



# COMMUNITY AND RADICALISATION

An examination of perceptions, ideas, beliefs and solutions throughout Australia

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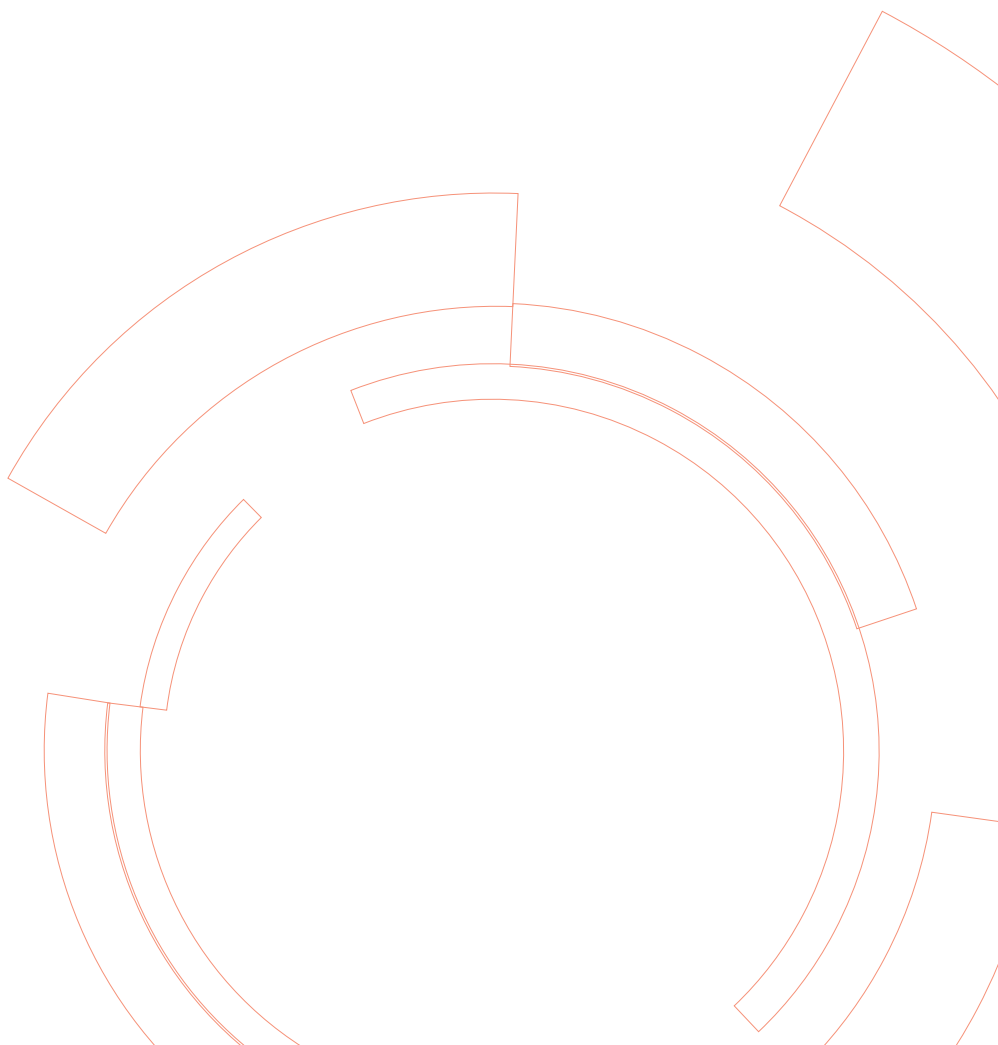
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## Aims and scope of study

*Community and Radicalisation: an Examination of Perceptions, Ideas, Beliefs and Solutions throughout Australia* was a year-long national study designed and conducted as a qualitative research project through a partnership between Victoria Police, Victoria University and the Australian Multicultural Foundation. The key aims of the study were:

- To identify how communities understand the meanings of and relationship between radicalisation and extremism.
- To explore community perceptions of the underlying drivers for radicalisation and extremism.
- To explore perceptions of the impact of radicalisation and extremism on sense of community and social harmony and cohesion.
- To solicit community views about effective approaches to and solutions for eliminating or reducing the threat of violent extremism in Australia.
- To provide an evidence base for community views and perceptions that can inform and support the development of effective policies and strategies to counter radicalisation and extremism in Australia.

## Methodology

Four key interrelated assumptions informed the study's design and methodology:

1. Within the last decade, forms of terrorism and terrorism-related activities conducted by organisations and individuals who claim to act in the name of Islam have dominated the domestic and international discussion on, and response to, terrorism.
2. Many Muslim and non-Muslim communities, in Australia as elsewhere, have been disturbed by the way in which – especially following the US terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the British bombings of 7/7 – perceptions of Islam as a religion and a culture have seemingly become inextricably associated with terrorism. This perception is largely a consequence of the occurrence and nature of acts of terrorism and violent extremism perpetrated by those who claim to act in the name of Islam, along with a range of activities that either intentionally or inadvertently encourage this association.
3. Both Muslim and non-Muslim community members are in a strong position to assist in identifying the drivers of, and potential strategies to prevent or mitigate, the development and impacts of radicalisation and extremism within Australia.

4. The ability to hear a range of community and stakeholder voices across a broad purposive national sample is a critical component of Australia's ability to understand and engage with community concerns, and solutions, in developing effective strategies for addressing contemporary forms of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism.

In addition to these assumptions, the study design also included a focus on exploring public perceptions of two recent nationally publicised counter-terrorism operations – Operation Pendennis (Melbourne and Sydney) and Operation Neath (Melbourne) – and their subsequent arrests, trials, convictions and sentencing. While Victoria Police has examined the implications of Operation Pendennis from an internal and inter-agency operational perspective, considerably less effort has been devoted to date in assessing its social impacts for both Muslim and non-Muslim communities throughout Australia.

542 respondents drawn from all Australian states and territories contributed to the study, broken down into three participant cohorts:

1. government stakeholders with relevant knowledge and understanding of issues related to violent extremism and terrorism;
2. community leaders from a wide range of both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, and
3. general community members, including young people, drawn from a variety of religious and ethnically based Muslim and non-Muslim communities across the nation.

Methods of data collection included individual interviews with government stakeholders and community leaders, focus groups with general community members, and written submissions invited from members of culturally diverse communities through press advertisements. The research data were then analysed thematically to develop key and emerging points of insight, consensus and contrast that informed the study's findings. All aspects of the research were conducted by the principal researchers from Victoria Police and Victoria University, with assistance from the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF) in facilitating the national focus groups component of the project.

The project received Human Research Ethics approval as detailed in the report. Anonymity and confidentiality for participants were key components of ethics approval for the study and all data have been rigorously de-identified.

## Limitations

This study has not included a review or analysis of the current literature on the issues of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism from community perspectives. This is being provided by a related research project in which Victoria Police is a partner. As part of the qualitative methodology employed for the project, sampling for all participant cohorts was purposive and the results are therefore not generalisable.

## Summary of key findings

Overall, the picture that emerges from these consultations around community perspectives on radicalisation and extremism is that community leaders, community members and government stakeholders are reasonably confident that Australia is in a good position to meet and address some of the continuing challenges presented by the threats of radicalisation and extremism. However, a range of concerns, strategies and solutions were identified by participants that helps focus attention on what work still needs to be done, how this can best be pursued, and what strategies need to be developed to stay abreast of a social and political environment that is dynamic, fluid, occasionally volatile and still working toward broad-scale resilience and social cohesion in local, national and trans-national contexts. The key findings for each of the study's main themes are summarised below.

### CHAPTER 1: WHAT DO RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM MEAN FOR PARTICIPANTS?

For most community leaders and government stakeholders,<sup>1</sup> radicalisation meant a process of moving beyond accepted social or community norms. By contrast, extremism tended to be seen as the ideological end-point of the radicalisation process. However, some participants saw this differently, believing that extremist beliefs were the necessary pre-condition for embarking upon a radical path.

Both radicalisation and extremism were perceived to involve intolerance for the viewpoints of others and the imposition of one's own truth claims on other people or on society as a whole. However, there was little consensus amongst participants around the relationship between the concepts of radicalisation and extremism. Some government stakeholders and community leaders felt that radicalisation led to extremism, while for others extremism led to radicalisation, and for still others there was little meaningful distinction and the terms could be used interchangeably.

A number of Muslim-background participants questioned the underlying premise of broadly accepted meanings of radicalisation and extremism. For this group, such meanings were more closely linked to Western liberal frameworks than to Islamic concepts of moderation and extremism. Muslim-background participants also felt that extremism and Islam had become increasingly interchangeable terms in the post-9/11 and 7/7 environments. They attributed this to a perceived highly politicised consensus in the West around radicalisation and extremism in relation to Islamic belief and culture. This view was implicitly confirmed by the significant proportion of government stakeholders who drew explicit contrasts between Islam and democracy in their responses.

Some government stakeholders also felt strongly that over-generalising radicalisation narratives and processes was a risk. These participants were concerned about the loss of in-depth understanding of, and strategic responses to, the different pathways by which individuals and social groups may become radical or extremist if simplistic profiling techniques or models of radicalisation were used.

1. Community participants in the focus groups were not asked this question.



## The role of violence as a threshold in defining radicalisation and extremism

There were contradictory perceptions of the role of violence in relation to concepts of radicalisation and extremism. Many government stakeholders and some community leaders thought extremism indicated willingness to take concrete action, including violent action, to achieve desired outcomes, while others felt extremism did not necessarily involve condoning violent action. However, there was greater consensus around the idea that arriving at an extremist standpoint often involves a transition from latent belief or passive support to the willingness to take concrete action in some form, even if not explicitly violent, that has an impact on self, others and society.

### CHAPTER 2: THE CAUSES AND DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM

Responses to this issue covered a broad and complex spectrum of drivers and factors. For many, these drivers were interrelated, sometimes intimately. This is best understood as a convergence paradigm, in which a number of personal and environmental factors need to coalesce for an individual before they find themselves on the road to radicalisation or extremism.

Specific drivers identified by participants ranged across **personal and individual factors** such as the influence of family and early life, including the role of family history in the normalisation of violence, and the psychosocial vulnerability of individuals, including lack of resilience. For a very large number of participants, issues around identity and sense of belonging were seen as important underlying factors in helping drive people toward radicalisation and extremism. These included the implications of lack of belonging; the tensions of multiple cultural allegiances and loyalties; rebellion against family or community norms; the yearning for cultural and religious authenticity; and the need for approval and attention, particularly for those whose fractured self-esteem or sense of self-worth makes them strive to feel like a 'somebody' rather than a 'nobody'.

The dominant perceived driver in relation to **socio-cultural factors** informing radicalisation and extremism was the broad domain of marginalisation, racism and social exclusion. This included the rejection or marginalisation of minority groups by mainstream society; the phenomenon of self-exclusion and insularity by minority groups from the mainstream in an effort to preserve a coherent cultural identity; and the corrosive experience of discrimination and racism in the community, particularly for Muslim- and African-background participants.

**Religious and community leadership** was another major driver for Muslim-background participants, who identified concerns around the lack of guidelines or accreditation for Islamic religious leaders and educators; the misleading of religious followers either through ignorance and lack of education or else in order to promote deliberately a variety of 'political Islam'; the uneven nature of parental oversight for children's religious education, and the consequences of this for isolating children and young people from the familial and social support networks that can serve as protective factors against radicalisation.

A range of **political factors** were also canvassed by participants. These included perceived frustrations and injustices, especially for Muslim-background participants, in the realm of international affairs and Western foreign policy, with the Israel-Palestine conflict and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq emerging as focal points for the capacity of radical and extremist groups to attract and maintain support.

Despite some respondents' views of the perceived risks inherent in Australia's ability to manage both elements of its domestic social inclusion and its foreign policy framework, a majority of participants who offered views on this topic thought **the prospect of home-grown terrorism** in Australia was fairly low. Reasons given for this included: Australia's relative geographical isolation; a sufficiently friendly and peaceful domestic culture; good access to democratic processes and freedom of expression; reasonable approaches to social inclusion, and a relative lack of political aggression.

Notably, the wide range of interlocking factors and frameworks identified above led many government stakeholders and community leaders to question the value of generalising about the mechanisms, pathways, and processes by which people can become radicalised or develop into violent extremists in light of the perception that *'what we're talking about here is a whole series of small things rather than one big thing.'* Most participants thought there was no single model or pathway to radicalisation and spoke of the challenges in trying to develop strategies to deflect people from going down this path.

### CHAPTER 3: THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE IN ADDRESSING GRIEVANCES

Most participants perceived the causes of and justifications for extremist violence to involve the 'perfect storm' paradigm, in which some or all of the vectors of personal vulnerabilities, environmental circumstances, group dynamics and proximity to extremist narratives or influences converge to enable or encourage violent responses to grievances or problems. In line with this, the most common drivers of violent action highlighted by participants were seen as interrelated or co-dependent.

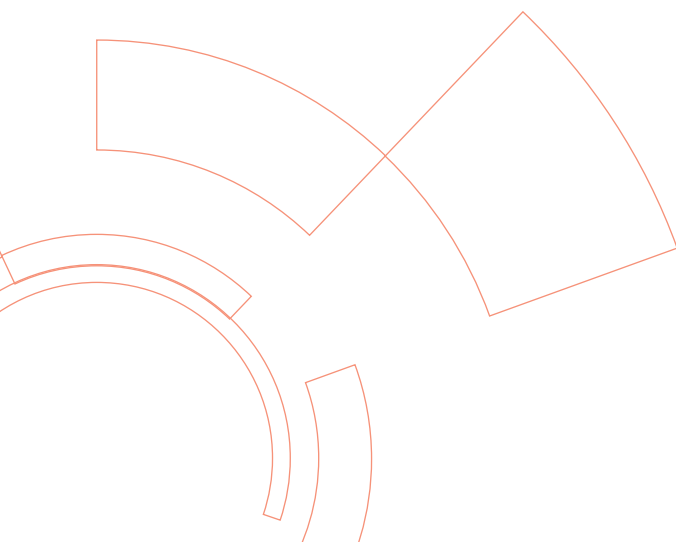
Responses ranged across **personal factors**, such as mistrust, family history, early exposure to violence, peer influence and lack of educational or other personal resources; **socio-cultural factors** such as ethnic or cultural background, social environment, marginalisation, limited or no sense of other options, and the desire to 'be somebody' through taking violent action; and **political factors** such as ideology, religious or political solidarity, a strong sense of personal and/or political grievance or disenfranchisement, perceived inability to effect peaceful political change, and the suppression of political dissent – often violent in its own right – that leads to a violent counter-reaction.

A large number of participants argued that non-state violence could be justified as a legitimate response to state-sponsored oppression or the denial of basic civil liberties and human rights, particularly in countries overseas where democratic systems were either fragile or non-existent. Nevertheless, strong distinctions were drawn between perceived legitimate political insurgencies targeting governments and the military, versus terrorist violence targeting non-combatants and civil society as a whole.

### CHAPTER 4: THE EFFICACY OF DEMOCRACY TO ADDRESS POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

The vast majority of participants who contributed to this theme were positive about democracy, seeing it as a political system that is reasonably robust and capable of responding, within limits, to diversity of viewpoint and orientation. Many participants said democracy is the best available political system for guaranteeing highly valued rights such as freedom of speech, movement, political beliefs and the right to practice one's religion without discrimination or persecution. Being able to speak freely and to dissent without fear of imprisonment, sanction or other forms of persecution was particularly important to those participants who hailed from countries or regions where such rights and freedoms were curtailed or absent.

However, participants also identified a number of challenges and limitations for democracy as a political system. These included the perception that while democracy may be a strong and fair system, it must involve full participation and good understanding of its capacity by the people who are subject to its rule. Democracy was not universally perceived by participants to deliver justice or live up to its own principles. In particular, many examples were offered of perceived hypocrisy or failure to live up to expectations, particularly in the area of foreign policy relating to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the ongoing Israel/Palestine conflict.



Criticisms or reservations about democracy were more connected to the *realpolitik* of democracy in action, rather than to any fundamental disagreement with the premises or precepts of democracy as a political system. However, certain risks in relation to radicalisation and extremism deriving from the limitations of democracy in action were also highlighted. These included: the perception that democracy can frustrate people because it is bureaucratic and slow, which can in turn encourage turning to extremist or violent means of achieving social change; the extent to which minority needs and concerns may go unheard or unmet in a democracy that favours majority rule; the perception that democracy does not always tolerate cultural difference as well as people think; and that democracy cannot benefit those who lack capacity to engage with it, which can then discourage or alienate them from relying on democratic processes to resolve their grievances.

Perceived solutions to these issues were that more education about democracy is needed to keep it robust and viable, and that more attention is required to ensuring that the least advantaged in our communities are provided with the means to fully engage with and benefit from democratic systems.

#### CHAPTER 5: ARE THERE PERCEIVED LINKS BETWEEN ISLAM, EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM?

An overwhelming majority of participants believed there was a strong and well-established perceived link between Islam and terrorist thought and action in public community discourse. The primary source of this link was seen to be **the media**, with a particular emphasis on commercial media and, to a lesser extent, publicly funded broadcasters. Most participants thought that this link was forged mainly through media sensationalism, stereotyping and distortion; media oversimplification or 'dumbing down' of issues around Muslims, extremism and terrorism; and the propensity of mainstream and especially commercial media to marginalise, dismiss or ignore diverse and/or moderate views within the broader Australian Muslim community.

Media sensationalism around Muslims and terrorism were seen by participants as driven primarily either by cultural bias, ignorance, or the desire to sell more papers or attract more advertising based on populist appeal. Many participants believed that truthful, accurate or balanced reporting on Muslim and terrorist issues took a back seat to the economic drivers of news cycles and advertising revenue.

**Non-media drivers** of the perceived link between Islam, extremism and terrorism for participants included the success of extremist rhetoric in defining Islam in the broader public sphere; non-Muslim perceptions of and prejudices against Muslims and Islam; lack of contact and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims; an over-emphasis on the visible difference of Muslims from mainstream Australian communities; the perpetuation of an 'us and them' mentality by non-Muslims and Muslims alike; the influence of the post-9/11 environment; lack of educational opportunities for mainstream communities to learn more about Islam; lack of publicity for diverse viewpoints across Muslim communities, and the lack of general community awareness that Islamic extremism is not the only form of violent extremism that may pose a threat to the community.

The influence of these perceived links on participants' own views of Muslims and of Islam as a religion fell into three broad categories: those from Muslim backgrounds who said this perception had not changed their understanding of their religion or cultural identity; those non-Muslims who said it had little or no impact on how they viewed Muslims and Islam, and those non-Muslims who said it had spurred them to develop greater knowledge of Islam and contact with Muslims in order to challenge either their own ignorance or what they saw as the biased and ill-informed views of others.

## CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF MEDIA WITHIN DISCOURSES OF RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM

There was almost universal consensus that **television, radio and print** media are enormously influential and at times insidious in shaping both 'headline' and also day-to-day perceptions about one's own society and that of others, with tangible impacts and consequences. This was particularly the case for how media discourses shape perceptions around the nature, impact and implications of radicalisation and extremism both in Australia and overseas. For many, the advent of globalised media means that the distinction between 'Australian' and 'foreign' media is no longer seen as relevant, particularly in relation to global issues such as extremism and terrorism.

Most participants felt that the media in general was overwhelmingly focused on fostering a perceived negative link between Islam, violence and extremism, led by 'hot media' that deliberately sets out to provoke conflict, passion and dissent in the community. A large number of respondents felt that commercial media such as television and radio were responsible for significantly distorted reporting on issues relating to Islam and to Muslims, and for practicing their own form of extremism through sensationalised, imbalanced and/or inaccurate representations of the connection between Islam, extremism and terrorism. The power of the media to shape how people think was seen to go hand in hand with a heightened expectation of responsibility by media for how they portray issues related to Islam, radicalisation and extremism.

Participants identified risks in relation to radicalisation and extremism as a result of their distrust in media motives and behaviours. A substantial number thought there was potential for peaceful Muslims to become radicalised because the steady diet of negative media imaging and discourse about Islam was so pervasive and humiliating.

Accordingly, levels of distrust, cynicism and disenchantment with media were generally high to very high amongst participants in all three cohorts. Nevertheless, the media was also seen as having potential positive capacity to foster greater knowledge about Islam as a religion, the place of Muslims in the general community, and a realistic understanding and assessment of the risks of extremism and radicalisation.

### Solutions to the problem of media distortion concerning Islam, extremism and terrorism

Two main solutions were offered by participants to address the concerns above. The first was the need to make Australian media organisations more accountable through monitoring and regulation with reference to responsible and balanced portrayals of Islam and Muslims. The second was the task of developing stronger consultative relationships with Muslim spokespeople who represent the moderate majority of Australian Muslim society, rather than relying heavily, as media is now perceived to do, on controversial or radical Muslim figures on the fringes for commentary on a range of Islamic and other issues.

### The internet and other social media

The social and interactive dimensions of the internet and other relatively new social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, were seen by many participants as critical in shaping how extremist and terrorist discourses are played out. The internet and social media were seen as dynamic, fluid spaces in which radicalisation as a social process can be either reinforced or hampered by how users of internet and social media sites build and direct flows of information, opinion and perspective.

Responses around the **social dynamics** of the internet and other social media included the broad perception that radicalisation and the internet are both driven by social interaction, so that the internet and other social media were seen to play a significant role in incubating radicalisation and extremism through forms of immersive virtual community-building. The internet was generally perceived by participants to reinforce existing views rather than create new views. Many participants pointed out that the internet could be used both to help and to harm others more generally, stressing the role of people rather than technology in this regard.

The **social impacts** of the internet and other social media were likened by a broad majority of participants to a 'giant borderless pamphlet', one that facilitated faster, broader, easier access to radical and extremist views than ever before. Hand in hand with this went the idea that the internet and other new communication technologies are fundamentally altering our perception of reality and our capacity to distinguish between the 'virtual' and the 'real', particularly for young people born in an age in which the internet is reshaping consciousness as a part of daily life.

Participants thought the impacts of promoting hatred and cultural stereotyping on the internet were important factors in relation to radicalisation and extremism. Reactive radicalisation in response to one's religion or cultural identity being constantly denigrated or disrespected on internet sites was the most common concern. Such hatred was felt by many participants to be another variety of extremism in its own right. More government support for strengthening resilience amongst communities bearing a disproportionate burden of web-based hatred was also seen as important.

Finally, a number of **social and operational challenges and opportunities** in relation to internet- and social media-based radicalisation and extremism emerged for participants. These included a strong emphasis on how the internet and social media can be used to counter as well as facilitate radicalisation and extremism. Participants wanted to see alternative internet and social media-based narratives and options more easily available to those who go to radical or extremist sites out of curiosity or uncertainty about who they are and where they belong. However, there was broad consensus that better awareness needs to be fostered about balancing the positives and risks of the internet and social media, particularly for those still grappling with new languages, technologies and freedoms. The majority view was that trying to censor or control the internet was impractical and unrealistic; could potentially backfire by making restricted material more desirable, and poses significant and unacceptable risks to Australian democratic freedoms and rights, including that of privacy. Participants with this view placed high value on democratic freedoms and were wary of assigning too much power to the state.

## CHAPTER 7: PERCEPTIONS OF OPERATIONS PENDENNIS AND NEATH

Sharp distinctions emerged between government and community perspectives on the efficacy and integrity of these two counter-terrorist operations. Government stakeholders almost unanimously perceived the procedural integrity of these operations to be successful and to reflect the healthy nature of the Australian democratic and justice systems. They felt that lessons from earlier counter-terrorist operations had been learned, particularly in relation to engaging communities in the aftermath of the operations. However, a number of government stakeholders also strongly questioned whether cultural sensitivities or issues could or should form part of a strategic approach to counter-terrorist operations more generally, citing a range of operational and other concerns.

A limited number of focus group participants and community leaders, particularly outside Victoria and New South Wales, were able to respond to this theme because many lacked familiarity with these operations. However, for those community-based participants who did express a view, a large majority thought Pendennis and Neath were not justified. They were uneasy about convictions based on what people thought rather than what they did. A significant proportion thought these operations were more about harassing and intimidating Muslim communities than about detecting crime and preventing violent extremism. However, some participants also stressed that it was local community members themselves who had first brought those ultimately targeted by Operation Neath to the attention of authorities.

These participants thought that more publicity should have been given to the willingness of other Muslims to come forward about a terrorist threat within their own community.

Community-based participants also thought that Australia had increasingly shifted its approach in countering violent extremism toward intervention and away from prevention. They wanted to see more focus on preventative strategies that would reduce the need for intervention and surveillance. They stressed the ways in which the residual social impacts following operations like Pendennis and Neath can damage how Muslim communities are perceived by non-Muslims, setting back the agenda for intercultural harmony accordingly.

## CHAPTER 8: PREVENTING OR MITIGATING THE THREAT OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

### Counter-narratives

Questions were raised by participants about the effectiveness of counter-narratives that emphasise the 'negative case' in relation to violent extremism. Both government stakeholders and community members wanted to see more 'affirmative' narratives that emphasise what binds us together rather than what separates us socially and culturally as Australians. Positive narratives of inclusive national identity that shift beyond discourses of 'us and them' to 'we' in shaping Australian identity and allegiances were seen as the most desirable approach.

There was a strong view amongst many government stakeholders and community leaders that government agencies are not effective sources of counter-narratives, particularly in the context of influencing religious debates or perspectives. There was general consensus that Muslim communities themselves are best positioned to develop, disseminate and reinforce counter-narratives against violent extremism, especially where religious ideology is used to justify these actions. Muslim-generated counter-narratives were seen as more credible amongst those whom such narratives aim to influence, and there was a strong call for encouraging further cooperation with and support by government for community-based counter-narrative strategies.

In relation to the focus of counter-narratives, many participants suggested that counter-narratives need to be embraced by mainstream Muslims but not aimed at Muslim communities alone. There was also concern that continuing to target Muslim communities explicitly through counter-narrative strategies risked a backlash response from Muslims.

### **Making violent extremism less appealing**

Education was identified by all participants as the most critical element in reducing the appeal of violent extremism. Strategies included promoting moderate Islam through curricula at all education levels, and demystifying some of the 'romance' around violent extremism through public education campaigns in order to reduce its appeal. Education was also seen as important in helping develop and sustain the level of critical reasoning and analytical skills that can strengthen resilience against violent extremist ideology and suasion.

### **The role of police**

The main mechanisms for police to enhance their effectiveness in preventing or mitigating the threat of violent extremism were identified by participants as building trust with communities; minimising police social distancing, particularly with culturally diverse communities; strengthening their communication and feedback skills, especially in the context of keeping communities informed about local developments relating to counter-terrorism; and bringing more Muslims into the law enforcement fold so that the 'insider-outsider' gap around countering violent extremism was reduced.

### **The role of government**

The vast majority of participants saw the main role of government in preventing or mitigating the threat of violent extremism in terms of **empowering, educating and engaging communities** by strengthening social cohesion and building intercultural capacity and resilience. The primary role of government in this context was identified as facilitative rather than directive.

Bottom-up grassroots initiatives that **empower communities** to prevent violent extremism were perceived as more effective than top-down approaches. Communities were also seen as better able to identify and support at an early stage at-risk individuals, and the role of government should be to support such interventions. Participants identified a strong need for governments to appropriately equip Muslim communities to identify and respond to emerging radicalisation and extremism at the local level. It was suggested that greater openness and dialogue between communities and governments about the risk, threat and consequences of extremism and terrorism was needed to support this endeavour.

Supporting families to help young people to stay on the right track by avoiding or rejecting violent extremism was also emphasised.

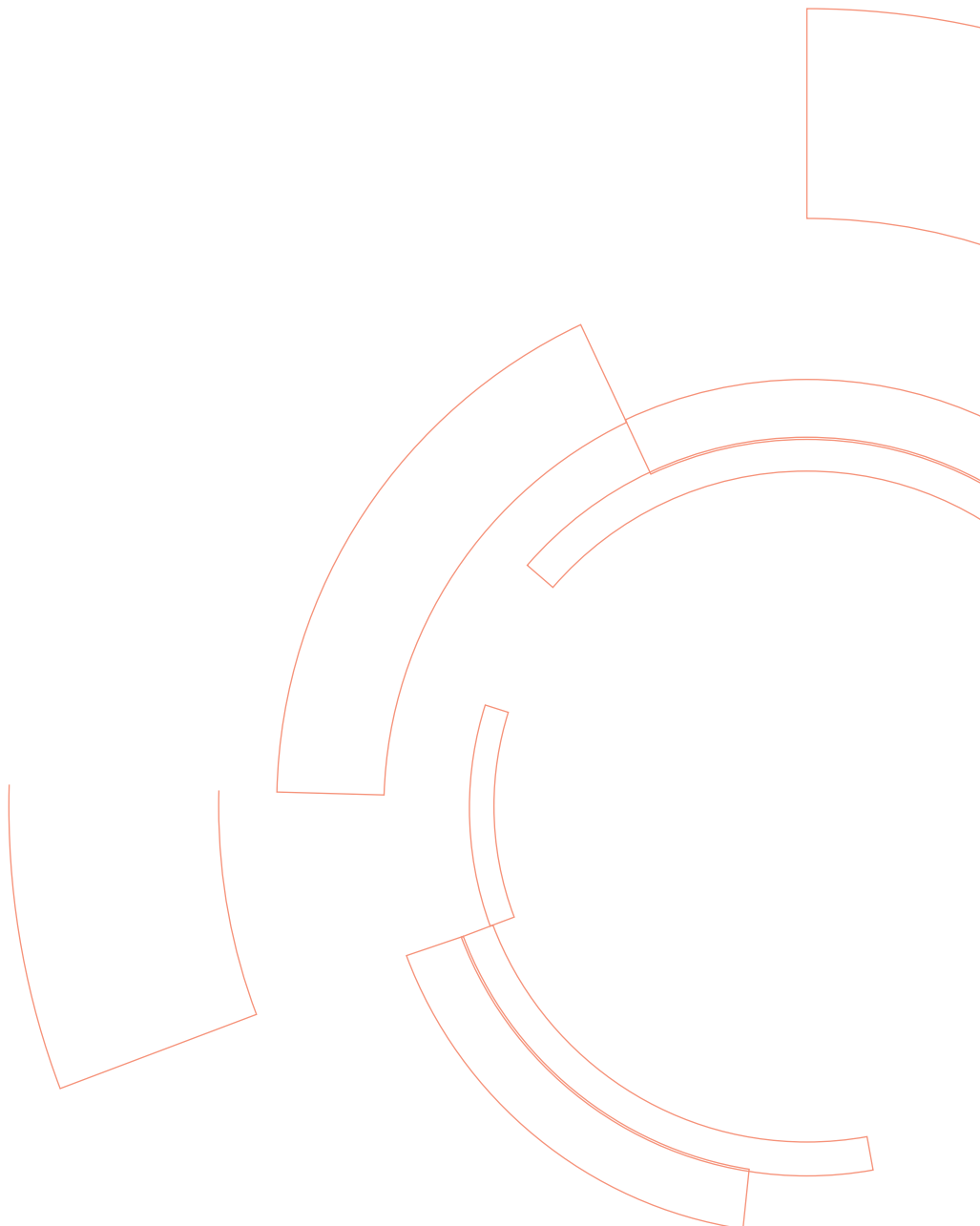
**Educating communities** for social cohesion and alternatives to violence was central in the thinking of many participants in relation to what government can promote, as well as increased emphasis on cultural diversity, critical thinking and analytical skills in classrooms and other educational settings. In addition, there was a strong sense that government should foster openness and receptivity to being educated by communities in order to learn more about the best ways to develop effective strategies for countering violent extremism.

The main ways in which government could be most effective in **engaging communities** were identified as prioritising social cohesion by making it a reality rather than an aspiration; driving social cohesion through grassroots community processes rather than high level government policy; showing strong political leadership for multiculturalism; doing a better job at translational communication of government objectives around social cohesion and community strengthening; and narrowing the trust gap between at-risk communities and government. Greater cooperation between Muslim communities and government more generally was strongly emphasised. Participants saw the role of Muslim community leadership in engaging more broadly with countering violent extremism as vital. Community-based participants also wanted to see much stronger recognition and support by government for those Muslim groups and communities who share a commitment to countering violent extremism.

## The role of communities

All communities – Muslim and non-Muslim alike – were perceived by a large majority of participants to have key roles and responsibilities in preventing or mitigating the threat of violent extremism. The role of the general community was perceived by participants to revolve around normalising cultural difference and community cohesion; encouraging intercultural contact, and reducing community insularity.

There were consistent views expressed by community participants that Muslim communities need to be more outspoken in countering the religious, cultural and political justifications for violent extremism, and in promoting alternative views that help counter the legitimacy of violent extremism as a response to dissent and dissatisfaction with domestic or foreign policy. However, a range of challenges in fostering such cooperation and dialogue were also identified by community-based participants. This included lack of trust in mainstream authorities; the perception that cooperative relationships between communities, police and security agencies were a one-way street; and disunity and disagreement between different Islamic religious and cultural groups, which can make managing and progressing such relationships time-consuming and uncertain.







Despite or perhaps because of this, there is no real consensus within the contemporary international community on the definition of terrorism or on its causes, impacts or remedies. This is reflected in the wide diversity of opinions and analysis amongst scholars, governments and everyday citizens as to what constitutes terrorism. The term has often been used very loosely but also widely, particularly in the modern era, by those who wish to characterise politically based motives, actions or movements that they see as undesirable, unpalatable or unsupportable.

This arbitrary application of terrorism as a descriptor has contributed to a lack of cooperation and coordination at the international level, which in turn has impacted adversely on the capacity of states and societies to counter both emergent and actual terrorist groups and events. This is all the more pressing because the combined impacts of globalisation, new communication technologies and increased transnational flows of people, capital and ideas now link terrorist ideologies and their proponents more rapidly and effectively than ever before.

Coordinated policing responses to terrorist threats are essential when an act has been planned, is imminent or has been executed. However, a policing response alone is not sufficient to counter either the threat or the reality of terrorism. A key response should be developing strategies to prevent the processes of radicalisation and extremism from taking hold to begin with.

For such an approach, one needs to understand how social dynamics exert their forces on the people who make up a society, the nature of grievances or issues that might attract people to adopt radicalisation and extremism as a solution, and how these challenges can be met in order to mitigate or neutralise the potential for terrorist responses to such issues.

This project has been developed on the assumption that the general community is in a strong position to assist in the identification, first, of what causes radicalisation, extremism and terrorism, and second, of potential strategies to prevent or mitigate these processes. The study has thus sought the views and perceptions of community members, community leaders and government stakeholders across Australia on the following questions:

- How can we best understand the meanings of and relationship between radicalisation and extremism?
- What inspires or causes radicalisation and extremism?
- Where does the appeal of resolving political grievances through violent extremism lie for those who adopt this approach? And how efficacious is democracy perceived to be in offering peaceful resolution of grievances or conflicts?
- Why are some people more resilient in the face of extremist messaging than others given similar cultural, social and political circumstances?

- What is the impact of conventional and new media on public understandings of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism?
- Are there ways to make extremism and violence less appealing?
- How should governments and the community deal with radicalisation and extremism on the internet?
- What can the police and government do to prevent or minimise the threat of terrorism?

This report attempts to respond to these questions and to offer insights based on community responses in order to develop approaches and recommendations that can contribute to current debate and to the development of evidence-based policy in combating terrorism.

The researchers acknowledge that the analyses and discussion presented here are by no means a comprehensive solution to the issue of radicalisation, extremism or terrorism. Nor are they intended to serve as a substitute for a policing and security approach when there is an imminent or immediate threat to national security. Instead, they offer an additional dimension in thinking about how best to address a complex and multi-faceted range of issues that may be of use in complementing other approaches.



## Overview

*Community and Radicalisation: an Examination of Perceptions, Ideas, Beliefs and Solutions throughout Australia* is a year-long national study designed and conducted as a qualitative research project through a partnership between Victoria Police, Victoria University and the Australian Multicultural Foundation. 542 participants drawn from all Australian states and territories contributed to the study, broken down into three cohorts of participants:

- Government stakeholders with relevant knowledge and understanding of issues related to violent extremism and terrorism;
- Community leaders from a wide range of both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, and
- General community members, including young people, from a variety of religious and ethnically based Muslim and non-Muslim communities across the nation.

Methods of data collection included individual interviews with government stakeholders and community leaders, focus groups with general community members, and written submissions invited from members of culturally diverse communities through multicultural community press advertisements. The research data were then analysed to develop key and emerging themes and points of consensus and contrast that informed the project's findings. The research, including the collection and analysis of data and the preparation of the final research report, was conducted by the principal researchers from Victoria Police and Victoria University, with assistance from the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF) for the national focus groups component of the project.

The project was approved by the Victoria Police Human Research Ethics Committee (VPHREC) and was conducted in accordance with VPHREC's protocols. Mirror Human Research Ethics approval based on VPHREC approval was granted by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (VUHREC). Anonymity and confidentiality for participants were key components of the ethics approval granted to this study. Consequently, scrupulous care has been taken to de-identify the data used to support the project's findings in order to avoid any potential identification of individual study participants.

## Key assumptions

A number of key, inter-related assumptions informed the methodology used in this study:

- Within the last decade, forms of terrorism and terrorism-related activities conducted by organisations and individuals who claim to act in the name of Islam have dominated the domestic and international discussion on, and response to, terrorism.
- Many Muslim and non-Muslim communities, in Australia as elsewhere, have been disturbed by the way in which – especially following the US terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the British bombings of 7/7 – perceptions of Islam as a religion and a culture have seemingly become inextricably associated with terrorism. This perception is largely a consequence of the occurrence and nature of acts of terrorism and violent extremism perpetrated by those who claim to act in the name of Islam, along with a range of activities that either intentionally or inadvertently encourage this association.
- Both Muslim and non-Muslim community members are in a strong position to assist in identifying the drivers of, and potential strategies to prevent or mitigate, the development and impacts of radicalisation and extremism within Australia.

