

Sheik Mohammed Omran tells ‘bloody PM’ Morrison: ‘blame police ... not us’



Sheik Mohammed Omran outside the Hume Islamic Youth Centre in Melbourne's Coolaroo yesterday. Picture: Aaron Francis

exclusive

Chip Le Grand, Victorian Chief Reporter, 12:00AM November 13, 2018

The spiritual leader of the Islamic youth centre where Bourke Street terrorist Hassan Khalif Shire Ali attended prayer sessions has accused Scott Morrison of making the Muslim community a scapegoat to distract from the failure of police and intelligence services to prevent Friday's attack.

Mohammed Omran, the emir of the Hume Islamic Youth Centre close to Shire Ali's Meadow Heights home, dismissed the "bloody Prime Minister's" call for imams to do more to stop Islamic extremists, saying the greatest power he had was to dial triple-0 when confronted with a threat.

The HIYC, a sprawling mosque, cafe, gym and bookstore in the Melbourne suburb of Coolaroo, has seen a procession of jihadists and would-be terrorists through its doors, including domestic terror plotters and suicide bombers who killed themselves in Iraq.

Sheik Omran — the most senior Australian figure in the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah movement, which adheres to a strict, salafist interpretation of Islam —

said the “Prime Minister” needed to be accountable for the failure of government agencies before he blamed Islamic leaders. “This person was on the watch list,” the sheik told The Australian. “So what did they do? Nothing. “After he jumped in the street and started waving his knife to them — sometimes they are running after him and sometimes they are running after them, and even the public interfered to take his attention because the police, they couldn’t handle him. “First, we want to be really truthful with each other. This bloody Prime Minister, instead of turning the heat on somebody else, he should answer us about what he did.

“He has spent billions of dollars — billions — on security service. And what is the end result? We have crazy people in the street.”

Mr Morrison has urged imams to identify “infiltrators” in their mosques and to be more alert for and proactive towards any signs of radicalisation.

The Prime Minister’s call came in the wake of Friday’s savage attack in which Sisto Malaspina, a beloved Bourke Street restaurateur, was killed and two other people were left with serious knife wounds. Shire Ali, 30, was shot by police and later died of his wounds.

Victorian federal MP Michael Sukkar said Sheik Omran’s comments were “outrageous” “When I read his remarks this morning, the first thing I thought of was: ‘Houston, we have a problem’,” he told Sky News. “When a leader in this community ... not only not taking any responsibility for it or seeing constructively how he can help, but blaming everybody but himself, his organisation, or let’s be frank, the insidious ideology that sits behind it. “Sheik Omran say(ing) these things ... speaks to the problem and the broader issue of trying to find those strong, powerful voices in this community.”

Pellegrini’s, the iconic Melbourne cafe Mr Malaspina co-owned, opened this morning for the first time since he was murdered and is serving free coffees in his honour. Mr Malaspina have accepted the state government’s offer of a state funeral

Sheik Omran’s outburst at the Prime Minister comes as The Australian can reveal that Shire Ali’s partner, who has been radicalised, is not co-operating with investigators trying to reconstruct the terrorist’s last movements. The Australian understands the woman is being closely monitored by members of the national intelligence community as they attempt to piece together the last movements of Shire Ali. The woman, believed to be aged in her 20s, is

considered crucial to investigations but is not helping national security officials determine why Shire Ali stabbed three people and tried to set off a car-bomb in Melbourne.

The Prime Minister's forceful rhetoric was aimed squarely at imams he believed were "looking the other way" when confronted with extremism in their mosques.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton has also called for Muslim community members to help bring potentially dangerous radicals to the attention of police.

Mr Morrison told The Australian yesterday the "active co-operation" of Islamic leaders was required to prevent terrorism. "When you've got 400 people on an investigation program and 230 people with cancelled passports, there's no way you can have active eyes on everyone," Mr Morrison said. "No government can achieve that. This is about protecting their own communities, and their own religious communities' integrity, because at some point a young person is always going to be vulnerable. "That's when these infiltrators go to work. They can sniff it out and in they go. We've seen it time and again."

Hassan Khalif Shire Ali tries to stab an officer before he was fatally wounded in Friday's attack on Bourke Street. Sheik Omran said he didn't believe the Bourke Street attack was an act of terrorism. "If this man was a Christian he would not be called a terrorist," Sheik Omran said. The sheik's spokesman, Mustafa Abu Yusuf, said religious leaders at the youth centre were already reporting to police signs of radicalisation but police had appeared unwilling to follow up this information.

"We report it to police and they give it lip-service," he said.

Mr Yusuf said the political response to the Bourke Street attack wasn't helpful to people working on the "frontline" with marginalised Muslim youths. He said the budget priority given to policing and intelligence gathering, rather than to youth work, was a failed strategy. "They don't fund us, they don't want to talk to us directly," Mr Yusuf said. "No one from the Prime Minister's office or any conservative minister wants to talk to us. Talk to us about how we can solve the problem. They are not interested. "It is not helpful to people (who) work on the frontlines with these kids. We have an open-door policy. When these kids come in you have a chance to connect, you have a chance to correct their judgment. What they are doing now is not working. "At least get out of our way. Let us deal with this these kids. They are misguided."

Shire Ali's parents, Somali refugees who have lived in Australia for 20 years, regularly attended the moderate Virgin Mary Mosque in Werribee. Counter-terrorism investigators believe that Shire Ali, who was radicalised in the early years of the Syrian conflict, had in more recent years attended prayer sessions at the HIYC.

Shire Ali had been monitored by national security authorities and was known to hold radical views.

Police confirmed this week that in 2015 his passport was cancelled because ASIO assessed he planned to travel to Syria. Police also said that in the lead up to the attack he was no longer being actively monitored. Sheik Omran, who had a difficult relationship with John Howard and Tony Abbott during their terms as prime minister, does not recall meeting Shire Ali, but said it would be unsurprising if he had attended the youth centre. "Let's say he came here every day, five times a day," Sheik Omran said.

"What does that mean? "Let's say they are coming here. Why not? This is the youth centre. If it is possible for me to get everyone from the street and put them here I will. This is my job, to bring people from the street, from the drugs, to the mosque. "They came here and they came to hundreds of places. They gather in McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, they gather in so many mosques. I am not blaming the mosque. The maximum authority we have is to call triple-0 when we have something we think he is a suspect. "They said he was known to us and was on a watch list. They need us to tell them more?"

Additional reporting: Richard Ferguson, Greg Sheridan
Chip Le Grand