

## Row over Navy's Islamic account after Tony Abbott retweet

The Australian, January 5, 2016, Rosie Lewis, Reporter, Canberra; Cameron Stewart, Associate Editor, Melbourne

Captain Mona Shindy is the Chief of Navy's strategic adviser on Islamic affairs. Picture: Toby Zerna

A navy Twitter account has been shut down after its most senior Muslim officer retweeted a counter-terrorism expert mocking Tony Abbott following the Liberal Party leadership coup and backed the Grand Mufti's response to the Paris terrorist attacks.

Captain Mona Shindy, the Chief of Navy's strategic adviser on Islamic affairs, appears to have run the account @navyislamic until it was deleted last month, posting a series of tweets about attitudes towards Muslim Australians and terrorism.

The closure of the account came six months after Captain Shindy called for the word "Islam" to be removed from all reporting on Islamic State in an essay for the June edition of United Service, the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of NSW.

Arguing that there was no connection with the terror group and religion, Captain Shindy accused the media of "fear-mongering" in its portrayal of Muslims and said it made them feel alienated and vilified and provided "ammunition" to terrorist recruiters.

In the essay, Captain Shindy mirrored the disputed claims of Grand Mufti Ibrahim Abu Mohamed after the Paris terror attack in November, in which he said causative factors such as foreign policy, the media and lack of opportunity were fuelling Islamic extremism.

Dr Abu Mohamed's comments were widely criticised as offering potential justification for the killings, forcing the Grand Mufti to revise his public position.

On November 18, five days after the Paris attacks, Captain Shindy used the @navyislamic account to declare Dr Abu Mohamed was a "righteous & courageous man who categorically denounces" Islamic State and terrorism, tweeting the hashtag #IStandWithTheMufti.

On the day after the leadership spill in which Malcolm Turnbull toppled Mr Abbott, Captain Shindy posted a 2011 YouTube video of Mr Turnbull on the ABC's Q&A discussing Muslim schools and the need to promote and encourage moderate Islamic traditions.

"The idea that you demonise the faith of billions of people with 1500 years or thereabouts of history and tradition and scholarship is absurd," Mr Turnbull said in the clip.

Captain Shindy tweeted: "Looking forward to a #PM that unites #auspol & #OZ"

There was also a retweet of counter-terrorism expert Anne Aly, who on the night of the leadership change tweeted: "Wait. Did our new PM just give a speech and not mention boats, death cult, security, death cult, terrorism, national security and death cult?"

Mr Abbott was criticised by parts of the Islamic community and MPs for his rhetoric and hardline response to terrorism that some said divided Muslim and non-Muslim Australians.

The Australian asked the Defence Department a series of questions yesterday, including why the @navyislamic Twitter account was shut down and whether Captain Shindy's tweets were reflective of naval policy.

A Defence spokesman said: “Navy has consolidated its social media platforms to achieve a ‘single source’ so as to strengthen its messaging in synch with its support to traditional media.”

Captain Shindy, who is on leave, declined to comment.

Defence did not verify the tweets, which have been published on the blogs of conservative commentators Andrew Bolt and Bernard Gaynor, a Queensland Senate candidate for the anti-Islam party Australian Liberty Alliance.

Captain Shindy, whose role is to “help create a better understanding” within the navy of the Islamic faith and cultural sensitivities, and Chief of Navy Tim Barrett met the Grand Mufti in October 2014 at the Lakemba Mosque as part of its Islamic community awareness program.

Captain Shindy is a respected 26-year veteran of the navy and the head of its Guided Missile Frigate Program. She was appointed to her Islamic advisory role by then-chief of navy Vice Admiral Ray Griggs in March 2013. She was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross in last year’s Australia Day honours and in November was named Telstra NSW Businesswoman of the Year.

It is highly unusual for a serving military officer to offer public comment on such a politically contentious issue as Islamic terrorism, much less to adopt positions that appear to be at odds with government policy.

The removal of the Twitter account about December 20 came days after the Defence Force said it would appeal against a Federal Court ruling in favour of Mr Gaynor over his being discharged for making controversial comments about gay men and lesbians. It also came days after a complaint by the Australian Liberty Alliance was made to the navy about Captain Shindy’s Twitter account. The complaint warned the navy that ADF members were obliged not to make political statements in their official capacity.

Mr Gaynor said yesterday the ADF was “caught in a bind” over appealing his case but allowing Captain Shindy to make political comments in an official capacity.

In her essay, Captain Shindy called for a “frank, fearless debate” on the “root causes and triggers” of Islamic grievances, which she said included foreign policy double-standards and a belief among young Australian Muslims that they had been sidelined and marginalised. She questioned the effectiveness of bombing campaigns against extremists.

“We need to move on quickly from a single approach of talking tough and broadly bombing regions where we believe extremists operate,” she wrote. “Working on preventive strategies gives us the best likelihood of long-term success. Security, jobs, income to support families and stability to grow and educate populations are the key ingredients to preventing the explosive, desperate reaction to despair that is extremism.”

She blames the media for placing young Muslims and their families “under great strain” through negative coverage of Muslims. She also said Islam had nothing to do with terrorism.

“Constant negative media reporting on apparent Muslim behaviour provides ammunition for terrorist recruiters enabling them to convince impressionable Muslims that there is an agenda against them and their religion — again, supporting a call for armed jihad,” she said. “Indeed, the word ‘Islam’ needs to be removed from reporting on ISIS/ISIL or Daesh. The barbaric nature and ideology of these groups has nothing to do with Islam and we should work to limit their appeal to vulnerable Muslims,” she writes.

Mr Abbott last month claimed Australians were in denial about the “problems within Islam” and called for a “reformation” of the religion. ASIO chief Duncan Lewis was among those who distanced himself from the remarks.

Additional reporting: Leo Shanahan