever it may be, in America or in London or in Australia or in Lebanon or in Palestine or in wherever it is, we abhor killing the innocent children. This is something fundamental in our religion. When we hear this information, we don't know what to make of it. If these Muslims are doing that, then they're not doing something according to Islam at all. We don't want to believe something like this; it doesn't exist now and we don't want to believe it, this is nothing, this is something which we don't need, we don't want. This is dirty, this is evil.

Tom Morton: But if it were proven in court for example that one or more of the men who were arrested in Melbourne or Sydney

had in fact done the things that are being alleged, that is, that they were considering or preparing an act of violence, a terrorist act, in which people might have been killed, what would be the attitude do you think of the young Muslims that you know?

Belal Assad: First of all, the Muslims want to see a justice system being applied, that's the first thing. If a justice system is applied to them, as Australia has always taught us that their system is just, and that they're not differentiate between a Muslim or a non-Muslim or a rich person or a poor person and so on, that they're all treated equally according to the law, then we'd be happy about that. If the justice system has been applied and these people really are terrorists and it's proven, then we are innocent from such actions. We will abhor and reject such actions. We have a saying of our Prophet, peace be upon him, which is quite ideal for the question that you just asked. It says, 'Assist your brethren whether he or she is the oppressor or the oppressed'. They said 'O messenger of God, we understand how to protect them, when they are oppressed, but how do we assist them when they're the oppressors?' So he said, 'You assist him or her by preventing them from the oppression.' So we have to try and prevent anyone who has these views, from having those views.

Tom Morton: What you've been hearing is just a sample of some of the ways that young Muslims are thinking and feeling about the recent arrests, and no doubt there are many more.

Waleed Aly thinks that the diversity of responses to the arrests is a sign of what he calls a maturation process amongst Australian Muslims.

Waleed Aly: Well I just think that the response within a community now to a lot of the issues surrounding terrorism, seems to be a lot more considered. And it seems to be a lot more diverse, as well. Which I think is a reflection of people starting to think independently. In the very early period after September 11, 2001, and particularly when you had the ASIO raids in October, 2002, there was a real siege mentality within the community. That still exists in part, but it was just incredibly dominant at that time, and naturally so. And so I think it would have been very, very difficult for anyone to stand up at the time of those raids and say that they were worried. Almost every Muslim in Australia was worried and to be honest, I they had very, very good reason to be because in those raids you saw kids being held at gunpoint and all sorts of things that just seemed totally unnecessary, and it yielded nothing,

But I think what's happened now is that the community has started engaging in a much more robust form of self-criticism. So what you see now is that there are a lot more people within the Muslim community for example, who are now prepared to stand up and say, look, whether or not people who are raided or charged, or engaged in criminal activity, whether or not they're Muslims, is just totally irrelevant. We stand now for justice, irrespective of who does these things. And that doesn't mean that they necessarily accept that. Every allegation made about the Muslim community is true, but what you're seeing now is a much more stronger view to take a more objective stance about these sorts of things. And I think that if everyone in Australia did that, that would actually be a really positive development.

Tom Morton: It's certainly been put to me by a number of people I've interviewed for this program that previously there's been a kind of emphasis particularly from the leadership of some of the major Muslim organisations on maintaining, if you like, the outward appearance of unity, not admitting to differences, to conflict, to debate within the community. Are you saying in a sense that that preservation of unity at all costs is starting to disappear, and a more open debate is happening?

Waleed Aly: I just think that people in the community who are actually engaged in the public conversation, realise that trying to project some false veneer of unity is just an absurd thing to do and a very unwise thing to do. White Australian society recognises the fact and the Muslim community now recognises the fact I think that debate and disagreement within a community is actually a sign of its strength, and a sign of its comfort within itself, that it's prepared to engage with itself in that way, and prepared to tolerate disagreement. I think that view is becoming really far more prominent now, and I think within the very short term, it will become really the only view that's publicly broadcast.

Tom Morton: Waleed Aly.

But if there's a new mood of openness permeating Muslim communities, it has yet to reach some religious leaders. That, anyway, is the view of another young Muslim from Bankstown, in south-west Sydney.