## Scope of the study

*Community and Radicalisation* has focused on the following key aims:

- To identify how Australian communities understand the meanings of and relationship between radicalisation and extremism.
- To explore Australian community perceptions of the underlying drivers for radicalisation and extremism.
- To explore perceptions of the impact of radicalisation and extremism on Australians' sense of community and social harmony and cohesion.
- To solicit community views about effective approaches to and solutions for eliminating or reducing the threat of violent extremism in Australia.

The research design also included a focus on exploring public perceptions of two recent nationally publicised counter-terrorism operations – Operation Neath (Melbourne) and Operation Pendennis (Sydney and Melbourne) – and their subsequent arrests, trials, convictions and sentencing. While Victoria Police has examined the implications of Operation Pendennis from an internal and inter-agency operational perspective, considerably less effort has been devoted to date in assessing its social impacts for both Muslim and non-Muslim communities throughout Australia.

## Limitations

This study has not included a review or analysis of the current literature on the issues of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism from community perspectives. This is being studied by another research project in which Victoria Police is a partner. Sampling for all participant cohorts was purposive and therefore these findings are not generalisable.

## Data sources

Extensive consultations through interviews, focus groups and written submissions were conducted nationally over the course of the study. Methods of sourcing participants to contribute to the study included chain sampling, the use of existing research and community networks by the partners in the study, and public advertisement soliciting written submissions.

The research team conducted broad national consultations with the following project stakeholders:

1. Members and leaders across the spectrum of Australia's Muslim communities.

2. Consultations with members and leaders of non-Muslim communities. Non-Muslim community views were sought because of the complexity of interrelated dynamics that may lead individuals to become radicalised or to take violent action against others or against the community at large. As such, a holistic approach to community consultations was taken. Such an approach acknowledges that the views and actions of different groups and elements within the society as a whole inevitably influence and impact upon each other, at times creating a potential cycle of mutual suspicion and violence. The views and actions of Australia's Muslim communities cannot, therefore, be properly understood unless we also examine the beliefs and perceptions of those external to these communities in order to gain insight into these broader contexts and dynamics.
3. Government and other stakeholders with relevant experience and knowledge of Australia's state and national policy and operational frameworks in relation to domestic and international developments in the areas of radicalisation, violent extremism, terrorism and counter-radicalisation strategies.
4. Written submissions from general community members were solicited through advertisements in multicultural newspapers with national circulation in a variety of language groups detailed on page 23. Five responses were received.

## Methods of data collection

### Interviews

Forty-seven individuals were interviewed in face-to-face settings across all States and Territories with a view to gaining diverse and balanced perspectives across the government stakeholder and community leader cohorts.

The interviews were semi-structured and the average duration of each interview was between 1.0-1.5 hours. In some cases, small group interviews with 2-3 participants were conducted depending on how many people chose to represent a group, organisation or agency. Respondents were asked a set of pre-designed interview questions across the main focus points of the study and at times discussion was extended on particular issues or themes depending on the nature of each respondent's comments.

Government stakeholders were drawn from a variety of State, Territory and Commonwealth agencies and were purposively sampled for their policy and operational background and expertise in relation to countering violent extremism, community engagement and cultural diversity. Community leaders were sourced across a range of Muslim and non-Muslim community groups. They included religious leaders, leaders of multicultural community organisations, academics and those with leadership roles in various political and advocacy groups.

The distribution of interview participants across all States and Territories appears in Table 1:

**Table 1: Distribution of Individual interviews across Australian States and Territories**

ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	NATIONAL TOTAL
10	7	5	5	3	6	4	7	47

All interviews were conducted between February and June 2011 by the project's principal researchers. The views expressed by some of these interviewees are personal and do not necessarily represent the formal position of the organisations or agencies with which they are affiliated.

Because of the sensitive nature of the issues under discussion, and in order to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity for interview participants, interview data were not tape-recorded. Instead, the principal researchers relied on the capacity of one of the researchers to produce transcripts developed through word-for-word data transcription (that is, typing as fast as people speak) using a laptop computer combined with supplementary hand-written notes taken by the other researcher. This method has ensured as high a degree of accuracy as possible in the absence of audio-recordings of participant responses to each question.

### Focus groups

Forty-seven focus groups were conducted throughout Australia between November 2010 and June 2011. In total, a sample of 490 participants was canvassed through this method. The primary objective of the focus groups was to elicit community perceptions surrounding the causes of and potential solutions to the issues of radicalisation and extremism. Participants were recruited to ensure that the research was informed by a broad range of religious, ethnic and geographic community voices.

The focus groups were organised and facilitated by the AMF in each State and Territory. The AMF contacted peak organisations, community leaders, youth organisations, state and territory authorities, individuals and community organisations to recruit participants for each focus group. The AMF also appointed a coordinator in each State and Territory to assist in convening the focus groups. The national distribution of focus group participants appears in Table 2 on the next page:

**Table 2: Distribution of focus group participants across Australian States and Territories**

Number of focus groups by location	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	NAT
1	10	10	9	9	7	8	9	8	12
2	11	8	8	6	9	8	8	10	15
3	9	8	Extra 35	8	15		9	9	
4	10	10		8	7		8	30	
5		10		6			10		
6		10					9		
7		11					8		
8		10					9		
9		9					11		
10		8					10		
11		15					11		
12		12							
<b>Totals in each location</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>27</b>

**TOTAL: 47 focus groups with 490 participants**

Muslim focus group participants came from Sunni, Shia and Salafi backgrounds and included Islamic teachers, students, professionals and non-professionals, Imams, community leaders, representatives of community organisations and general male and female community members from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds including Arabic, Afghani, Bangladeshi, Bosnian, Caucasian, Chinese, Congolese, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Fijian Indian, Indian, Indonesian, Iranian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Lebanese, Liberian, Malaysian, Pakistani, Palestinian, Sierra Leonean, Rwandan, Serbian, Somali, Sri Lankan, South African, Sudanese, Syrian, Togolese, and Turkish.

Non-Muslim focus group participants hailed from a similar variety of cultural and religious or secular backgrounds. Respondents included community leaders and members, representatives of community organisations, multi-faith leaders, professionals, non-professionals, university students and young people from Anglo-Saxon, Italian, Greek, Indian, African, Chinese and Middle Eastern backgrounds, along with Christians, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs and those who did not identify with any religion.

In the interests of energising discussion, selected focus groups included a mix of Muslims and non-Muslims. All participants were aged eighteen years and above. As for individual and small group interviews, no audio-recordings were made and detailed notes of focus group participant comments were recorded by focus group facilitators.

### Written submissions

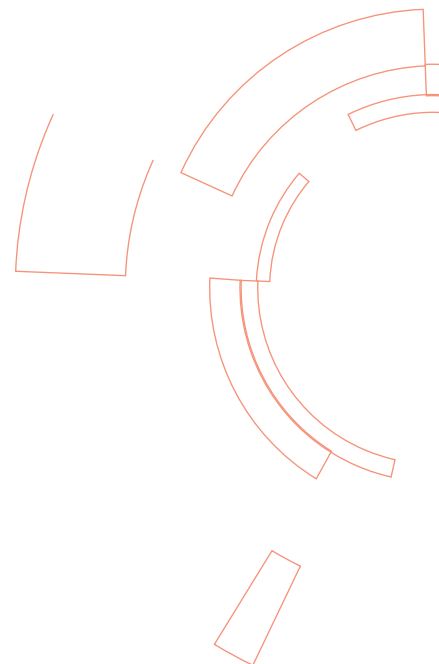
Written submissions were sought from a wide variety of sources through ethnic media. Communities were given the opportunity to provide written submissions delivered either electronically or by post through paid advertisements in 17 multi-lingual media outlets, many of which are circulated nationally. These included *EI Telegraph*, *The Greek Herald*, *Il Globo*, *Indo Times*, *Jewish News*, *An Nahar*, *Dunya*, *Irish Echo*, *The African Migrant* and *Sing Tao*. Five written submissions were received from community members.

### Data analysis

The transcripts of all interviews and focus groups, as well as the five written submissions solicited through advertisement in the ethnic press, were analysed individually in relation to the main themes of the study's focus. Themes and sub-themes were then developed through iterative refinement of the data to identify meaningful key perspectives within each of the three participant cohorts of government stakeholders, community leaders and focus group participants. Analytical trustworthiness was established through each of the two principal researchers independently analysing portions of the data and then comparing and cross-checking their analyses against those of the other researcher, amending or further refining the analysis as required. A supplementary academic colleague with expertise in the area was also engaged to review the final draft of the study's analysis and findings.

The principal researchers have maintained a strong focus on the voices of participants throughout the presentation of the study's analysis and findings in the final report. This reflects the nature of the research, which has concentrated on eliciting and gaining insight into the views of community members and government stakeholders across a wide diversity of regional, social, cultural and religious backgrounds.

While the data supporting our findings have been analysed and presented in aggregate form, the study distinguishes throughout the presentation of the data between the voices and views of government stakeholders, community leaders and focus group participants in order to provide clarity around the extent to which various perceptions and beliefs may be shared across cohorts or, alternatively, may characterise one or two cohorts in particular. However, readers should note that while representative quotes and comments have been limited, with a few exceptions, to a modest number for each theme and sub-theme to support the research findings and to illustrate the range and nuances of community views on these topics, each selected comment represents the perspectives of many more participants than the individuals whose words have been used as examples here.



# CHAPTER 1: THE CONCEPTS OF RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM

Many government stakeholders and community leaders<sup>2</sup> did not always distinguish sharply between the concepts of radicalisation and extremism in their own thinking when asked about how they understood these terms. Broad consensus emerged about what radicalisation and/or extremism meant for a majority of participants around the following themes, which saw these terms as involving:

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2. Focus group participants were not consulted on this theme.



- The process of individuals or groups going beyond accepted community norms in their thinking and/or behaviour;
- Being or becoming intolerant of other viewpoints and the right of others to hold these;
- Seeing issues in fixed black and white terms; and
- Translating thought and belief into concrete planning and action.

However, there was often confusion or disagreement about what constituted the difference between radicalisation and extremism and the relationship between these concepts when viewed as part of a continuum of thought, belief and behaviour.

A majority, though not all, participants also saw radicalisation as an inherently social process of developing certain kinds of ideas and attitudes, whereas extremism was generally considered to be more of an abstract and fixed set of beliefs or an existential condition – a terminus rather than a roadmap.

The notion of radicalisation and extremism pushing ideas or beliefs to or beyond the boundaries of social norms was common; as one community leader stated,

*“Extremism is taking anything to the very end of its logical and sometimes illogical interpretation, which can create extremists amongst us. It creates tension among us.”*

A government stakeholder commented that in the context of terrorism, radicalisation is a process by which an individual or a group moves from holding views and attitudes that would be seen as within the bounds of community norms to a point where they actively challenge those norms. Another government stakeholder felt radicalisation was a process of getting to the point where it is seen as legitimate to pursue an ideology or position that is extreme, whether this involves violence or other destructive behaviour, in order to cause social ills that will achieve a particular outcome.

### **Radicalisation and extremism are inextricably bound up with religion**

In defining radicalisation and extremism, some participants saw these terms as explicitly linked to religious beliefs. For them, radicalisation and extremism fall almost exclusively within the domain of religion. One community leader observed that radicalisation means taking religious beliefs or laws and re-contextualising them so that they are used to support an alternative, often fundamentalist understanding of religious doctrine that causes social harm, while another saw radicalisation as comprising extreme views held by people who ascribe to certain religious faiths, primarily those that accommodate a fundamentalist viewpoint. Others, however, thought it was important to draw a sharp distinction between extremism and religious fundamentalism, terms they thought were often erroneously conflated in public discourse:

*“I think the word ‘fundamental[ism]’ has been distorted by the media – it has become synonymous with extremism but it really isn’t. I know many Muslims who try to live by the fundamental precepts of Islam but wouldn’t dream of taking up arms – they see their salvation as lying in prayer and a belief system rather than trying to convert the whole world to a particular ideology.”* (Community leader)

### **Radicalisation and extremism can characterise any issue or ideology**

Yet a large number of respondents pointed out that the concepts of radicalisation and extremism are not limited to religion alone. Several community leaders felt that the focus on religion in relation to the concept of extremism was over-emphasised, suggesting that many people did not stop to consider varieties of extremism beyond religion, such as the personal, the social or the ethical. Several community and government participants also saw radicalisation and extremism as a fixed system of beliefs, values and ethics in relation to any number of issues – whether religious, political, or social – that its adherents believe is the only true and correct path to take. A number of participants also pointed out that converts to various belief systems who are ‘born again’ into a different faith or ideology are often more fanatical and can have much more intense allegiances than those ‘born into’ such belief systems through family history or national/cultural heritage. The key issue for these respondents was the fixed nature of these beliefs, which can lead to significant dislocation from the

social mainstream:

*"I regard extremism as a case where people have fixed views on the edges of social norms, who then take themselves outside of normal political or philosophical discourse that takes place in an open society. You can become an extremist without being radicalised, but I doubt you can become an extremist without being alienated."*  
(Government stakeholder)

### **Does radicalisation precede extremism, or vice versa?**

The most significant dissonance around the meanings of radicalisation and extremism emerged when these terms were viewed as a continuum. There were many respondents who thought that radicalisation as a process preceded arriving at the end-point of extremism; there were also many who saw extremism as the necessary pre-condition for embarking on a process of radicalisation; and there were those who felt there was little meaningful distinction to be drawn between these terms. These responses can be broken down as follows:

1. Radicalisation is a process that leads to a fixed position of extremism.
2. Extremism is a belief system that fosters radicalisation.
3. Radicalisation and extremism are terms that can be used interchangeably because they effectively refer to the same phenomenon.

#### **1. Radicalisation leads to extremism**

An emergent distinction amongst participants saw extremism as a late stage of radicalisation in which radical perspectives tip over into willingness to take

concrete actions harmful to self, others and society:

*"Extremism means anything that is destructive or disturbs the normal everyday community life. Religion has a purpose, but when it disturbs the balance of life then it becomes extreme, destructive and damaging to people, especially where it contradicts the aims of religion itself."* (Community leader)

In this view, extremism was considered to be a subset of radicalisation, the position that one would arrive at as the result of a process of radicalisation. Radicalisation was thus seen by these participants as a pathway to extremism as part of a broader continuum, rather than posing these as mutually exclusive either/or terms. For this group, the distinction between radicalisation as a process and extremism as an end point or existential state was important:

*"Extremism isn't a process – you hold extreme views or you don't. Radicalisation is the process."*  
(Government stakeholder)

Another government stakeholder thought radicalisation was a slightly softer term than extremism, seeing radicalisation as a process of shifting from somewhat ideologically oriented religious views toward a more explicitly politicised extremist position. Several participants suggested that fixity and exclusiveness of ideas often characterise this progression: once someone has extreme ideas they become very single-minded and develop a 'my way or the highway' perspective on the world that clearly sets them apart from the general community:

*"When you're an extremist it means that your belief in your radical idea goes against other beliefs, so you tend to hate and react negatively to other ideas that are not your own."*  
(Community leader)

Also prevalent was the idea that radicalisation was more likely to be restricted to theories or perspectives, whereas extremism more readily translated into practice and action:

*"My own view would be that radicalism is more of an introspective look at the core of an ideology or religion, stripping it back to its purest form and believing yourself to be an extension of that word, whereas extremism is more the manifestation and implementation of that ideology that sometimes loses sight of that core because it gets so caught up in its practice."*  
(Community leader)

#### **2. Extremism leads to radicalisation**

A significant number of participants, however, including government stakeholders, saw extremism as preceding radicalisation. For these respondents, radicalisation is best viewed as a subset of extremism:

*"Extremism is someone who has a strong belief in religion, politics, ideology, etc., probably past the step of fundamentalism. Radicalisation, by contrast, is the process of moving a step past extremism where they're prepared to take violent means to achieve their goal, whether religious, ideological or whatever."*  
(Government stakeholder)

Some community leaders said that extremism defined a person, whatever s/he believes in, who starts thinking that everyone else should believe and behave similarly, whether friends and family or complete strangers. Radicalisation is the next phase and connotes someone with extremist views who gets involved in activities, actions and plans to drive change toward the desired outcome. A feature of this progression for these respondents is that the extremist who becomes radicalised increasingly thinks that others should agree with them not just in the context of religious beliefs, but more broadly across all aspects of social attitudes and behaviours. In this view, an extremist is a person who keeps their ideas to themselves or within their own immediate circle, however deeply or fully these may be held, whereas the radical extends out into the social and political sphere and starts implementing and propagating their beliefs in order to persuade or compel others to join them.

### 3. Radicalisation and extremism can be used interchangeably

The third category comprises those respondents who used the terms radicalisation and extremism interchangeably. This group could not see any meaningful differences between the two concepts. One community leader thought that the common factor in both terms was that they connoted a person or group characterised by marked intolerance of the views and feelings of others.

Regardless of whether they are called radicals or extremists, what matters for these respondents is that such individuals or groups follow their beliefs rigidly and translate them into action, even if they are contrary to the mainstream; they are not susceptible to approval or sanctioning by others. In this sense, both radicalisation and extremism are seen as bound up with the willingness to bypass or ignore social norms in order to drive the desired social or ideological change they are seeking. As one community leader put it, *'The radical stirs the pot, wanting it to change and to create problems.'*

Another community leader said,

*"You can be radical in any situation where you pursue a specific agenda. When you take it to the extreme you become too radical in your views and maybe in action too. The two terms lead to the same end."*

And a government stakeholder observed,

*"[It's] fairly simple – radicalisation is when people take a fairly extreme position. A lot of that language has been used in terms of 9/11, e.g. the war against terror, related to Islamic fundamentalism, when various groups wage war against a population. I think it relates fairly well to Al-Qaeda and the media who drive it. It's something that we have been thinking about and dealing with over the past 3-4 years in terms of police and what community safety and harmony is about, but effectively, in contemporary terms, radicalisation and extremism, and also marginalisation [are the key terms]."*

However, while there was significant lack of consensus and some confusion across participants in general around the concepts of and relationship between radicalisation and extremism, a number of Muslim participants in particular felt they had greater clarity around the origin of these concepts.

### Western liberalism sets the benchmark for what is considered 'radical' or 'extreme'

For many Muslims radicalisation and extremism have originated as Western concepts that do not accurately reflect what Islam is. These respondents believe different societies set their own distinctive parameters for what is considered 'extreme' and beyond acceptable social or community norms. Many participants who shared this view thought that those who may be seen as 'extreme' from outside a social or cultural grouping may be seen very differently by insiders of that group.

For these respondents, the post-9/11 and 7/7 environments, along with the more vigorous global emergence of religious fundamentalism, have inevitably politicised terms such as 'radicalisation and extremism', which they would argue do not have an uncontested, simple or single meaning. The concepts of extremism and moderation are clearly operative within Islamic jurisprudential perspectives, but Muslim-background respondents stressed this is nothing like the way these terms are bandied around in public discourse in the West.

Accordingly, these participants believed the reference point for such discourses is more in line with Western liberal ideology than with the history of Islamic thought. Examples of extremism within Islamic frameworks included the instance of someone praying all night and ignoring the demands and rights of their body or family, and this was seen as a more accurate reading of Islamic understandings of 'extremism'. As a community leader observed, 'Radicalisation is something above the normal perception of religion. There are rules that every Muslim should obey and anything that jeopardises everyday life isn't considered to be acceptable. Radicalism distorts this'.

Another community leader commented,

*"The concept of radical Islam that is used in Western discourse is probably closer to what we consider to be 'true' Islam – but it is not our idea of what is radical or extreme. There is Islam, there are Muslims and there is non-Islam. In relation to dissent about meaning, there is room for differences of meaning within Islam. There is a perimeter within Islam that can tolerate these differences, but there is an outer perimeter or boundary beyond which there are unacceptable or non-Islamic interpretations that you cannot go beyond – when it's simply just not Islam anymore. For example, the idea that you can target innocent people is beyond the line – it's just un-Islamic and you just can't do it. The idea that homosexuality is wrong is not 'extreme' Islam – it's just Islam."*

And yet another linked these terms to the concept of Orientalism<sup>3</sup> and the way the West has historically engaged with Muslims:

*"My answer is both academic and personal. [Radicalisation and extremism] are terms that lack definition – highly subjective. We use them in academic discourse but they are adopted from political discourse. Extremism is now a short-hand term, Western-constructed, that basically describes any Muslim we don't like, anyone who is not like us. The origins come from engagement of the West with the Middle Eastern and Arabic parts of the world which sees that part of the world as a bifurcation of 'you are with us, moderate' or 'extremist, you are with them'. It doesn't really have application to the way that Muslims live their lives. We practice according to which school of thought we believe in (Maleki, Hanafi, Hanbali or Shafe'i). 'Extremist' or 'moderate' doesn't really fit with how we describe our own practice. Extremism is a Western political construct imposed on us in the context of Islamist movements as a simplified way of describing the 'out' group."*  
(Community leader)

Some focus group participants felt similarly, preferring instead to use the term 'traditional' to describe Islamic thought as a way of collapsing the sharp opposition between 'moderate' versus 'extreme'.

Many respondents also believed that radicalisation and extremism have now become terms applied explicitly, even exclusively, to Muslims in the context of terrorism:

*"Radicalisation and extremism can exist in any community group, any system of beliefs – they are not confined to any particular group. Unfortunately, terms come to be used almost exclusively in relation to one religious group so it has almost become acceptable to talk of radical and extremist Muslims – very unfortunate and clouds over that you can have radicals and extremists in any group – anything can be taken to extremes."*  
(Community leader)

### **Defining radicalisation and extremism as threats to democracy and the rule of law**

More broadly, the idea that radicalisation and extremism are defined within Western liberal frameworks by their opposition to perceptions of fundamental or 'political' Islam – particularly in relation to perceived threats to democracy and the legitimacy of the state – was supported in the view of many government stakeholders:

*"In official definitions of these terms it is clear that they are defined in terms of threat to a democratic system of government – that's the Netherlands definition of radicalism, for example. There is a challenge both to the vertical relationship of government to people and also the horizontal relationship of citizens to citizens, seeking to overturn both."*  
(Government stakeholder)

3. The widely influential theory of Orientalism was developed by the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said in *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, 1978.

*“Think about the difference between the motivations of the IRA versus the jihadi. Both are saying that the way society wants to make decisions on my behalf will not deliver on what I need in terms of my beliefs and needs. One says we want a more localised set of representatives, the other is saying no, your entire mode of governance is offensive to me based on the words of Mohammed. Democracy is always seen as a threat, even on a global scale when you have local Islamic states.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“The meanings of radicalisation and extremism can’t be disengaged from the fact that the West has its own fundamental values as well. So these terms reflect a sense of threat toward what we cherish and the core of how we define ourselves as a people.”* (Government stakeholder)

### **The role of violence in concepts of radicalisation and extremism**

Finally, participants had contradictory views on whether the meanings of radicalisation and extremism included violence. Some respondents thought that radicalisation charted an inevitable path from radical thought to concrete violent action:

*“Radicalisation to me is a descriptive term that describes a process, the movement of latent belief to violent action. It is that process that I see as radicalisation. What you become radicalised to is another question. Radicalisation is about movement, and it is about the tipping point from which latent belief can be benign, to putting that belief into action, especially through violence.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“Radicalisation is a process by which a person adopts an ideological set of beliefs that lead to violence as a way of bringing about political or social change. ‘Belief’ is the really key figure.”* (Government stakeholder)

Similarly, extremism for a significant number of participants was synonymous with violence:

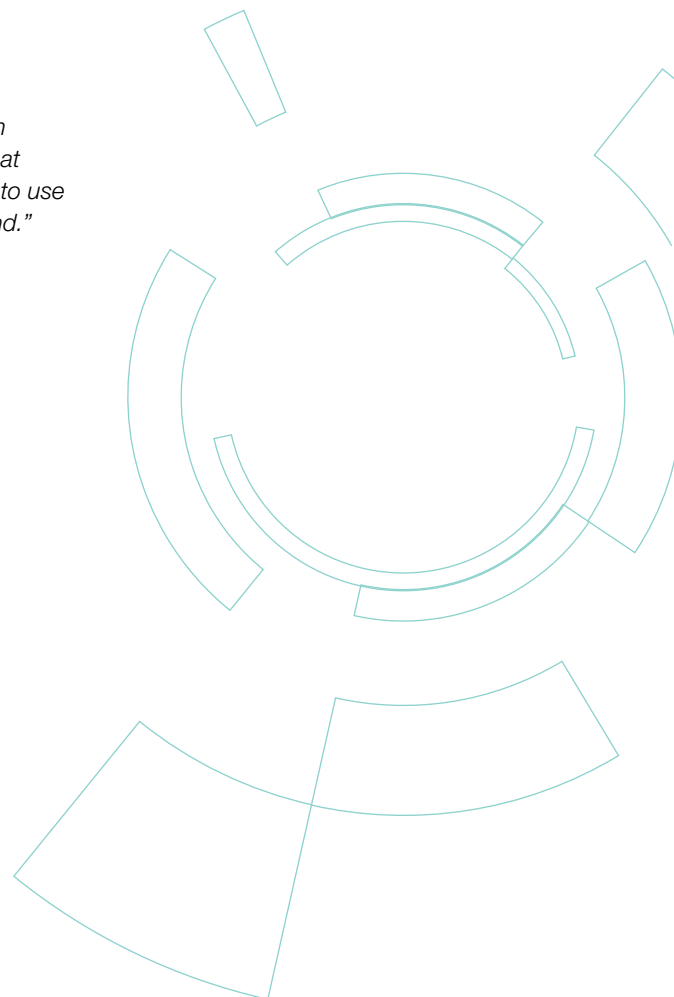
*“Extremism would be the support for or the use of violence to achieve political ends.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“My perspective on extremism is that it’s probably the point at which someone finds it okay to use violence as a means to an end.”* (Government stakeholder)

However, other government stakeholders contradicted this view, perceiving no integral link between the definition of radicalisation or extremism and violence:

*“The majority of people who engage with radicalism never adopt violence – for example, environmental movements, universal suffrage.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“I don’t think all extremism has to be violent. There are also forms of violence that are completely unrelated to extremism.”* (Government stakeholder)



## Conclusion

The majority of participants consulted on this theme felt that radicalisation was a process of moving beyond accepted social or community norms, and that both radicalisation and extremism involved intolerance for the viewpoints of others to the extent of universalising and imposing one's own truth claims by a variety of means. However, there was little consensus and some confusion amongst participants around the relationship between the concepts of radicalisation and extremism, particularly in terms of how they were positioned on a continuum or spectrum of thought and action. Some government stakeholders and community leaders felt that radicalisation led to extremism, while for others extremism led to radicalisation and for yet others there was little meaningful distinction to be drawn and the terms could be used interchangeably.

A significant number of Muslim-background participants, however, questioned the underlying basis of thought on which broadly accepted meanings of radicalisation and extremism were premised, linking these more to Western liberal frameworks than to operative concepts of moderation and extremism within strands of Islamic thought and law. Many also felt that extremism and Islam had become synonymous in Western uses of the term 'extremism' because of the post-9/11 and 7/7 environments which have produced a highly politicised, if contestable, consensus in the West around the concepts and of radicalisation and extremism in relation to Islamic religious beliefs. There were also varying perceptions of the role of violence in relation to concepts of radicalisation and extremism, with community leaders and government stakeholders split on whether violent action is an integral part of either or both radical and extremist ideologies. However, there was slightly more unified support for the idea that arriving at an extremist standpoint (whether via the pathway of radicalisation or by some other means) often involves a transition from latent belief or passive support to the willingness to take concrete violent action that causes harm to self, others and society.

The lack of consensus and divergent understanding around the meanings of and relationship between radicalisation and extremism within the government stakeholder cohort in particular was notable. This suggests that there is at present no unified narrative within government at state and federal levels about the analysis and meanings of radicalisation and extremism as both theoretical and operational concepts. This may signal a healthy climate of informed and democratic debate about the meanings of radicalisation and extremism based on different schools of thought and experience. However, it can also lead to confusion and disjointed understandings and approaches when thinking about how best to operationalise these understandings in the context of counter-extremist and counter-terrorist initiatives at national, state and local community levels. This is particularly the case when trying to implement national dialogues with Muslim and other religious and ethnic communities about what radicalisation and extremism mean for government and communities in the Australian as well as the global context.

## CHAPTER 2: CAUSES AND DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM

This portion of the study asked participants about their perceptions of the underlying causes of radicalisation and extremism and what factors they thought drove people to radicalise or adopt extremist viewpoints and behaviours. Both focus group respondents and individual interviewees from government and community leadership roles suggested a number of different causes.

It was generally agreed that multiple and sometimes interlocking drivers, albeit with different emphases for different respondents, best defined the underlying drivers of radicalisation and extremism. A significant number of participants adhered to what may be described as the **convergence paradigm**, which brings together a range of personal and environmental factors that combine to radicalise an individual or a group. As one government stakeholder put it, *‘It is a convergence of the internal and external – being vulnerable and then being exposed to people or materials that come together to bring someone to the point of extremism. There is an external element as well that accompanies the internal vulnerability – this is required’*. One convergence scenario from participants was that a personal sense of grievance or frustration combined with the external influence of ideology or belief systems to produce a commitment to act or to support the extreme and often violent actions of others; another was that intergenerational family history combined with the trigger of political events in the country of origin or elsewhere on the world stage could tip someone over into radical or extremist attitudes and behaviours.

A minority of participants thought that low socio-economic capital, especially lack of education, was *‘the biggest driver’* (community leader) for radicalisation and extremism, with violence perceived as a tool of expediency in this context:

*‘At school, there are poor students and violence is all they know. They get their way through violence. Some people don’t have the intellectual understanding; it is a quick solution to things.’*  
(Focus group participant)

However, other participants pointed out that many radical people who go on to become terrorists are highly educated and drew a distinction between extremist leaders and their followers in relation to educational levels, noting that some leaders of radical movements are highly educated and come from middle class or even more privileged backgrounds.

Poverty and an accompanying sense of political and social powerlessness were also identified by a few respondents as a leading cause of radicalisation and extremism:

*‘Sometimes it’s linked to poverty too, because if you haven’t got anything to eat and you see someone else with plenty to eat, you want to grab that and fight for it. I believe all the world’s problems are related to poverty or injustice. Where things are going well you don’t see much fighting going on.’*  
(Community leader)

*‘You look at people from developing and developed countries and there is a huge gap in social living, and many Muslim countries think either I can embrace them and be like them or if I cannot be them, it’s better to destroy them.’* (Focus group participant)

There were some sharp distinctions drawn by focus group participants born and raised outside Australia between the impacts of poverty and lack of educational levels or opportunities in other countries versus the perceived relative ease of educational and economic opportunity in Australia, which was seen as a protective factor against extremism:

*‘In Australia even uneducated people have opportunities, so they don’t go for such things. They feel secure. Everyone is treated in the same way. In India and Pakistan it is very different, there is no middle class, just rich and poor.’* (Focus group participant)

*‘If there are economic problems, terrorism can hit any country. The Saudi government is only giving people money, and not many jobs. When there were protests in Saudi, the government gave everyone money, and increases and bonuses, and people went home.’*  
(Focus group participant)

Others from similar backgrounds, however, thought that these risks were as potent in Australia as elsewhere because the lack of opportunity and its accompanying frustrations can make people vulnerable to radical or extremist suasion:

*‘The process of radicalisation is embedded in social, economic and political systems in Australia. For example, if you don’t have a job and you are uneducated or if you are educated but cannot find a job. If someone approaches you and offers participation in their movement, they might convince you to join the organisation.’*  
(Focus group participant)

*‘The second and third generation in Australia will look at the background generation, how well did mum and dad integrate, he’s a nice man, honest, but treated like dirt, he got nowhere, so I will get nowhere.’*  
(Focus group participant)



In general, however, the key themes to emerge from the data across all three participant cohorts on the issue of what drives radicalisation and extremism revolved around a variety of personal, socio-cultural and political factors. Many of these were interrelated for participants, as discussed in more detail below. There was also some focus by participants on the risks of overgeneralising or oversimplifying the causes of radicalisation and extremism, and on the presence or absence of drivers for home-grown violent extremism in Australia.

## Individual and personal factors

### The influence of family and early life

There were different views among respondents in relation to the role of family in the process of radicalisation and extremism. For some participants, one's upbringing is a major explanatory framework for why one might be more or less vulnerable to external influences, and this can be either a positive or negative influence:

*"I come from an Asian culture where the home environment has a very great influence. My boys are well mannered because I keep telling them about it! It's the same with radicalisation. If they are not happy at home and they see anger all the time they must be thinking, 'Well, there must be another way'."* (Community leader)

*"If you look at a child and their environment, and they see what's going on, see terrorism going on, or see violence and they think they can get a desired thing by violence, that creates the problem."* (Focus group participant)

Consequently, many within the focus groups believed that parents need to be more fully engaged with and responsible for their children's education, though they acknowledged this could be a challenge if the parents were themselves not well educated or had heavy competing demands on their time and resources:

*"Muslim parents send their kids to Islamic schools to get the right education, to get the Islamic values and traditions, but they do not know what is happening there."* (Focus group participant)

*"I know parents who, in good faith, feel proud of [their] son going to a particular madrassa or something, and feel proud because he's not into other social vices, but they didn't know, had no idea until he came home and packed his bags and said 'thank you, good bye, I'm going for jihad'."* (Focus group participant)

There was also a reasonably strong view that young people can be radicalised within their own families because of the transmission of intergenerational grievances, beliefs and attitudes. Some respondents cited the instance of families arriving from war-torn countries who bring their past experiences when they settle in Australia and pass this on to their children so that the children internalise this as part of their own identity formation, an example of what the American scholar Marianne Hirsch terms 'postmemory'.<sup>4</sup> These families have often experienced such severe violence or disadvantage in their lives that it can be hard to move beyond this, and their children inherit their sense of vulnerability and frustration or else wish to avenge their family's previous suffering:

*"The world is now internationalised and the issues like Palestine or other developments across the Middle East are talked about in many families who originated from these countries. This would be part of what they talk about at the dinner table. It is in the air as part of the everyday discourse for families for whom these issues and conflicts are meaningful. It can also be about the centuries-old grievances that people have suffered which are experienced as live issues in the present."* (Government stakeholder)

*"I think if they have had a tragedy in their own family, something like that, if their parents got killed, people can get manipulated by that, and it can become a revenge thing."* (Focus group participant)

Several participants thought that people are more inclined to become radicalised if they have been in a violent family, had a violent childhood, or been involved with gangs, problems that were further compounded if the family or local community had not stepped up to the challenge of assisting young people at risk by taking some responsibility for their education and development. One such instance, nipped in the bud because the family was able to offer good support to the young person in question, was outlined by a focus group participant:

<sup>4</sup> Marianne Hirsch (1997), *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Harvard University Press.

*"I know someone [previously exposed to radical viewpoints through university] who went through a period when he was trying to get a job, but felt he had to change his [Muslim-sounding] name to get a job. His friends were saying, 'What's the point? We are never going to fit in'. This individual luckily has a good family and support but if he didn't he may have gone down the wrong path. He started to look at conspiracy theories but his family supported him and changed his views. There are colleagues in positions of responsibility who are supposed to understand and help these people, but they don't and then these people do not feel part of the community. The outside world is not accepting, even the Muslim world does not accept. So then it becomes personal and they turn to crimes of hate. They fall into the hands of the wrong people."*  
(Focus group participant)

Different views were also expressed about the influence of parents with distinct roles defined by gender.

This issue was seen as especially challenging when the prevailing view within the family was thought by participants to be narrow or limited, for example in the case of allegiance to a particular religious or political perspective. Some focus group participants saw radicalisation as stemming from the lack of children's exposure to alternative views in families that strictly monitor their social and educational contacts, while others addressed the issue of gender relations within Muslim families, commenting on the influence of the father's perspective over not only the children but also the mother in relation to progressively radicalising the entire family or, alternatively, forestalling the mother's radical views from being absorbed by her children. The issue of siblings influencing each other's views, particularly amongst male family members, in relation to progressive radicalisation was also raised. A focus group participant commented, 'Young guys get these negative thoughts from their parents or older brothers. I have a friend who says he thinks the Bali bombing was a good thing. We had a fight about it. He got that perspective from his parents.' The isolation of children from broader social networks was also considered a significant factor by several participants.

