

Moderate Islam in danger from within

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On August 9 this year, about 300 leading figures in Australia's Muslim community gathered for a dinner at the Waterview reception centre in the Sydney suburb of Homebush.

While the Grand Mufti of Australia, Ibrahim Abu Mohamed, sat at his table, the evening was not about him — instead it was about feting Sheik Abdul Salam Zoud, one of the leading candidates to be the next grand mufti.

Zoud is a Salafist — until a year ago a prominent member of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah, an extremist Salafist organisation with strong Wahhabi inclinations. He was educated at the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, the spiritual home of Wahhabism — a hardline sect of Islam from which emerged al-Qa'ida and Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the September 11 attacks in the US.

The dinner was noteworthy for the fact the Grand Mufti did not speak — despite being the most senior imam, or Islamic scholar, in Australia. Instead, Zoud was the guest speaker and was celebrated as a returning son.

“I was very uncomfortable with the whole thing,” says one Muslim community leader who was at the dinner. “It made you think there was a strategy going on — he's (Zoud) being groomed, he's certainly being groomed.”

The extremism of ASWJ is evident from the statements of members such as Sydney Sheik Jamil el-Biza, who has called for Allah to destroy non-believers.

El-Biza, like Zoud, was educated at the Islamic University of Medina and is also a member of the Australian National Imams Council, which elects the grand mufti. He has made online lectures that have appeared in several Australian pro-Islamic State videos. In one video, he screams as he calls for the destruction of Shia Muslims, who he calls “the dogs of this nation”.

The Grand Mufti of Australia, it would seem, is under siege. Not only is he facing a growing political challenge from Salafists but he is also facing intense public scrutiny.

With virtually no English, Abu Mohamed has found himself under demand from the media at a time when Australia's broader Muslim community has been placed centrestage by events in Australia and overseas.

In public relations terms, his response to the terrorist attacks in Paris last month was disastrous.

A statement released by the Grand Mufti and ANIC said “all causative factors, such as racism, Islamophobia, curtailing freedoms through securitisation, duplicitous foreign policies and military intervention, must be comprehensively addressed”.

There were accusations from commentators and politicians that the statement failed to condemn the attacks by trying to underscore the causes of terrorism in a media statement.

The Grand Mufti then clarified that he had unequivocally condemned Islamic State's actions many times.

However, at a time and in a political climate when the Muslim community in Australia needs its leaders addressing the broader community, Abu Mohamed has gone to ground.

Other leaders and advocates from within the Muslim community have described to The Weekend Australian that some of the closest advisers to the Grand Mufti on addressing the public are incompetent, “controlling” and “clueless”, and lacking the skills to address media.

Abu Mohamed, elected in 2011 for an unspecified term, virtually never does interviews and even avoids background meetings.

Sydney’s influential radio broadcaster Alan Jones tried for weeks to have a private meeting with Abu Mohamed. The Grand Mufti’s office repeatedly delayed the meeting, finally guaranteeing a meeting before Jones went on leave last week. But 45 minutes before that meeting was due to begin, the Grand Mufti’s office cancelled, saying it would need to be rescheduled — for next year.

The Weekend Australian also experienced Abu Mohamed’s allergy to the media — after he personally agreed to an interview, the next day his office said it would not happen.

There appears to be a pattern — the Grand Mufti himself agrees to media interviews but his advisers then decide they will not happen, apparently on the basis of wanting to shield him from any difficult interviews or questions.

Extraordinarily, even questions in writing receive no response. After The Australian sent the Grand Mufti questions about serious allegations — including that he had supported Middle Eastern sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi who urged Muslims to fight in Syria and had supported suicide bombings — he gave no response.

This week, the day The Australian published that story, the Grand Mufti also pulled out of his weekly on-air interview on Quran Kareem Islamic radio station, of which he is the director — even after the station had promised on air he would be interviewed. The Mufti turned up to the station — which is inside his office — for a short time, then left before the show began.

Neil Elkadomi, head of Parramatta mosque, which was implicated in teenage gunman Farhad Jabar’s killing of police worker Curtis Cheng outside NSW Police headquarters in Parramatta in October, says the Mufti and ANIC marginalised themselves.