Fadi Schmeissem: My name is Fadi Schmeissem, I was born in Australia and I'm 30 years old. I come from Lebanese parents, my parents came to Australia in the early '70s. I'm a chartered accountant and a lawyer, lived all my life in Australia, and developed an interest in Islam and in turn this has led me to both attending lectures and giving lectures as well.

Tom Morton: Fadi Schmeissem says that much of the religious leadership is still stuck in the old defensive attitude.

Fadi Schmeissem: I would say the majority of people in positions of authority within the Muslim community, are people who do not have the actual interests of Islam at heart, but rather have their own survival at heart, I would say the majority of people in positions of authority within the Muslim community are people who do not have the actual interests of Islam at heart, but rather have their own survival at heart. and what is at stake for them is their own reputation, rather than the reputation of Muslims generally. So they'll often seek not to upset anyone who claims to belong to the Muslim community, therefore they may for

example see a tendency within their own mosque for extremists to congregate and to spread their teachings. But in the interests of maintaining their leadership over that particular mosque they will not seek to confront these people because by doing so, they may undermine their own authority in the mosque.

Tom Morton: Fadi Schmeissem says that religious leaders have told him that to admit publicly that there are extremist or isolationist groups within the mosques, would be a sign of weakness.

But Fadi believes that that approach is wrong.

Fadi Schmeissem: There is no sign of weakness necessarily, if we come out as Muslims and say what we really think. If we distance ourselves from groups that may be perceived by non-Muslims to be extremists, there is no weakening of our view or our image among non-Muslims, rather the contrary would be the case.

Tom Morton: So you're saying then that in your view there's been too much emphasis placed on maintaining unity at the expense of actually confronting problems and issues that need to be faced within the Muslim community?

Fadi Schmeissem: Absolutely. And that emphasis, that over-emphasis on unity at all costs rather than speaking out against extremist elements in the community, has meant that Muslims in general have come under attack. Rather than what would have been the case had Muslim leaders from the start distanced themselves and cut off general Muslims from movements which are perceived to be extreme, if they had taken that role early on, then I think non-Muslim society in general would not have taken such a hostile stance towards Muslims in general.

Tom Morton: So has that been happening at mosques here in Sydney, to your knowledge? That extremist elements have been tolerated within mosques that have a position of authority within the community?

Fadi Schmeissem: Without doubt. One of the main mosques in Sydney has had a problem with extremist youth congregating and propagating their views. Leaders within that mosque have done nothing about it; they've known of the presence of these people, have done nothing about it either out of fear of confronting this group, or out of a general dislike of being perceived as people who are dividing Muslims. So obviously these people are not interested in taking sides, they are purely interested in being perceived by all the groups as being people who just want to co-operate and support purely some vague general Muslim cause.

Tom Morton: Are you able to say which particular mosque you're talking about here?

Fadi Schmeissem: I prefer not to, but I think many members of the Muslim society would know of not just one mosque, but many mosques who are in a very similar situation.

Tom Morton: Fadi Schmeissem. If what Fadi says is true, and there are extremist elements in a number of Australian mosques, what can be done about it?

Belal Assad: Well through our public speeches about this particular topic. We choose the name of the topic and make it very blunt, saying is terrorism in Islam allowed? What are the views of those who think that terrorism is allowed? And we get a very large number, that's number one.

Tom Morton: So you've actually been giving public speeches about this?

Belal Assad: Definitely we have.

Tom Morton: Belal Assad has been working closely with young Muslims at the Preston mosque in Melbourne.

Belal Assad: Since before Ramadan, about a month before Ramadan and a month after Ramadan, every Saturday night between 7.30 and about 9, we've been holding lectures on that specific topic, clearing that up and showing strong evidence from the religion, because that's look, this is what the Muslim youth want. They want to see evidence from the religion; they love their religion, so they want to see what does Islam really say? We don't want to hear opinions. I don't want to hear opinions of this imam or that imam, that doesn't matter to us, the imam can't change the religion. So what the imam here has been doing is that he's been showing the evidence from what they call the Qu'ran and the Sunnah, when they find all these things, the youth are starting to change their views.