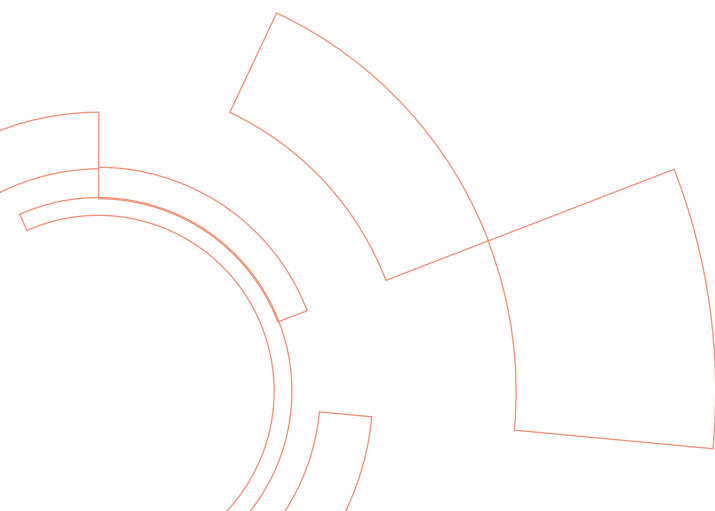
### **The role of family history in the normalisation of violence**

Normalisation of violence or acculturation to political violence because of family influences or experiences was also a significant theme for a range of participants. In some cases, this was seen to originate in the experience or endorsement of political violence in countries of origin, which has then been transferred to the current generation through family or their immediate community, whereas in others it was seen as more aligned with domestic family circumstances such as a history of or predisposition for resolving issues through violence:

*"I think it starts from the home where domestic violence is condoned and people see that violence leads to some sense of superiority of one person over the other, and then this translates to a much larger scale. In a lot of cases, where extremists resort to violence, they think they are merely standing up to a bully."*  
(Community leader)

*"Thinking about Northern Ireland, for example, it is partly inter-generational – there is an acceptance that if it has already happened in your community in the past, you accept it as part of your history and culture to be in this struggle. So that's an enculturation thing."* (Government stakeholder)

The notion of individuals, families and communities becoming habituated to a certain level of violence through experiences in the country of origin was further reinforced by two participants, a Pakistani Muslim community leader and an Eritrean Christian community leader, reflecting on their own young adult experiences in their countries of origin:



*“When I went to school we had no violence in Karachi, nothing. A lot of sectarian violence began in the late 1980s when I was in college – the odd occasional guns in college, and we used to get scared. Then at uni, that was the be-all and end-all – we saw people carrying guns, random shootings became the norm. So once we started seeing it all the time, it stopped fazing us so much. You became a bit blasé and it became normalised. Because I saw all that back home you can become a little desensitised to violence and extremism – you no longer feel so scared and take its presence for granted. It becomes part of the landscape of your daily life and this can be a problem.”*

*“I became politically active at 14. I was carrying a gun at 18. I joined up because I was the best student in my family out of my brothers. My brothers were not interested in joining Eritrean politics and activism – but I was groomed by someone who saw something in me.”*

A minority of participants attributed the normalisation of violence to cultural sanctioning rather than historical or family influences, a view summed up by the following comment from a community leader:

*“That is their cultural tradition. I have no doubt about this. Some people come from countries where they have a way of sorting out problems violently. That can even apply to Western countries. In recent years, if a man killed his wife’s lover in Sicily, he would only get a few years of jail. This was a value system that the Italians in that region kept alive. This kind of violent heritage can be carried to other countries through migration, such as the Italian crime syndicates that went to the US.”*

### Psycho-social vulnerability

Some participants thought that psychological trauma, mental imbalance or personality disorders contributed significantly to an individual’s predisposition to radicalisation and extremism, so that becoming involved in radicalisation and extremism is perceived as the manifestation of a pathology rather than a conscious or rational choice:

*“For some the desire to take a new path in life is related to some sort of trauma – this relates to the psychological factor mentioned earlier.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“I think that many people in this situation may have personality disorders, such as narcissistic personality disorders, manic-depressives, etc. These are disorders that can be very dangerous in radical and extremist contexts.”* (Community leader)

However, a more compelling psycho-social explanation was offered by several focus group participants who spoke of the way in which extremist recruiters manipulated vulnerable young people into believing that becoming radicalised would help or reward their struggling families:

*“It could be related to the psychological backgrounds of people, people say if you do this you get this, you’ll have peace and security after, and then we’ll take care of your family afterwards and give them money. If you are weak, you will believe this.”* (Focus group participant)

*“I met a guy from Somalia, he was told by a sheikh in Somalia, if you blow yourself up, 70 of your family will go to paradise. His older brother showed me a video of who he chooses to go to paradise.”* (Focus group participant)

*“In [some Muslim] countries there’s another perception, it’s a poor country, if they have lots of sons, people to feed, if he commits an act, the rest of the family is taken care of. He’s making a sacrifice for family as well.”* (Focus group participant)

Thus the desire to help or reward one’s family is seen as a mechanism with which to transform vulnerability or weakness into heroism and sacrifice for the benefit of other family members.

Several participants thought that a general predisposition to extreme views and behaviours was more generic than specific in nature and could find expression through a variety of mechanisms including but not limited to political violence or extremism:

*“What makes a person to be extreme? If you come from the left and are very extreme and you have chip on your shoulder, you do drugs, steroids, etc. and then you can easily go to another extreme. To go from an extreme point of view to another extreme is easy. If you have a moderate point of view you will generally stay with moderate.”* (Focus group participant)

*“I had a friend who told me he had a friend with radical ideas. He said the friend had just started practicing Islam, whereas before he hadn’t. This guy had grown up in Australia. He was formerly clubbing, drinking, using drugs. He found there was no end to it and he saw his destruction in it. He wanted a remedy. He thought he found it in fully practicing Islam. He went from one extreme [of self-destructive behaviour] to another extreme [of religious devotion]. It’s like a ball bouncing from one side to another but then settling down into one place.”* (Community leader)

### Identity and sense of belonging

Lack of sense of belonging in Australia was a key issue for many participants when thinking about the underlying drivers of radicalisation and extremism. A significant number of respondents thought that when there is no sense of social belonging there is little if any sense of responsibility towards the community and country one lives in:

*"It all boils down to identity. Usually people getting radicalised are young, they are not in their own country. If they don't feel like they belong they don't feel the same sense of responsibility they would to their own people or country. If you don't feel Australian you don't feel the same [sense of] care about the Australian people."* (Community leader)

*"I do not see my identity in anything Australian. If you include people in Australian society and make them feel this is their home, no one will attack their own home. It's just simple things that make us feel like we belong."* (Community leader)

These participants stressed the importance of a person's understanding of their place in society and the need to feel anchored by place and community. They commented that it is when people feel disengaged from or alienated by the social processes that occur around them, even when they appear to be participating, that they are most vulnerable to radical or extremist overtures:

*"I came here dreaming that I would work hard, send my children to a good school, buy a house. But how can I do those things if I am not given an opportunity to share in a system that I see as belonging to me as well? Those kinds of things are the problem. When you are talking you are also excluded because what you say makes people feel they are being criticised. But you have to speak the truth. If people keep doing the same thing over and over, where do you find this respect?"* (Community leader)

*"The elements are lack of place and sense of belonging coupled with an alternative that offers a sense of being welcomed, supported and looked after."* (Government stakeholder)

This driver resonated not just intellectually but personally, particularly for young participants with leadership roles in their communities:

*"It radicalises you if you don't feel you belong. As I think you can see from what I say and my emotions, I am radical although I don't condone violence, but to speak I don't fear. These are the things that are driving us crazy."* (Community youth leader)

*"For refugee people who come here, as young people we have major identity crises. If someone presents an idea that seems so concrete and that provides me with a sense of identity and belonging, of course I'm going to buy it. It shows me I can be someone and have some ultimate form of meaning in my life."* (Community youth leader)

*"You have this anxiety when applying for a job maybe your surname is different from the others and they will not call you. When all the young people are together you feel left out because they can't pick up what you're talking about or are suspicious of what you are going to say. You can see some social segregation at university about where you sit. But we are human and we deserve the same rights as other citizens. But at a time when things just click because you feel undermined by certain things you can become radical."* (Community youth leader)

### Multiple cultural allegiances and loyalties

Compounding the problem for many participants around sense of belonging was the issue of multiple or divided loyalties and sense of identity in relation to culture and nationality, particularly for those from migrant backgrounds. This was sometimes a personal issue for participants themselves, as the researchers noted during interviews and focus groups that many non-Anglo-Australian-background participants, even those who might feel well integrated within Australian society, thought of 'Australians' only as Anglo-Australians and excluded themselves from the category of 'Australian' altogether. At its most pronounced, this view was succinctly expressed by one second-generation focus group participant: 'Jihad, it's not about holy war, it's about defending yourself. If Australia invades my country, we have the right to fight back.'

Respondents noted that the experience of multiple or split national and cultural allegiances can express itself in a number of ways: for example, as a result of conflict between a strong sense of identity and allegiance in relation to both the country of origin and the country of destination, or because a previously strong sense of cultural identity in the home country begins to fray and fracture under the pressures of integration in the new environment, creating tension, guilt and confusion for those who are trying to adjust to their new lives. They pointed out that this can sometimes take several generations to peak.

The tensions and uncertainties produced by a sense of lack of belonging can make young people from migrant backgrounds in particular more vulnerable to extremist influences. Some community leaders were very concerned about this, saying:

*“When a 13 year old African girl from a [refugee] camp comes here and is expected to go into grade 8 having never read a book in her life, the system is then very flawed right from the start. Sometimes it feels like such a huge thing that you can’t ever reach your goals. So radicalisation becomes an outlet for the frustration and anger that people feel in this situation.”*  
(Community leader)

### **Rebellion against family or community norms**

In some cases, participants thought that young people who are struggling with such issues may also manifest this through rebellion against their parent’s values or norms as a way of trying to resolve conflicts of identity, which also makes them vulnerable to extremist influences:

*“In the Lebanese community, if you go to the homes of these people and look at their bedroom wall, most of the posters are Afro-American rappers. Their music is not Arabic, it’s Afro-American rappers. I think the theme and music of the cheated, oppressed, victimised under-dogs cause over-identification with this group. If these people were thrown in the middle of Beirut they’d be misfits, but they’d fit in well in the Bronx.”*  
(Community leader)

*“Young people do want to get out and get involved. Those who are having problems in the family and rebelling, they go into crime, they get arrested and there are self styled imams in prison and they indoctrinate them and say they will forgive their sins and this is the true path to follow and they brainwash them.”* (Focus group participant)

Such rebellions can also manifest themselves in explicitly religious contexts. According to one focus group participant,

*“[Young people] don’t fit in with the culture of their parents but don’t fit in with the norms of the West either, so they are cultural in-betweeners, second and third generation Muslims, male or female. They take Islam as a conscious rejection of their parent’s Islam, girls wear [head] scarves when mum didn’t and grandma fought not to, so that has to do with identity dynamics for Muslims in the west, what is more powerful, and the master identity becomes more rigid, if religion becomes more central to my identity.”*

### **The search for cultural and religious authenticity**

A range of participants felt that sometimes people sought to resolve the crises of identity described above through seeking a greater sense of cultural and religious authenticity, what one participant described as a process of filling up the ‘empty space’ left even after material needs and desires have been met:

*“Religions have tended to be built on finding people’s weaknesses in the social make-up of a community and feeding off that, in so doing providing a sense of belonging. We are pack animals, we like to live in groups, and feeling included and part of something is important to human beings. This is helpful when you’re trying to set up something like that – whether it’s the Catholic Church or any other religion.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“Even with a beautiful family and money, both of which I have, you feel as if something is missing – you want to fulfil something, for example, a duty to God if you are religious. Under certain conditions this can lead to radicalisation.”*  
(Community leader)

A number of participants emphasised the importance of understanding that when people live in diasporic conditions, particularly those who are second generation migrants, their sense of cultural grounding is challenged, as discussed above. For many young people whose parents come from religious backgrounds and have sought to continue this as part of their children’s upbringing and value system, the conflict is perceived as one of wishing to gravitate toward mainstream culture but finding that activities popular with mainstream Australian youth, such as clubbing, drinking and sexual experimentation, do not fit well with Muslim perceptions and values.

Thus, these respondents thought that young people who grow up in Australia and who have no direct connection to their countries or regions of origin can nevertheless feel disconnected across the board from being properly 'Australian' but also from being 'properly Arab' or 'properly Muslim', for example. This was felt by participants to be the genesis of the search for a culturally authentic identity, one that forges a valued sense of connection to the lived reality of their experience. As one community leader commented, the effort to unpack 'what it means to be 'Arab' or 'Muslim', or Arab-Australian or Muslim-Australian, in this place and this time' can leave people feeling disconnected and alienated unless there is a coherent narrative of identity in which they can locate their own experience.

Radicalisation, with its emphasis on a 'black and white universal religious doctrine that offers a cultural value system, identification and cognitive coherence that maps onto sense of identity' (government stakeholder), can seem to reinforce the integrity of such a sense of connection:

*"One valuable insight from community workers is if a young person is beginning to distance themselves from their family and has no other support system to turn to, it seems like one of two ways can be taken: either more liberal than your parents or more conservative than your parents. An interesting case is a young man who had gone the second way, didn't want to accept his parents' view and ran away from home and was protected by a doctor who saw an opportunity to bring this young person's views around to the doctor's way of thinking, which was a radical perspective."* (Government stakeholder)

Focus group participants noted that this can work to the advantage of proponents of religious dogmatism or extremism, as can the freedom for individuals to negotiate and live a chosen rather than decreed identity in a relatively open multicultural and democratic environment:

*"What I have observed here at the moment – [we had] Muslim student associations which were created earlier that were initially Muslims and others from different faith backgrounds, but the character of these are changing now, because we have more students from the Gulf who speak Arabic, and when they talk about Islam they are seen as having an authentic voice, and so now these associations and the students are being indoctrinated into what it means to be a Wahabi Muslim, rather than it just being a social space."* (Focus group participant)

*"I think it has a lot to do with being a new religious minority in a multicultural society – they develop their own identity because multiculturalism and democracy give them that opportunity. These groups are clever and intelligent in manipulating the law and the ground rules."* (Focus group participant)

### Gaining approval and attention

Another psycho-social driver of radicalisation identified by participants was the desire to get attention and gain the approval of peers or the broader community.

Most participants felt that the desire to be, and be seen as, a 'somebody' was directly linked to earlier experiences of marginalisation, exclusion and being made to feel different or less worthy, with the predictable negative impact on sense of self-worth and value:

*"We hear often of cases where people are made to feel like nobodies and then they become radicalised in order to be heard and to feel like somebody. If you can't get recognition for doing something good in the community you end up doing something the other way."* (Community leader)

*"I'm Lebanese background and I used to work with street kids in gangs in [a capital city]. They'd say, 'We came from a war-torn zone, my parents chain-smoke, my teachers keep telling me I'm a loser nobody, girls aren't interested in me. The only time I'm a somebody is when I hit the streets and hang out with my friends. People in public part like the Red Sea when they see us. We love that sense of attention and power. It's the only time when I feel like a somebody.'" (Community leader)*

The notion of going down the path of radicalisation as a form of redemption from a previously 'bad' way of life was also mentioned by several community-based respondents:

*"If you've been a nominal Muslim, engaged in crime, you need to find ways to redeem yourself, and you find religious scholars who tell you one way to do this is to become a martyr, and it also has to do with proving to yourself as well as others that you are a good Muslim."* (Focus group participant)

### Lack of resilience

A large number of focus group participants also raised the issue of low individual or community resilience as a perceived driver for radicalisation and extremism. These respondents felt that an inability to withstand traumas or frustration, a tendency to see things in black-and-white terms, and the lack of strategies to negotiate conflict or manage negative experiences was a factor in making people reactive, rather than proactive, in dealing with problems or grievances:

*“Converts are very susceptible to this – they have had lives which are in many ways able to be described as dysfunctional and they are seeking certainty. They are looking for yes and no answers. A radical group can come in and provide certainty and people are attracted to that. Resilience is key. It’s hard to generalise, but I think there is something to be said for terrorism being particularly attractive to those who see things in black-and-white terms.”* (Community leader)

*“Well, it depends, there are two kinds of people, there are those who when they are bullied become subdued and upset, and others who will lash out, hit out and try to protect themselves, but feeling cornered from all sides is a big factor.”* (Focus group participant)

*“When I think about what I have experienced before and after 9/11 – it’s your experiences which build up over time, it’s the small little things and whether you can take them in your stride or not.”* (Focus group participant)

### Socio-cultural factors

#### Marginalisation and social exclusion

An overwhelming majority of participants across all three cohorts of government stakeholders, community leaders and focus group participants perceived marginalisation and social exclusion to be fundamental drivers of radicalisation and extremism. In the words of one community leader, *‘Radicalisation and marginalisation are so intertwined it is difficult to untangle – they go hand in hand.’*

Lack of social inclusion and the rejection or marginalisation of minority groups by the mainstream in particular was felt to play a key role in creating the conditions that nurture radicalisation and extremism. A number of participants made the point that it is not just a case of individuals who feel they cannot fit in with mainstream culture, but a broader sense that their entire community is marginalised and socially excluded. While this might begin as an acute feeling of being rejected or marginalised, a dangerous threshold identified by participants was when such feelings become chronic rather than acute, reflecting long-standing experiences of and frustration with being disadvantageously positioned in relation to mainstream society.

Most participants agreed that one’s social environment plays a central role in shaping a person’s attitudes and behaviour towards others: *‘It is how the society treats you that makes you who you are. It can influence you to be a good person, or else push you to the edge so that you are never thinking that there is a life out there for me or that life is worth living.’* (Community leader) Consequently, it can be difficult to develop or regain a sense of belonging and being valued when the perception of being excluded becomes chronic:

*“I come from a war torn country and am traumatised but I also have useful ideas that can be exploited [for good] to make changes to society. To participate I need to share, to be respected, not to be treated like an outsider.”* (Community leader)

Many participants directly identified the marginalisation of specific ethnic and religious groups as a risk factor for developing radical or extremist views:

*“Marginalisation can be a breeding ground in terms of being or feeling excluded from the broader community and can take on the rhetoric of radical groups. We need to see radicalisation and extremism in the context of marginalisation and our role is to see that these people are helped not to feel marginalised and vulnerable to prevent their being susceptible to these agendas. When they see mainstream society as being unsupportive or hostile, this tends to further push people into those positions.”* (Community leader)

*“People are driven to radicalisation if they continually feel really offended. If people are discriminated or teased about their name they can become really angry and this can lead to becoming isolated from the community. A person can become radicalised if there are personal attacks on them and most of the time it is about religion.”* (Focus group participant)

In the eyes of participants, the cumulative sense of rejection and frustration that is fed by the chronic experience of being marginalised, however trivial or petty particular incidents may seem at the time, can make those at the receiving end of such treatment easy prey for recruitment by radical or extremist groups:

*"I think there may be an agenda for radical groups who prey on weakened and vulnerable people who are marginalised – for example, people in prisons who are already angry with society are vulnerable to people who 'nobilise' [make noble] a cause and give it a greater value under extremist ideology. It can make their lives seem like they have meaning and can offer a form of hope for those who are feeling stereotyped or bullied by the mainstream society."* (Government stakeholder)

*"They just get sucked up; when you associate with people who understand what you've gone through, marginalised, bullied, similar background, they want to fight against it, but most wouldn't consider violence. But at the same time, when you have others who are compassionate to your reasoning and give you a way out [that involves violent extremism], that's the scary part, it's when they feel like that, I'm rejected for being Australian because I'm different, where do I go?"* (Focus group participant)

Marginalisation of minority groups can include stereotyping and subtle as well as direct forms of discrimination. Many focus group participants stated that repeated stereotyping and targeting of ethnic and religious minorities on the basis of cultural background can sometimes anger and demoralise people to the point of tipping the balance even for those who might otherwise not be susceptible to extremism:

*"I am a youth worker and what I find is we live in a world where stereotypes exist. I have seen and know of people that I think could cross the line and become radicalised. I feel they could become violent because you constantly get comments as a Muslim, for example people always question why I wear the hijab. I get really frustrated and this pushes you."* (Focus group participant)

*"It becomes a problem when you get it in your head that you are being labelled. How can we fight back? Some people cannot think through the situation clearly. I know people who are like this, they may not blow things up but they will start trouble. They will aggravate the situation and try to start a fight. If they fall into the wrong hands they are the kind of people who can get manipulated."* (Focus group participant)

Yet exclusion or marginalisation does not have to be related to Islam or indeed any religion in order to contribute to radicalisation and extremism. As one participant remarked,

*"I'm not a practising Muslim, I'm running away from the Islamic Republic of Iran, but I harbour extremist views that while not related to religion are the causes for extreme anger or frustration. There is an intangible dimension [to feeling marginalised], how much are new people welcome in the new context as well, I don't mean locals have to bend over backwards, which is part of the illusion that newcomers have, they come thinking I'm an engineer, where's my job, misconceptions go both ways. Place and identity, people go back to their homelands in their heads and grasp it hard."* (Focus group participant)

### **Insularity and self-exclusion from the mainstream**

Several participants noted that the phenomenon of social exclusion is not always driven by mainstream society's rejection of those who are different or in the minority; a number of individuals, groups and communities were also perceived to consciously choose to insulate themselves from exposure to or contact with those outside their own communities and to be reluctant to interact socially with mainstream Australians. Sometimes this was seen as a defensive response in order to preserve a sense of cultural identity that risked being fragmented through integration with another, more dominant cultural paradigm. At other times, however, participants suggested that it was driven more by fear and anxiety about the unfamiliar than a desire to conserve one's heritage and cultural identity. A community leader elaborated on this view, saying:

*"[People with this attitude] remain bubbled within extremist thought patterns and don't connect. I know plenty of people employed and working as chartered accountants who are still excluded from the broader society. They are excluding themselves rather than being excluded by others. They do this because of their fear of the unknown."* (Community leader)

Those in focus groups echoed this, believing that those who isolate themselves do so because of lack of education or language barriers, or through the fear that they will experience even greater marginalisation or rejection if they attempt to join in:

*"But some people think, 'Why would I want to know more about society, because it will just make me more segregated'."* (Focus group participant)



Yet most participants felt that, whatever the causes or origins of social exclusion, such an experience creates a climate of hopelessness for people who come to believe that they cannot achieve their potential and have no meaningful prospects for the future. While they may have arrived in Australia with high (and, in the eyes of some participants, unrealistic) expectations, they have experienced disappointment, frustration and sometimes despair because their new lives are not what they had envisaged. Such experiences of disenfranchisement can lead to or further entrench social isolation and lack of sense of belonging, which in turn increases vulnerability to radicalisation. Nor does this apply only to the first generation of new or recently arrived migrants. As a community leader put it,

*“When you have an inability to achieve your full potential, this makes it easier to fall prey to radicalisation. Home-grown terrorism comes from a lack of integration. People who are caught between two cultures not feeling integrated. Although home-grown, they may not feel part of the mainstream, and they will search for radical groups. My children were born here, but they are still wondering when they become Australian?”*

Indeed, feeling and being disenfranchised -- whether socially, politically, economically or a combination of these -- was seen as a more important driver of radicalisation than religious ideology for a number of participants:

*“You can do it around white Anglo extremism, like Neo-Nazis. Potentially, where you have— people need the ability to learn, earn, be valued in society. If they don’t fit in that mainstream or don’t see any potential for themselves or their kids to fit into this, then that could create an environment where some people could be targeted [by extremists]. They used to join the French Foreign Legion and now they become terrorists.”* (Government stakeholder)

### Discrimination and racism

In addition to marginalisation and social exclusion more broadly, specific experiences of discrimination and racism for minority groups were keenly felt to be a driver for radicalisation and extremism for a large number of participants, especially those who were themselves from minority religious and racial backgrounds. A number of respondents related first-hand encounters of such scenarios and their impacts, illustrating the insidious relationship between being perceived as a threat and becoming one in actual fact. Discrimination seemed to be particularly felt by participants from African backgrounds, who said:

*“It’s just about the colour, we’re African, it’s not about the religion; I think they think we’re all the same.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Radicalisation is occurring within Australia but is currently not within our African communities. [However,] the way authorities negatively represent Africans to the Australian community causes African communities to become angry and frustrated.”* (Focus group participant)

Australian-born focus group participants from Anglo or European backgrounds tended to concur with this view, noting that while ‘we are often portrayed as better than we are, when you have conversations with friends or others you realise just how racist we are’ and suggesting that ‘in terms of Australian society, there is a lot of closet racism. It is not something that is always obvious but racism is there’:

*“Australian racism is due to a lack of knowledge. I have conversations with my friends who don’t know about other cultures and don’t mix with other cultures so they form their views from media and from what other people say.”* (Focus group participant)

This perception was unexpectedly reinforced during the research project itself when interviewing a European-background community leader, who remarked to the researchers that his perception that ‘Africans are black and cannot be seen in the dark’ understandably scares people.

The perception of contemporary Australian discrimination and racism was not limited to encounters with individuals at the local community level, with community leaders pointing to more structural forms of discrimination at the level of state government, particularly in some of the smaller states:

*"In [this state] it's just like a transit centre – you stay here for some time and then you go. You don't find anyone working in a position in our [state] government who is a person of colour who comes from a migrant or refugee background. You have to go to Sydney, Perth or elsewhere for that. We lobby just to highlight these issues to politicians and the community to correct the community capacity building, but there is no political will in [state] Parliament to speak out on behalf of our communities as new arrivals. There are a few projects here and there but they don't work."*  
(Community leader)

### **The likelihood of home-grown extremism in Australia**

Despite the strength of perceptions that marginalisation and discrimination are key drivers for radicalisation and extremism, however, a large majority of focus group participants nevertheless thought there were fewer drivers for violent extremism in Australia compared to elsewhere. In the view of these participants, Australia is less at risk (though not entirely unthreatened) than a number of other states and regions around the world. In some cases, the relative absence of drivers was seen as due in part to Australia's relative geographical isolation from other parts of the globe:

*"We are not at risk in Australia. It would be different if we were near the Middle East. In Australia we hear about terrorism but it doesn't affect us. However, it could be headed our way."*  
(Focus group participant)

*"In Australia there are issues and there is violence but Australia is much more isolated and not like UK and US. Australia is not like the other countries."*  
(Focus group participant)

For the majority of participants who thought the risk was low, however, the perception was that Australia has a sufficiently friendly and peaceful domestic culture, democratic processes and freedom of expression, reasonable approaches to social inclusion and a relative lack of political aggression, conflicts and dissent, and as a consequence. Representative comments in the national focus groups on this theme included:

*"In Australia it's hard to provoke, because I think it's really nice here, it's a both-way handshake, they treat you good, you be a good citizen. If you don't cause problem, it's okay."*

*"We had open day at the mosque and the topic was Australian culture against Islam and the result is it is not. I love Australia more than so-called Islamic countries and they do more for Islam and Muslims here. Australia promotes multiculturalism you have that right to practice religion and believe what you want. If your right is taken away you can sue the government. This is amazing. This is good leadership."*

*"I reckon it'd be harder to radicalise people here, because over there...just compare some of the differences, a person who's the same age here and there, here there are more comforts, there's security, no matter what else you've got a home and a bed, you know you'll wake up in the morning, there's less risk of you getting killed. Over there you might not have any of those things."*

A few focus group participants, however, were more concerned about the risks of home-grown terrorism in Australia, arguing that *'Australia is not immune to [world] events'*, that *'reverts'* (i.e., formerly moderate Muslims who adopt more extreme or fundamentalist religious views) pose a particular threat to domestic harmony, and that terrorism *'can happen [in Australia] if the government doesn't do something serious about it. They have already caught people'*.

### **Group dynamics and peer influence**

Peer influence or pressure and group dynamics were also important underlying causes for participants in thinking about why people, and especially young people, become radicals and extremists. In effect, these respondents emphasised the fact that radicalisation is an inherently social process. Belonging to or becoming part of a group, sharing similar views and attitudes with like-minded people, feeling well-supported and valued, and feeling secure and safe in relation to one's identity and sense of self is an important part of most people's lives. When any or many of these experiences or supports are absent for people, the desire to create or replace these missing elements can play a key role for those who are attracted to or become caught up in radical or extremist activities. Young people who may still be in the process of exploring or negotiating their sense of identity and place in the world, and for whom peer approval is particularly important and often more deeply felt compared to adults at later stages of life, were thus seen to be especially susceptible to the influence of peers and group dynamics.

Community leaders and government stakeholders alike saw group dynamics as absolutely core to radicalisation as a social process, describing these as the ‘engine of radicalisation’:

*“There are processes in small group dynamics that are critical in getting people moving from talking about something to doing something. It becomes a continuum and then the entire group moves. [With] mutual reinforcement of people getting together and becoming increasingly isolated, the leader becomes more and more important – it’s an echo chamber. You can have a leading figure or central personality playing a role there, and in other cases it is all members of the group egging each other on.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“The company that you keep is very, very important. There is a lot of peer pressure to be part of that group and think along the same lines. So falling in with the wrong crowd has an important influence on whether they become attracted to extremism or not.”* (Community leader)

Focus group participants supported these observations, describing the need to feel accepted, the desire to ‘go with the flow’ of what others in their social circle are doing, and naivety about the consequences of their choices as a continuum of factors that can lead to exposure to and involvement in radical or extremist settings.

*“On the dynamics that can lead to radicalisation – they need to feel they belong somewhere, and feel accepted in a larger setting. Knowing you are accepted becomes very important for young people.”* (Focus group participant)

*“It is easy. Get one person with hatred in a certain group, he can preach that hate and get people doing what he wants. A person who is a leader who does this can lead people down the wrong path. It happens here.”* (Focus group participant)

*“‘Mob situations’, young people see their peers going to a particular imam and they think it is the right thing to do so they follow their peers. I don’t think they go because they want to, I think they just hear about them in the circles they hang around.”* (Focus group participant)

### **Tactics of selective targeting by extremist recruiters**

A few government participants compared the process by which extremist groups attract and retain members as similar to cults, particularly in relation to targeting the vulnerable, the disenfranchised and those seeking certainty or direction in their lives, but others cautioned against over-emphasising such comparisons because they overlooked significant differences and could lead government to adopt ineffective and potentially alienating strategies in dealing with counter-extremism:

*“Alternative group settings can be appealing because they offer a kinship style system that may be lacking in other sources – cult leaders also offer this. People who are highly vulnerable who have a sense of disconnect to society can help explain drivers in this context.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“There are aspects of cult dynamics, but not all of them are cult-like. There is danger in drawing too close an analogy to cults which can lead governments to apply strategies used for cults to what are in fact merely elements of mainstream religious fringes. This risks alienating large-scale numbers of adherents to that religion who are more moderate.”* (Government stakeholder)

Focus group participants, however, had more expansive views on the process and mechanisms used by extremist groups to target and recruit members to their activities. There was broad consensus amongst respondents who spoke to this theme about the nature of the vulnerabilities that made some young people in particular become prime targets for recruitment by radical or extreme organisations. Many in this group saw it as a result of young people being failed by the family or social systems that were supposed to support and protect them:

*“I think about the teenager Somali in the US who has been accused of plotting a terrorist act. He feels excluded from the mainstream and he is approached by other groups who allow him to connect with others who teach him these negative views and he accepts them because he is vulnerable. Radical groups target those young vulnerable people.”* (Focus group participant)

*“But people that turn to extremism, I think that most of the time in a country like Australia, it happens because the system fails you in many ways. The [Neath] Somali boys were on drugs, they were in trouble, then they meet one person who cares about them for the first time, takes them off drugs, his ideas become gold to them, so he’s picking on the vulnerable.”* (Focus group participant)

Others saw it more in terms of selective monitoring and identification of particular pressure points in young people's lives, whether these are material or psychological in nature:

*"Financial crises, these can be a good factor – when there is no money for food, people take advantage of weakness, they will keep on talking and brainwash vulnerable persons. If their families have no money, or if the people are not educated, or if they have had people killed by drone attacks. ... In Pakistan they recruit kids, who are vulnerable, aged from 7-13, from families who are killed by American forces or who are poor and need money."*

*"There are those who are full of emotion and don't have a sound religious understanding, they have a wounded pride. I could persuade young kids to do something if I wanted because I could get them all pumped up and they would listen to me. These young people do not have a proper understanding of religion and they do not practice it properly. They can be sparked if you hit the emotional cord, it can happen."*

And still others emphasised the extent of planning, preparation and strategic misdirection that went into targeting and recruitment activities:

*"I don't think these people who radicalise are from outside the community. Once they have your confidence they will control you, they will not disclose their intention straight away. You don't know who is Al-Shabab, it could be anyone, even someone from the madrassa. These radicals do exist. Al-Shabab could become the new Taliban."* (Somali Muslim focus group participant)

*"They target people who can be turned around easily, they will know when to start and where to start on someone, these guys know about the feelings and they use them. ... Intermediaries who recruit people are becoming more and more important."* (Focus group participants)

### **Drugs, kidnapping and brainwashing**

For a significant number of focus group respondents, narratives that involved the reported use of drugging, kidnapping and 'brainwashing', or subjection to repeated propaganda – what one participant termed 'hammering' – by extremist organisations seeking to expand their membership were powerful elements in their thinking. The implication for many of these respondents was that some individuals who become extremists have at times been recruited by illegitimate or deceptive means. Consequently, they may be seen by some of their peers as less responsible for their actions because their participation is perceived to be coerced and involuntary rather than based on ideological or religious commitment to a cause:

*"I have heard that they drug them before they do that, a bit of drug before the act, they numb them, and they are usually young, and don't know better, [at an] early age they are kidnapped."* (Focus group participant)

*"It's like if you tell a twelve-year-old that it is good to die for your religion, it is good to die for your religion, it is good to die for your religion – [then] if you ask him if he would kill people, he will say yes."* (Focus group participant)

*"They have interviewed failed suicide bombers, those that sent them are the strong decisive ones, and the bombers are patsies, coerced, bullied, and when they've failed and come back – a lot of them were brainwashed, actually."* (Focus group participant)

For others, however, the concept of 'brainwashing' was more aligned with being misled through ignorance, lack of education, choosing the wrong path or being influenced by the wrong people or environment:

*"They are being inculcated to believe these things. They are looking for answers to questions and if these people who try to brainwash them give them answers to their questions, they will believe them."* (Focus group participant)

*"Radicalisation is the same as brainwashing. In my [Muslim] community I have seen people who are radicalised and are not very educated. They are attracted to people with similar views who are generally older than them. The younger people are radicalised through misinformation."* (Focus group participant)

*"It's always about the child – that happens when from early childhood young people are brainwashed, it is so much in them that they can't accept the reality [of how things are] and that causes them to [take] the wrong path; even if they blow up and cause harm to brothers, they think it's a sacrifice."* (Focus group participant)

## Religious and community leadership

The issue of religious leadership or its absence was a very strong theme among Muslim participants, particularly within the focus groups. These respondents often emphasised the critical role that religious and community leadership has in influencing community standards and attitudes either positively or negatively, particularly in the case of young people. There was a general view amongst participants that if a person is Muslim, s/he is supposed to live according to the Qur'an and the teaching of the Prophet. However, a wide range of participants noted that when it comes to the interpretation of more elaborate concepts within Islam, religious leaders become aligned with a number of different paths and strands of Islamic thought that are then taught and followed.

### Lack of guidelines or accreditation for religious leaders and educators

Focus group participants in particular were very concerned about the absence of unified guidelines or criteria to become a leader. They felt that anyone can become a leader and that community members often do not have the inclination or skills to do their own research and compare what one imam is saying in relation to another, instead merely accepting whatever is said out of respect for the authority of the leader; as one focus group participant put it, *'If you don't have the knowledge you cannot challenge it.'*

There was a pervasive belief that people with devoutly religious views, particularly if they themselves are relatively uneducated, can often be easily convinced about the right way to practice their religion, do not question what they are told and uncritically trust any leader claiming religious authority, particularly if that leader is charismatic or popular. One community leader, referring to extremist community members with whom he was familiar, said:

*"It was the people they looked up to and saw as their role models who they followed. So a person who says the solution is a peaceful solution, they might follow that. But if a leader says the only way to resolve this situation is through violence, then people following them will take that road to violence."*

### Misleading followers by ignorance or design

Religious leaders who were perceived to have negative influences by virtue of promoting radicalisation and extremism were divided into two types by participants: those who lacked sufficient education or understanding of religious issues to preach and lead effectively against violent extremism, and those who deliberately misled people in order to propagate extremist viewpoints and behaviours.

In the first category, a number of focus group participants thought there were imams in their community whose lack of education and religious understanding caused specific problems, both for the Muslims who followed them and for perceptions of Islam by non-Muslims more generally:

*"The problem is that people will turn to the imam at the mosque, but the imam doesn't have the full understanding of Islam and the Qur'an, they are missing the basics. They give the wrong picture about Islam. These Muslims do not follow the true Islam but they follow some ideal, and then non-Muslims listen to these people and think that they are talking about true Islam. If they saw the reality of Islam they would see the right way. We need to study the religion properly."* (Focus group participant)

In the second category, numerous examples were offered from participants' first- or second-hand experience of imams and other leaders whom they felt were deliberately misleading their followers with respect to religious teachings for their own political purposes, a sample of which is provided here:

*"We had an imam who had a small prayer centre at uni. I went once, he was young, with a beard, and he gave akubra in English first, nice and peaceful, and then he did it in Arabic, and he was denouncing everyone, girls in miniskirts, and all the Saudis were nodding and agreeing, but the others, Indians, etc., they didn't understand what he was saying, but he was denouncing the Australian culture and way of life, and how they think about the Middle East and how they think about Muslims. I never went back there, I felt it was pretty full on."* (Focus group participant)

*"I know of people radicalised, there was a person at a particular musallah. He was from Jordan and a strong believer of Salafism. I spoke to him. He was about 35 years old. ASIO got involved because of his weird views. He preached to people, to build them up emotionally to a point when it could become violent. He drew on the religion to put a seed of doubt in their head."*  
(Focus group participant)

However, one focus group participant thought that religious leaders who preach violence do so through fear of losing people: not just from the perspective of losing followers who may want to depart from their particular teachings, but from that of losing out in a more profound sense to modernity and the lure of secularism. In this participant's view, it was this dimension of fear and anxiety that drives some radicalised imams to deliver more extreme teachings.