“They isolate themselves and they isolate other communities,” he says. “To be a leader of a community, you have to be more open — you don’t have to isolate yourself.” Elkadomi notes that there is strong distrust of the media too.

“Maybe the media isolated them ... the media has (made a) big attack on them.”

The Grand Mufti has several people who assist him with media statements. A grassroots Muslim media email network seeks advice as to whether leaders of the community should respond if approached by the media, and in some instances has weighed in on the Grand Mufti’s press releases, according to the convener of the email network, but it is still unknown who advised Abu Mohamed on the first Paris attack statement.

However, despite the Grand Mufti’s lack of public engagement and a fear of liaising with the media, Elkadomi is “still deeply hurt” Abu Mohamed did not give him private support or even telephone him after the Parramatta shooting.

“I was at the mosque by myself. No one was there to (support me) at all,” he says. “I’m very disappointed from (the) whole Muslim community, from the Mufti down.”

In addition to internal criticism, the Grand Mufti is facing an apparent leadership challenge from Salafist imams hoping to attain legitimacy and take the ANIC in a different direction. The community leader at the August dinner says many in the audience — including some he knows to be hardliners — are boosting Zoud, and he questions whether Zoud's loyalties are still very much with ASWJ, despite leaving the group.

The community leader — who knows the Grand Mufti well — says people close to Abu Mohamed, who he describes as a “good man, a moderate Muslim”, have warned the Mufti about a possible coup against him, potentially by Zoud. “Some people are warning him (about a coup) but either he thinks they (the Salafists) have changed or he is in no danger,” he says. “If the Salafi guys get into power, we go back 30 years and it will be chaos.”

The leader says that for all of Abu Mohammed's “shortcomings” in relation to his lack of English and questionable media strategies, he would be better than Salafists with theological loyalties to ASWJ.

“To them (Salafists), everyone else (including many Muslims) is an infidel ... it's the Saudi Arabian strain of Salafists,” he says. “At the moment they are supporting him (the Grand Mufti) but once they feel the time is right I have no doubt they will say, ‘See you later.’ ”

Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah — which means the Followers of Sunni Islam and the Community — regards itself as the most puritanical form of Sunni Islam. The Australian branch of ASWJ was founded in 1985 and has alleged ties with al-Qa'ida and Jemaah Islamiah, the group behind the Bali bombings in 2002 that killed 202 people, including 88 Australians.

For more than 15 years, ASWJ has been on the radar of ASIO, which is concerned that among its ranks are extremists. Zoud was a major figure in the organisation for about two decades.

It is associated with several groups across Australia, including Bukhari House bookshop, which has close links to Sydney's Street Dawah preaching group, some of whose members have died fighting for Islamic State. These include Mohammad Ali Baryalei, the former nightclub bouncer and “kingpin” of Australia's Islamic State recruitment. It is believed he was killed in Syria last year.

Zoud left ASWJ about a year ago because of disagreements over a project he founded called Awqaf. The Awqaf venture, launched at the August 9 dinner, is focused on the Islamic concept of waqf, a charitable endowment in Islamic law, whereby adherents donate assets held in trust for the intention of building mosques or funding social welfare institutions.

The Weekend Australian understands Abu Mohamed supported Awqaf and so Zoud left the Salafist organisation to work more closely with ANIC, the umbrella group established in 2008 that elects the Grand Mufti.

The community leader at the dinner says he is concerned members of ANIC who he thought were “moderate” seemed to be exalting Zoud. Adherents to the most hardline Salafist interpretations of Islam subscribe to the takfiri concept, whereby they consider those who stray from the fundamental foundations of Sunni Salafist Islam as non-believers or impure. In Australia, the demographic breakdown of Muslims is almost 90 per cent Sunni and 10 per cent Shia and its offshoot, Alawites.

The growing anti-Shia sentiment or takfiri accusations are highlighted by the words of one of its Sydney identities, el-Biza. He says in a video about Shia Muslims: “When you're seeing your sisters being raped and persecuted for no other reason than that they are Sunni ... may Allah destroy the kafirun (non-believers) of all the world. May Allah allow us to destroy them ... with our hands or with our prayers, for they are the disease of this Ummah (global Muslim community).”