Tom Morton: Can I ask you, though, how do you deal with the fact that the men who have been arrested and of course we're not making a judgment here about what the court may find about their guilt or innocence but as you yourself have said to me, they're known by people in the community, some of them may at times have prayed in this very mosque here. How do you reach out to men who may have formed wrong views, who may have been wrongly contemplating violence as you've been saying, against the teachings of Islam. How do you reach out to them in time to prevent them going down that path?

Belal Assad: What we are doing at the moment is that we publicly speak about these issues to the Muslims in the mosques, at their homes, so we at the moment are studying that if these people are out there, what kind of words would convince them? And we've discovered that there are two things: respected imams that are sincere and people admire them; number two, the use of evidence and proof from our religion, and this is how these people, if they are out there, this is how these people we think definitely will start to change.

Tom Morton: Not just in Australia, but throughout the Islamic world, there's a fierce struggle going on over who has the authority

to correctly interpret the Qu'ran and the Islamic law.

Some young Australian Muslims are looking beyond their local mosques for religious guidance. They're plugging into a global Islamic community, on the Internet.

Irfan Yusuf: Because what's happened now and this is the beauty of the Internet, it's not just the ABC and their podcasts that are benefiting from Internet; a lot of young people are downloading the lectures and talks and messages of mainstream English and American imams and scholars who are actually like as in real Americans, or real English people you know. And so new names are popping up, Hamza Yusuf, Tim Winter, Michael Wolf, these are becoming the voices just as they are right now the voices of mainstream American and English Islam, they're now becoming the voices of mainstream Australian Islam without these people needing to visit Australia. And I think this is a positive development.

Nasya Bahfen: Look, it's just easier. I mean if you had a question, I would much rather jump on an email and send it rather than going outside, getting in the car, driving down to the mosque to make an appointment with the sheikh, you know, it's much easier to jump on line and check out the websites of these people, who certainly have large global followings.

Tom Morton: There's a virtual galaxy of Islamic websites, where Muslim youth can get advice on matters of Islamic law and morals, and find articles aimed specifically at young Muslims living in the West, articles with titles like 'The Social Role of Women in Islam' and 'Being a Real Man in Islam: Drugs, Criminality and the Problem of Masculinity'.

But if you're a young Muslim looking for guidance, you don't have to go online, you could also go down to your local Islamic bookshop.

Mustapha Elsamad: Right now we're looking at the narrations of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and there are thousands and thousands of volumes of narrations. And the apex, the best one that has collected the narrations of the Prophet is a man by the name of al-Bukhari, who's well-known as Imam al-Bukhari, and he is the most authentic in that sense. He worked very hard in bringing the narrations together and making sure that they were 100%.

Tom Morton: Is he still alive, or...?

Mustapha Elsamad: No, he's not. I think he died about 1,000 years ago.

Tom Morton: Shows how ignorant I am.

Mustapha Elsamad: And also his student here, we have Imam Muslim, that was his student also.

Tom Morton: At the Bukhari Bookshop in Auburn, Mustapha Elsamad is aiming specifically at young Muslims whose first language is English.

Mustapha is in his late 20s. At 19 he went on the haj, an experience which he says transformed his life. There are rows of shelves in the shop stacked with traditional Islamic literature.

Mustapha Elsamad: ...understandings and teachings there is something called the most authentic books which are the six most authentic narrations of the Prophet peace be upon him, and they start off with...

Tom Morton: Opposite the narrations of the Prophet is a shelf of DVDs.

Mustapha Elsamad: Mainly lectures actually. Mainly lectures in English; there are some in other languages. And very influential people in the Islamic community. They start off with people like Hamza Yusuf, Bilal Phillips... For the Muslims, especially for the youth, they'll ring a bell, they'll know who I'm talking about. You've got also people like Yusuf Islam, formerly Cat Stevens, of Britain. He talks about the beauty of Islam. You'll notice that most lecturers, the most influential ones, the English-speaking ones, are actually converts to Islam, or as we say, reverts.

Hamza Yusuf is a very influential speaker and lecturer. He is probably one of the most influential English speakers in the world on Islamic issues. They actually did a poll with the Islamic youth, where they found that the most listened-to English speaker, Muslim English speaker in the world, was Hamza Yusuf.