Some participants spoke of new Muslim migrants to Australia whose need to work led them to become an imam as a way of earning a living and becoming more embedded within a new community. However, these respondents said many such freshly minted imams were not seen as properly trained and did not have a good understanding of Australian society, which these participants felt could easily lead them to teach things that sit uneasily with many moderate Australian Muslims, as in the following example:

*"The sheikh tells me not to sit next to a girl and he doesn't know that I am sitting next to girls at university. He needs to know the time and place and that this is Australia, you have to adapt. I work in a primary school and the kids walk away from music because the sheikh tells them they cannot listen to music. These sheikhs are so powerful. These sheikhs have to be qualified to teach at madrassas. But our standards are low for a religious figure. There are too many imams who are not qualified."*  
(Focus group participant)

Nevertheless, with increasing access and ease of global communication, those who may doubt the religious efficacy of their local religious leaders are sometimes turning for guidance to overseas sheikhs, particularly when their own home-grown leaders are preaching violence, according to some participants:

*"[Religious leaders in my Australian community] listen to our Prophet but do not follow the religion properly. I have read the Qur'an and I am listening to the Prophet's stories. It does not say to be violent. I have a Sheikh overseas, not in Australia. My dad is overseas and I ask dad to speak to a Sheikh overseas when I need advice. I have asked Sheikhs here in Australia about different things like piercings. When I asked the Sheikh here about piercings he said I could not have three piercings and this didn't make sense to me, and stuff like that makes me realise that this Sheikh is not great, so I refer to the Sheikhs overseas and they say that the number of piercings do not matter."* (Focus group participant)

### **Parental oversight of children's religious education**

The importance of parental involvement in and monitoring of their children's religious instruction to avoid young people's exposure to radical or extreme views was also highlighted by a number of participants:

*"I grew up here and then went back to Kenya. After I came home I would criticise what my mum wore and it was because of things that I picked up in the madrassa in Kenya – it was rituals. Our parents don't question the quality of leadership in the madrassa and they accept the teachings. There is less focus on the content that they teach. It's ongoing; once you leave the madrassa you are given the messages to address others."*  
(Focus group participant)

Participants noted such teaching at times went as far as attempting to turn children against their parents – a first step toward isolating young people from family and other support networks so that they are more reliant on a radical or extremist group leader:

*"As a teenager you are taught that you cannot visit your mother, you cannot have a relationship with your mother and that is the teaching. It is quite controversial and this knowledge is used to turn you against your parents. A weak minded person could be easily turned."* (Focus group participant)

This was seen as linked to the tendency of some imams to develop friendships and social relationships with people, especially the young, as part of the process of radicalisation:

*“Prior to the radicalisation process is the socialisation process. And this is where trust relationships are established, so the radical imam who will radicalise the person, they have a history, they are friends, that’s why they will follow this person.”* (Focus group participant)

*“In an uncertain world, it’s understandable that some desire a narrow certainty to hold on to. If you have an imam who can prey on vulnerable young people, between ages 17-24, young men and some women too – women get something from being supporters of that – it gives meaning in a very narrow world, and anyone can be vulnerable to that.”* (Focus group participant)

### Religious leaders and ‘political Islam’

There was a general view amongst Muslim participants in the focus groups that a number of extremist religious leaders in Australia explicitly bring politics into their religious teachings, what a number of respondents called ‘political Islam’. Participants who spoke on this point were generally uncomfortable with the intersection of religion and politics, however, as they felt it went against the grain of their perception of Islam as a religion of moderation:

*“People make the religion extreme and bring politics into the religion. Islam is a moderate religion but people bring these extreme ideas into the religion. Yes, there are those with extreme ideas that can lead to violence. I go to lectures and talks with imams and scholars from overseas who talk about infidels and that it is OK to cheat Centrelink. They say things that can be counterproductive. I have seen this happen.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Politics can guide a person and it can be driven by populist views and [the] use [of] religion to drive this view. Influential people get together and say al-Qaeda says this and other people start to believe it.”* (Focus group participant)

Other focus group participants argued that moderate Islam needed to be reclaimed from its more politicised or extremist proponents:

*“Young people want good leadership and knowledge. We need to gain traditional Islam back from those who have turned it into a violent religion.”* (Focus group participant)

*“We have crazy sheikhs in the community who the media always go to but they are not the right people. There should be guidelines for government and media about who to go to for comments and to make sure the right people are heard.”* (Focus group participant)

### Political factors

The role of what one community leader called *‘the history of hatred of developing countries for the developed world’* based on inequities in socioeconomic standards and access was seen by many participants as central to the issue of how long-standing grievances and perceptions of injustice can lead to chronic disenchantment towards Western societies that can be very difficult to overcome. As the same community leader went on to say,

*“Hatred rather than love drives radicalisation. Older generations have living memory of the direct experience of colonisation through their parents or grandparents. In Australia, there was a celebration of D-Day. Our community was invited to the celebrations. An Australian WWII veteran was standing up and talking about what this meant to him. [Three African-background men] got up and left. Next day we confronted them. They said the day that the war ended was the day colonisation of their country began. The seeds may only be sprouting now but the ground was planted a long time ago. It is a time bomb and makes it easier to exploit people.”* (Community leader)

### International politics, foreign policy and transnational grievances

Many participants, particularly those from Muslim backgrounds, believed that internal socio-political problems in various countries, regional politics in areas such as the Middle East, Africa and Asia, and the foreign policies of Western nations, including Australia, all play a crucial role in the radicalisation of Muslims around the world, regardless of which side of the political fence you are on. As one community leader said, *‘In relation to Islamic radicalisation, the political situation in the world – where lots of people feel marginalised and are looking for an alternative way to resolve these issues – that’s a driver because there’s political frustration there.’*

Most focus group participants identified Australia's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan as a key cause for some Muslims becoming radicalised in Australia, and many participants identified the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the underlying cause of all contemporary terrorism and radicalisation. As one participant stated, *'It is inseparable. Recruiters use these examples, of Afghanistan, Iraq, that's a driving force overseas factors and radicalisation.'*

The Western geopolitical alliance was seen by a significant number of respondents to implicate affiliated nations in the impact and consequences of world politics and events, including terrorist responses mounted in these countries:

*"The primary cause of radicalisation is Western foreign policy [in the Muslim world]. This is the key ingredient and main source of grievance that drives people to radicalisation. There is a debate about whether it is foreign policy or interpretations of Islam, but you have to have a causal driver regardless of this debate. The foreign policy gives rise to material grievances, e.g. Afghanistan or Iraq. Various acts of terror are caused by Western foreign policy – for example, Osama bin Laden said very clearly after 9/11 that you had military bases in the Holy Lands, you keep supporting Israel, you occupy Saudi Arabia with military bases, etc. In the UK, in Spain before, you can see there was a link – whereas New Zealand is completely off the map."* (Community leader)

The injustice and hypocrisy that many Muslims perceive in international affairs was seen by a large number in the focus groups to serve as a rallying point for ideologies of hate and violence.

*"On that, different rule for people, it's the injustice and disparity concept. It's like two siblings, two brothers, same rules but one favoured, the other follows the rules gets less favour, he psychologically starts to hate his brother, and has a sense of inequity and injustice."* (Focus group participant)

This included the way in which international events were covered by mainstream media, as detailed in Chapter 6 below.

### Identification with the *ummah*

Conflicts elsewhere in the world were often cited as being used by extremists in order to justify violence at home and abroad through appeal to the emotions rather than the intellects of viewers and readers. In this context, the concept of the *ummah* emerged as especially relevant for those focus group participants who said that the suffering of their Muslim counterparts elsewhere in the world was felt personally by Muslims in Australia:

*"Because if you look into so-called Islamic terrorism, I think it's because these people have strong attachment with their brothers and sisters and they feel that if one side of the party was abused, the guy that abused them should feel the same."* (Focus group participant)

*"You have to understand something else about Islam: when they hurt we hurt. We are a unified body regardless of disciplines."* (Focus group participant)

*"It's not too hard to relate to, it's not too hard to find the connection ... sometimes you feel more than others, you feel that pain more than others, you feel it like you're there."* (Focus group participant)

Related to this, many participants also thought that the kinds of deeply felt multiple or split national and cultural loyalties discussed above, as well as genuine dissent or sense of injustice, could serve to trigger extremist responses fuelled by events that occur overseas:

*"If we're talking internationally, I'm Palestinian, so I can relate, empathise, and sympathise with these experiences. I've been denied the right to go back to Palestine, but I work with Jews in the Together for Humanity Foundation, so I see another side as well. You see these things happening, your family hurt, dislocated, dispersed, you get angry, you want to do something. For some youth, life becomes meaningless so they put hope into the afterlife, so it's a lot to do with frustration if we're talking about international conflict and context."* Similarly, a number of participants said the impact of footage on YouTube and other internet and media sites of the killing of civilians in countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan *'induces feelings of strong emotion [that] feed into part of your identity, creating an emotionally laden identity'*. (Focus group participant)

### Redress for injustice and disparity

The idea of radicalisation and extremism as a route to redressing perceived injustice when other means have failed was prominent for some community leaders and focus group participants. In some cases, this was seen as either a skewed form of idealism or else a generalised response where social conditions and institutional mechanisms failed to meet people's needs or expectations:



*“For a minority group, if there is a perception of inequality and inflexibility which can reach the point of being unable to address the problems and people can feel the only way to change is to do something outside of the norm, outside of the status quo, things become gridlocked, you can’t do anything. If you get that sort of perception on a local level about an injustice and can see no way in the system to address this, this can lead people to become violent.”* (Focus group participant)

*“At an even higher level of idealism, a sense of injustice and needing a method to right the wrongs and looking for a panacea that can convert injustice to justice – this is the point at which the moral compass can become very skewed.”* (Community leader)

Others, however, thought that governments had some responsibility in failing to heed the warning signs of discontent amongst the populations they govern:

*“Governments can contribute to this through misinterpreting, teaching things badly, can shut their eyes and ears and don’t want to know – so the driving force is [government] leaders who pursue their own interests and are not interested in what others think or who ignore consequences.”* (Community leader)

Some participants discussed the power of the claim by some extremist groups that Western foreign policy was explicitly aimed at undermining Islam. One government stakeholder observed,

*“Al-Qaeda is an example, espousing the removal of Western influence and nation-state regimes, return of Israel to Palestinians, restoration of the caliphate – these are still overarching strategic goals of Al-Qaeda and they still resonate amongst parts of communities. The theological part of the strategy is that Islam is under siege by the West and Muslims are under obligation to act wherever they are. This is obligation as opposed to duty. Distortion of theology is part of ideology.”*

Yet contradictory rather than overarching or unified foreign policy targets were cited by other respondents as the source of grievances that contributed to radicalisation:

*“What we have today is the product of the last sixty years of world history, in particular the Middle East and specifically Palestine. It is common knowledge how the Israel-Palestine situation has affected the Arab world. The problem is that I cannot preach democracy and at the same time appoint a gangster to run the country – this applies to all the Middle Eastern countries. Contradictory and deliberate foreign policy is helping radicalisation. These are the conditions that can cause people to take up radical approaches.”* (Community leader)

*“Where it starts to create further complications is [with] our political leaders [who] should be accountable for what they do. When they say they will petition for human rights and then ignore Palestine – when you hear comments like this it creates a sense of hypocrisy. Let’s be fair, there are other human rights violations where Australia turns a blind eye, and this creates a sense of marginalisation and anger.”* (Focus group participant)

### **Feeling politically silenced or targeted**

Some focus group participants felt aggrieved that as Muslims they perceived the need to be careful about what they said in general because their comments might be interpreted as un-Australian or indicating a level of radicalisation. They felt their ability to freely sympathise with or critique international politics and events was stifled and that even their travel history, for example visits to various Muslim countries, would make them looked upon with suspicion by authorities. A Somali respondent observed,

*“If we go home [to Somalia] and fight we can be seen as terrorists. If we were to fight with Hamas we would be seen as terrorists. Anyone who tries to sympathise with them is seen as a terrorist. Muslims believe we are all brothers everywhere in the world. We understand globalisation, it is happening everywhere.”* (Focus group participant)

The idea of West/non-West political relations as a reciprocal cycle of violence and hatred was also a compelling explanatory narrative for how international relations drive extremism for some participants: *'The West is violent and if they are violent then they must accept other to be violent'*. (Focus group participant) Another focus group respondent saw this *'vicious cycle'* as a multiplier for future generations of radicalised communities:

*"It is terrorism that creates terrorism, it's a vicious cycle, but terrorism creates its own fount of terrorism, because every time you bomb in Pakistan, there is collateral damage, and those people who are affected then become drawn to terrorism, they have anger and they are a great contribution to terrorism."*

These perceived grievances against Western foreign policy in particular were seen by some participants to contribute directly to radicalisation and extremism here in Australia. As a religious leader noted:

*"Also, I know in Australia, many, many young people are very upset about the slaughter of people and they want to do jihad. Three weeks ago I had a young man come and say to me, 'I want to go overseas and fight, what are the rulings about this?' He was in a hurry, he wanted me to give him a quick answer. I had to ask him to sit down so we could talk. So far people talk more about going overseas [than staying at home] to fight, but for others, they do want to bring it here, they want you to see what it feels like to see your sons killed, to feel what it feels like to have your homes demolished."* (Community leader)

## Conclusion

### The risk of overgeneralising radicalisation narratives, processes and responses

The very wide range of factors identified by project participants in this chapter confirms that there are no easy or single answers in trying to gain greater insight in how to understand and address the underlying drivers for radicalisation and extremism in Australia, as elsewhere. Participant responses to this issue covered a broad spectrum of explanatory frameworks in thinking about this issue. For the vast majority of respondents, these causal factors were interrelated, often intimately or even indistinguishably, and can best be classed as falling into what we have called a convergence paradigm, in which a combination of personal and environmental factors need to coalesce and crystallise for an individual before they find themselves on the road to radicalisation or extremism.

Specific drivers identified by participants ranged across **personal and individual factors** such as the influence of family and early life, including the role of family history in the normalisation of violence, and the psychosocial vulnerability of individuals, including lack of resilience. For a very large number of participants, issues around identity and sense of belonging were seen as key underlying factors in helping drive people toward radicalisation and extremism. These included the implications of lack of belonging; the tensions of multiple cultural allegiances and loyalties; rebellion against family or community norms; the yearning for cultural and religious authenticity, and the need for approval and attention, particularly for those whose self-esteem or sense of self-worth is fractured and who consequently strive to feel like a 'somebody' rather than a 'nobody'.

The most significant category for participants when thinking about **socio-cultural factors** that informed the processes of radicalisation and extremism was the broad domain of marginalisation, discrimination, racism and social exclusion. This included the rejection or marginalisation of minority groups by mainstream society, as well as the phenomenon of self-exclusion and insularity by minority groups from the mainstream in an effort to preserve a coherent cultural identity, and the corrosive and frustrating experience of discrimination and racism in the community, particularly for Muslim- and African-background participants. The role of group dynamics and peer influence, especially for young people, was identified as significant, as were the tactics and techniques of selective targeting by extremist recruiters, including a number of participants who focused on the reported use of drugs, kidnapping and brainwashing in advancing their perceptions of how responsible some extremists may be for the actions they take. Lack of education and the inability to apply critical skills in independent thought and analysis in order to challenge extremist viewpoints were also seen as relevant by some participants.

**Religious and community leadership** was another major driver for participants, who identified concerns around the lack of guidelines or accreditation for religious leaders and educators; the misleading of religious followers either through ignorance and lack of education or else in order to promote deliberately a variety of 'political Islam'; the uneven nature of parental oversight for children's religious education, and the consequences of this for isolating children and young people from the familial and social support networks that can serve as protective factors against radicalisation and extremism.

Finally, a range of **political factors** were canvassed that included the perceived frustrations and injustices for Muslim-background participants in particular of international affairs, Western foreign policies and transnational political dynamics and events, with the Israel-Palestine conflict and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq seen as focal points for the ability of radical and extremist groups to attract and maintain support. Participants also emphasised the implications of identification with the *ummah*; the appeal to emotion rather than reason in the discourses of extremism that circulate through alternative media, particularly the internet; the strength of the desire for means to redress perceived disparities in power and in political, economic and social wellbeing, particularly between developed and developing countries; and the anxieties created for some Muslim participants by feeling stifled from free expression and critique of international events through fear of being labelled as radical or extremist themselves.

Despite the focus by participants above on some of the perceived gaps in Australia's ability to manage both elements of its domestic agenda of social inclusion and of its foreign policy framework in ways that minimise the prospect of radicalisation and extremism at home, a significant number of participants said that they thought **the prospect of home-grown terrorism** in Australia was fairly low, citing Australia's relative geographical isolation, a sufficiently friendly and peaceful domestic culture, good access to democratic processes and freedom of expression, reasonable approaches to social inclusion and a relative lack of political aggression as the main reasons for believing the risk was relatively small.

However, a small minority of participants disagreed with this view, with some believing it was only a matter of time before an attack occurred and noting that home-grown terrorist events had already been planned, even if successfully thwarted by authorities.

Because of the very wide range of interlocking factors and frameworks identified, in concluding this chapter of the report we want to draw special attention to some of the comments by government stakeholders and community leaders who see significant pitfalls and problems in attempting to overgeneralise or profile the mechanisms, pathways, and processes by which people can become radicalised or develop into violent extremists. The participant responses analysed in this chapter support well the observation of one government stakeholder that 'we need to keep reminding everybody that all the stories are different.' Another participant from a state policing agency observed:

*"It's an interesting perspective where you can explain behaviour through either visionary 'this is what I want to achieve' or through a defensive reaction to a particular threat or a frustration. One is reactive and born of frustration, the other is proactive and visionary. It argues against profiling except in the broadest sense in relation to terrorism. I think it's what you do with profiling that's most important, not the profiling in the first place. If I stopped every person walking in a dark alley under 17 years of age, you'd probably prevent 80% of graffiti – but not everybody of that age walking on that alley would be out to graffiti. [Profiling] has some cautious value. If you're not cautious then we have racism, for example."*

A number of community leaders and government stakeholders thought there was no 'single model of pathways to radicalisation' and spoke of the challenges in trying to develop strategies to deflect people from going down the road of radicalisation and extremism. In particular, they cautioned against the consequences of over-simplifying our understanding or analysis of these phenomena:

*"There are too many factors we don't know about and on which we need more research. Mainly we can blame academics who write for a populist audience who reduce radicalisation to these oversimplified drivers. People identify with groups for all sorts of reasons."* (Community leader)

The words of the participant below effectively sum up the implications of the themes and analysis relating to the underlying drivers of radicalisation and extremism we have discussed above:

*"What we're talking about here is a whole series of small things rather than one big thing. This is partly because the ways in which people become radicalised are so individual and communities are so diverse that our responses have to be very carefully targeted and tailored."* (Government stakeholder)

## CHAPTER 3: VIOLENCE AS A SOLUTION OR RESPONSE TO GRIEVANCES AND PROBLEMS

All participants were asked two related questions about violence in relation to the social and political contexts of radicalisation and extremism. First, they were asked about their perceptions concerning the causes of violence and why some people resorted to forms of violence to address grievances or resolve problems. Second, they were asked about whether they felt that violence as a political response could be justified under any circumstances. It is important to note that the use of term 'violence' in the discussion below takes into consideration the intersection of social, personal and political modes of violence that may, singly or in combination, contribute to violent extremism and terrorism.

Broadly speaking, the most significant perceived causes of violence in the context of radicalisation and extremism were identified as:

- Ideological belief systems and allegiances, including religion
- Social, cultural and family norms and experiences that legitimate violence
- Social exclusion, marginalisation and disenfranchisement
- Failure or inadequacy of political processes to effect peaceful change
- Reaction to political suppression and state violence

In relation to whether or not political violence can ever be justified, responses were varied. Two main strands of response emerged from the data:

- There is never any justification for violence
- Violence can be justified in certain circumstances

These perceptions about the causes of and justifications for extremist and political violence are discussed in more detail below.

## The use of violence as a response to grievances or problems

### Belief systems and allegiances

Many participants felt that ideology, religious or other belief systems were one of the main reasons that people resort to violence; as one community leader said, *'I think it's purely ideological and conceptual. You've grown up being exposed to different ideas and then it's about individual inclination to different ideas.'* In some cases, this was seen as an instance of sincere but misguided thinking and values, while others perceived a failure to recognise that meeting peoples' material needs and expectations is not all it takes to sustain a personal sense of wellbeing:

*"Ideology is a dangerous thing. Young people are hungry for it as I was. Young people here have everything. Having all your needs met can be boring if you don't engage them."* (Community leader)

Some participants stressed that religion alone could never be the primary driver for extremist violence in the absence of other converging influences and pointed to the instability of how religious doctrine can be interpreted when it is used to justify violent action:

*"It is not culture or religion that leads people to adopt violence as political solutions. It is their individual experience and life histories that lead to adopting such an approach. In the end, it's how people interpret religious books or teachings, not the teachings themselves necessarily. For example, there are women who won't wear the burkha because their interpretation of the statement in the Koran regarding modesty doesn't mean covering the face, whereas others do interpret that statement to mean face covering. People will always point to certain verses and passages that can prescribe violence, e.g. Christian holy books – but this is still interpretation."* (Community leader)

*"You can't say they're doing it because of religion. You can say they did it because they had hatred, but it's not about religion."* (Focus group participant)

### Religion and hatred can drive violence

However, not everyone agreed with this view. Some participants thought that religious beliefs and convictions, however spuriously derived or constructed, did play a role in justifying what one participant called a 'theology of hate':

*“If one talks to those people who use a political form of Islam and cherry-pick the Koran to find things that justify violence, they can build an ideology that says that violence against anyone who isn’t us – most of the rest of the world – is justifiable because people who are other, who are not righteous, who don’t have the right view of the world, who are not the true believers, are eligible targets. Certain types of political Islamic crusades about 750 years ago are still seen as a justification for doing something in this view. So it works for all sorts of extremist violent behaviour.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“There are people who kill innocent people, for a cause. They may say if you want to serve God then you must kill the non-believers. They kill due to the theology of hate.”*  
(Focus group participant)

Such hatred was not always perceived to be religiously based, however. While many participants had varieties of Islamic fundamentalism or other forms of religious doctrine in mind when thinking about this issue, the perspective of Western Australian participants was also directed toward the use of violence by white supremacists motivated by hatred of other races or cultures, rather than by religious convictions:

*“The biggest threat and the most violent people in Australia are white supremacists. Jack van Tongeren here in Western Australia with the Australian Nationalist Movement – they promote a lot of race hate. Van Tongeren blew up a lot of Chinese restaurants. He is out of jail now. You can see them gathering occasionally here in Perth. Combat 18 in the UK has had an impact here as well.”*  
(Community leader)

### Solidarity with the *ummah*

As also discussed in Chapter 2, some Muslim-background participants thought there were blurred lines between religious convictions and sense of solidarity with or grievance on behalf of the *ummah*:

*“Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia think they are doing a favour for all Muslims by attacking the west, and they misinterpret the hadith or the Koran without mentioning the whole message, they take it out of context.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Religious motivations – when something wrong happens, especially in Muslim countries, and other Muslims sympathise with them, and when they have no medium or approach, they adopt certain aggressive ways to show their sympathy, certain people use that sympathy in a way that can be violent.”* (Focus group participants)

This in turn was perceived to make such individuals particularly susceptible to extremist influence and indoctrination:

*“Religion is so powerful. People who have a faith or follow religion also have a conviction and so if they are infiltrated by someone who sells their message using the religion you can get them to do anything.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“In Australia, the violent approach has been a case of people feeling they should become the torch bearers for a certain ideology, way of thinking, etc. They want to become martyrs for this particular point of view, either locally grown or whether it comes from someone they look up to, a mentor or someone like that, who guides them towards this supposed wisdom.”*  
(Muslim community leader)

### Social, cultural and family norms that legitimate violence

Many participants did not think that family or cultural background contributed significantly to the use of violence, instead placing more emphasis on either socio-political drivers or on personal vulnerabilities and predispositions. Several participants thought, for example, that there is simply a ‘*proportion of people who adopt a violent approach to any situation, not just politics*’ (government stakeholder), and that personal anger, frustration or mental instability could play a key role in whether or not individuals chose violence as a means of dealing with others.

Yet a number of respondents did believe that family background and cultural context contribute strongly to whether or not people may choose violence as a means of solving problems or addressing grievances, particularly when people had experienced early or frequent exposure to violence in the family, culture or community – a perception well supported by research on the social normalisation of violence.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the focus on the normalisation of violence through family history or intergenerational community violence discussed in Chapter 2 above, some respondents also placed special emphasis on the impact of both early and later life experiences of war, violent conflict and trauma in making people more easily led towards violence as a solution:

*“When I was overseas, I remember hearing little kids who were talking about seeing people die or being shot, they were so used to it. And that affects people.”*  
(Focus group participant)

5. See *Changing social and cultural norms supportive of violent behaviour*, World Health Organisation, 2009, p. 3 and ff., [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241598330\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241598330_eng.pdf)

*“When you get children growing up in a fear or survival situation it can retard their development. It can affect their whole psyche, decreases their learning ability, which then feeds into that easy way to radicalise people, offering an opportunity to get ahead through violence rather than other means. The longer we keep people in refugee camps in unsafe environments, the more easily they become the target of extremists. Basically, the needier, the better is the rule in terms of who gets targeted and nurtured as extremists.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

Still other participants felt that for some people, family and/or cultural influences made violence as the first port of call for dispute resolution almost inevitable:

*“Because they don’t know any better. Probably in their family or their culture, that’s how things were resolved, by violence. They don’t know how to make representations to decision makers, to lobby.”*  
(Community leader)

*“Many people [from non-Western cultures] say that when they look to the state to provide justice it is not forthcoming – they have to do it themselves. It becomes an issue of feeling the state is not able to comprehend these issues and that resolution or redress must be sought or affected by some other means.”* (Community leader)

### **Social exclusion, marginalisation and disenfranchisement**

A significant number of participants believed that using violence to solve problems was driven by a sense of economic, social and/or political marginalisation, deprivation, powerlessness, frustration, or hopelessness. For these respondents, individuals or groups who feel routinely excluded from political decision-making and from access to social and political power structures, or who perceive that their claims, perspectives and needs are unheard or unmet by social or political institutions, are far more likely to resort to violence to address these issues than those who have a stronger sense of social and political inclusion and enfranchisement.

### **Poverty and disadvantage**

Some government stakeholders and community leaders linked issues around violence, deprivation and powerlessness to the relative deficit in material comfort and security for disadvantaged groups and communities, noting that when circumstances improved the threat of violence was more likely to recede:

*“As much as there is poverty in developing countries, here [in Australia] there is anger for young people when they see their families not achieving a good lifestyle and economic security. When this is concentrated in highly dense localised areas, e.g. housing estates, this is a pressure cooker and makes it easy to exploit those with a sense of being left out of a good lifestyle.”* (Community leader)

*“In the Irish context, violence was more attractive when times were tough, but when things got better economically and the future looked rosy, the kids were influenced by global culture and didn’t particularly care.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

### **Frustration and powerlessness**

For most respondents who addressed this issue, however, the key point was the use of violence as a means of addressing grievances or disadvantage based on extreme frustration and/or sense of powerlessness in bringing about change:

*“It is the approach of violence to the resolution of their political grievances. The masses feel they are being held back and the only way is violence. The people in power feel the only way to keep power is also through violence. Underlying this is greed, selfishness, power struggles – and I think when you ask this question – we may say that people feel that those in power, in politics, for example, who are causing problems for the mass of people, people will say enough is enough. Too much red tape, feeling powerless and unable to intervene successfully – it’s like teasing a child, do it enough and the child will snap.”* (Community leader)

*“The key issue is where people can really see no other option, or believe they have no means other than violence to resolve their problems – it’s a sense of desperation, the end of the line, a sense of powerlessness.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

### Lack of education or other resources

Others pointed to the problems created when reasonable formal access to political processes is provided but people are unable to use these to achieve their goals, whether through lack of education, insufficient interpersonal skills and resources, low rates of social or political participation, or a range of other structural or social factors. Lack of formal, social and religious education and a corresponding sense of efficacy regarding alternatives to violence were seen as the most important of these issues:

*“When you have an argument and it finishes, then fists start as far as some people understand it. The Australian way of life always solves problems by talking, criticising, argumentation, using verbal means. It’s not common in Australia to use physical violence to resolve conflicts and when it happens it is pretty limited compared to some parts of the world. It’s all to do with the education. Those people who do use violence to resolve political conflicts lack the verbal skills to do otherwise. The cause of conflict is misunderstanding each other and education is the key. When you eliminate misunderstanding, then conflict melts down.”* (Community leader)

*“It is a misinformed approach to resolving grievances – misinformation, not understanding non-violent alternatives and the power of these. I don’t see it as something necessarily caused by frustration – it is more about a sense (or lack) of alternatives, not being educated and skilled in exercising these.”* (Government stakeholder)

### Perceived failure or inadequacy of processes to effect peaceful change

Many participants also felt that various social and political processes were themselves flawed and saw this structural deficit, rather than personal or social disenfranchisement *per se*, as a primary driver of violent action. These respondents suggested that perceived failures or limitations of mainstream social and political processes to deliver improvements in people’s lives were likely causes of the decision to take up violence. They felt these limitations led to loss of trust in mainstream political institutions and structures and lack of engagement with mainstream authorities and support networks, both of which were identified as potentially leading to violent responses:

*“Traditionally I see violence as ... born out of frustration with the current system, or through loss of faith in or abandonment of the current political system. I suspect when you look at everyday domestic violence or other kinds of violence, you can see that our entire community is based on some trust in our processes that then breaks down. Where people lose trust in authority and lose a sense that engagement with family or community is going to be positive for them, that’s when the problems start.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“If you feel deprived you seek other alternatives. I see people who do some radical things who think that violence is a solution. That’s where we come to the point, because in politics you can see the head and I can see the tail. They think, ‘we have come this far politically but nothing is changing – what else can we do?’ [They think] life is meaningless to me, so let’s destroy it.”* (Community youth leader)

### Violence occurs when other options have been exhausted

A number of participants thought that violence as a means of effecting political change was not merely an anomaly of the present, pointing out that history is peppered with examples of people taking up arms against a dominant power structure and fighting for a cause through violence to achieve their goals. However, most respondents across all cohorts believed that one consequence of chronic social exclusion, marginalisation and political disenfranchisement was that people or groups chose violence as a last resort when non-violent means of bringing about change or improvement had been exhausted or when their patience with peaceful political processes that failed to deliver had worn thin:

*“[Violence occurs] when people lose any sense that they can influence the views of others through discussion or reason or engagement, so that their only solution is an extremist perspective. [...] They may have gone down a path and tried to do it by the book and the system, trying to make change, but they’ve been unsuccessful.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“If a group feels they have run out of options, have explored all possibilities to resolve an issue, and have run out of patience and resources and avenues – courts, mediation, community elders, etc. – then I think frustration breeds the desire for justice and equality or for resolution, and this is where people get into an extreme position where they consider [violence] to justify their goals and the achievement of their objectives.”* (Community leader)



### **'You can't hear our voice, so you will hear our noise'**

For focus group participants in particular, the use of political violence to command attention for a cause or grievance when other means of being heard have been unsuccessful was a powerful explanation for why they thought violence could occur. While one focus group respondent thought that *'using violence'* was simply *'an easy means to get attention'*, for many participants this was bound up more deeply with issues around perceived lack of respect for a religion, identity or community, and the desire to crash through barriers that prevented their voices from being heeded by those with the authority and power to respond meaningfully. As one participant noted, the experience of not being heard can characterise not just individuals but entire groups: *'An individual Muslim who has a lack of voice could be a product of the whole community not having a voice.'* (Focus group participant)

*"I think the violence comes, or affects you when you get distressed, and when they ignore you. But if you respect somebody else's opinions, then there wouldn't be any of those actions."* (Focus group participant)

*"A big thing about terrorism is that it gets the message across if you have no other way of venting your frustration."* (Focus group participant)

*"It's when you run out of options. They think, I can't go to the UN, but I can pick up a gun."* (Focus group participant)

Several community leaders agreed with this view, noting that while as a strategic political tool terrorist violence against society or the state was generally not successful, it had greater impact as a means of getting one's cause onto the political radar. However, some focus group participants disagreed that violence was unsuccessful as a strategic tool, believing it might fare better in driving change when other means had failed or were unavailable. These participants tended to feel that non-violent means of redress were ineffective for at least some parts of the community who struggle to get their voices and issues on the agenda:

*"Often these organisations do calculations, aiming to gain the maximum affect, with little effort, [and find that] violence works. Non-violent political movements haven't historically worked very well, except for India, civil rights in the USA, and apartheid in South Africa, but not many have felt that that is a viable option in the first place."* (Focus group participant)

*"Maybe [violence arises because of a] feeling that doing the normal ways and writing letters of complaint doesn't help and isn't making a difference. For example, when we sent those letters to Channel 9, it didn't change their views."<sup>6</sup>* (Focus group participant)

### **Violence as a political shock tactic**

Closely related to the use of violence to gain attention for a cause or grievance was the perception that violence has some utility as a political shock tactic when directed against mainstream structures and authority, particularly in times of conflict and instability. A number of participants from the government stakeholder and community leader cohorts saw this as a compelling reason for why violence becomes attractive to those who feel that other means of achieving social or political change are inaccessible or ineffective:

*"In contexts where the economic or social circumstances are in crisis, [violent extremism] can grow because people are being made to feel they need to do things that are harmful to others because of their problems – you can't hear our voice so you will hear our noise."* (Community leader)

*"Violence is used by some terrorist groups to shock us out of some kind of ideological slumber. There may be political answers. It may be such fundamental change and so systemic that it requires a radical break – straightforward revolutionary politics."* (Government stakeholder)

6. This is a reference to the *60 Minutes* (March 2011) and *A Current Affair* (May 2011) television broadcast interviews with controversial Australian Muslim convert Ibrahim Siddiq-Conlon. A number of other project participants also mentioned the same Muslim community group letter to Channel 9, which deplored what they saw as the over-reliance by Channel 9 in using controversial, anti-Australian figures such as Siddiq-Conlon whom they feel do not represent the majority of Australian Muslims and a corresponding lack of balance in presenting a diversity of mainstream Muslim viewpoints. See also Chapter 6 below.

### Violence as a reaction to political suppression and state violence

The final theme in the context of drivers for violence relates to the issue of political suppression and violence perpetrated by a state against its own population. Some participants noted that when a state curtails or denies the rights and freedom of all or some of its peoples, when the demand for such rights is responded to by repressive measures, and where there are no legitimate democratic channels to express grievances or negotiate dissent and diversity, then a resort to violence as a means of bringing about political change is far more likely. The events of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, which steadily gathered pace and commanded global attention during the time that interviews and focus groups were being conducted, were given as examples by many participants as instances in which people were compelled to use violence against the oppression of their state. As one government stakeholder observed, when *'the state is seen as wielding violence to maintain the status quo it is seen as legitimate to use violence to combat this as a strategic choice.'*

Another government stakeholder noted that even prior to the events of the Arab Spring, political suppression of dissenting groups in the Middle East offered a clear path to radicalisation and extremism, and emphasised the importance of political enfranchisement for new arrivals in Australia for similar reasons:

*"The Muslim brotherhood in Egypt was suppressed and suppression radicalised them. There are a number of people from non-English speaking backgrounds who are elected to public office in Australia relative to proportion of population. But compulsory voting means people feel involved and this can help them integrate better. If they cannot get involved in politics they could get frustrated. The number of ethnic minorities in Australian politics is low."* (Government stakeholder)

And community leaders made similar points about both past and present responses to state-led oppression:

*"No one lifted a finger against Mubarak but we know through the people we associate with how violent he was, how his regime suppressed people who protested against the regime. It started as non-violent but towards the end it did become violent, and other countries are going through the same situation now. It may start off as a non-violent movement but along the way if they are not being heard and getting results, obviously people will go to take other measures."* (Community leader)

### Can violence ever be justified?

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, participants across the three cohorts held different views on this issue which can be grouped into two main categories: those who felt that political violence can never be justified under any circumstances whatsoever, and those who felt that under certain circumstances or for certain reasons some modes of political violence could be justified.