In 2005, The Australian reported that a phone call intercepted by ASIO revealed that Zaky Mallah, who was convicted for threatening to kill an ASIO officer, sought the blessing of Zoud to become Australia's first suicide bomber.

In that conversation Mallah sought permission to travel to Lebanon and kill non-Muslim targets. At the time a spokesman for Zoud confirmed that Zoud had been approached by Mallah; however, he said Zoud refused to give Mallah permission.

In the same year, The Australian also reported links in French government documents between Zoud and convicted terrorist Willie Brigitte, who is serving a nine-year sentence in France for plotting an attack in Sydney. Zoud is reported to have presided over Brigitte's wedding to Australian Melanie Brown and French documents indicated Brigitte was recruiting people in Australia for a terrorist attack.

Zoud has denied links with al-Qa'ida. But despite the fact Zoud is no longer with ASWJ, the community leader at the dinner says Zoud's ideological past seems too extreme to suddenly be aligned with the Mufti, regarded as a moderate. The leader describes what is going on as "stacking" from those seeking the Mufti's position.

While the role of Grand Mufti in Australia is symbolic and does not bring with it the power of a similar position in a country such as Egypt, the honorary position is influential and coveted.

"The Wahhabis are seeking legitimacy," the community leader at the dinner says. "They have a legitimacy problem, and they also want influence."

The ANIC's own documents say the organisation is the "only official body that has the right and the authority to nominate and elect the position of Grand Mufti of Australia in a free and fair election without any internal or external interventions".

"He has a large group around him," another leading figure in the Islamic community says of Zoud, who was based at Al-Azhar mosque in Belmore in Sydney for about a decade. "But still people don't like Salafis."

Parramatta mosque's Elkadomi says the Muslim community is deeply divided. On October 11, a week after the Parramatta shooting, 20 leaders of the Muslim community met the NSW Premier, Mike Baird.

Elkadomi says most of the leaders were interested only in their own affairs. "(Leaders were saying) I want funding for this and this, while the most person affected from that (shooting) is me, it was Parramatta," he says.

Elkadomi brands many leaders of the Islamic community as "selfish" and says they are "still playing the same politics from their countries overseas".

He criticises the Mufti's support for Qaradawi, who has urged Muslims around the world to fight in Syria and who has approved suicide bombers.

Elkadomi is concerned some people may try to join ANIC purely to become mufti and that there are no police checks on anyone joining.

"I don't see a good future for ANIC because there's a lot of people who want the Mufti's job," he says. "One day ANIC will be in the hands of extremists."

Elkadomi — whose warnings are general and not about Zoud, with whom he has an amicable relationship — says one day “somebody” will bring extremist ideas to the ANIC. He says the leaders of the Muslim community have different ideologies and some “might not fit in Australian society”.

The Muslim community leader at the August dinner tells *The Weekend Australian* that new members of ANIC should be forced to sign a declaration that they recognise all theological schools of thought — not just Salafism.

“A true Salafi would never sign anything like that,” he says.

One Islamic scholar tells *The Weekend Australian* the “Saudi strain” of Islam is troubling. He points to the problem of Saudi Arabia being able to use its enormous wealth to spread its Wahhabi ideology.

He says one example three years ago illustrates the problem: a student approached an Australian university to do Islamic studies, but the student also had been offered a position in Saudi Arabia, which was also offering him free tuition, accommodation and annual home visits to Australia.

“In contrast, in Australia he’s being charged HECS and will end up with a lot of debt — the student opted for Saudi Arabia. This is what we’re up against,” says the community leader. “This ideology is really well funded — that’s how it’s spreading.”

Charles Sturt University academic Mehmet Ozalp says there is a need for “reasonable and mainstream” Muslims and non-Muslims to combine their goodwill, energies and resources to tackle extremism.

“The future of Islam in Australia hinges on the Muslim community’s ability to produce not only indigenous scholars but also local spiritual matters,” Ozalp says.

“There is a mutual communication problem. Some Muslims and non-Muslims are speaking through paradigms that offend one another and prevent necessary communication conducive to solving deeply rooted social and religious issues.”