

Cronulla riots 10 years on: Muslim to Muslim — if you don't like it here, leave

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Hassan Awada has a message for his fellow Muslims — if you don't like it in Australia, he'll buy you a one-way air ticket to a place of your choosing.

And Mr Awada is in a position to follow through.

He is now a highly successful Sydney businessman — he and his eight siblings between them employ more than 200 people full-time.

That in itself is extraordinary given that when Mr Awada came to Australia from Lebanon at the age of 22, he could not speak any English.

Today he is Deputy Mayor of Sutherland Shire Council, which covers Cronulla, made famous for its race riots 10 years ago this weekend.

“If you don't like Australia, I'm happy to contribute to a one-way ticket to fly you wherever you want to go,” he said this week.

Hassan Awada, Deputy Mayor of Sutherland, says the voices of moderate Muslims are drowned out by extremists. Picture: Britta Campion

At the time of the riots, Mr Awada ran a barber's shop near the beach. The day after the riots, a young man with long hair entered his shop and asked for a haircut as he was going for a job interview.

Mr Awada gave him one, but afterwards went out to buy the newspapers. It was only then that he realised the young man had been one of the leaders in the wave of anti-Muslim violence that swept the area.

One newspaper carried a picture of the young man with the words, “We grew here, you flew here” written across his bare chest.

As a moderate Muslim, Mr Awada is concerned that extremist Muslim groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir — which wants the establishment of an Islamic caliphate — get more media attention than people like him, who have no tolerance for extremism.

“You only have to get someone from Lakemba to stand up and shout ‘Allahu Akbar’ and he suddenly becomes my representative, unfairly,” he said.

Today, Mr Awada, who came to Australia with his parents in 1988, owns childcare centres.

Mr Awada and the Mayor of Sutherland Shire, Carmelo Pesce, are hoping that plans for a protest to mark the 10th anniversary of the riots this weekend do not go ahead. Mr Pesce remembered that period as a dreadful time.

He had first-hand experience of the concerns of both sides — as an Italian, his olive skin made him fear he would be attacked because he may have been seen as having “Middle Eastern appearance”.

And because his wife and children are blond, he feared they may be attacked in “reprisal attacks” by Muslim youths.

Mr Pesce and his Sutherland Shire Council have joined with the NSW police to try to prevent today's protest. Mr Pesce said the Party for Freedom, which has been organising the protest, and its leader, Nick Folkes, were not welcome this weekend in Cronulla.

"He (Mr Folkes) has views but his views are not Australian," he said. "His views about Islam and Muslims don't relate to the shire — he's just using the shire as an excuse to demonstrate his views."

Mr Folkes told The Weekend Australian he wanted an end to Muslim immigration.

He said it was wrong that Hizb ut-Tahrir had been allowed to hold a protest recently in Sydney but his group was being told it could not. He said the protest would go ahead even if police refused a permit.