### There is never any justification for violence

Some participants held very firm, even absolute views on this topic, believing that violence of the kind they associated with terrorism can never be justified regardless of the cause, provocation or circumstances. For many in the community, this was often based on their understanding that terrorism involves the targeting and death of ordinary people who are simply going about their everyday lives:

*"No, I don't think terrorism can ever be justified. I understand terrorism to mean indiscriminate violence against people merely in order to make them afraid. So when Israel describes an attack on a military post as terrorism, I don't accept that as terrorism. But if someone blows themselves up on a bus stop, that to me is certainly terrorism, and I've always believed that if people are going to listen to you and hear you, you must be prepared categorically to say that, for example, suicide bombers terrorising civilians is terrorism. I don't think there is a moral or political case for terrorism."* (Community leader)

*"No, we don't believe in violence. You cannot justify Bali or September 11 in any way."* (Focus group participant)

Predictably, the broader political views of participants at times informed their responses. One community leader brought a feminist perspective to her perception of this topic: *'Can terrorism ever be justified? That's a categorical no. I tell men, if you spend the money you spend on arms on food, the world would be a different place'*, while a male community leader from a Pakistani background felt that Gandhi's commitment to non-violence under all circumstances provided a guiding principle even for the political crisis in Libya current at the time of interview:

*“Look, I don’t think violence of any sort can ever be justified. I’m more a Gandhi believer in that respect. Even in relation to current situations such as Libya, Gandhi sets the example. In India, Gandhi showed that a non-violent situation was possible – even though I shouldn’t be saying this as a Pakistani!”* (Community leader)

Other participants believed that the use of violence merely promotes a vicious cycle of violent response and counter-response:

*“Violence begets violence. Look at violence in the community context and the family context, and every act of violence becomes an excuse for another round of payback or retribution – it’s self-perpetuating. Depending on which side you’re on, you can always find a justification. You can’t do anything about the past, but you can do something about the future – but if you go down the path of violence, it will never be any different than it is now.”* (Government stakeholder)

Some Muslim participants were particularly resolute in rejecting violence when it comes to non-combatants, and felt that those who committed violence against ‘innocents’ in the name of Islam or any other religion was a profound distortion of religious doctrine:

*“In Islam, if you read the protocol of going to war, it says you cannot harm women, children or animals. Religion has stipulated specifically what you can and cannot do. If someone kills innocent people the Q’uran forbids this with specific statements. It depends on what you define as political violence and terrorism. Even if you justified 110% the reason to go to war, if you are not sure then better to leave them [the innocents] from the point of view of the Koran – abstain from violent action.”* (Community leader)

Other focus group participants, however, were more equivocal. Respondents in this group acknowledged that while they themselves did not condone violence, they could understand the reasoning and motivation behind such actions:

*“You’re saying innocent people, but the thing is you have to see the back story, know what a terrorist thinks, I’ve seen a lot of documentaries, and they think – you killed me, you killed my family, my people, so I’m going to be the one to stand up and take revenge, I’m going to take the law into my own hands, as revenge for killing my people. I know they’re innocent, but that’s the way they think.”* (Focus group participant)

*“To base an attack on religion is not right. But if you were attacked and you quote the Qur’an and say it says you must defend yourself, it is ok but not to kill innocent people.”* (Focus group participant)

A number of focus group participants also pointed to what they considered the inherent hypocrisy of condemning terrorist violence by extremist groups targeting innocent people while at the same time sanctioning the violence that sees innocent civilians killed by Western government armed forces in military conflicts such as Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere:

*“When we talk about terrorism, it is only if high value targets are killed that it’s terrorism, for poor people’s deaths there’s nothing. We have many drone attacks in Pakistan and they kill many innocent people, but this is not terrorism. There are double standards. When any innocent person loses their life it is not good.”* (Focus group participant)

Those who did not believe that political violence under any circumstances was ever justified also stressed the importance of understanding that positive change can be achieved through non-violent approaches to conflict resolution:

*“Listening to the Palestinian story the other day on the ABC<sup>7</sup> was very powerful. I cannot imagine what that doctor who lost all his daughters went through and [how he] still stayed peaceful and continued to stand very strong so that he didn’t want to embrace violence. He continued to do the things that he wanted to do and to use non-violence to resolve the issues. This was a very, very powerful message for me.”* (Community leader)

### **Violence can be justified in certain circumstances**

In the domestic context, virtually no government stakeholders or community leaders thought there could be any justification for resorting to violence within democratic societies such as Australia:

*“It comes back to the social compact here. We are a secular country and we expect people to abide by our set of laws. But we are a democracy so if you don’t like the laws you can protest or seek to get them changed. But if you can’t, it doesn’t entitle you to go out and throw bombs.”* (Government stakeholder)

7. ‘Palestinian doctor promotes peace amid tragedy’, *PM*, ABC Radio, 18 May 2011, [www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2011/s3220529.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2011/s3220529.htm)

*“Domestically I’d say no, because of our open democracy. Even in the most extreme circumstances my own answer would still be no – it is not the violence that achieves the change. There are other ways of attracting attention and support and violence is not one of them.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

However, a number of respondents also drew careful distinctions between state- and non-state-sponsored violence and between combatants and non-combatants in both Australian and overseas contexts:

*“On the killing of innocent people such as through suicide bombing – this is cold-blooded murder and it is absolutely forbidden. No matter how desperate the circumstances, it is not permissible. In the situation of a war, they are under certain guidelines, and they would be able to harm those who are fighting them, but not their families or friends, innocent bystanders. It is the same for any other conflict, including other forms of political violence.”* (Community leader)

And one government stakeholder felt this reflects a ‘split set of values’ in relation to domestic versus foreign policy:

*“As a government official working in an Australian context, my answer would have to be that it can’t be justified. [But] looking at the rebels in Libya – we support them as a government. The set of values we apply is a split set of values. We as governments can be accused of hypocrisy because of this. We’re not arming the Libyan rebels, but the Australian government’s position is one of wanting to remove a totalitarian dictator.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

Some government stakeholders and community leaders questioned whether we can really draw such clear lines between legitimate and illegitimate uses of political violence, particularly where democratic structures are fragile or non-existent:

*“When states argue they have the monopoly on use of violence, others say why can you use violence and we can’t? Political theory says we can’t make this distinction so easily.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“If the state can’t respond to the people’s will, it is a sickness of democracy in those states. They are so sick that they ignore the needs of the nation and don’t acknowledge that the needs of the nation have changed. Then they feel the pressure and then it explodes on them. I don’t see this as political violence – it is a legitimate uprising even if it involves violence. If democracy was working in those places, these things wouldn’t happen.”*  
(Community leader)

However, an overwhelming majority of participants, including government stakeholders, thought that in certain situations violence against the state can be justified. For example, a significant number of respondents commented that political violence against the state could be justified when there is a threat to democracy, human rights, civil liberties or insurgency against oppression by an occupying power:

*“International law says people can use violence against the state if the state is behaving with extreme oppression against its own people. This would not be terrorist but legitimate insurgency against an oppressive regime.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“Political violence can be justified if there is oppression – it is the duty of the people to stop that oppression, particularly if the government does not address the issue. It is first the responsibility of the government to stop oppression, but if they don’t, it is the responsibility of the people. If the government is doing the oppression itself, it is the right and duty of the people to stand up and stop that oppression. It is the responsibility of foreign governments also to step in and help the oppressed people.”*  
(Community leader)

In such cases, several participants noted that the goals of both state and non-state, or terrorist, violence can be the same: to protect one’s system or world from a perceived threat:

*“To take al-Qaeda’s perspective, they are fighting against a globalised immoral system of capital that they think is destroying values and morality, so we need to understand the violence in relation to that which you are seeking to protect from some kind of threat.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“But if the army is surrounding you, as in Libya, you have to defend yourself if you are surrounded – that’s different. But you are not the one to start this. There is a fine line between defending yourself and your rights and taking away the rights of others through using violence to infringe on the rights of others.”* (Community leader)

Those focus group participants who felt that political violence could be justified in certain circumstances largely fell into the categories of these last two themes: those who felt violence could be justified when the state no longer responded to or actively worked against its own people, and those who saw violence as legitimated to protect people or groups from a perceived threat.

Focus group respondents who thought that political violence against the state was an understandable response when people were perceived to be oppressed commented:

*"My view is that it can be justified, and when the shoe's on the other foot you see that. ... Look at Palestine, the violence there can definitely be justified."*  
(Focus group participants)

*"Hezbollah are not terrorists, they are the government. However, if I say that, my friends tell me to be quiet because non-Muslims would see Hezbollah as political terrorists."*  
(Focus group participant)

## Conclusion

### Causes of violence: the 'perfect storm'

Most participants perceived the causes of and justifications for extremist violence to revolve around the 'perfect storm' paradigm, in which some or all of the vectors of personal vulnerabilities, environmental circumstances, group dynamics and proximity to extremist narratives or influences converge to enable or encourage violent responses to grievances or problems: *'I guess it's that combination – if a person feels disengaged from existing processes, they have grievances, they feel they are not part of the society or can't participate in these means, and it is suggested to them that violence is a legitimate way of achieving their aims, they can respond to this'*. (Government stakeholder)

In keeping with this perspective, the most common drivers of violent action highlighted by participants were often seen as interrelated or co-dependent. Responses ranged across personal factors, such as mistrust, family history, early exposure to violence, peer influence and lack of educational or other personal resources; socio-cultural factors such as ethnic or cultural background, social environment, marginalisation, limited or no sense of other options, and the desire to 'be somebody' through taking violent action; and political factors such as ideology, religious or political solidarity, a strong sense of personal and/or political grievance or disenfranchisement, perceived inability to effect peaceful political change, and the suppression of political dissent – often violent in its own right – that leads to a violent counter-reaction.

### Justification of violence under some circumstances

In relation to whether political violence could ever be justified, a strong majority of government stakeholders argued that it could be justified as a legitimate response to state-sponsored oppression or the denial of basic civil liberties and human rights. However, virtually no government stakeholders or community leaders thought that political violence in Australia could be justified because of the strength and accessibility of domestic democratic systems and structures. Strong distinctions were drawn between perceived legitimate political insurgencies targeting governments and the military, versus terrorist violence targeting non-combatants and civil society as a whole.

Those who did feel that violence could be justified under certain circumstances, particularly in the focus groups, thought that violence as a response to a perceived threat by a government or occupying power against one's own people or group was legitimate. Several government and community respondents also pointed to the politically shifting sands of how we define and draw the line between when violence may be considered legitimate and by whom. However, a minority of participants felt that violence could not be justified under any circumstances whatsoever and where this view was held it was expressed strongly and with deep conviction, frequently reflecting an underlying philosophical, moral or religious set of beliefs.

## CHAPTER 4: THE EFFICACY OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES TO ADDRESS POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

In this portion of the study, participants were asked for their views on whether democratic processes were an effective means of addressing political grievances. In thinking about this issue, the vast majority of respondents in all three cohorts felt that democracy was the best possible system available for a reasonably fair, open and non-violent pursuit of political claims and differences. However, a number of criticisms and reservations about the limits of democracy under certain circumstances and in relation to certain groups were also expressed.

As we discuss in greater detail below, many participants thought that democratic processes are a robust and effective means of addressing political grievances. However, others felt that, while democracy may be the ‘least flawed’ system we have, it also has limitations and challenges, including:

- Democracy is only as good as the people who participate in its systems.
- Democracy does not always deliver justice or live up to its own principles.
- Democracy can frustrate through the slow pace of its processes.
- Democracy privileges majority rule at the expense of minority needs and concerns.
- Democracy does not always tolerate difference as well as people think.
- Democracy cannot benefit those who lack capacity to engage with it.
- More education about democracy is needed to keep it robust and viable.
- Sometimes democracy is not compatible with religion.

### **Democratic processes are effective in addressing political grievances**

A clear majority of participants felt that democracy was effective in allowing people to legitimately express grievances, engage in lawful forms of protest over events at home and abroad and progress peaceful domestic change. While for many this did not mean that democracy was a perfect system incapable of improvement, democracy was nevertheless perceived largely in the following way: ‘Churchill summed it up by saying, “Democracy is the worst system apart from all the others.” It is a flawed system but the alternatives are worse – so democracy is the ‘least worst’ system.’ (Government stakeholder)

### **Democracy is valued in Australia**

In the Australian domestic context, most government stakeholders and new arrivals or migrants from other countries – in many cases, those with non-democratic governments or else with governments felt to have betrayed their democratic ideals – spoke with strong feeling about what they perceived to be the advantages of democracy over other political systems:

*“Democracy in Australia is so strong that many believe they can positively contribute to the development of the country, and if ever we are to experience such a [radical or extremist] group, those people will not be supported.”* (Focus group participant)

*“I like democracy [in Australia]. It’s more fair and equal and gives individuals a chance to speak up. In my country [of origin], although it is a democracy we have a lot of political nuisance – democracy is just a word and really they just do what they want.”* (Community leader)

*Not in Australia, no. That situation may vary in other countries, where democratic processes may not work so well, but there are not significant limits or problems here.* (Government stakeholder)

### **Freedom of speech is democracy’s most important asset**

For those in this group who felt positively about democracy’s efficacy, freedom of speech was the most highly valued attribute:

*In Australia, one good thing is you can express yourself, people here are more down to earth, people will tell you if they don’t like you and you can accept that and get on with it. I think freedom of speech is not a problem in Australia. I say what I like and no one has touched my shoulder yet.* (Community leader)

*In Afghanistan or Sudan, you can’t sit and talk like this. But we are having it here.* (Focus group participant)

*I don’t think there are any limitations to the process of democracy. Given our support for freedom of speech and expression of thought, you have the capacity to say almost anything you want within the law.* (Government stakeholder)

### Democracy is only as good as the social contract that supports it

Other government stakeholders and some community leaders, while they also saw democracy as an effective means of dealing with political grievances, were more measured in their assessment, pointing to perceived risks and challenges in maintaining the viability of democratic systems under a complex range of social and policy pressures. For these respondents, democracy works as well as the people who understand, value and participate in the system. However, participants in this group also suggested it can become fragile if the social contract that supports democratic processes is challenged or ignored:

*I think the social compact we have in Australia is that democracy has to work in this way. You either write to your member and it achieves nothing, you vote and the same outcome, you write letters to paper or protest on the streets, but that's as far as you can take it. That's our social contract. For some asylum seekers, for example, [the social contract that limits political violence] is why they come [to Australia]. If you follow the political process and this does not lead to an outcome, it might lead to violence. (Government stakeholder)*

### The limitations of democracy

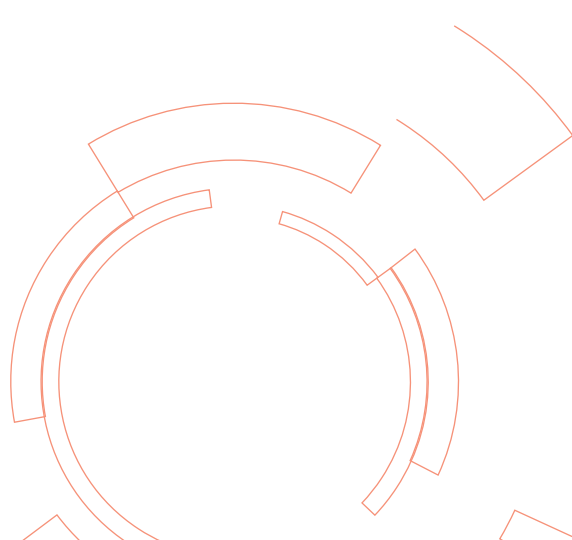
As noted above, while only a tiny minority of participants directly questioned whether democracy was a good system for meeting people's needs and concerns, a range of critiques around the limitations of democratic processes were also identified. For some participants, democracy works better in theory than in practice and does not always deliver justice or live up to its own principles. Accordingly, these perceptions largely revolved around the practical *realpolitik* of democracy in particular contexts and with respect to particular groups, rather than representing a fundamental disagreement with the precepts of democratic rule *per se*.

### There is only so much democracy can achieve

A number of participants felt that democracy had inherent limitations in dealing with the array of political problems and grievances that can arise in a globalised environment with wide disparities in ideology, social structures and the distribution of political and material resources. This view reflects the concerns that a range of participants had when thinking about the limitations of democracy in both domestic and overseas contexts. For example:

*"We hold up democracy as an ideal but it is far from ideal. Where the grievance is foreign policy – US support for Israel which is at the forefront of any terrorist organisation who wants to be heard – these countries say we can't do anything about that. Democracy can give people a voice but it doesn't necessarily give them satisfaction. Every terrorist organisation that has put down its weapons and participated in the democratic political process has resulted in a splinter faction forming that continues the violence – ETA-M might be an example. And we have yet to see what happens with Sri Lanka. So, democracy on its own is not the only answer. [...] People [may] feel that in a so-called democratic society they are still not getting justice. This is the limit of democracy because the country is not listening to the people. This breeds radicalisation and extremism." (Community leader)*

A few Muslim community leaders were also worried by what they perceived as the tendency for democracy to emphasise political and civic freedoms without a corresponding emphasis on the social responsibilities and obligations of citizens in a democratic environment. A perceived imbalance between rights and responsibilities was, for these respondents, a fundamental flaw in the way they see democracy playing out in various societies:





*“The problem with democracy is that it allows for independent freedom and liberties but generally, by providing that, the rules of responsibility get thrown out of the window. Thus what happens is that democracy leads to chaos, social breakdown and the disintegration of society. In a lot of countries where democracy has been applied they’ve disintegrated into civil war because the responsibilities that come with individual freedom have not been part of the process – this makes it a dangerous thing. [However], out of all the systems that we have, democracy is the least flawed one, so to speak.”* (Community leader)

One Muslim community leader, however, felt that the main problem was not the lack of balance between rights and responsibilities but the deeper imbalance between democracy as theory and democracy as practice for transnational Muslim communities:

*“I would distinguish between democracy as theory, which has a lot of benefit, and the practice of democracy, in which over the last two centuries, [we have seen that] the people running the show are the problem. Therefore the system does not facilitate any solution. How do you make the [Muslim] voice heard outside the mainstream without using violence? The voice will only be properly be heard when you establish the Caliphate, which will give us our own state, our own army, and then we will have equal footing with others. We seek to establish the Caliphate and this is where the influence will come from. This has been a long term objective but we think it is imminent.”* (Community leader)

The power of lobbying and political interest groups, who were seen to employ a variety of methods (including media) to close out the voices of ordinary communities seeking to get their message across, was also a concern for a few community leaders:

*“The problem is the extent of the lobbying and the political interest groups that can influence governments, as well as the influence of media. There is a level at which people can end up being frustrated – not to the point of taking up arms, but still... So when democracy gets corrupted or overtaken by large interest groups, this is when the problems start. But there is also something like the tyranny of the masses – for example, support for slavery in the US all those years ago. But any system is flawed, and the alternatives are far more horrendous in my view.”* (Community leader)

#### **Democracy can move too slowly**

Some government stakeholders suggested that a key limitation of democratic process is the bureaucratic and time consuming nature of its processes. They were concerned that this can wear thin for those who feel rapid and urgent change is required who then become frustrated with the slow pace of change. Such frustration was seen as a trigger for those inclined to seek alternatives to democratic avenues for addressing grievances or problems – for example, those who split from broader social movements ‘to take direct action because they see the political process as too slow – this is the exigency argument’ (government stakeholder).

*“The amount of time it takes for social movements to achieve results in democratic systems frustrates or can frustrate people who think change is not happening quickly enough. I think we see that over time in a variety of social movements.”* (Government stakeholder)

#### **Democracy favours the majority at the expense of minorities**

A large number of those participants who identified limitations to democratic systems cited the issue of majority rule and the marginalisation of minorities under a democratic system as a key limitation of democracy. For some this related to the inherent challenge within a democracy of having to make decisions that inevitably will not achieve 100% consensus, while others perceived a more direct link between majority culture and majority rule at the expense of minority voices and perspectives:

*“The majority vote is an important aspect of democracy, and for minorities democracy doesn’t solve any of their problems. The minorities know in advance their candidate will not win. While they can participate in the process, they know they will still be the losers at the end of the process. I think it’s hard to sell democracy to these people. At a local Australian micro-level I think the best thing that can happen is giving these people a valid voice. Five years ago when John Howard had a Muslim reference group happening, there was a lot of excitement about being given a platform and validity.”* (Community leader)

*“When you talk about democracy, what does that mean? For example, when we were sending troops to Afghanistan there were rallies against it, but they were ignored. In the US, society is dictated by the Jewish society. It is the same here. We don’t recognise Hamas. There are double standards.”* (Focus group participant)

### **Democracy does not always tolerate cultural difference well**

Another critique of democracy across the three participant cohorts was its failure to sufficiently address fundamental differences in world view between people from different cultural backgrounds, which in turn was seen to lead to problems with how modern democracies deal with incommensurable ideas about justice and power. For some, this was an inherent blind-spot of democracy at the level of political theory:

*“Democracy itself disavows its own intolerance under the guise of being open and tolerant. But it’s built upon a set of historical and cultural beliefs, values and exclusions.”* (Government stakeholder)

For others, however, the challenge was perceived to exist mainly in the context of living in a multicultural society that must acknowledge and respond meaningfully to diversity and difference at all levels of the social and political environment. As one community leader pointed out, *‘You either choose to go with the crowd or stand out. The moment that you start having different views you start to stand out and it’s not easy, you will be hated by certain people – but we have to fight for social rights and social issues. We can’t always be asleep’*:

*“Maybe it is the people behind the democratic processes. We need to appreciate that Muslims are part of the non-Muslim world and we want the same. We subscribe to Islam but we still want peace and happiness.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Democracy and multiculturalism can work together, but the challenge...is to understand the social context [... and] be prepared to listen to that and understand that substantive equality is critical – this means people being treated equally which sometimes means treating people differently. The limit is the lack of understanding and preparedness to deal with the complexities and circumstances of diversity that require a more diversified response than a one-size-fits-all template.”* (Government stakeholder, policing agency)

### **Democracy cannot benefit those who lack capacity to engage with it**

Related to issues around democracy and multiculturalism, a key concern for participants in all three cohorts was the perception that to fully benefit from democratic processes, you need to have the means and the capacity to engage fully with these. Many participants were keenly aware that not all communities or minority groups have the social, cultural and/or educational bridging capital necessary to do this, and felt this curtailed the effectiveness of democracy as a system in which grievances could be peacefully addressed and resolved as a result:

*“There is a lack of capability amongst some groups, especially ethnic and migrant communities – it’s easier for an organised, white, maybe Christian organisation to write an effective grant proposal. Capacity building is needed to help take advantage of democratic processes.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“The democratic process within Australia doesn’t work for African communities because they are not on a level playing field with other Australian communities.”* (African-background focus group participant)

### **We need more education about democracy and its uses**

Accordingly, there was strong support amongst participants for increased education around participatory democracy: its flexibility, its accommodation of diversity and differing viewpoints, and most of all how to intervene effectively through participation in democratic processes to ensure that diverse voices and standpoints are represented effectively. One community leader felt that *‘you have to keep selling the concept’* to those who may be mistrustful or cynical about what democracy can deliver, while others thought the level of education both about democracy specifically and also more generally needed to be improved. As one participant noted, democracy is not a *‘magical medicine’* that is simply administered and then forgotten; it has to be supported, managed and reinforced at various points and in various ways:

*“If you give people opportunities and feedback and support for their ideas and help educate them about better ways to do things, this is the way to go. If people cannot come up with good ideas there is a problem with our education. We can’t blame democracy because democracy has to be managed – it is not a magical medicine.”* (Community leader)

*“I think the problem is not with democracy itself but with a failure to understand how accommodating and flexible it is. People impose their own limits but may not understand just how robust it really can be.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

### **Democracy is sometimes incompatible with religion**

As the discussion above suggests, a clear majority of participants felt that on balance they admired democracy and were comfortable living within a democratic Australia, despite the deficiencies or limitations they highlighted. All of the participants in this group also thought that promoting and managing democracy in the context of multiculturalism was in some sense the best evidence of why democratic systems are worth having, whatever the challenges may be in ensuring that alternative views and needs are heard and met to the greatest extent possible within the limits of democratic rule.

A number of Muslim participants, in particular, were at pains to dismantle what they saw as the widespread perception that Islam had neither a current interest in nor any tradition of democracy, particularly where this is broadly conceived as consultation with the polity:

*“Democracy is not something which the Muslim communities are ignorant of. Although Muslims had kingdoms, they always had close knit consultation with communities. [...] From where we sit, democracy is THE solution. Even very ardent supporters of other causes in Libya, etc. still want democratic systems and the freedoms that go with them.”*  
(Muslim community leaders)

However, a sizeable minority of participants perceived that, at times, democracy and religious beliefs could collide and that in many respects they were fundamentally incompatible. This view was expressed by both Muslim and non-Muslim respondents across all three participant cohorts. Community leaders and government stakeholders tended to dominate in contributing this perspective. For some Muslim community leaders, the main concern was that Western-style democracy was an alien concept in Islamic countries because the liberal democratic separation between religion and government contradicted the notion of an Islamic state in which such distinctions are untenable:

*“The BBC would have you believe that they are all calling for democracy in places like Egypt, Syria, etc. in the ‘Arab Spring’. But Muslims in these places don’t mean ‘Western’ democracy. What Muslims mean is accountable government, a chance to vote, a chance to choose who rules them. What they don’t mean is Western liberal democracy, in which the people are sovereign and secularism is therefore also sovereign. So you need to go beyond the superficial level to understand they are calling for an accountable system of government but with God as sovereign. The essence of Western democracy is that people are sovereign. If you ask Muslims whether people should be sovereign or whether God should be sovereign they would have a definitive answer. So the only way to reconcile this is to understand what Islamic people believe about democracy.”*  
(Community leader)

In a related vein, some participants thought that incompatible values and precepts could not be assimilated either easily, or in some cases at all, either by diaspora communities or those populations into which they are integrating:

*“A pluralist secular society requires that the individual be able to distance themselves from their own set of beliefs in order to respect and tolerate the beliefs of others that may not be cognate with their own values. It’s asking individuals to de-historicise and de-culturalise themselves.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“But to practice democracy you must give up many aspects of your faith. In certain areas such as marriage law, inheritance law, etc. you can’t be democratic in that – Islamic laws take precedence and they are different.”* (Community leader)

*“A lot of those I talk to, who are small ‘I’ liberal thinkers, have worked in refugee centres, etc., and they have a nagging discomfort. When they are really pushed about what it is, it’s the contradiction between Islam’s sense and expectation about freedom of expression of religion, but the freedom to leave that religion is not held up to be valued among Muslims generally. When that’s come up in discussion, it’s been something of an issue: how can you marry that? How can you demand from your new society or expect it to value these things in the Australian context, which are expressions of our values, but not uphold all [of them] yourself?”*  
(Focus group participant)

For government stakeholders, however, the primary thrust was the broader incompatibility between secular democracy and any form of religious doctrine that seeks to govern society structurally rather than just offering spiritual guidance to its adherents:

*“There is a section of the community for whom democracy can never be seen as a legitimate means of resolution because of religion. [Moreover,] secular liberal democratic societies have not been able to provide a kind of policy or government framework that can deal with a strong religious paradigm.”*  
(Government stakeholders)

## Conclusion

The theme of democracy and efficacy in addressing political grievances elicited very detailed, thoughtful and in-depth responses from community leaders and government stakeholders, suggesting that this issue is a topic of current interest and concern for many from these cohorts. Focus group participants contributed less to this portion of the discussion, however. This disparity in responses may reflect the older and better educated age groups from which community leader and government stakeholder participants were drawn compared with the largely youthful cohort in the focus groups. For those who did contribute to this theme, the vast majority of respondents were positive in their assessment of democracy as a political system that is reasonably strong, capable of responding within limits to diversity of viewpoint and orientation, and that is the best available political system for guaranteeing highly valued rights and freedoms such as freedom of speech, movement, political beliefs and the right to practice religion or other forms of cultural identity free from discrimination and persecution.

Democracy was described as accommodating, flexible, robust and capable of absorbing and respecting a variety of perspectives up to a point. Being able to speak freely without fear of imprisonment, sanction or other forms of persecution was particularly important to those participants who hailed from countries or regions where freedom of speech was curtailed or absent.

However, a number of challenges and limitations for democracy as a political system were also identified by participants. These included the perception that while democracy as a system may be admirable, it must involve full participation and good understanding of its capacity by the people who are subject to its rule. Democracy was seen by some not always to deliver justice or live up to its own principles, with many examples offered of hypocrisy or failure to live up to expectations, particularly in the realm of having an impact on foreign policy, for example in relation to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the ongoing Israel/Palestine conflict. Some Muslim community leaders in particular were concerned about the perceived lack of balance between the rights and freedoms offered by democratic societies without commensurate responsibilities on the part of their citizens, while both community leaders and government stakeholders pointed to the gap between democracy in theory and democracy in practice. Overall, most critiques of democracy were rooted in the *realpolitik* of democracy in action rather than with any fundamental disagreement with its premises or precepts as a political system, though a minority dissented with this view.

Democracy can frustrate people because of its bureaucratic structure and the slow pace of its processes, and this was identified as a risk by some participants, particularly government stakeholders, in relation to fostering receptiveness to extremist or violent means of achieving social change. Some participants were concerned by the extent to which, in its privileging of rule by majority at the polling booth, minority needs and concerns may go unheard or unmet, and this was also identified as a potential risk factor in relation to radicalisation and extremism.

Other risk factors included the perception that democracy does not always tolerate cultural difference as well as people think, and that democracy cannot benefit those who lack capacity to engage with it, which in turn can discourage or alienate them from relying on democratic processes to resolve their grievances. One solution to these issues offered by participants was that more education about democracy is needed to keep it robust and viable, and more attention is required to ensuring that the least advantaged in our communities are provided with the means to fully use and benefit from democratic systems.

A minority of participants thought that at times, democracy is not compatible with religion. For some participants, particularly those in government, this was because of broader convictions about the incompatibility between secular government and religion. For a number of Muslim community leaders, however, the concern was the contradiction between Islamic and non-Islamic understandings of the state in relation to how liberal democracy may be understood in Muslim contexts.

## CHAPTER 5: PERCEIVED LINKS BETWEEN ISLAM, EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

Participants were asked whether in their view there is a generally perceived link between Islam, extremism and terrorism, and if so, why they thought this was the case. While only a small minority of respondents held this view personally, an overwhelming majority believed that there is a general and well-established perceived link between Islam and terrorist ideology and activity in public discourse and the community at large. The primary driver of this link for the majority of participants was media, on which respondents had complex and wide-ranging views, as discussed below.

Other non-media drivers of the link between Islam, extremism and terrorism included the successful dissemination of Islamist versions of what Islam stands for; non-Muslim perceptions of and prejudices about Muslims and Islam; lack of contact and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims; an over-emphasis on the visible difference of Muslims from mainstream Australian communities; the perpetuation of an 'us and them' mentality by non-Muslims and Muslims alike; the influence of the post-9/11 environment; lack of educational opportunities to learn more about Islam; the lack of publicity for diverse viewpoints across Muslim communities, and the lack of general community awareness that we should be concerned with forms of extremism other than the Islamic variety, such as right-wing extremism.

The influence of this perceived link on participants' own views of Muslims and of Islam as a religion was asked of non-Muslim participants and their responses fell into two broad categories: those who said it had little or no impact on how they viewed Muslims and Islam, and those who said it had spurred them to develop greater knowledge of Islam and contact with Muslims in order to challenge either their own ignorance or what they saw as the biased and ill-informed views of others. However, a minority of non-Muslim participants did say that for them, a perceived rise in Islamic religious fundamentalism has raised questions and increased their sense of threat concerning Islam.

### **Media drives perceptions of the relationship between Islam and terrorism**

The most dominant theme emerging from both interview and focus group participants around the drivers for this perceived link was the role of media and its influence on mainstream communities. Most participants believed that:

- media sensationalism, stereotyping and distortion;
- media oversimplification or 'dumbing down' of issues around Muslims, extremism and terrorism; and
- the propensity of mainstream and particularly commercial media to marginalise, dismiss or ignore diverse and/or moderate views across Muslim communities were largely responsible for forging a perceived link between Islam and terrorism in the minds of the general Australian population.

In addition, a number of participants attributed the commercial imperative of media organisations – to sell more papers or attract more advertising – as the dominant feature of media angles on Muslims and terrorism, with truthful, accurate or balanced reporting taking a back seat to the economic drivers of the news cycle.

### **Media is biased against Muslims**

The view that media is biased and therefore responsible, at least in part, for fostering and reinforcing a perceived link between Islam and terrorism was held by government and community participants alike. As one government stakeholder asked rhetorically: *'What proportion of the Australian community recognises that the media reporting on Islam and terrorism is largely responsible for driving this perception?'* In many cases such views reflected a more general level of cynicism and disenchantment with commercial media in particular (see Chapter 6):

*"Definitely, a lot of people [make this link between Islam and terrorism] and the media makes this happen. I'm a Muslim and I find this very sad. It's just stereotyping."*  
(Community leader)

*"I think the link comes from media and from how we have articulated the issues in Australia. ... Here we have the Plymouth Brethren but no one calls them 'extremists' even though they hold some very extreme views. ... I think 70% of the public are fed complete rubbish by commercial media that severely limits our ability to make informed independent judgments about the dilemmas we face."*  
(Government stakeholders)

### **Media marginalises moderate Muslim viewpoints**

Moreover, some participants felt keenly that marginalisation of more moderate Muslim views is commonplace, and that such views are routinely dismissed by a globalised media culture intent on sensationalising issues around Islam and extremism wherever possible:

“No one really listens. Not much attention is given by media to [Muslims] saying, ‘violence is wrong’, as opposed to when violence is called for [by Muslims]. Moderate Muslims condemn violence and extremism more than we realise, but people are not out there reporting this in the media to the same extent.” (Community leader)

“I think this [perceived link] is a common feast on television. Is it the case that we need to create an enemy in order to stay interested in watching TV? It certainly sells the newspapers. The images would seem to support the view that people who are of Muslim background are just a rabid rabble. .. After a terrorist event if you get the Islamic Council coming out and condemning it, that view would be ignored in favour of someone else saying there are legitimate reasons [for the attack].” (Government stakeholders)

In turn, a number of participants felt this had a multiplier effect on Muslim communities more generally. They perceived that through imbalance or bias, media reporting routinely assumes and promotes a link between Islam and terrorism. This was seen as linked to the tendency to flatten out or ignore the diversity of Australian Muslim community beliefs, values and practices:

“There’s a view within Australia that there is a ‘Muslim community’ in the singular. There is a spectrum of views [within Australian Muslim communities], however, just as there are for Christians and Jews. The media understands the difference between the different Christian denominations, for example – Uniting, Anglican, Brethren. But in relation to Islam, one Muslim is the same as another and one imam the same as another in the media – and

the more extremist the better, because it makes for better press.” (Government stakeholder)

“The media takes this [perceived link] and portrays it as all Muslims doing [terrorism], so people see my beard when I am going to work and think, ‘I wonder what he’s up to.’” (Community leader)

### The September 11 attacks were a media beat-up, invention or conspiracy

In addition to these concerns with how the media is seen to promote a distorted view of the connection between Islam and terrorism, a worryingly large number of focus group participants questioned the veracity of how the media represented September 11. Some participants, while believing that these attacks took place, felt that subsequent discourses on 9/11 were a media ‘beat-up’, while others questioned whether the attacks were completely invented and then peddled by media organisations around the world. For this group of participants, conspiracy theory around the events of 9/11 in particular was a strong narrative driver, with many citing ‘conspiracy’, ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘government trickery’ as the main rationale for the perceived link between Islam and terrorism:

“September 11 was fake, if it was real they would have blown up the White House, think about it, it doesn’t make sense to blow up the Twin Towers and kill innocent people.” (Focus group participant)

“They already have that perception about Muslims, it could have been anyone. We never knew who did September 11, probably done by George Bush.” (Focus group participant)

“How can we be so sure that they actually did it, still a lot of confusion about 9/11 – I’ve seen documentaries made by locals, by non-Muslims.” (Focus group participant)

### Non-media drivers of the perceived link between Islam and terrorism

Beyond the dominant theme of media that emerged for almost all participants, a range of other key issues emerged around what contributes to the perceived link between Islam and terrorism. Many participants felt that the assumed link between Islam and terrorism was founded on a deeper and broader set of assumptions about Islam as an extremist or fundamentalist religion, pointing to the fact that not only Islamists but also many non-Muslims promote the idea that Islam is a religion of extremism and violence.

### Islamist justifications of ‘political Islam’

Across all three participant cohorts, a number of respondents attributed this perception to hardline Islamist groups and individuals, whom they see as successfully perpetuating a distorted view of Islam as inherently violent and extreme in order to justify what some respondents termed ‘political Islam’ (community leader) or ‘Islamofascism’ (focus group participant):

“People who commit highly visible acts of terrorism self-identify as ‘authentic’ carriers of Islam. Most of the people watching this unfold take them at their word and don’t argue the point. In a sense, the confrontation between the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’ is taken as the major narrative and text of the history of these relations – so that Islam is seen as somehow inherently confrontationalist, inherently violent.” (Community leader)

*“There is a perception in large sections of the Australian community that portions of the Muslim community provide support for terrorist activity. This is partly because of the success of the ideology put out by Islamists who have themselves made that connection through claiming – whether Al-Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiyah – that what they are doing is what all good Muslims should do, which gets reported and repeated. Ten years ago, most Australians knew very little about Islam, but such things as they know now they pick up from what Bashir says in his trial in Indonesia, or on the internet by Islamists, and this is what gets reported in the media.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“I’m a part of Aussie Muslims.com and we have some, not many, who have fundamental and strict views, and even they are against Ibrahim Siddiq-Conlon from 60 Minutes, who gives a picture of Islam that would make anyone hate it.”* (Focus group participant)

However, a minority felt that the casting of Islam as a religion that espouses extremist violence is not wholly unfounded:

*“There are some unpalatable truths that need to be acknowledged. The concept of violent jihad isn’t a new invention: it is a historical strand within Islam that has been there since the very beginning. The reputable Islamic scholars say that the jihadists’ agenda is a distortion of Islam, but it does have built into it sufficient material to allow that distortion to be made. It is just a distortion, not an invention.”* (Government stakeholder)

There was also qualified minority support in the focus groups for Al-Qaeda’s political agenda in relation to the West:

*“There is a perception that Muslims love Al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden, and that is wrong. Many Muslims disagree with how he did things, but those who don’t hate him say they don’t because they see him as the only person who ever stood up to an international bully. ...They see him as less of a terrorist than the USA is.”* (Focus group participants)

### **Non-Muslims perceive Islam as a religion of extremism and violence**

Equally, many participants felt that non-Muslims were more generally inclined to perceive Islam as a religion of extremism and violence because of broader cultural and social ignorance about or bias toward Muslims, including lack of awareness of diversity across the spectrum of Muslim beliefs. Such ignorance was perceived to lead to stereotyping, overgeneralisation and lack of interest in understanding why some Muslim individuals and communities might experience a sense of social or political sense of grievance. In turn, this was perceived by some participants to enhance rather than reduce the prospect of radicalisation:

*“When we had some Muslim women coming up to my office, in this very secure building, I rang the security guards downstairs to let them know some Muslim women were coming up to see me, as I was a bit sensitive about this. The guard on the phone said, ‘Don’t worry, I know how to deal with terrorists’. He equated Muslims and terrorism just like that – snap. This is the kind of thing we need to change.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“In Australia, they have the wrong idea about Muslims though, they see us like Sheikh Hilali, they think everybody is like this, and that Muslims think Islam should be the only religion, and they don’t understand other views that other Muslims have.”* (Focus group participant)

*“As to why [this link exists], that’s a really sad answer. The general perception is that these people are born angry and there is no point in trying to reason with them or trying to understand them. It’s a feeling of, ‘Not only am I misunderstood, but nobody cares why I got to that stage – they only care that they see me as Muslim and angry.’ The fact that people don’t ask ‘why’ often enough is one of the contributing factors for the continuation of the violence you are talking about.”* (Community leader)

### **Lack of contact and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims**

However, the strongest driver beyond media influence for perceptions of a link between Islam and terrorism identified by both community and government participants was lack of knowledge about Islam and lack of contact with Muslims by non-Muslim Australians:

*“If you don’t know anything you will take the first thing that is thrown at you. There is a link between Osama bin Laden and Islam, but that only applies to him and his followers. If you knew what the Koran said and what Islam stood for, you’d understand that he is wrong and that is not what the Koran stands for and that he has got it really wrong. But if you’re ignorant you accept that this is what Islam stands for – the bin Laden version.”* (Community leader)



*“People use these terms (Islam, radicalisation, extremism, terrorism) in the same sentence. One of the things I’m party to through meetings with police, etc. on extremism is uncomfortable conversations about Muslims. There is a lot of misunderstanding about jihad amongst the general public.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“In Alice Springs where there are no Muslims, or in Perth in remote areas, also no Muslims – these people also need contact first-hand because when something goes wrong and the media has an opinion that is wrong or inaccurate, they can counter this based on their personal experience. Interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims will be critical to this effort.”* (Community leader)

As an extension of this view, many respondents felt that more education and interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly in relation to more moderate forms of Islamic belief and practice, was required to combat this perception. However, such educational and contact opportunities were perceived as either ad hoc or very limited, despite participants’ observations of relatively modest levels of knowledge in Australia about other parts of the world:

*“In school there was one subject called ‘Religion and Philosophy’ – it was an option and not many people did it. I did it and changed my views. But now it has been dropped from the state [secondary education] curriculum – ethics, religion and philosophy are no longer offered. Last year it was dropped completely.”* (Community youth leader)

*“But that’s when it becomes your job to educate your neighbours against that. You have an uphill battle. I thought about that, yesterday, I was outside with some people, some farmers who were asking some questions – one asked me, are you from Sudan, I said no, I’m not from Sudan, but I really want to know what they think about us, they said we don’t know where you’re from, we know you’re from Africa but you all look the same.”* (Focus group participant)

### **Over-emphasis on visible difference of Muslims from the mainstream**

Another strong theme, especially from government respondents, was the perceived emphasis on the visible difference of Muslims, and the ways in which this is used in the service of ‘Islamophobia’, as one government stakeholder put it, to ‘legitimise continued hatred or dislike for difference through resort to visible signs of [Islamic] difference.’