Hamza Yusuf: ... human beings can be worn down, just as you have wars of attrition you also have peace of attrition. In other words, you need to wear your opponent down. And sometimes people are belligerent for very valid reasons, that the imam was mentioning earlier. But that belligerence can still be removed with good intentions and good will, but it takes effort. One of the interesting things...

Tom Morton: Hamza Yusuf was born Mark Hanson, and converted to Islam at the age of 17. He lectures widely in the United States and Britain, and he's taken an uncompromising stance on extremism in both countries.

'I would rather live as a Muslim in the West than in most of the Muslim countries,' he's said, 'because I think that the way Muslims are allowed to live in the West is closer to the Muslim way. If extremists are going to rant and rave about the West, they should emigrate to a Muslim country.'

Hamza Yusuf: ...the principle of jihad is a universal principle, it has nothing to do with military endeavours, nothing whatsoever.

Tom Morton: Mustapha Elsamad says that the appeal of speakers like Hamza Yusuf is not hard to explain.

Mustapha Elsamad: It's the English language. The first language for many people whether being born in non-Arabic speaking

countries, is that their first language is English. So the first communication you're going to have with someone is the talk, so if you're understanding each other linguistically, then you've got half your problem solved. So I think that's probably the issue, the main issue there. Issues like war and peace, you see we've got a very famous CD on that, issues like instead of trying to condemn people, make them better, and he even tried that on their president, George Bush, and he was actually invited to speak to him, and in a famous CD that he's got he says, 'Look, they call me the adviser to the President, but he didn't take my advice. I told him not to bomb Afghanistan.'

Tom Morton: It would have been good to be a fly on the wall at that conversation I think, yes.

Mustapha Elsamad: Exactly. Look the thing is, he's honest, and very straightforward.

Tom Morton: As well as plugging into this global Islamic culture, young Muslims in Australia are using the internet to debate and discuss local issues.

Websites like Muslim Village and AussieMuslims.com provide online forums where young Muslims can talk to each other, about everything from the anti-terrorism laws to whether it's halal to have a crush on someone.

Nasya Bahfen says that websites like these provide an alternative public sphere for young Muslims, a place where unofficial voices can make themselves heard.

Nasya Bahfen: It's interesting to note that places like Muslim Village are actually set up not by people affiliated with the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, not by the Supreme Islamic Council of New South Wales, not by the ICV, these are ordinary Muslims setting up these sites. Because like I said, young Muslims don't want to be talked to, they want to be part of the discussion.

It is much easier for a Muslim who is not affiliated with any of those official voices to jump online and talk to his or her friends about this issue.

Mohammed El-Leissy: Regarding Aussiemuslims.com, well I must say that the key issues that makes me a regular visitor to the site is the fact that it's kind of like (as with all forums) a big room where I feel that I can communicate with the wider Muslim community, not just those at my local mosque. For example, I'm at home watching the news regarding the recent ASIO arrests, feeling rather nervous about the pressure the government is exerting against Muslims. How is Ali in Sunshine feeling? What's Aishah in Doncaster doing? If the internet has turned the world into a global village, then AussieMuslims would be the Islamic quarter.

Tom Morton: Mohammed El-Leissy. He's 21, a student, and a regular user of Aussiemuslims.com

Nasya Bahfen says that forums like this give young Muslims a freedom to express themselves and to engage in the battle of ideas, that it's hard for them to find elsewhere.

Nasya Bahfen: I've seen a lot of discussions and I've been a part of a lot of discussions on MuslimVillage and on AussieMuslims that are very frank and that are very open. And it's very difficult to imagine these types of discussions taking place at the mosque. So what we're seeing on the internet is a wide array of Muslim voices coming from unofficial or unsanctioned sources, but it's very much a medium that is suited for young Muslims, because they want something that is interactive, they want something which is far more open to debate and discussion.

A threatened Muslim world makes a less positive, or a less optimistic partner for peace than a Muslim world that feels comfortable in itself, and feels comfortable in discussing issues that are relevant to its members.

Tom Morton: You've been listening to Background Briefing. Our Co-ordinating producer is Linda McGinnis; Research and original music was by Jason di Rosso, and additional research and interviews by journalist Mansour Razaghi. The Technical Operator was John Jacobs, and our Executive Producer is Kirsten Garrett. I'm Tom Morton.

Credits

Presenter Tom Morton