*“One of the problems of the last decade is a quite direct association in the public mind between Islam and terrorism. This is because all the high profile cases of terrorism that we’ve seen have been done in the name of a perverted and extreme form of Islam. But it’s also corresponded to a time where we’ve seen a more assertive period of Islam with women wearing niqab, hijab, etc. Media has a role in this. I spent an afternoon in the Operation Neath trial last year. One of the things that struck me was the Somali families there – most of the women were wearing niqabs, and all the media cameras focused right in on them. The strong association in the public mind is there.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“It’s deeply embedded socially that when you see Muslims wearing burkhas, you immediately think ‘terrorist’. It’s been way too embedded. You see terrorists on the TV wearing their [Islamic] gear and you take that as read.”* (Community leader)

*“Yes, I find this, people on the bus, they ask me, ‘Why are you wearing a scarf?’ They keep asking me, I feel like they hate it. They say you would have lovely hair underneath that, why do you hide it under that? This happens on the bus, and it makes me uncomfortable.”* (Focus group participant)

Not all respondents shared the view that community concerns about Islamic visible difference were misplaced, however:

*“There is still the whole burkha argument – should they be allowed in this country? Could you imagine us having an argument about the bikini in this country? So it’s something that people obviously find threatening but it’s just a piece of clothing.”* (Female)

*“We don’t make the same judgment about Indian women’s clothes, but that’s because you can see their face. Even with extremist publications on the internet, there are pictures of women with burkhas and AK-47s.”* (Male)

*“Yes, but [the weapons are] not under the burkhas!”* (Female)

(Exchange between female and male government stakeholders)

*“I grew up [in an African country], I see these people, they put on that thing; you only see their eyes. If they wear that I think they are real bad people – I grow up in a community of Muslims, and then when they cover their faces, bad things happen – where they cover their face – I still think it is bad.”* (Focus group participant)

### The 'us' and 'them' mentality

The focus on the visible difference of Australian Muslims from mainstream society was in turn felt to be linked to deeper perceptions about the irreconcilable nature of cultural differences between non-Muslim and Muslim Australians. As one government respondent said, *'This link invigorates an old enmity between Islam and the West. It's about trying to differentiate ourselves from the Other – they are everything that we are not.'* The belief that significant portions of Australian communities hold an 'us and them' set of beliefs about Muslims and non-Muslims was primarily attributed to media influences and Australian cultural insularity and fear of change:

*"Media creates an 'us' and 'them' mentality. People want to hear the 'us' side of their view, not the other side's view. They want something that supports their existing biases and ideas. For any person who might think there is a slight link between Islam and terrorism – the media amplifies and fuels this and makes it worse."* (Community leader)

*"Why that perception? I think there is a perception of that link because the fear is that 'they' want to change 'our' way of life. It's always very much us and them. 'They' want to impose their beliefs and change the way 'we' live and are prepared to do anything to achieve that. It's that fear of being forced to adopt or change or have your freedoms taken away from you – religious freedom, freedom to dress the way you want, etc. For most of us in WA, we might know a couple of Muslims, and the ones I know are very moderate – but the perception is that 'they' are the ones with the crusade and 'we' are the ones under threat."* (Government stakeholder)

Moreover, some recent arrivals who came to Australia in order to escape religious conflict, war and persecution felt that 'us and them' divisions continued to shape their perceptions and experience, despite occasionally improved relationships between such groups in the new environment.

*"Sudanese Christians and Muslims here are fine, but deep down there is division, always will be because of the war. But everywhere you go, Egypt, Muslims and Christians are divided, same people from the same country but still there are divisions. ... We [still] have that fear."* (Focus group participants)

### Influence of post-9/11 environment

Unsurprisingly, the influence of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, DC were keenly felt by a majority of participants to have created a 'before' and 'after' set of perceptions about the links between Islam, extremism and terrorism. One government participant noted that while non-Muslim terrorism was a familiar concept previously through the activities of the IRA and the Tamil Tigers, for example, it was 9/11 that really put Islamic-based terrorism on the 'front page' and front-and-centre of global consciousness, including in Australia. Another government participant said, *'I think the perception we have of the link between these is only since 9/11. If you asked most Australians about Islam prior to that event, most would've had a bland view, if any. So it's just 9/11, Bali and London, these three events, that have led most Australians to have firm views about the link between Islam, extremism and violence.'*

Many in all three study cohorts felt that the negative impacts of the post-9/11 environment on perceptions that Islam and terrorism are fundamentally intertwined have been exacerbated through Western narratives that have exploited this link for the purpose of the global 'war on terror'. One community leader put it this way:

*9/11 is now the defining yardstick for a whole generation of children and young people, and this has a strong influence on them, including regarding the perceived links between Islam, terrorism and radicalisation.*

He went on to say that the lack of any 'counter-narrative from the West' reinforced this, and that the perceived link between Islam and terrorism is now 'embedded' and it may be too late to backtrack, despite some evidence of recent government efforts to do so.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim community members compared Australian 'before' and 'after' experiences and perceptions in the way that the media has used the post-9/11 environment to strengthen the idea that Islam and terrorism are connected:

*"I came here in 2000, and the people were very friendly when I came, and it was very good. After September 11, the people changed, and it's very changed now, whether you are at work college, study, everyone looks at you, and for a woman, if they wear the scarf, and women get abused."* (Focus group participant)

*“There are two different perspectives between then and now, and 9/11 is the dividing line here. Media plays a big part in this. I moved to Australia in December 1996 and people would ask me where I was from. Their general perception of Pakistan at that time was cricket and squash. At that time many people didn’t understand Islam at all, and I’d be teased about multiple marriages, etc. These days, if I say I’m Muslim and from Pakistan, people’s defences go up immediately – even just at the mention of my being Pakistani, never mind Muslim.”* (Community leader)

*“September 11 and the media have done a great deal to foster this link. The early Muslims who came [to Australia] in the 1800s are fantastic. But we don’t hear about them now – only about bin Laden.”* (Community leader)

Despite this, a few community participants also thought that the post-9/11 environment has produced some positives for Muslims, particularly in relation to producing greater curiosity and awareness to find out more about Islamic history and belief systems:

*“9/11 has also produced greater awareness of Islam – most Westerners didn’t know much before then about Islam at all. People who are prepared not to be brainwashed by media have been more prepared to explore it for themselves.”* (Community leader)

*“After 9/11 there was a lot of radio discussion and someone called in and said, ‘I have Muslim neighbours, they’re not terrorists – they are normal people, they visit me, I visit them.’ If Muslims were not here you wouldn’t have that kind of comment and knowledge developing.”* (Community leader)

Others, however, felt that the negatives of post-9/11 discourse far outweigh the positives for Muslim communities, in some cases to the extent of blaming this discourse for encouraging radicalism and extremism:

*“There are still many stereotypes and enemies. We create people who become extremists through the language we use and the actions we take – we have driven people crazy. The impact of 9/11 has been huge in this regard, and this has led to many other things.”* (Community leader)

*“The whole war on terror is a form of terrorism itself, makes Bin Laden bigger than he is, and gives these people credit.”* (Focus group participant)

### **Concern about non-Islamic violent extremism**

A range of government (but not community) participants highlighted the importance of broader understandings of extremism and terrorism beyond Islamic-based extremism. Some participants felt it was important to do this in order to balance the ledger between perceptions of Muslim versus non-Muslim extremism; some thought any fundamentalism of any variety, whether religious or ideological, could potentially lead to extremism; and others saw it as a pragmatic recognition of different threats in different national, transnational or local contexts:

*“You don’t have to go far back in any religion to find that it can support terrorism or extremism – think of Christianity during the Inquisition in the Middle Ages.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“I can give you an example of non-religious based radicalism – [names prominent environmental activist organisation]. There are eco-terrorists out there who will blow up a building rather than see some chickens eaten.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“You can find people like [right-wing American fundamentalist] Timothy McVeigh in the US – he killed lots of kids, didn’t just blow up a government building.”* (Government stakeholder)

### **Does a perceived link between Islam and terrorism affect people’s general view of Muslims?**

Three major themes dominated this section of the study, all related to rejecting or qualifying the impact of the perceived link between Islam and terrorism on participants’ own views of Muslims. The first was the importance of personal interaction and contact between Muslims and non-Muslims; the second was the importance of better education about Islam, particularly for non-Muslims; and the third was disavowal of any impact based on their own previous experience, whether in their personal lives, working lives or both.

### More contact with and knowledge about Muslims in the local community

Many non-Muslim government and community respondents explicitly questioned the perceived link between Islam and terrorism on the basis that it sweeps up all Muslims as a singular, homogenous group and 'tarnishes' the peaceful majority based on the actions of an extremist few. Their responses highlighted the fact that their individual efforts to move beyond the oversimplifications of the generally perceived link between Islam and terrorism has made them especially conscious of the importance of personal relationships or interactions with moderate Muslim colleagues, neighbours and friends:

*"I know differently through my marriage and raising 3 Muslim children and having long contact with Islamic people. Very few Islamic people are friendly with Australians and vice versa. Not much of a connection is happening."*  
(Non-Muslim community leader with Muslim spouse)

*"[Some] years ago I went to [a Middle Eastern country] for [a period of time]. I had many questions about Islam. My tour guide answered many questions about Islam in a very positive way. Without that I have no idea what my views would be – probably just the same as everyone else's in my normal environment."*  
(Government stakeholder)

*"From a personal perspective, it makes me feel quite a lot of empathy and more of an effort to empathise and to advocate for Muslims. Even before this job I felt the need to challenge people's racism. Growing up in a very multicultural area, I never saw people who felt as much permission to judge people on the basis of culture, race or religion as they do with Muslims. When I go shopping and I see a woman in a hijab I want to smile and say we're not all racist and judgmental."*  
(Government stakeholder)

### Educating oneself and others about Muslims and Islam

A second and related theme centred on the way in which such a link emphasises the need both for Muslims to educate others, and for non-Muslims to become better educated themselves about Islam. Amongst government stakeholders, this was an important point in particular for participants from police services:

*"I developed a counter-terrorism course for police in [state] where I spend about five minutes on the flip side of Islam as a credible religion, just to give them that little bit of grounding before we start talking about suicide bombing. I generally get a few questions afterward so I tell them to go find out more and do some further reading. I think the policing fraternity would do well to do that in a more formal sense. Most police officers are thinking individuals; you plant a seed and they're inquisitive."*  
(Government stakeholder, policing agency)

*"There's a course I'm involved in that has several elements on suicide bombing interdiction and what motivates terrorists. It's pretty one-sided – it's the axis of evil presentation. They don't talk about the pillars of Islam or anything that is really inspirational. If you're fed that diet and that diet alone and you don't take the time to pick up a few credible magazines to read anything else or have contact with anyone who has different but equally credible ideas, you get radicalised in the other direction as police. I think it should be more balanced training."*  
(Government stakeholder, policing agency)

Muslim community leaders also stressed that the rise in perceptions of a link between Islam and terrorism made them want to work more proactively to counter non-Muslim ignorance about Islam:

*"As a Muslim it has made me want to work harder to quell those fears and that association between Islam and terrorism. It's disappointing but my faith is not in any way shaken, neither in Islam nor in the community."*  
(Community leader)

### No impact of perceived link on personal views of non-Muslims towards Muslims

The final theme to emerge from this portion of the data was the disavowal of any impact on non-Muslim participants' personal views of Islam and Muslims, spread fairly evenly between government and community leaders. This view was expressed primarily by those non-Muslims with extended knowledge of and/or previous contact with Muslim individuals, communities and cultures:

*"I think the link is in the general community but I don't subscribe to it. I spent a lot of times with Muslims back in England so guess I was aware enough and had a clear enough understanding of Islam to know that it's a radical group who are Muslims and not Muslims themselves. I don't believe that all Muslims are extremists. It is a minority within Islam who are driving the extremism and radicalisation."* (Government stakeholder)

*"I have a more benevolent view of Islam going back to my earlier experience. I see that of 1.5 billion Muslims, the extremists are only a fringe minority of a very big religion. Over history, at the extreme end of religion there has been terrorism across the board, so it's not just Islam."* (Government stakeholder)

*"I have not been swayed in any fashion by the rubbish [in the media] that I see. I've read the Koran and tried to understand it, so this hasn't changed my view, which is that every single person determines their outlook of life based on their prior personal experiences."* (Non-Muslim community leader)

### **Religious fundamentalism causes a re-examination of beliefs about Islam**

Despite the prevalence of these three main themes across the responses, however, a few participants did feel that the perceived link between Islam and terrorism had either changed or reinforced the way they saw and felt about Islam as a religion. In the case of Muslim participants, some said the upswing in the perceived link had led them to re-examine previously taken-for-granted assumptions about their own faith:

*"When I was in Fiji, there was militancy, no doubt, but I was oblivious to the level of exposure to Islamic terrorism and all that. It was only when I came to Australia that I realised it's such a massive issue in people's minds. It makes you stand up and question your own belief systems and wake up to the reality of what's going on around you. If you don't question yourself about what's going on around you I think this is stupid, not to question it."* (Muslim community leader)

*"When I started hearing the news in the 1980s, there were no suicide bombings even though there were killings in Russia [in the Chechen conflict], for example. I wasn't confused then. But in the 1990s when the Kashmiri issues came up, I started as a young person to read the Koran and other materials, to try to see historically, where was violence happening in Muslim history? How many times were they criminals and how many times victims? In the mid-1990s I made up my mind that in Islam there is no room for violence and a lot of room for forgiveness. People who take violence as part of Islam, they do so for personal benefits – commercial, or otherwise. I still stick to that view today. If someone is a criminal it is not related to his religion. My faith is still in religion in that there is no room for violence. If people are ignorant of their own religion, however, this can lead them to justify violence by using religion as the excuse."* (Muslim community leader)

Only one interview participant, a member of a minority religious community in a predominantly Muslim country prior to arriving in Australia, felt that the perceived link had enhanced his sense of the risks of fundamentalist religious beliefs, which he associated strongly with Islam:

*"As I said before, whether Jew, Muslim or Christian, we are human – there is nothing wrong or bad about people. But religion can influence people's behaviour. I am very concerned that if there are a huge number of Muslims in Australia, it will become a country not like the one we have now if the power of Islam becomes huge. They want to apply shari'a in England for those Muslims. How can you have a rule within a rule? This cannot happen but if they become powerful enough I reckon they will do it. I left [my country of origin] on my own but my family is still there. I came because I felt I was discriminated against, didn't have the ability to go into politics, etc. Now I feel what happened in [my country of birth] could happen here."* (Community leader)

### **Conclusion**

An overwhelming majority believed that there was a generally strong and well-established perceived link between Islam and terrorist ideology and activity in public discourse and the community at large. The primary source of this link for the majority of participants was seen to be the media – both commercial media and to a lesser extent public broadcasters such as ABC and SBS.

Most participants believed that media sensationalism, stereotyping and distortion; media oversimplification or 'dumbing down' of issues around Muslims, extremism and terrorism; and the propensity of mainstream and particularly commercial media to marginalise, dismiss or ignore diverse and/or moderate views across Muslim communities were largely responsible for forging a perceived link between Islam and terrorism in the minds of the general Australian population.

In addition, a number of participants attributed the commercial imperative of media organisations – to sell more papers or attract more advertising – as the dominant feature of media angles on Muslims and terrorism, with truthful, accurate or balanced reporting taking a back seat to the economic drivers of the news cycle.

A major concern for participants in all three cohorts was an over-emphasis both in media representations and at community level on the visible difference of Muslims from mainstream Australian communities, and the corrosive effects of perpetuating stereotypes of Australian Muslim communities and individuals.

Non-media drivers of the link between Islam, extremism and terrorism included the success of Islamist versions of what Islam really means; non-Muslim perceptions of and prejudices about Muslims and Islam, and lack of contact and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. Other concerns related to the link between Islam, extremism and terrorism at community level included the perpetuation of an ‘us and them’ mentality by non-Muslims and Muslims alike; the influence of the post-9/11 environment; lack of educational opportunities to learn more about Islam; lack of publicity for diverse viewpoints across Muslim communities, and the lack of awareness that violent extremism across the political and cultural spectrum, and not just with Islam, also needs to be addressed.

The influence of these perceived links on participants’ own views of Muslims and of Islam as a religion fell into three broad categories: those from Muslim backgrounds who said this perception had not changed their understanding of their religion or their cultural identity; those non-Muslims who said it had little or no impact on how they viewed Muslims and Islam, and those non-Muslims who said it had spurred them to develop greater knowledge of Islam and contact with Muslims in order to challenge either their own ignorance or what they saw as the biased and ill-informed views of others. Personal interaction and contact between Muslims and non-Muslims and importance of better education about Islam, particularly for non-Muslims, were seen as the best approaches to addressing this issue. However, a minority of participants did say that for them, a perceived rise in Islamic religious fundamentalism raises questions and increases the sense of threat concerning Islam.



**CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF  
MEDIA WITHIN DISCOURSES  
OF RADICALISATION AND  
EXTREMISM**

## Part I: Television, radio and print

A view of society as shaped by various discursive trends and forces has saturated general social consciousness in the West for the last two decades. As a result, a general understanding that we live in a world significantly shaped by identifiable (if also shifting and competing) discourses, particularly those produced in the public realm, has led to increasingly sophisticated understandings at community level of the role of media in shaping public perceptions and views around particular issues. This includes the ways in which the media simultaneously operate, and are operated as, a social force, an economic driver and a cultural industry.

'Media' as used in Part I of this chapter focuses specifically on more traditional media formats such as television, newspapers, radio and print-based magazines and journals. Perceptions of the impacts of media structured and driven by new information and communication technologies, including the internet, on-line newspapers, blogs, social media sites, websites and other digital formats, is dealt with in Part II below.

Participant views on the role and impact of the media discourses of radicalisation and extremism confirm other research<sup>8</sup> that has identified a strong and widespread perception that media significantly influences and shapes perceptions around the nature, impact and implications of both radicalisation and extremism both in Australia and overseas. Indeed, the advent of globalised media has meant that for many respondents, the distinction between 'Australian' and 'foreign' media is no longer seen as especially relevant, particularly in relation to global issues such as terrorism and radicalisation. Others, however, felt that Australian-based media had a particular responsibility to deliver accurate and balanced reporting to the Australian community in the domain of terrorism, extremism and related issues. Government stakeholders, community leaders and community members shared the view that such accuracy and balance is often absent in contemporary media reporting on these issues, particularly in relation to Muslim communities and individuals.

Accordingly, levels of distrust, cynicism and disenchantment with media were generally high to very high amongst study participants in all cohorts. The media were seen by some participants as offering valuable information and positive effects in relation to fostering greater knowledge about Islam as a religion, Muslims as community members and a realistic understanding and assessment of the risks of extremism and radicalisation. However, as we saw in Chapter 5 above, most participants felt that the media in general was overwhelmingly focused on fostering a perceived link between Islam, violence and extremism.

This theme continued throughout the discussion relating to media's role in broader social discourses on radicalisation and extremism. A large number of participants felt that the media in general – and in particular, commercial media – were responsible for significant distortions in reporting on issues relating to Islam and to Muslims, of plying their own version of extremism through sensationalised and often imbalanced and/or inaccurate representations of perceived links between Islam, extremism and terrorism, and of failing to question a range of assumptions, premises and claims that many in the community still believe it is a primary responsibility of journalists to question and to scrutinise.

8. Samina Yasmeen (2008) *Understanding Muslim Identities: From Perceived Relative Exclusion to Inclusion*, [www.omi.wa.gov.au/publications/Muslim\\_Identities\\_report.pdf](http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/publications/Muslim_Identities_report.pdf); Mohamad Abdalla and Halim Rane (2007) *The Impact of Media Representations on the Understanding of Islam and Attitudes toward Muslims in Queensland*, [www.griffith.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/52083/MAQ.pdf](http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/52083/MAQ.pdf); Anne Aly (2010) 'Shifting Positions to the Media Discourse on Terrorism: Critical points in Audience Members' Meaning-Making Experiences', *Media International Australia* 134: 31-46.



Community members consulted through national focus groups were unanimous in their view that the media is enormously influential and at times insidious in shaping both 'headline' and day-to-day perceptions about one's own society and the societies and cultures of others, with tangible impacts and consequences. In the views of many, the power of the media to shape how people think goes hand in hand with a heightened expectation of responsibility on the part of media for how they portray issues related to Islam, radicalisation and extremism:

*"I think the media has the role to give Islam or whatever religion a bad name or a good name."*  
(Focus group participant)

*"It also affects the children who watch the news, they think these Muslims did this, Muslims did that, they grow up and they think, you are Muslims, oh, you are terrorist, you see every house, they watch news, and it affects all the kids."*  
(Focus group participant)

*"Things are slowly planted in people's minds through media."*  
(Focus group participant)

### 'Hot' and 'cold' media

Many participants distinguished between what one interviewee called 'hot' versus 'cold' media. 'Hot' media denotes a reporting and discussion style designed to provoke strong views and emotions that often characterises popular media formats such as opinion and commentary in both newspaper and digital formats such as blogs; talk-back radio; commercial current affairs programs; and some magazine or documentary-style television formats. By contrast, 'cold' media were seen as characterised by the more neutral and balanced reporting and dissemination of information or informed perspectives in the public interest.

Hot media were widely seen to feed on and nurture ignorance and prejudices by playing to populist fears and bias in fostering a perceived link between Islam, extremism and terrorism. Reasons given for why hot media operates in this way ranged from the common view that media pursues ratings at any expense – *'the media always looks to sensationalise, that's their bread and butter'* (community leader) – to accusations of cultural stereotyping through ignorance or laziness, to analyses that see media as a socially irresponsible actor in fostering a version of community cohesion based on scapegoating or creating fear concerning a perceived 'outsider' group.

### Media routinely oversimplifies and sensationalises stories about Muslims and Islam

For a significant number of participants, what many considered to be an exaggerated or over-represented focus on Islam in media reporting on issues related to extremism and terrorism is a taken-for-granted feature of contemporary life:

*"Islam is the bogeyman at the moment and it sells. If these things were to be objectively assessed they would not stand up to scrutiny. When it comes to Islamic stories, balance goes out the window. You can peddle any rubbish and it will sell in the media, because the public out there is in a feeding frenzy."*  
(Muslim community leader)

*"Why does Islam always have to be the operative word [in media reporting on extremism]? Australians aren't against Islam, they don't know."*  
(Focus group participant)

*"You only have to watch some of the programs on TV, and not just on TV – there are radio shock jocks who thrive on things that happen at the extreme end of the Muslim world. People who subscribe to radical views or sensationalist views are given more airtime than they deserve."* (Non-Muslim community leader)

The theme of media playing to the lowest common social denominator on issues of ethnicity, race and cultural background was also prevalent amongst participants:

*"I have not been here for a long time, but my thinking is kind of changing. When I lived in Africa I thought Australia is very advanced, they think differently to the way I do, but [through the media] I find it's the opposite, the way they understand Africa is different, being African [is bad] and then being Muslim is even worse."*  
(Focus group participant)

*"I tend to think, and I agree it can be out of balance, some of my friends are very anti-Israeli, and they've got that just from media intake, and there's always two sides of the story."* (Focus group participant)

*"One police guy was interviewed saying that 'carrying weapons and hurting people is the Sudanese way of life'. But seriously, did you see that TV? It was just broken glass on the ground, it could have been from anywhere! Just dark people, not Sudanese, not anything related, just this footage, alcohol and violence, and then African adults, old ladies and men, alcohol, African, alcohol, African. This is the image they are giving."*  
(Focus group participant)

This had more resonance in some states than others, with Western Australian respondents especially sensitive to ‘shock jock’ media impacts. As one government stakeholder said, ‘*The radio stations, especially the shock jock stations, e.g. 6PR, are the ones where you get all the rednecks. In WA, the descriptions of criminal activity have stopped using ethnic descriptors and we have copped some flack internally with some struggles about this.*’

Yet it is not only professional journalists and mainstream media who are seen as responsible for the promotion of ‘hot media’ approaches to these issues. Referring to earlier research by Samina Yasmeen,<sup>9</sup> one participant pointed out that the advent of internet and social media has loosened some of the social and regulatory constraints around public commentary, intensifying the front-and-centre positioning of Muslims in public discourse around extremism and radicalisation:

*“Samina Yasmeen did a big range of interviews with both Muslim and non-Muslim people around perceptions of Islam. The explosion of public commentary through blogging and other channels enables people to feel more empowered to say things that might not have gotten an airing in earlier times.”* (Government stakeholder)

When thinking about commercial media, however, the strongest view was that of an inexorable link between media reporting and economic profit with little regard for the social consequences of ‘hot’ media discourse. A community leader summed up this view by saying, ‘*Western media, because of its ignorance and the pursuit of ratings – ratings are killing this world. And behind the ratings lies money.*’

### **Media organisations should be better informed and better regulated**

Coupled with the view that mainstream media organisations are more interested in profits than balance in their pursuit of populist ratings is the belief that many journalists and editors are either misinformed or uninformed about the diversity of Muslim communities and cultures as an integral part of modern multicultural Australia, failing to recognise that the vast majority of Australian Muslims are non-extremist and non-violent. As one community leader noted,

*“Muslims are part and parcel of Australia now and media needs to take responsibility for understanding Muslim issues and culture as part of Australia, not as something alien. Instead, they are relying on the internet and YouTube.”* (Community leader)

Nor is it only commercial media that is seen as culpable in this context. SBS’s highly regarded current affairs program, *Insight*, which many participants expected to ‘know better’ than commercial media about the complexities of Islamic culture and belief systems, was particularly singled out for criticism:

*“The Insight program [on SBS] last night [November 2010], it was horrible, basically some quite intelligent Muslims speaking with dumb and horrible people, creating a lot of antagonism. It wasn’t a useful debate; it didn’t answer the question or take away the fear. Some of these shows make the issue worse because you’re legitimizing intolerance by going out and actively having those who are lacking tolerance, and having Muslims who don’t know what they are talking about. There are so many different sects of Islam, and none of them [on the program] could name them, and how Wahabism has hijacked the debate, and so many sects of Islam that are no less legitimate, but when people say Islam they mean extreme version of Wahabism and they are so off base it’s hard to get them back.”* (Focus group participant)

*“They are biased. On SBS there was a show on Insight and it was called ‘Trusting Pakistan’. I always watch SBS and Insight, usually it is good at showing the other side. But I think they should stick to Australian documentaries – this was really bad.”* (Focus group participant)

Many respondents felt that media organisations should be bound by stronger government regulatory controls:

*“Some sort of control [is needed], something that actually drives the media to be more responsible.”* (Focus group participant)

*“The government needs to stop the media from branding the Muslim community. Politicians cannot control the media. How do you win the media over?”* (Focus group participant)

9. Samina Yasmeen, *Understanding Muslim Identities*, op. cit.

Participants suggested that the best way to help achieve better-informed media on these issues was the use of expert consultants on Islamic beliefs and culture to promote ‘a healthy flow of information’ about Muslim cultures and identities and minimise inaccurate or negative stereotyping of Muslim communities and individuals.

### Media marginalises moderate Muslim voices in favour of radical or extremist Muslim perspectives

In this context, participants spoke about the tendency of commercial media, particularly television current affairs programs such as *A Current Affair*, *Sixty Minutes* and *Today Tonight*, to go straight to controversial Muslim media identities for comment on extremist issues while bypassing more moderate Muslim community representatives. Many Muslim community participants in particular felt that media organisations deliberately marginalised moderate Muslims in order to sensationalise stories about Muslims and extremism, preferring to give airtime to inflammatory Muslim extremists who themselves represent only a marginalised minority on the fringe of mainstream Australian Muslim communities:

*“In the past I took the trouble to write articles to try to give another kind of story. But nothing gets published – after a while you say what’s the point? It’s not going to make a difference. Why bother? Now I think for the community, people just feel we can’t be bothered, but this is negative for us as a community as well. The Multicultural Commission is naive to think we can just go to the media and get a positive story in the press. Although we are not disenfranchised materially – we have jobs, businesses, good livings – there is a sense in which we are not listened to.”* (Muslim community leader)

*“In the A Current Affair example, they pick this one guy [Ibrahim Siddiq-Conlon in NSW] who represents only himself, but they say, ‘In the last ten years mosques have mushroomed’ – not been built, mind – ‘mushroomed’, and then they use graphics to show the rapid growth of mosques, say in Victoria. Ethics means nothing in those situations. How do you fight that? Sometimes I’ve called ABC’s Media Watch, but nothing. As a journalist I look at it from a professional view and say this story needs correction or balance, but there is nowhere you can go to get redress.”* (Muslim community leader)

*“Media looks for the ‘right kind’ of Muslims to fit their broader narratives.”* (Community leader)

### Negative media portrayals of Muslims do not correspond with reality at home or abroad

A broad range of participants also felt that media representations stigmatising Muslims or promoting an assumed link between Muslims and extremism in general are significantly out of step with the realities of life both in Australian communities and also overseas:

*“Such a big Muslim population, but how many do bad things? A fragment, but the fragment gets all the attention.”* (Focus group participant)

*“In our community meetings with Muslims here in Sydney, that is their number one gripe. Their grievance is that things have been misrepresented and that the media is making Muslims in general out to be terrorists, so much so that we got Quentin Dempster from the ABC to come along and say that the journalists doing this weren’t doing proper journalism.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“It’s like that in Islamabad or Lahore, or in Karachi, you see this footage of bombs and things, and you think everything must be exploding but you get there and you realise that is only a small part of the city, the rest of the city gets on as normal.”* (Focus group participant)

However, a small number of participants expressed the view that media were more reflective than directive of negative community sentiment about Islam and Muslims:

*“Media doesn’t shape perceptions so much as confirm views they already hold. What’s really important is to understand how people have arrived at the world views they hold.”* (Government stakeholder)

### Media manipulates people and stories

In focus groups, some participants were concerned by the perceived tendency of Australian media representatives to solicit, manipulate or misrepresent both people and events in order to shape news or feature stories concerning violence or extremism to the biases of their audiences. These participants felt such practices played into broader issues of media untrustworthiness and reinforced their belief that the media manipulates and distorts facts for reasons of profit, culture or ideology:

*“On the media, there was one guy from Today Tonight, he went to Broadmeadows and he came to talk to us [in Carlton], and said I’ll buy you slabs of beer, whatever you want, I just want you to wear ‘gangsta’ colours – the guy was literally trying to bribe us, this guy from Channel 7, he had machetes, brought them down to Carlton, and then he went to Broadmeadows. They did it down there, [but] we told him to piss off.”* (Focus group participant)

*"[Journalists who manipulate the news] should be punished, there should be some sort of legal process, because that's incitement, but it's already done the damage, calling it false information after doesn't make any difference. It's too late."* (Focus group participant)

However, while conceding that the perception of media manipulation of people and news events may be widespread, some participants also noted that this is not the province of Western media outlets alone. As one participant put it, *'Muslim media can also create propaganda. It can happen in Muslim countries. The same is occurring here and you get labelled'* (Focus group participant).

### **Negative media stereotyping of Muslims can alienate and radicalise people**

Most of the views above relate to the impact of media on perceived links between Islam, extremism and terrorism for the general community at large. However, there was very broad consensus amongst community participants about the ways in which sensationalised, imbalanced or inaccurate reporting on perceived links between Islam and terrorism could actually radicalise those who become alienated, demoralised or outraged by a steady diet of perceived oversimplification and negative stereotyping in relation to Muslims and terrorism:

*"Keep telling someone he's a Muslim, he's an enemy, over and over and over again, and showing you examples from overseas saying this happened here, this happened there, stay away from him, on the wrong day he could do this too."* (Focus group participant)

*"I call it Muslim bashing on the news, I choose to ignore it, [but] I used to get really angry, they always say Muslim extremist, Muslim extremist, Muslim extremist, always emphasise the Muslim."* (Focus group participant)

*"But if you keep at them, saying Islam is bad, if you look at Muslims on TV, the Muslims they show, and then you see Americans killing lots of people in Iraq, and you think they did that on purpose, that can lead you to terrorism."* (Focus group participant)

In some cases, participants spoke about the potential loss of those who might otherwise be allies for authorities seeking to root out extremism at the community level:

*"In an attempt by the media to clobber anti-social behaviour, they may think they are ridiculing and discouraging this, but it has really backfired. This is because it has alienated potential allies who would ordinarily be happy to work with authorities to root out violent extremism and do in terror cells but instead feel so offended and alienated they end up gravitating less toward the authorities and more toward these people who say, 'I can really understand your frustration' – it makes them ripe for exploitation by extremists."* (Community leader)

There was also concern amongst focus group participants about the specific impact of this on young Muslims, coupled with the lack of positive role models for Muslim youth available through Australian media:

*"When I first came to Australia I didn't know any Muslims here, and everyone told me before I came, oh, Australia is a racist country. I first became friends with Buddhists, Hindus, etc., and they were good friends. But every time I turned on the TV, I got a different picture...I know that people are not against me because I'm a Muslim, but watching TV makes you think, why do they hate me so much because I'm a Muslim?"* (Focus group participant)

*"A young Muslim might feel violence is the only way to be here. I can understand their grievances with all that they see on the media, they feel nothing is being done when you look at the news."* (Focus group participant)

*"We are given no Australian role models on TV, for example. When I came here I expected to find a home, but instead I find all these norms and ideas and stereotypes that conflict with who I am. And so I have to create an identity that is radical and extremist because it is my only choice."* (New arrival community youth leader)

### **A steady diet of negative media towards Muslims damages social cohesion**

Finally, some participants noted the ways in which the role of media in consistently focusing on links between Islam, extremism and terrorism damages social cohesion to the extent of fostering what they see as two-way radicalisation, provoking mutual antagonism and distrust between Muslims and non-Muslims:

*"Media creates radical views on both sides, it makes Muslims radical, but it also leads to bullying of Muslims."* (Focus group participant)

*“[The media] separates both sides further, it creates polarisation, not just Muslims being radicalised, but radicalising others in their attitudes to Islam, and developing hate.”*  
(Focus group participant)

## Part I: Conclusion

Participants were unanimous in their view that the media is enormously influential and at times insidious in shaping both ‘headline’ and day-to-day perceptions about one’s own society and the societies and cultures of others, with tangible impacts and consequences. In the views of many, the power of the media to shape how people think goes hand in hand with a heightened expectation of responsibility on the part of media for how they portray issues related to Islam, radicalisation and extremism.

Respondents’ views on the role and impact of the media discourses of radicalisation and extremism confirm earlier research showing a strong and pervasive belief that media significantly influences and shapes perceptions around the nature, impact and implications of both radicalisation and extremism in Australia and overseas. The advent of globalised media has meant that for many respondents, the distinction between ‘Australian’ and ‘foreign’ media was no longer seen as especially relevant, particularly in relation to global issues such as terrorism and radicalisation.

A number of participants, however, felt that Australian-based media had a particular responsibility to deliver accurate and balanced reporting to the Australian community in the domain of terrorism, extremism and related issues. Government stakeholders, community leaders and community members shared the view that such accuracy and balance is often absent in contemporary media reporting on these issues, particularly in relation to Muslim communities and individuals.

Accordingly, levels of distrust, cynicism and disenchantment with media were generally high to very high amongst study participants in all three cohorts. This perception was taken by some focus group participants to the extent of questioning the reality of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York, with some participants believing that the attacks were media beat-up or outright invention. Nevertheless, the media were seen by some participants as offering valuable information and positive effects in relation to fostering greater knowledge about Islam as a religion, Muslims as community members and a realistic understanding and assessment of the risks of extremism and radicalisation.

However, most participants felt that the media in general was overwhelmingly focused on fostering a perceived link between Islam, violence and extremism, with ‘hot media’ that sought to provoke conflict, passion and dissent in the community clearly in the lead. A large number of participants felt that the media in general – and in particular, commercial television and radio – were responsible for significant distortions in reporting on issues relating to Islam and to Muslims, of plying their own version of extremism through sensationalised and often imbalanced and/or inaccurate representations of perceived links between Islam, extremism and terrorism, and of failing to question a range of assumptions, premises and claims that many in the community still believe it is a primary responsibility of journalists to question and to scrutinise.

The media were seen as capable of manipulating not only stories but people to produce the desired outcomes rather than reporting accurately on events and movements. Participants identified risks in relation to radicalisation and extremism as a result of their distrust in media motives and behaviours, saying that there was potential for peaceful Muslims to become radicalised because the steady diet of negative imaging and discourse about Islam and Muslims was so pervasive and humiliating. A further risk factor identified by focus group participants was the impact of such negative portrayals by media on young Australian Muslims, who were seen to have few positive role models available to them through Australian media (and television in particular) to counterbalance the distortions of ‘hot media’ programs and outlets.

A popular solution to some of these issues for participants was, first, to better monitor and regulate Australian media organisations with reference to how Islam and Muslims are portrayed, and second, to develop stronger balance of and consultative relationships with Muslim community leaders and spokespeople who represent the moderate mainstream of Australian Muslim society, rather than the perceived over-reliance on controversial Islamic figures at the fringes of the mainstream who are seen to serve the commercial but not the moral imperatives of media organisations.

## Part II: The internet and other social media

Unlike their views on more conventional media, in which participants felt relatively powerless to influence or intervene in media discourses around radicalisation and extremism, when it comes to the internet, many respondents emphasised the social and interactive dimensions of the internet and other relatively new social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, in how discourses and dialogues around extremism and terrorism are played out. The internet and a variety of social media sites were seen as dynamic, fluid spaces in which *radicalisation as a social process* can be either reinforced or alternatively hampered by the way in which users of internet and social media shape and direct flows of information, opinion and perspective.

The main themes emerging from participants around the role of the internet and other new media in discourses of radicalisation and extremism fell into three broad categories:

- Social dynamics of the internet and other new media.

- Social impacts of the internet and other new media.
- Social and operational challenges posed by the internet and other new media.

The dynamics, impacts and challenges of internet and other new media spaces in relation to discourses of radicalisation and extremism are explored in more depth below.

### Social dynamics of the internet and other social media

#### Radicalisation and the internet are both driven by social interaction

A number of government stakeholders in particular stressed the ‘*social function*’ of the internet ‘*in bringing people together through chat rooms, Skype, blogs, etc. Since radicalisation is a social process*’, it followed for these participants that ‘*the internet has a social interaction role in this regard*’ (government stakeholder).

Some participants thought internet discourses of radicalisation and extremism catered particularly for those who lack social skills, so that those who are less comfortable with face to face encounters can still plug into social networks. The internet was also seen as a space in which people are emboldened to express extreme views they might otherwise censure or moderate in face to face social settings:

*“It allows people to connect anonymously; people can be braver and are prepared to say things and encourage behaviours that they might not be prepared to do in person.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

The internet was also seen by some as responding to and meeting the real needs of people that other social avenues or mechanisms were failing to address:

*“Rather than focus on what it is about the internet itself, we should be looking at the interaction between audiences and websites. What needs does the internet fill for people who are seeking something, looking for answers?”*  
(Community leader)

Whether or not internet content promoting radicalisation or extremism was ‘true’ or not was perceived as beside the point. As one participant commented, ‘*It’s not about truth on the internet; it’s about engaging and interacting*’ (Government stakeholder). In fact, the truthfulness and trustworthiness of internet content in this context were seen as major casualties of internet discourse. In this sense, the internet was viewed overwhelmingly by participants as a domain where persuasion and rhetoric, rather than argument or logic, were the most powerful tools in influencing how people think and act: ‘*All this material which has been carefully constructed [by extremist groups] is now widely available because of the internet*’ (Government stakeholder).

#### The internet fosters immersive virtual community-building around radicalisation and extremism

As a result, many respondents also felt that the internet promoted a different kind and intensity of engagement with ideas and influences that is not available in more traditional communication formats. There was a strong focus on the ways in which ‘virtual’ communities are generated and sustained through the sociality of the internet, transcending geographical, cultural, national and other differences or boundaries.

The difference between conventional and new media, and the capacity of the internet to normalise ideas and approaches that would otherwise be considered marginal or extreme because of the sheer quantity of sites and users, was highlighted by several participants:

*“The internet has a level of engagement and immersion which you don’t get from books and magazines. I think that’s a real issue. It enables people who are geographically distant to feel a part of a community, because we see relationships form via the internet where people want to form a physical relationship, such as internet dating. So in that way, and in the environment [of terrorism] we’re talking about, it’s the only way that someone can feel sufficiently part of a community other than the one they actually live in to make the sorts of decisions that community would want them to make. It’s harder to do that via print culture. I think it’s the immersive nature of the internet.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“The internet is a media platform but different one. You can be a consumer, you can react or you can create. One cannot become radicalised on the net by itself but it can facilitate group identity through the creation of virtual groups. The internet is just a media platform but its features – interactivity and production as well as consumption – mean that there is no doubt that there is a huge presence on the internet of radicalised platforms, recruitment activities, etc. I believe there has to be some other intervening driver or cause for someone who becomes radicalised. Sheik Google is right there, alive and well. When people want answers they turn now to Google and the internet. Up come 50,000 answers and off you go.”* (Community leader)

The ability of the internet and other social media to sustain sense of community by linking people across multiple geographical, national and cultural boundaries and affiliations was seen by many focus group participants in particular to increase identification and involvement with political struggles in their country or region of origin. When this occurs across intergenerational lines, focus group participants thought it could sometimes provide a mechanism for increasing family or culturally based social cohesion based on ties to the past or to elsewhere, but also risk fracturing identification with current ties to the Australian community for those who have relocated to Australia from other countries, particularly when there is pressure from those in the country of origin to return some of the benefits of migration to those left behind. Those who have a fragile sense of belonging or identity in their new environment are seen as particularly at risk:

*“The kids like to look at their home country where mum came from, and they see message, about the war, about something going on, sometimes good or bad but they can read things that are not for children.”* (Focus group participant)

*“The internet plays a really big part. I saw a doco on YouTube, it was sending live streams of videos showing people getting killed, like one with a man and a kid, and the army killing a kid, the US army, in Iraq, and it’s easy to see and think they are killing our kids, killing our generation, so why not kill off their generation.”* (Focus group participant)

The internet and other social media were also seen as key mechanisms for allowing the isolated or lonely, the disenfranchised and the alienated to become part of a group and develop a sustainable individual identity as part of a larger collective through ICT<sup>10</sup> networks:

*“The other side of this is that the people who are unhappy with these kinds of things, and who are isolated and alone, can find a sense of companionship with others who are upset and alone and angry through the internet. It can be a fertiliser for radicalisation through bringing these people together to form bonds. It helps you feel not so alone and belonging to a larger community, and people can egg each other on.”* (Community leader)

*“It is possible for someone to self-radicalise on the internet and never talk to anyone else.”* (Government stakeholder)

### **The internet is an important social marketing tool for extremist groups**

Consequently, the internet was also seen as a useful tool that enhances the ability of extremist groups to promote their ideological and political platforms. One participant saw this as part of the broader prevailing social discourse on, and obsession with, marketing and promotion in Western societies, one that extremist groups have been canny in taking advantage of. As another participant put it, ‘Advertising and creation of the “brand” around certain groups is important’ (government stakeholder).

10. ICT stands for information and communication technology.

Of significant concern to many focus group participants around the country was the capacity of the internet to provide what many participants saw as highly distorted or illegitimate versions of Islamic belief, life and culture to those whose capacity to critically assess such material is limited or non-existent, making them more susceptible to being influenced by what they see on the net:

*“The thing is you can see that nowadays terrorists are young people who want to transform themselves, and they go to the mosque, but it is humiliating because you should know these things, so you don’t want to ask the questions, so he goes to the internet but he doesn’t get the right information – you have to decide if you go to internet and if what you find there is the right path, or not.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“YouTube is a perfect example of people manipulating their religion to get their [message] across. I saw a thing which showed a Sunni gathering information and putting it on YouTube about how Shi’ites are infidels and inciting hatred among Muslims, it’s very dangerous and influential.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“Google a sheikh, many aren’t qualified, just self-made clerics, and the wrong sheikh comes up.”*  
(Focus group participant)

Others suggested that the internet and other social media create opportunities for extremist figures who have been ostracised in more traditional face to face settings, such as mosques or community centres, to reach broad audiences without moderation or censure from others within their community:

*“Many Muslims in NSW have tried to talk to Ibrahim Siddiq-Conlon, he’s banned from at least one mosque, all Muslims openly said I don’t agree with his views. And the internet is dangerous because he’s been making clips for many years on YouTube, and many Muslims were never aware of the videos he’s been making on YouTube for years. ... And for many who watch these [videos], these figures turn into rock stars, they develop attraction.”*  
(Focus group participants)

Government stakeholders commented specifically on the capacity to manipulate the internet’s multimedia nature to direct the flow of internet traffic toward particular sites and views:

*“I think because it’s an open and anonymous source of information, if people are looking for a definitive statement, the internet is the first place they go to. If you type ‘jihad’ into Google, the first pages will all lead you to understand that jihad will lead to violence – and 80% of people will not go beyond the first page of sites. It’s the algorithms and there are ways of manipulating that to get your site higher up.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“Yes, people are getting influenced by the internet all the time. Smart users can influence groups of people by what they put on there. The beauty of the internet is that it’s multimedia – it uses multiple channels and ports of entry. Wait until we get to Generations Y and Z – it will be a big issue for them.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

Still others saw the internet as a socially dynamic ‘battlefield of ideas’, in which both radicalisation and counter-narratives fought for the hearts and minds of those who surf the internet wave:

*“Whether it’s radicalisation or the opposite, I think it’s a battlefield of ideas. That’s the key. Where you have a free flow of ideas, it’s very important. It’s not as if radicals can do more with the internet – the AFP and the Attorney General’s office are out there with their agenda, we’re out there with ours, other Muslims are out there with theirs. But because of instantaneous media, social networking sites, etc., it is crucial for all of us.”* (Community leader)

Yet many felt it is precisely the free flow of ideas and the internet’s capacity to instantaneously reach so many people that creates new challenges for gate-keeping and scrutiny of internet content and flows. A wide range of respondents thought the internet and other new social media present formidable obstacles to traditional ways of regulating content, preventing or constraining the ability of extremist views to be accessed and promoted, and demanding accountability for what is claimed:

*“I think the internet provides a platform where an underground can be built without much scrutiny from the agencies. The nature of the internet is such that you can hide in there in the maze of information for a long time, and before you are detected you can move to another area of the net.”*  
(Community leader)

*“The radical Islamic preaching by sheiks from foreign countries who may not be welcome in other foreign countries are able to reach audiences there because there’s nothing to flag it.”* (Government stakeholder)



*“One thing about the internet is how private it can be. A person could be communicating, learning, downloading at 2 am and no one would know. In those twilight hours where people are very vulnerable, there’s nothing there to screen or counter what they are absorbing. This lends itself to extremism because there is really no buffer to say ‘stop, think, question what you’re doing.’ They are connecting with people crossing boundaries and borders on the other side of the world and it can be a very insidious medium because it is unsupervised.”* (Community leader)

### **The internet reinforces existing views rather than creating new views**

Nevertheless, despite acknowledging the internet’s immersive power, collapsing of geographical and cultural distance and the difficulties of regulating the internet environment, participants were divided on whether or not radical and extremist discourses on the internet could radicalise those who would not otherwise be attracted or responsive to extremist perspectives. A number of community leaders and government stakeholders questioned the extent to which the internet could really create, rather than merely bolster, radical and extremist leanings. For these respondents, people go to the internet seeking to confirm what they already believe:

*“For many people the internet sustains already held views rather than being the initial catalyst or influence.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“If you are that way inclined, the internet can provide you with a lot of the information you need. Human beings need justification for what they do – rightly or wrongly. If I think something is the right thing to do to plant a bomb and knock off a few people, I will need to find justification, and the internet is a good source of this – websites exist that can support any point of view you can think of and can legitimise such actions.”* (Community leader)

Others, however, felt that the internet was a more neutral space accommodating a highly diverse range of views and information in which personal judgement and choice were paramount:

*“There is the side of the internet in terms of what we see in the Middle East at the moment with the spreading of a revolutionary democratic movement connecting people into significant social action. Then there is the other side of individuals with a narrow perspective finding others with the same perspective who reinforce that perspective and keep out alternative knowledge.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“The internet provides easy access to information – that’s all it does. While the internet may be a hotbed for radicalism, it is also a source of more moderate information and way of living too. ...The internet can also be a healthy information source for people but it all depends on whether people accept it or not. Personal judgment is important here.”* (Community leaders)

### **The internet can provide ‘the other side of the story’**

As an extension of this perspective, some participants felt that the internet offered a valuable counter-balance to what they saw as the hegemony of conventional media in promoting mainstream reporting and analysis of world events and politics. For these respondents, the internet offered a valuable corrective in providing the ‘other side of the story’ to that offered by mainstream media reporting and information-gathering:

*“But you can’t always see the internet as a bad thing, you can’t think that showing those videos [of US soldiers killing Afghani children] is bad because it can influence people, you’re showing it at least... another side of the story.”* (Focus group participant)

*“The other side of the story, man, you gotta look into it, because it’s not presented to you. What’s presented to you is danger, terrorists could attack at any time, but people don’t know about the distraction on the other side, so I think the aim is to desensitise us so we don’t feel sympathy for those other people.”* (Focus group participant)

### **The internet and the ‘lone wolf’**

Similarly, there was little consensus as to whether the internet specifically facilitated the radicalisation of ‘lone wolves’ – socially isolated or inept individuals who became active terrorists solely or primarily based on their internet-based reading or relationships. A minority of participants, particularly those who believed that concrete social interactions were fundamental to the process of radicalisation, felt that the ‘lone wolf’ paradigm was potentially overrated:

*“The instances of lone individuals sitting in front of computers not interacting with other people but being radicalised by what they read on the internet are rare and probably exceptions.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“The internet facilitates proximity to radical/extreme ideas for more people more rapidly than was possible previously – but how effective that is versus face to face contact is another question.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

More pervasive, however, was the view that the role of the internet in creating home-grown terrorists who find both the rationale and the means for engaging in terrorist activities was well-established. Government stakeholders in particular attributed this to the internet’s ability to reach across borders of both time and space and to bring more sophisticated messages in more languages to more people than was hitherto possible:

*“[Radicals and extremists] don’t need to go to a training camp. They can learn in their own lounge room with no fear of exposure or standing out. If they’re socially inept, they can make a big impact just by going down to the shopping centre. There is also the convenience factor – you can still go to work during the day and spend your nights doing ‘research’ [on how to be a terrorist].”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“The internet has been talked about as a source of the ‘lone wolf’ or home-grown terrorist. He may not be well plugged into his society but he finds a peer community through the website.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

## **Social impacts of the internet and other social media**

### **Faster, broader access to radical and extremist views**

The internet and other new social media were widely seen by participants as ushering in profound transformations in how we think, know and communicate with other. Not surprisingly, one major theme for communities in relation to the social impacts of the internet and other new media revolved around the intensified speed and reach of communication that internet and social media technologies have created. They pointed to the way in which the ‘instant’ global communication environment of the internet and social media, coupled with the enormous quantity of information now available and the ease with which this can be accessed, means far wider and unmediated exposure to radical and extremist messaging than ever before:

*“The new age of electronic media is now like a wildfire that spreads really quickly – it wasn’t formerly as quick or as frequent or as accessible. Now young people in Australia through Facebook, etc. are exposed much more quickly to extremist messages and hate upon hate.”* (Community leader)

*“Pamphleteering has been going on for hundreds of years but always had limited geographical reach. The internet is a like a giant borderless pamphlet where hundreds of millions of people can now read and access it instantly. Even 20 years ago this was not possible.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

A related concern for many participants was how the internet has made the mechanics of both disseminating extremist views and providing practical knowledge for engaging in terrorist acts much easier:

*“The internet has really assisted in both radicalisation and extremism and in getting a wired up reach for these ideas to be accessible to a greater community. It has aided and abetted radicalism because it’s so easy to access polluted versions of Islam.”* (Community leader)

*“It makes it much easier. If radicalisation is about the message rather than the messenger, then yes. It has made the mechanics of terrorism easier (e.g. how to make a bomb) but also the mechanics of radicalisation have become easier – no question.”* (Community leader)

### **The internet is changing our perception of reality**

A second major theme to emerge from participants was the way in which the blurring of distinctions between ‘virtual’ versus ‘real’ worlds facilitated by internet connectivity is bringing with it new forms of individual and social consciousness – literally rewiring the way we conceptualise and distinguish between real and virtual scenarios and driving new identity and cognitive frameworks as a result. While some respondents thought it was simply a matter of extremist groups using any available popular communication technology for the classic purpose of exploiting, manipulating or ‘brainwashing’ the vulnerable or naive, other participants felt that more significant paradigm shifts in social consciousness were now underway as a result of the cognitive transformations inaugurated by internet use, particularly for younger people who have never known a world without the internet.

*“The virtual world and the real world is a false dichotomy – they are now so intertwined. ... The internet is now part of normal existence for people 5 years of age and onward.”*  
(Government stakeholders)

This was especially significant for a number of participants because of the way in which it can shape knowledge and understanding of Islam. As Olivier Roy has pointed out in recent work on Islam and globalisation,<sup>11</sup>

*“Radicalisation and extremism are linked to processes of de-territorialisation and de-culturalisation, the formation of a global identity that has no roots in a geographically defined sense, only in virtual terms. That in itself is seen to be an important characteristic for the formation of a radical identity, one that gives over to fantasising about ‘pure Islam’ and its birth, for example.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

This emphasis on a virtual world in which a borderless variety of ‘pure Islam’, untainted by material circumstances or debates on the ground, can be constructed and sustained is important because:

*“In many ways the type of radical Islamism that we are talking about primarily exists on the internet. It’s not, generally speaking, the political ideology of any particular country; it’s not as if you can easily find mosques where this is preached, though they exist. It is largely on the internet, where you can find whatever you’re looking for and a way to justify your views. It concocts a particular form of Islam that goes through the Koran and takes all the cases and quotes that can be found to justify violence and terrorism and can create quite powerful narratives. But if you come to it without any real understanding of Islam, then it can probably seem plausible.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

### **The internet deals in flows of emotion as well as information**

In keeping with the discussion above concerning the internet and other social media’s reliance on mobilising rhetoric rather than argument as a primary mode of transforming people’s views, a number of participants made the important point that new communication technologies are particularly well suited to mobilising emotion, rather than reason, in the display and orientation of various kinds of radical and extremist content. The internet’s capacity to blend words, images and sounds in emotionally provocative ways makes it especially hospitable to such uses, and participants noted it can be difficult to resist the affective impact of what you read and see when using the internet and other social media:

*“It’s one of the factors, going on Facebook and stuff, that’s a very good point, we’ve been mentioning the poor and rich, but the factor of emotions and feelings exist to everyone, soft hearted or hard hearted, and emotion can be carried out through any medium, and that can really create violence in personality.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“They put things like beheadings, and that’s the first thing you see.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“Facebook is very provocative, one Facebook page published the Danish cartoons, and said things about Muslims, one Muslim was against this and his account was blocked.”* (Focus group participant)

In addition to the selective use of text and images to mobilise affective responses to internet content, a number of younger focus group participants pointed out that the internet is an ideal setting in which to feed people’s curiosity about taboo or semi-taboo subjects. Like pornography, extremism and terrorism can be socially difficult subjects to explore in face to face conversations or encounters, but for those who are curious about non-mainstream views or alternative perspectives on global events or who are seeking the controversial, the internet and social media are increasingly the first ports of call. This was not necessarily seen as a problem, but in the minds of some participants it did imply the potential for extremist sites to capitalise on natural curiosity, interest or boredom:

*“I think usually people who go and check on terrorism websites have an interest, not to join, but curiosity.”* (Focus group participant)

*“I’ve gone to some internet sites -- a friend from Somalia, he told about one, about where he killed the family and he was getting revenge, the site was an Al-Shabbab site.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“Anything positive these days is boring, that’s what they say. ... It’s more interesting to go to a site that is controversial.”*  
(Focus group participants)

11. Olivier Roy (2004), *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, New York: Columbia University Press.

### The impacts of promoting hatred and cultural stereotyping on the internet

As in Chapter 6 on the role and impact of the media, a large number of participants were similarly concerned with the impact of the internet and social media to promote reactive radicalisation as a response by those who feel socially excluded, despised or provoked as a result of their encounters with cultural stereotyping and hatred of ethnic or religious groups over the internet:

*“Facebook can be used to build hatred and pressure and YouTube and other resources can be used to gather action, mobilise people, make bombs, it’s an endless resource.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“You have racist Australian people, you see the signs, saying ‘Fuck off, we’re full’ – I’ve been to that group [on the internet] and the things they say, and I was curious, they say really bad things, it’s actually against everyone, Asians, Blacks.”* (Focus group participant)

Other participants, however, were also concerned with the reverse trend: the intensification of mainstream bias toward and vilification of Muslims and other minority groups because of false information about other cultural groups peddled by xenophobic or anti-Islamic websites:

*“Anti-Islamic information on the internet is horrible and untrue. In Australia, we have Cadbury chocolate with the halal stamp on it – then the emails and internet started flowing around if you buy this brand you are supporting Al-Qaeda. This had an impact on people – if they hear this and are unsure about Islam this can help them become hardened against it. Other internet messages say Islam is linked to paedophilia, domestic violence and beating your wife – this leaks into the mainstream and can have a negative influence.”*  
(Community leader)

*“I think with the burning the Quran thing, it was a very important issue at that time, and I went to these websites which were talking about it, and explained about it, and I read the comments, thousands of them and they were all basically supporting it, so when someone reads those comments, it can make you angry.”* (Focus group participant)

### The role of self-regulation in resisting provocation from internet and social media sites

However, there was also strong support from focus group participants for strengthening the capacity of people to engage in self-regulation and become more resilient when dealing with provocation on the internet and other social media in relation to anti-Muslim or extremist messaging. Ignoring internet-based provocation, avoiding anti-Muslim websites and being ‘mentally strong’ in resisting the effects of extremist or hate-based content were all stressed as strategies that could be employed:

*“[My roommate and I] had a strong argument about sites. My idea was just ignore it. It was general stuff, they were using Facebook about Mohammed, peace be upon him, anti -Mohammed, and I said ignore it, there are lots of bad things on the internet, it’s trying to get you angry.”* (Focus group participant)

*“The thing is, don’t focus on it, ignore it, delete it straight away, people trying to provoke you, you get provoked, you let them win.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“Actually, most of the [Pakistani] Muslim community deleted Facebook because of the issue, there were many bad things about Islam on there, and Facebook were very slow to react, so we closed our accounts. You can comment back, but what does that do? You get more negative comments.”*  
(Focus group participant)

### Social challenges of the internet and other social media

Participants identified a range of social challenges thrown up by the internet and other social media in relation to countering radicalisation, extremism and terrorism in these communication environments. The key themes that emerged from the data relate to two main areas:

- How we might best think about the internet and other social media not only as a threat to social cohesion and moderate viewpoints, but also as a resource to strengthen social cohesion, counter violent extremism and support those who are vulnerable to radical and extremist messaging.
- How to respond in practical terms to the challenge of controlling or preventing radicalisation and extremism on the internet and other social media sites.

### The internet and social media can be used to counter or facilitate extremism

A large proportion of respondents thought the internet and other social media could be used in various ways to positively influence discourses around radicalisation and extremism. These participants were unwilling to concede that the impacts of the internet in relation to extremism and terrorism were the sole province of extremists themselves:

*“One of the arguments would be that this is already happening with generational change within Muslim communities. Violent extremism not seen as so sexy anymore – it’s losing its sex appeal. Twitter and Facebook herald a change – think of the Egyptian example.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“Regulating the internet can’t work – too much information can get past the gate-keeping and blockades. It is better to educate the people and have a good communication between the people and the government, especially with community leaders – the internet can be used in a positive way in this sense.”* (Community leader)

However, a few participants pointed out that these positive impacts are strongly reliant on people’s willingness to actively counter extremist messaging within the internet environment:

*“It can also counter radicalisation and extremism, but the problem with this is that good people don’t stand up against evil that happens. There should be people counteracting it using the internet and other means, but the people who don’t believe in radicalism tend not to use [such] media, whereas the radicals do. So in some ways the internet becomes a lopsided communication channel for those who want to express extreme views.”* (Community leader)

Many participants were also at pains to emphasise the multiple functions and pathways of the internet as a social force for either good or ill in the world and saw this as an important challenge confronting modern society:

*“The internet is a double-edged sword – it can be used for good and bad – these days it is being used about 70% for bad and about 30% for good. [There are] are problems in relation to the internet, but it also can bring humanity together and I love it for this reason. You can use a car for travel or to ram into someone else or to rob a shopping centre – it’s the same thing.”* (Community leader)

*“The internet also has other functions – if people put up extreme material on YouTube or other sites, there will be a response – you will get counter-material to radicalisation and extremist views. The internet can also be used to support the vulnerable as much as to exploit them.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“The internet is a useful tool and needs to be used in this situation, because there’s so much information, and people are looking for the right information. If you put the info there, and if there are enough arrows, people will see it. On the anti-Islamic side there’s not enough information to combat that, [but] it is there.”* (Focus group participant)

### Balancing the benefits and risks of the internet and social media

Related to the discussion about the internet and other social media’s capacity to be used for constructive rather than destructive or disruptive purposes was the importance of educating communities – in particular, young people and the families of young people – with respect not only to the benefits but also the risks that the internet can bring to people’s lives, including viable alternatives to relying solely on the internet for the purposes of education and leisure:

*“The internet can be fantastic, teaching our kids a lot of good things. At the same time, there are lots of inflammatory websites – not just Muslim but other groups.”* (Community leader)

*“I always tell my daughter, internet is good, but can lead you to danger. Awareness about bad aspects of internet should be taught in school, and have community awareness.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Whether you’re radical or non-radical, you need a constructive way to channel that energy. ... As far as physical activity goes, they now spend lots of time on electronic media whereas in my day it would have been on the street, playing sport, socialising face to face.”* (Community leaders)

Notwithstanding this, some parents in the study rued the lack of control they felt they had over their children's access to inappropriate material, including extremist content, on the internet:

*"Older people are not so vulnerable to being persuaded by false promises and lies, but young people are vulnerable like this. Some of what the internet does is good, but not for young people."* (Community leader)

*"I think it's dangerous for children, it's good for education but as a parent, what we like to tell them is you have to use it for your school things, and don't go to certain things. But I don't know if there will be any control about it, because they can look anywhere, at school, or at the library, they can use it anywhere, but if you tell them about it, it can help."* (Focus group participant)

### **The challenge of preventing radicalisation and extremism on internet and social media sites**

There were two prevailing views for participants on the issue of how best to meet the challenge of trying to prevent or control radical and extremist content and messaging through the internet and other new social media, with the majority of comments on this theme coming from government stakeholders and community leaders.

One view, prevalent especially amongst government stakeholders but also some community participants, was that trying to censor or control the internet and other social media was futile in practical terms, could potentially backfire by making restricted material more desirable, and also posed significant and unacceptable risks to Australian democratic freedoms and rights. These participants tended to place high value on democratic freedoms and to be wary of assigning too much power to the state because of the potential for state-sponsored or sanctioned abuse of such powers, with a number of people citing China's tight control of the internet as a negative example. Overall, this was the majority view for all three participant cohorts.

The other view, with slightly more even cross-sectional support across the cohorts, was that some form of surveillance, moderation or control of the internet was needed in relation to countering or limiting radicalisation and extremism. The perception for this group was that government should play an active role in exploring and implementing such options. For participants who held the latter view, the value of democratic rights and freedom of expression was seen as counter-balanced by the need to protect communities from external and internal threats to safety. This was a minority view within the overall study sample.

### **Censorship won't work**

For those who saw efforts to control or manage the presence of radicalisation and extremism on the internet as problematic, the prevailing view was that censorship simply would not work either politically or practically. They were sceptical of the idea that the internet could be censored or filtered in any meaningful way, and worried about the social and political risks in doing so:

*"I do not think putting a flag or censoring extremists sites will help – if we do that today, tomorrow we find that human rights can be infringed very seriously. We do not want to give a government a chance to abuse rights that have taken us a long time to gain. We don't want a China where everything is censored. At the end of the day people are responsible for the actions they take, but if we provide education then we have contributed to the choices they can make."* (Community leader)

*"Person 'A' might cut so much content off the internet that is actually good and appropriate simply through not understanding it or being cautious. Person 'B' might be too conservative and not remove material that shouldn't be there."* (Government stakeholder)

*"One thing the government should not do is start to set restrictions, or censor things, because straight away the rebel in people starts to emerge, and it takes around three minutes to get around search engine blocks – so don't do that."* (Focus group participant)

Some participants in government roles also highlighted not only the political but also the operational challenges in trying to control the flow of extremist internet sites:

*“Stopping internet sites spruiking extremism would be a policing function on an international/global basis. You’d need uniform legislation across countries for that.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“How does extremism cross over to violent extremism or radicalisation – how do we identify the line that gets crossed there? It’s a fine line sometimes.”* (Government stakeholder)

### **More should be done about surveillance, control and disruption of extremist internet content**

Countering these perspectives were the views of participants who thought some type and level of surveillance, control and/or disruption of extremist internet content and sites was justified or desirable. Some respondents felt legislative control or content classification systems to minimise violent extremism on the internet were the most likely to succeed:

*“I think there does have to be a certain extent of control – maybe not blocking sites, but flagging or identifying them and letting everyone know that these sites exist and educate them about the lies and lack of credibility that they have. I think the government can create classification systems for this – we do it for child pornography, so why not for extremism? I think if something brings harm to someone, we should be able to respond accordingly. On Facebook, if I swear, someone can report me for abuse. It’s not different for terrorism and extremism. If someone is saying they are willing to commit a crime, then why shouldn’t we go against this?”* (Community leader)

Other participants focused more on the prospects for covert or overt surveillance and disruption of extremist internet sites. For this group, the anticipated protective factor of highlighting the consequences of being caught producing or consuming extremist content was a key element of this approach:

*“I take it the authorities can perform covert surveillance as with any other illegal or criminal activity. In terms of social policing, highlighting the consequences is not a bad idea, as they’ve done already with child porn access. The same could apply here – I could be caught and tracked, is it worth it?”* (Community leader)

Only one participant was comfortable with full censorship of extremist sites and content on the internet: *‘You could completely ban it. It is a balance between my freedom of choice versus mass destruction, and I think the benefit of banning extremism on the internet outweighs the consequences of losing some freedom of information. It is more important to protect humanity.’* (Community leader)

## **Part II: Conclusion**

For many respondents the social and interactive dimensions of the internet and other relatively new social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are critical in shaping their perceptions of how discourses and dialogues around extremism and terrorism are played out. The internet and other social media were seen as dynamic, fluid spaces in which *radicalisation as a social process* can be either reinforced or alternatively hampered by the way in which users of internet and social media sites shape and direct flows of information, opinion and perspective.

The **social dynamics** of the internet and other new media revolved around a number of inter-related themes, including a broad perception that radicalisation and the internet are both driven by social interaction and that the internet and other social media play a significant role in incubating radicalisation and extremism through forms of immersive virtual community-building.

The internet was seen as an important social marketing tool for extremist groups, one that had become more slick and sophisticated over time and was increasingly directed toward attracting and influencing a younger net-savvy generation of potential recruits to extremist causes. The sophisticated format of contemporary extremist internet sites and messaging can mask the crudeness of their content, and many young people in particular were not seen as being sufficiently critical or skilled to make this distinction. Moreover, the internet was seen as a way of providing access to and platforms and followers for radical leaders who had been ostracised by moderate or mainstream communities who sought to minimise their interpersonal contact with communities more generally.

The internet was regarded by most participants as reinforcing existing views rather than creating new views; in this sense, it was not considered a primary driver of radicalisation from scratch. Nevertheless, the internet was perceived as a critical facilitator in relation to making it easier for the socially maladapted to gain a sense of community and to learn more about radicalisation and extremism in private and convenient ways without ever having to interact in face to face contexts. This was particularly a concern for those who worried about the rise of home-grown extremism, coupled with a recent focus by extremist groups on encouraging acts of terrorism on home soil rather than having to travel overseas for training or to participate in international conflicts and hot-spots.

The internet was not always seen negatively in relation to the social dynamics of radicalisation and extremism because some participants felt that what was considered by some to be 'radical' or 'extreme' could also provide 'the other side of the story' to mainstream media representations of particular issues, particularly around politics and foreign affairs.

In relation to the **social impacts** of the internet and other new media, there was broad consensus amongst participants that the internet was like a 'giant borderless pamphlet', one that facilitated faster, broader, easier access to radical and extremist views than ever before.

Hand in hand with this perception went the notion that the internet and other new communication technologies are fundamentally altering our perception of reality and our capacity to distinguish between what we currently think of as the dichotomy between the 'virtual' and the 'real', with some participants saying this is no longer a viable distinction to make, particularly for those born in an age in which the internet has always existed for them.

Notwithstanding the collapse of this distinction, participants still drew a line between emotion and information, with many feeling that it is the capacity of multimedia technologies that combine text, sound and both still and moving images to tap not just into people's intellectual understanding of political, cultural or social issues but their visceral experience, aesthetic sensibilities and emotional responses – with implications and insights for how radicalisation and extremism exerts its force and influence through these media. There was also discussion about the extent to which the internet and other social media provide a liberating space in which to explore socially difficult or taboo subjects, with a number of participants arguing that terrorism is now taboo in social conversational settings in the same way that sexuality was for an earlier generation.

Participants felt that the impacts of promoting hatred and cultural stereotyping on the internet represented a significant risk to social cohesion, increasing the potential for reactive radicalisation in response to being constantly demeaned, humiliated or scapegoated on internet sites. In addition, they pointed to the potential loss of those who might be in a position to help counter radicalisation by working with authorities, but who became so demoralised or frustrated that they lost trust and confidence in mainstream Australian society because of the steady diet of hatred they encountered on the web. Such hatred was felt by many participants to be another variety of extremism in its own right.

Yet a number of young focus group participants also stressed the importance of self-regulation and resilience to resist provocation from internet and social media sites. These respondents said that it was crucial to learn how to minimise the impact of such material on one's emotions and responses, and suggested strategies including avoidance, humour and cognitive processing to limit these impacts. More support for strengthening resilience amongst those communities targeted by such hatred was also canvassed.

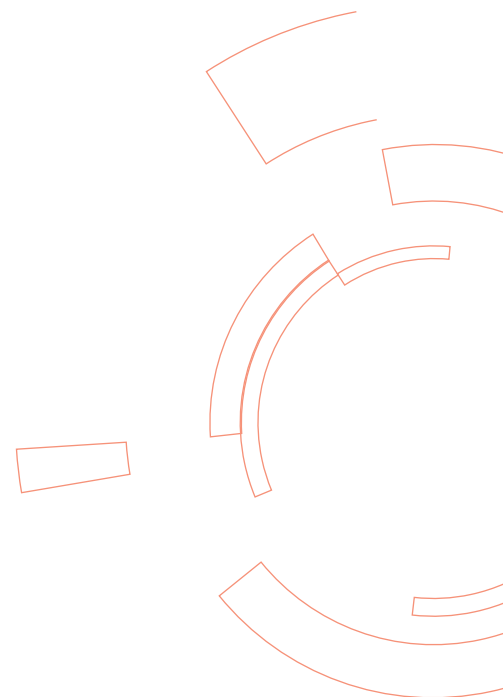


Finally, in relation to the **social and operational challenges** presented by the internet and other social media in relation to radicalisation and extremism, participants emphasised the importance of maintaining a balanced view of the ability of the internet and social media to counter as well as facilitate radicalisation and extremism. Respondents focused on the challenge of providing alternative narratives and options to those who go to the net out of curiosity or uncertainty about who they are and where they belong. Many participants did not want to concede the territory of the internet as a social force to extremists, arguing that it can be used for good as well as for ill and that with enough imagination or resourcing it was possible to intervene in a positive way through these media.

However, most participants agreed that much more awareness is needed about balancing the positives and risks of the internet and social media, particularly for young people, their families and for new arrivals who may still be grappling both with the language and the technology they encounter in Australia. Some parents in focus groups felt that such education and awareness was all the more important because they had little confidence that they could control what their children did or whom they contacted on the internet, given how widely available net and social media access now is outside the home.

The challenges of preventing radicalisation and extremism on internet and social media sites were seen as complex by all participants. The prevailing view held by most government stakeholders and many community leaders was that trying to censor or control the internet and other social media was futile in practical terms, could potentially backfire by making restricted material more desirable, and also posed significant and unacceptable risks to Australian democratic freedoms and rights. Participants who held this view tended to place high value on democratic freedoms and to be wary of assigning too much power to the state because of the potential for abuse of such powers, citing China or other non-democratic states' tight control of the internet as a negative example.

Another view for a minority of participants across all three cohorts was that some form of surveillance, moderation or control of the internet was needed to counter or limit radicalisation and extremism, and that government should play an active role in exploring and implementing such options. For those who held the latter view, the value of democratic rights and freedom of expression was seen as counter-balanced by the need to protect communities from external and internal threats to safety.



## CHAPTER 7: PERCEPTIONS OF OPERATIONS PENDENNIS AND NEATH

This section of the study explores government and community views on various aspects of two recent Australian counter-terrorism operations that resulted in the arrests and in some cases conviction of a number of people under federal counter-terrorism legislation. Participants were asked how they viewed these two operations, known as Operation Neath and Operation Pendennis, which were widely reported to the Australian community through the media. This included consideration of how the arrest, trial, conviction and sentencing phases of these operations were handled.

Although all participants were provided with an information sheet documenting a summary of publicly available knowledge about Pendennis and Neath, it should be noted that a large number of community members who lived outside Victoria and New South Wales had either not heard of these operations, had only glancing familiarity with one or both through news reporting, or had not formed a particular view about them. Consequently, the data-set reflecting informed responses for this portion of the study is more modest than for other project themes.

In addition, unlike the emergence of fairly consistent themes from the data across the three participant cohorts for the rest of the study, this portion of the data reveals sharply divergent views between government stakeholders on the one hand, and community leaders and focus group participants on the other, concerning the perceived fairness, impact and efficacy of these operations. We have accordingly clustered the contrasting views of government stakeholders alongside those of community leaders and focus group participants to highlight these discrepancies where they emerge.

### **Procedural integrity of Operations Pendennis and Neath and their outcomes**

#### **These operations successfully reflect Australia's healthy democratic legal system**

Most government-based participants familiar with Pendennis and/or Neath felt that the Australian justice system had dealt fairly and democratically with those who were investigated, arrested and tried in these operations. They saw these operations as testament to the healthy and transparent nature of both Australian democracy and the Australian legal system, in contrast to the perceived 'political failures' of other recent operations such as the 'Haneef inquiry'. A number of people drew attention to the fact that only some of the people charged with terrorist offences were convicted and sentenced, while others had their cases dismissed, seeing this as further evidence that the system worked fairly well. A number of respondents also commented on the fact that lessons from earlier operations in which significant Muslim community mistrust and hostility had arisen had been learned, as evidenced by the attention given to community debriefing exercises following the arrests:

*"The investigations were justified, the police took the appropriate action and did it in a culturally sensitive way and took great steps to link in after the arrests with the relevant communities so they understood what was going on. The trials were the most open and robust terrorist trials you would expect anywhere in the world, where some were convicted and some acquitted, and the judgements and sentencing were transparent and done very scrupulously. I think intelligence and police agencies learned from the fact that they created a lot of community mistrust from earlier operations and these lessons have been learned."*  
(Government stakeholder)

*"Given the serious consequences of a terrorist act on Australian soil, I think the very direct approach was perfectly justified in both cases. But if you reflected on some of the operations in Queensland you might have a different view, where there were some significant political and other failures, such as the Haneef inquiry."* (Government stakeholder)

One respondent also focused on the way in which the handling of various phases of these operations was useful in focusing on terrorism as a crime, rather than as a political event that could be contested ideologically or treated as beyond the normal rule of law in relation to state powers:

*“For both cases, I think all phases were handled appropriately and for me, demonstrated the fact that terrorism is a crime and will be treated as a criminal matter. The people who were arrested had all the same opportunities and rights that any other person arrested for any other crime has. Their trial was conducted like any other criminal trial. There was very little information that wasn’t presented publicly. The sentencing in particular demonstrated that it was handled accordingly to standard court procedures. A number had their entitlement to parole taken into account; some didn’t receive maximum sentences available under the law.”* (Government stakeholder)

However, despite the admiration expressed by some government stakeholders for the culturally attuned debriefing given to the target communities following the arrests, other government stakeholders had serious misgivings about how far police should go in taking cultural sensitivities into consideration during such operations:

*“Why should arrests be culturally appropriate? Think about [UK Prime Minister] David Cameron’s ‘muscular liberalism’ – we are not targeting individuals or communities, we are targeting behaviours and actions – why should culture come into it? The reality is that during an operation such as a siege or hostage situation how do you culturally sensitively resolve that? You don’t. You use all of the tools at your disposal.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“It is a luxury in certain situations to think about using culturally appropriate indicators. You need to make sure of the safety of both the operating officers and the people being taken into custody. It will be fast. Cultural considerations will come way below. Also, I’m not sure if cultural considerations are different from the liberal idea of respecting someone’s dignity in more general terms. It is an intrinsically undignified and invasive process, being arrested or being the target of an operation. Culturally appropriate methods may be what people talk about in interviews but it is pretty low on the list in practice.”* (Government stakeholder)

Some government stakeholders were confident that communities directly involved in these operations saw them as reasonable and justified:

*“We canvassed a number of NSW Muslim communities at the trial and sentencing stage of Pendennis and the arrest phase of Neath. We found that at the arrest stage of Neath, they had the opinion that the people who were arrested were criminals, it was justified and they should’ve been arrested.”* (Government stakeholder)

Other government stakeholders, however, cited reported concerns from communities about the integrity of the operations. These included community unease with charges based on *conspiracy* to act rather than on the actual commission of acts, and also perceptions of excessive sentencing for those convicted. This excess was perceived to be based more on their Muslim identities than on the gravity of the crimes for which they were being sentenced:

*“With Pendennis, at the verdict stage we found that there was a general lack of understanding of conspiracy in law. It’s different to shari’a law – if you have a number of people involved in criminal conspiracy, how come someone with a small minor role is getting the same sentence as someone who was much more centrally involved? When the sentences came out some people likened them to the 44-year sentences the Skaf brothers got for sexual assault. They thought the Skaf brothers and the Pendennis sentences were both examples of extreme sentencing based on those convicted being Muslims.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“The other feedback we got on Pendennis was that the judge, in summing up, said he believed the conspirators were going to commit a terrorist act ‘somewhere’. Some of the community members were concerned that it was not a specific event and they couldn’t understand how you could convict someone of a non-specific act – this contradicts elements of Islamic law under shari’a. Also, the lack of conspiracy anchored in anything concrete [was a concern to some in these communities].”* (Government stakeholder)

This concern with the perceived vagueness of convictions for what people think rather than what they do was echoed by participants in the focus groups. One participant in the focus groups spoke about his discomfort with detaining people based on *‘terrorist talk’* because he felt it was highly unlikely they would act on their extremist thoughts or dialogue. He cited the case of acquaintances who were detained in Perth for security reasons and thought it was *‘because these guys are men and big and look like what you think terrorists would look like they get detained’*.

Some community leaders and focus group participants also supported the arrests and convictions, expressing confidence in the integrity of Neath and Pendennis and seeing the subsequent trials as fair and the sentencing as reasonable. It was very important to several community-based participants that, as in the case of Neath, it was members of their own community who first brought those convicted to the attention of authorities:

*"I think there were some acquittals as well as convictions. This showed transparency and that the process works and it gave confidence to the community about the way the law works here."* (Community leader)

*"In Australia – the community exposed them. They need to realise that their own community exposed them."* (Focus group participant)

*"Benbrika was on the radar and so in the end it didn't surprise some of us that he was exposed. It was a bit of a relief that he was now arrested. With Neath and the [al-]Shabab, the people who wanted to blow things up were a real worry to us, and we welcomed the arrests and convictions."* (Community leader)

### **Operations Neath and Pendennis were not justified**

Yet a significant number of focus group participants saw things differently, expressing either doubt or denial that those arrested were involved in such events or that the official version of the activities leading up to the investigations, arrests and convictions was either accurate or justified. These comments are reminiscent of some of the doubts and denials evoked by discussion of the media and 9/11 above in Chapter 5:

*"I don't believe it. ... Allegations [about] Al-Shabbab.... Just alleged they were. ... But then the government pushes [alleged violent extremists] to make them say stuff and do stuff, and they might admit to stuff to get out."* (Focus group participants)

In a similar vein, some focus group participants questioned the moral reasoning around who is and isn't sanctioned to use violence in various contexts, seeing the state, and particularly the military, as fair game for attacks by violent extremists under certain political circumstances:

*"Depends on how you define criminal, this is the army, they are sent overseas to kill people, you see it's acceptable for the army, they have a uniform, they are a government thing, but in reality they are just humans with a gun, and they are in your country going to kill people."* (Focus group participant)

*"But in this case, nobody was innocent anyway, they were the army, they don't kill chickens. If [those arrested and tried] planned to go to a school, and hurt them [that would be wrong], but it was the army where people had guns and weapons to fight back."* (Focus group participant)

*"It comes back to different people and different reasons, they all have their purpose for doing things. Why would a terrorist choose the MCG and another one the army, they have their target, maybe you could say they choose to bomb army because they go fight Muslims usually."* (Focus group participant)

### **Perceptions of operational policing during Pendennis and Neath**

#### **The police handled these operations well**

The police were generally viewed by government stakeholders as having handled these operations well, with a number of people seeing helpful policy and operational lessons arising for future events:

*"The debrief by Victoria Police of the community following Neath was very rapid and also very successful, from what I hear. I think that was really impressive. I think there are some really good lessons to come out of these two operations for future police handling of these situations."* (Non-Victorian government stakeholder)

*"I have the police view which is that they were two very successful operations that achieved their objectives right through to conviction in some cases. I have some detailed knowledge of the operational aspects of it and I've not heard of anything that I thought was unacceptable. To prevent something happening without serious physical harm to any person and garnering sufficient evidence to convict someone using a transparent jury system was the best possible outcome."* (Non-Victorian government stakeholder)

Moreover, these stakeholders felt that police were well supported in their investigations and actions by the Muslim communities in which those arrested were based:

*“The Muslim communities in Melbourne were pretty supportive of what police were doing and in fact assisted in what was going on. From their point of view, these were people who had a very misguided view of Islam and it was proper that action should be taken against them. In Neath and also in Pendennis, the initial contact with Victoria Police was from [people] within these communities who had become concerned. Even with Benbrika and so on, they essentially withdrew from larger mosques and set up their own because the community did not generally support what they were talking about, so they set up their own ‘garage mosque’.”* (Government stakeholder)

And at least one community leader felt the police were between a rock and a hard place during such investigations and generally had their priorities right:

*“Sometimes when you handle something roughly people want revenge. But if you handle it too gently it seems like you aren’t enforcing things well enough. So it’s hard to win. But I don’t think pleasing people should be a priority when you are trying to protect people or prevent people from being harmed.”* (Community leader)

Another community leader, however, suggested that Australian police have a bad reputation for brutality both in Australia and overseas, which can unduly influence perceptions of police during such operations even when they are handling things reasonably well:

*“At the time of these operations, around the world and in Australia there were very bad stories about [Australian] police treatment, for example the Doomadgee case in Palm Island. Sometimes it is too late to reverse the damage done to the person by the police. We are living in a world with human rights and the police have to have that restraint on them but this is not always the case, and sometimes we find out about it too late. Police brutality is not a solution during the arrest.”* (Community leader)

#### **Police and security agencies are more interested in harassing Muslims than in detecting and preventing violent extremism**

Most overwhelming, however, was the view expressed by both community leaders and focus group participants that intelligence and security operations such as Pendennis and Neath are more about harassment of Muslim individuals or communities than about the detection or investigation of terrorism or related crimes. A broad range of community leaders suggested that such operations were illegitimate exercises in power by the state designed to intimidate and silence Muslims into compliance with mainstream values, attitudes and behaviours, and/or to showcase counter-terrorism efforts for political purposes:

*“It is our assessment that these anti-terror laws are more for intimidation of Muslims than for national security. Pendennis and Neath, like the others, are not proper convictions. I’m not saying they are not guilty under the law, I’m saying that they are guilty under laws that were introduced to make a big fanfare to show that we are doing something about security and terrorism. The convictions are sound under the existing laws, but the laws themselves are unsound, which means the convictions themselves are able to be discredited. Unlike people who actually bombed something, these laws changed to accommodate just planning or thinking about doing something – ‘a’ terrorist act, not ‘the’ terrorist act. How can you be a terrorist organisation when you haven’t done anything terrorist yet?”* (Community leader)

*“Our political analysis tells us that this is primarily about silencing Muslims on matters of foreign policy and radical extremists – if you go this way, this is the outcome, mind your own business and look after your own career. We fight that in the community – there is a fear that if you go to a peaceful demonstration, you will be under surveillance by government.”* (Community leader)

*“Is this kind of thing really about protecting Australian people and security and property, or is it about cynical point-scoring? This is one football you can kick as hard as you like. The push to expose and extract Muslim extremists in Australia – it’s go for your life. You can vilify as much as you like and there’s been almost no backlash. One of the problems when you have this association between a real event, a political problem you’re trying to solve and a media circus is that it runs the risk of backfiring. Rather than scaring people to think twice about going in this direction....people aren’t that stupid. They join the dots and realise it’s not so much about Australian safety, it’s about Muslim-bashing. They then end up gravitating more and more toward the margins.”* (Community leader)

For focus group participants in particular, harassment on the basis of suspected extremism linked to cultural difference was a significant grievance, with many citing personal or second-hand stories about repeated surveillance, stop and search procedures or other instances of perceived targeting and profiling by police and security agencies:

*“You watch – every time a visiting dignitary [comes to Australia], a community is raided, computers taken, searched [and] after they’ve gone, no charges are pressed.”* (Focus group participant)

*“I also believe that Muslims coming to this country may change their mind [about wanting to be in Australia], because everyone is watching, watch dog, the neighbourhood, everyone.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Always they say it is a random check but I have already walked past and they randomly get me back – I am the random Muslim for the day.”* (Focus group participant)

Aligned with this perception, many focus group participants also highlighted their view that the experience of being repeatedly targeted by police and security agencies can make individuals and indeed entire communities hostile to and/or fearful of authorities:

*“You keep raiding that house, your friends and families know and that builds a big nest of animosity.”* (Focus group participant)

*“The stuff they do, you watch the news, and people are getting locked up for the wrong reasons – that makes hatred in our hearts for governments.”* (Focus group participant)

*“And then this triggers more frustration, more aggravation, people get scared that you’ll just grab any Muslim and say they’re a terrorist and detain them, and now less people are coming to Australia because of the fear they will be seen as terrorist. Why are Muslims being segregated by police themselves?”* (Focus group participant)

Several focus group members also believed that police engaged in deliberate acts of provocation and entrapment, luring those who might otherwise not have acted to become involved in terrorist activities:

*“One of the things I have learned that happens is that the people who are responsible for the security of the country are also actually they are responsible for creating the problems by enticing these people and giving them the means to arrest them. ASIO actually encourages this person to say or do something wrong. When they have enough evidence that this person is bad they can come in and arrest them or raid their homes. This happened here and in the US. I wrote to government after the Somali incident had finished. The security made the person angry by saying things, then they say I know a guy who knows a guy and then they tap your phone and all you have to say is I support so and so and that is basically the issue. They set them up.”* (Focus group participant, Somali background)

*“We are set up by police. There was a case on the news and they show footage of some of the things this individual was accused of [in the Benbrika case]. The government is under pressure to get results and sometimes they create things that are not there to get the results. A person sent to one of the guys, they went outside Melbourne in the bush and they show footage of that. They went somewhere to do the tests. This person they had cameras in the trees.”* (Focus group participant)

A number of community leaders stressed the importance of using inclusive language and discourse when police make public statements about terrorist threats and efforts to prevent violent extremism. The importance of police and Muslim community leaders standing side by side in public was called for as a strategy to narrow the trust gap between communities and the police and send a more positive message out to the general community about cooperative Muslim community-police relations. One respondent noted that, unlike the police, Muslim communities have to live with the aftermath of inopportune statements made by police about their appearance or culture when publicity for anti-terror activities is at its peak:

*“You want our people to be on side and we do too, so don’t use terms like ‘of Middle Eastern appearance’ which get taken up out of control by the media monster. The Chief Commissioner can wash his hands of the affair after the arrests, but the monster is already unleashed in the community and no one wants to hear about it afterwards. The authorities just say ‘that’s the media, nothing to do with us.’ One solution is to ask Muslim community leaders who support cooperating with authorities on terrorist operations to stand side by side in public from day one; this is a symbolic part of the solution.”* (Community leader)

### **Australia favours intervention rather than prevention in dealing with violent extremism**

Some focus group participants felt that Australia is moving in the wrong direction by focusing on surveillance and intervention in suspected cases of violent extremism at the expense of prevention. In their view, this leads to over-vigilance on security matters with a corresponding ‘too little, too late’ investment in preventative resources and strategies that address the causal factors leading to violent extremism:

*“And then there’s the overprotection issue, when it becomes so overtly security [focused], like the Dr Haneef case, and how he was treated – he was detained wrongly. You need to look at how overprotected you are, and sometimes you cross the line in needing to protect the country, but you have to ensure human rights and freedoms are respected – is it right to detain people wrongly to protect [other] people?”* (Focus group participant)

*“The Muslim community say [the government] are tapping us and following us. So at what point does somebody step in? There is a responsibility for government to play a role in prevention and not just capture people when it is too late.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Now Australia is spending more on prevention in terms of weapons and mass destruction, but not on the people themselves. They need to spend more on prevention and people and less on security.”* (Focus group participant)

These views are aligned with those of focus group participants who felt that those caught up in Neath in particular were let down by the lack of early intervention in the circumstances that made them vulnerable to radicalisation in the first place:

*“Because [those involved in Neath] were bullied in schools here, misunderstood here, marginalised here. ... It may be just because they are not working, and uneducated. ... They fell in the wrong hands when looking for the meaning of life and religion.”* (Focus group participants)

### **Operations like Pendennis and Neath do long-lasting damage to whole communities**

Finally, many participants in the focus groups were concerned at the ongoing impact that anti-terror operations like Pendennis and Neath have on those left behind in the community who are blamed by association for the actions of a very few. For these respondents, the actions of a few violent extremists, and the perceived imbalanced media treatment afforded such cases, can have long-lasting effects that damage the entire community, particularly if that community is already battling against prejudice and discrimination on the basis of race, religion and/or cultural background. This was an issue particularly but not exclusively highlighted by focus group participants from African Muslim backgrounds:

*“When Tim McVeigh was arrested, he was marginalised with a personal history of trauma, that was one of his triggers, these are traumatised individuals, but we [in Australia] attribute it to the entire group.”* (Focus group participant)



*“When [Neath] came at that time, and the media was talking a lot about Africans and there’s a lot of commentary – some people say no, it’s not all Africans, but the young people they can’t make that distinction, understanding that we only have a certain group of people doing this. It got to the point that some of us felt the impact. You can go to the supermarket and you feel it, you feel a tension, and some people, it happened to one friend, they just threw eggs at him, but that’s the minority, the majority is saying no, it’s not all Africans.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“When the situation is not generalised it’s okay, but when it is generalised, it will have an impact. Because let’s say those of Somali group themselves are terrorists, and if media says Africans are terrorist, that will have an effect on all Africans.”*  
(Focus group participant)

## Conclusion

Operations Neath and Pendennis were generally seen by government stakeholders as successful and reflective of a healthy and democratic justice system in Australia. This view was also shared by some community leaders. However, some government stakeholders also cited reported community concerns and unease with one or more aspects and impacts of these operations.

By contrast with the perception of most government stakeholders, a significant majority of focus group participants thought these operations were not justified, and this view was shared by some community leaders. Focus group participants overwhelmingly thought that Neath and Pendennis were more about harassing and intimidating Muslim communities than about detecting crime and preventing violent extremism, and many in the community cohorts also thought that Australia had shifted its overall approach toward countering violence extremism from prevention to intervention. There was uneasiness for community participants about convictions based on ‘thinking about’ terrorism rather than engaging in concrete terrorist acts for which criminal charges could be laid. This unease was commented on and linked to a lack of understanding around conspiracy laws by a number of government stakeholders. Focus group participants also felt that the aftermath of operations such as Pendennis and Neath can do long-lasting residual damage to how Muslim communities are perceived and to the agenda of intercultural harmony more broadly.



## CHAPTER 8: PREVENTING OR MITIGATING THE THREAT OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The final section of the report examines participants' perspectives on what policy and other solutions participants felt were required when thinking about how to address locally and nationally the issue of preventing or minimising the threat of extremism and terrorism. These discussions covered participants' views about counter- narratives; how the appeal of violent extremism can be reduced; and what they thought government, the police, local communities and individual citizens should be doing to help counter the threat and presence of violent extremism.

## Counter-narratives of radicalisation and extremism

In thinking about counter-narratives, participants were asked to give their views on who is in the best position to develop and disseminate counter-narratives; who counter-narratives are, or should be, aimed at; and what kinds of counter-narratives are perceived to be most effective. The themes emerging in this portion of the study focus on both the challenges and opportunities for rethinking approaches to effective counter-narrative strategies.

### Who should be developing and disseminating counter-narratives?

#### Government is not effective or appropriate for producing counter-narratives

There was a notable lack of confidence amongst government stakeholders, community leaders and focus group participants concerning the efficacy of current national counter-narrative strategies. Some government stakeholders felt that existing counter-narrative approaches to date have not had much impact and that government may not be the most appropriate source for such interventions. Specific concerns about the limited effectiveness of government-based counter-narratives centred on their lack of credibility with the people and communities they are targeting:

*“Western governments find themselves in a tricky position – partly influenced by history, partly by the Iraq war – which is that offering overt government support for any view can undermine that view’s credibility. It has to be done carefully and sensitively. I don’t think there are any problems with providing support, but ultimately it’s not government that is going to make the difference. We can’t force people not to think or to act in certain ways.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“The Australian government needs to be careful – don’t say this is wrong, de-radicalise, and have twenty imams issue fatwas against it, because they will immediately be seen as sell-outs, and radicals would go underground.”* (Focus group participant)

Of similar concern was the fact that extremist groups seem to be winning the counter-narrative battle in terms of greater sophistication and savvy packaging of their messages, particularly in the on-line environment of the internet and social media:

*“Terrorists have been clever and effective users of the internet and social media and they’ve done a pretty good job, such as Inspire magazine and other publications that ... [are] good at putting out a fast food version of the same old content. ... But people putting together counter-narratives have been pretty slow off the mark.”*  
(Government stakeholders)

### Muslim counter-narratives have stronger credibility

Conversely, a very wide range of participants across all three cohorts saw a clear role and space for counter-narratives from Muslim leaders and groups. These respondents argued that Muslim-generated counter-narratives, particularly from within local Muslim communities, are likely to be more credible, authentic, and have greater influence and reach than parallel government initiatives:

*“The Muslim community has a role in counter-radicalisation and can help to counter the problem, provided there is a respectful engagement and they are not marginalised.”* (Community leader)

*“We [Muslims] make things authentic, we say they are giving me the real information, and feel it’s more potent and valid from him than you because you don’t fit my idea of authenticity, and if you always say to me, this is wrong, he’s wrong, you attack my knowledge creation, rather than offering a different view.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Counter-narratives are important but they need to be credible – that is, presented by someone who understands and is identified with the same belief system. You need to align counter-narratives with the same belief system you are trying to influence and change. ...”*  
(Government stakeholder)

There was also strong support for the idea that Muslim communities have a moral and practical responsibility to proactively mount alternative narratives, showcasing non-extremist varieties of Islam and drawing on their 'insider' authority, knowledge and capacity for leadership with relevant groups and individuals:

*"The 'sorry' speech by Kevin Rudd to Aboriginal people was a good example of that – it was an alternative narrative to what we'd all been taught and what the previous governments had maintained, and that was very powerful. So counter-narratives are very important ways of speaking for a lot of people who don't necessarily have the words to express themselves in this way. It's the full story we need to hear. That's when dialogue and relationships can 'kill' violence."* (Community leader)

*"Here [in Australia], if we see an atrocity done, under the banner of Islam, we need to be the first critics out there, loudly. Forget about pan-Islamism – we don't hear enough Muslims."* (Focus group participant)

*"[Muslim communities are the only ones who can create and disseminate] counter-narratives with any credibility or authority. They do have a responsibility to themselves and their community and the general community to address this, since so much recruitment takes place through the mosques. Community leaders have a responsibility to themselves and their community to provide real leadership and build up resilience for that community in an authentic way."* (Government stakeholder)

However, despite wide support for such an approach in general, community leaders in particular stressed that moderate Muslims should not be expected to do this automatically or without government resourcing and support:

*"I don't think it's a fair expectation unless [Muslim communities] are provided with proper resources or capacity to do this. Waleed Aly on [ABC] TV – other Muslims are inspired to be better people and he makes a huge difference. Government should not just expect him and others to do it as a routine – they've done nothing wrong. Why should they be blamed for others' distortions of Islam when it's not their fault? If you want them to be influential in changing perceptions via counter-narratives, you must support and resource them to do this. ... The important thing is not to blame the whole for the actions of a few, but to give them the tools to help support those who want to do the right thing."* (Community leaders)

Finally, participants across all cohorts felt that greater acknowledgement of cooperation between moderate Muslim community leaders and government authorities should form an essential part of any counter-narrative strategy:

*"[Government should be] cooperating with the clerics, the ones who are the sane clerics, they need to go out and say this is not right, these [other] clerics have different motives."* (Focus group participant)

*"The fact that the Pendennis and Neath police investigations were supported by Muslim communities is not well known and that support should be part of the counter-narrative that's not happening so well at the moment."* (Government stakeholder)

*"In terms of what they can do differently, if they have any positive news, announce this with a Muslim person at their side."* (Community leader)

## Who should counter-narratives be aimed at?

### Selectively target audiences for counter-narratives

There was little support for broad-brush counter-narratives aimed at the general community. Most respondents felt that counter-narratives needed to have specifically targeted audiences in mind with aligning and nuanced messages that helped prevent what one government stakeholder termed 'people at the crossroads' from proceeding further down the path of radicalisation and extremism:

*"Logically, we should be able to use the internet to divert someone from the path of radicalisation. If you are already radicalised, probably not. But if you are seeking guidance, we might be able to offer counter-perspectives that can get someone thinking rather than acting. It's the people who are curious and perhaps leaning who we need to be concerned with in relation to influence."* (Government stakeholder)

*"In the 1980s we warned the Australian government about young Africans heading toward Afghanistan and elsewhere for [extremist] 'training camps'. This was in 1985/1986, before terrorism was on the global agenda. How do you fight an ideology with another ideology? It didn't come overnight. [Extremists are] cultivating them, fertilising them from an early age. We need to address this now, otherwise they will just keep coming."* (Community leader)

### Counter-narratives are everyone's business

However, there was also a view amongst some participants that counter-narratives were a responsibility for Australian communities in general and should not be produced by or aimed at Muslim communities alone:

*"On occasions when people say things that are racist or anti-Islam, there are people who will stand up against Islamophobia. When you get that support, you are more likely to care about the people and your country, and we need more proper and moderate leaders to come into the spotlight."* (Focus group participant)

*"It should not only be the Muslim community doing this. It should be each and every human being. Extremism doesn't derive only from Islam – it can derive from one person to another, one religion to another, one culture to another. These counter-narratives should be by everyone for everyone."* (Community leader)

### Personalise and localise the counter-narrative message

Government stakeholders placed special emphasis on the importance of ensuring that counter-narratives are designed for emotional rather than purely logical impact. They felt that aiming counter-narratives at families, friends and communities that bear the brunt of anti-extremist interventions would be helpful, rather than concentrating on abstract 'master-narratives' of countering extremism:

*"Also the consequences need to be quite personal – some people have said to us that if such a [terrorist] act occurred here, the biggest victims would be Australian Muslims themselves in terms of harassment, victimisation and targeting long after the actual event was over."* (Government stakeholder)

*"I'm quite keen on the idea that mothers have the capacity to influence in an early stage – the multicultural mothers can put a lot of guilt on the kids. The mothers have the capacity to engage emotionally with socially distanced young people. Bringing it back to the effect on their immediate family can be powerful."* (Government stakeholder)

### What kinds of counter-narratives work best?

#### Do we really need counter-narratives? The alternative of affirmative narratives

The major theme emerging from participants in relation to what kinds of counter-narratives work best actually questions whether counter-narratives are desirable at all or whether fresh alternatives are required. A significant proportion of community leaders, government stakeholders and focus group participants suggested that the time may have come to replace or supplement traditional approaches to counter-narratives, which many respondents saw as potentially or actively divisive, with more affirmative, positive narratives focusing on the positives of what unites Australians from many different cultures and backgrounds. They also believed that 'assertive' narratives of national identity and unity would help limit the success of extremists in setting an agenda against which traditional counter-narratives are inevitably perceived as reactive rather than proactive:

*"Radicalised Islam is a social movement, a banner, it connects them to a big picture. To combat that social movement, you have to replace it with another, a big banner of a call to cooperation that others can see as a way of building a better way/world."* (Focus group participant)

*"Governments should produce not a counter-narrative but an assertive narrative of who we are as a society and what we stand for and need to protect."* (Government stakeholder)

*"I went to the ECCV<sup>12</sup> state conference, and a guy from Italian background was talking about Islamophobia and saying it's unacceptable, we have to combat it, and that's the first time I've heard a non-Muslim do that, and it makes you feel better – it made me feel, wow, somebody cares. We need to hear more positive voices."* (Focus group participant)

*"We are looking for unity in the wrong places – not our skin colour or our accents, but the fact that we are Australian – national identity is the only thing that unites us as Australian. Otherwise we are all too different. We need [narratives that recognise] the fact that living together here peacefully is really what binds us."* (Community youth leader, new arrival background)

#### From 'us and them' to 'we'

In a similar vein, many community-based participants felt that such narratives need to concentrate on bridging or eliminating the 'us and them' mentality that current national discourses on culture, identity and belonging, particularly on the political and media fronts, are thought to have helped shape:

*"What they need is a lot of the reputable [Muslim community] leaders to do a lot of the talking – this would break down the 'us and them' mentality and show it is just about 'us'."* (Community leader)

12. Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

*“Imam [name] – he does a great job, I’ve attended his events, and he doesn’t talk about non-Muslims and us, he talks about mercy and humanity, he feeds the hungry no matter who they are, they donate blankets to churches for the homeless.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“Australia works to increase and support multiculturalism, and that’s really important, I’ve known lots of Afghans and Lebanese, they say I’m Australian, my parents are Lebanese or Afghani... and that’s a big thing.”*  
(Focus group participant)

### **The role of Muslim leadership in counter-narratives**

A large proportion of community-based focus group participants thought the main challenges in developing strong Muslim counter-narratives to violent extremism were issues related to the quality, orientation and public profile of Islamic religious and community leaders in Australia and overseas. They wanted to see more qualified leaders with stronger religious and educational accreditation, stronger relationships between moderate Muslims and youth, better representation of moderate Islamic views in public forums, and more effective measures to limit the influence those leaders whom they saw as inciting division and extremism within communities:

*“I think the imam is important, he must have good knowledge and be a real scholar otherwise people, particularly those who are vulnerable, maybe at risk of showing the wrong path. I think that it is also very important that we train our own Australian born imams who understand Australian values and the law. Although we have qualified international imams from overseas some of them say things against the Australian government and they also teach this negative attitude to locals. If they were in their own countries they would be killed if they said things against the government. That’s why it is important to ensure overseas imams are trained to understand the Australian context as well as to know how to interpret the Qur’an in the right way.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Those young people don’t emerge in a vacuum, they are supported by others, those who are teaching them, so stop the teachers, change the environment. ... The policy lesson here is provide or establish youth centres for Muslims and let them socialise with imams who do not have these views and can develop trust and relationships in different settings and get different views.”*  
(Focus group participants)

*“It has gone to such mundane levels in some places; [the view is that] anybody daring to question anything about the prophet needs to have his legs chopped off. You can be talking about a particular vegetable that the prophet used to like, and then they’ll say all people should like it – if they don’t, they should be killed. Before we blame others we need to look at ourselves as Muslims.”* (Focus group participant)

### **How can we make violent extremism less appealing?**

#### **Educate both Muslims and non-Muslims about moderate Islam**

There was very strong support from both government and community participants for the idea that formal education in schools was the best way to reduce the appeal of violent extremism. They wanted to see a stronger educational focus on alternatives to violence and better understanding of moderate interpretations of Islamic religious doctrine in public and Islamic-based schools for both Muslim and non-Muslim young people:

*“I think education is the only solution for this. Muslim kids themselves need to be educated [because] Muslims for a long time have relied on imams. These imams were first generation, couldn’t speak English, and this was a problem. Now it’s hard to find Islamic teachers and it’s a problem. Our kids who grow up here are critical-minded and they know how to ask lots of questions. Here at our [Islamic] school we do our bit, but those at public school, it’s not good enough.”* (Community leader)

*“Teaching more about Islam in schools would be a big help if the moderate view of Islam is espoused. Educate Muslims who may be forming views or are educated in more radical versions of Islam that there are other alternatives. Part of the problem is that Muslims are a minority and if they feel they are being treated unfairly then this is the foundation on which radicalisation and extremism can begin. If we reduce that so they feel they are not so threatened or different, this would help. We need to educate non-Muslims to help make this happen too. So, education right across the board.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“If you can have an environment for young Muslims where schools are more open and facilitate Muslim education this would help. If roadblocks are put up for local Muslim schools (as is now happening in Liverpool) so that they are not under state government monitoring, then this means the children will be taught in a backyard by the likes of Benbrika or another radical. Whether a mosque, a school or community centre or whatever, it should all be on the radar and appropriately certified. The backyard and garage Muslim schools will then disappear or at least be reduced.”* (Community leader)

Related to this was an emphasis, particularly for focus group participants, on using education to encourage familiarity with and acceptance of critical thinking and social norms that can help inure impressionable young people from becoming vulnerable to radical suasion:

*“Education, social education, is that you tell people about the societal norms what’s acceptable, make them differentiate between right and wrong rather than forcing opinions. That lacks in our country [of origin], you are fed information, not analyzing information. In Western countries people are more critical thinking, so social education is a must.”* (Focus group participant)

*“If kids don’t have the confidence [to critically debate issues] they will not argue with their parent or their Qur’an teacher. They just believe what they say.”* (Focus group participant)

Yet while most participants were in favour of positive education strategies as a means of disarming or minimising the potential for radicalisation and extremism amongst young people, focus group respondents in particular were less sanguine about the prospects for success of explicitly targeted counter-radicalisation or re-education programs. While some suggested that to ‘control the specific groups that are at risk, education and the media can play a major role’ and argued that ‘you can convince kids to go one way [to] radicalise them, why can’t we radicalise them the other way?’, others believed that ‘you can’t control the choices of people and the radical sub-groups that emerge in communities that make people go to extremist thoughts’ (focus group participants) and that such programs were inevitably tainted by association with selling out to ‘the West’.

Moreover, some focus group participants cast doubt on whether venues such as mosques or *madrassas* were the main sources of radicalisation to begin with, while also conceding their influence in other respects:

*“Madrassas are a touchy topic, but 90 percent of extremists were not from madrassas but from universities in the west, engineers and doctors. But madrassa people know the intricacies, and they know that for a religious opinion to be valid it needs to be issued, or based through this religious tradition. You follow the authority of the traditional school of thought, therefore religious scholars cannot emerge without knowledge of these things.”* (Focus group participant)

### **Provide peer-based activities that deglamorise violence and offer alternatives**

*Beyond formal education strategies, a number of participants also stressed the need for more informal, peer-based youth activities. Peer-to-peer influence in reducing the appeal of violent extremism was seen as critical because of the importance of peer approval, social networks and group dynamics that characterise young people’s lives in their communities. Many respondents spoke of the need to develop and sustain peer-based youth anti-violence and anti-extremism programs that encouraged young people to ‘understand that violence is not acceptable and making them speak out against violence; changing their belief system that violence is acceptable and supporting them to do something about it. Violence isn’t an answer for them and they need to hear this from their peers.’* (Government stakeholder)

Similarly, some participants spoke of the need to deglamorise violence and provide equally attractive alternatives that ‘channel the anger and energy of young people into what they are good at’ (community leader) while simultaneously developing youth leadership skills that can be harnessed to anti-violence messages:

*"[Violent extremism] can have a magnetic and adventurous appeal. The logical answer is that we need to have just as glamorous or pleasurable alternatives. Both here and in the US there are a lot of projects that talk about this kind of thing in the arts and sports arenas. Provide funding for meaningful projects that target young people's interests and channel their energy in a healthy way. Boxing clubs have proven successful here in Sydney. Youth spokespeople and ambassadors is another avenue to pursue – it can be a real adrenaline rush for them."* (Community leader)

*"You must deglamorise violence and extremism. If you think about radicalisation as a process, there is an early point where you're not as fully desensitised and disengaged – so that you can intervene at that earlier stage to deglamorise extremism and violence."* (Government stakeholder)

De-glamorising violent extremism by stressing its fundamentally criminal nature was also seen as a useful strategy; one government stakeholder argued that *'treating terrorism as a criminal act by focusing on victims and promoting stories of victims'* can challenge *'the aspirational ideas of what terrorists want to achieve'*. However, others struck a note of caution in this regard, suggesting that it can be difficult to work against the tide of popular cultural messages glamorising violence as a heroic rather than banal pursuit.

*"But if we're talking about broad society here, with the torrent of movies and shows that glamorise violence, this is all part of the equation. This will always be with us – the lone hero going out against the masses."* (Government stakeholder)

The use of humour and satire as a way of puncturing the mystique of violent extremism was also recommended by some participants – *'make it an object of ridicule and laughter'* (government stakeholder) – while others pointed to the cathartic impact of humour for frustrated young people who may be toying with radicalisation or extremism because of social exclusion, bullying or discrimination:

*"Comedy can be an unbelievable release for dealing with the traumas of discrimination, bullying, etc. People think Muslim comedy is an oxymoron but it isn't. These aren't just superficial distractions."* (Community leader)

#### **Address the root causes of foreign policy to avoid home-grown terrorism**

Finally, while government stakeholders and community leaders generally thought that greater internal sanctioning of violent extremism by respected moderate leaders within Muslim communities, coupled with improved avenues for airing grievances, was one element of making violence less appealing to those on the path of radicalisation, the majority of focus group participants and some community leaders believed that the most effective route to reducing the appeal of violent extremism was to address what they saw as its primary driver: foreign policy decisions or actions that provoked violent extremism as a political reaction:

*"I think unfairness at the top of the world is nurturing this violence. ... I think the first thing is tone down about some issues, like Australian involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. ... There can be possibilities of having an attack here, because Australian military is involved in Afghanistan, etc. ... Australian troops are participating overseas, and Australia policies are so closely linked with Bush's and that creates a negative feeling in countries outside, they look it as Australia getting involved unnecessarily."* (Focus group participants)

*"For us it's connected with the causes. So you make it less attractive by ceasing the drivers and causes, which is Western foreign policy. Also through discussion and debate, you tell people the way forward is yes, through resistance and intellectual and political movements, but not through violence. Our message is that you need to work for the Caliphate, but violence is not allowed. We don't do this to help policy makers with national security, but because it is what we really believe. If the foreign policy continues you are not going to get anywhere."* (Community leader)



## The role of police in preventing or mitigating violent extremism

### Minimise police social distancing and strengthen community trust in police

Many participants across all three cohorts said that in their view, the most important role for police in preventing or reducing the likelihood of violent extremism was the enhancement of healthy and trusting relationships between police and local communities, and particularly at-risk communities. These participants stressed that while ‘specialist’ police and intelligence personnel – for example, those from ASIO, the AFP, and counter-terrorism or community engagement divisions within state police jurisdictions – were often well-versed in local community issues and had built strong relationships with key community leaders and other stakeholders, significant work remained to be done in fostering greater cooperation with and confidence in *local operational police* at the community level. Respondents suggested that if relations between communities and local police were already strained because of chronic low-level issues or routinely negative perceptions of each other, this would reduce the prospects of timely or relevant intelligence reporting and gathering because of community reluctance to approach any police (including those specifically tasked with counter-terrorism intelligence and engagement) based on previous negative experiences:

*“Often certain approaches by police can turn into harassment of particular communities. They can stop you all the time just on the basis of profiling even though you’ve done nothing wrong. The police need to create a relationship with people and communities, because most people come from countries where police are seen as dangerous. They need to build up harmony between police and minority communities. It will give them a chance to know who is who and will give confidence to the community to feel safe when they are around the police. But if police keep their distance and are thinking that all these people in a community are troublemakers, this can create a reaction that will not help the police or the community – and can actually produce the radicals and extremists they are trying to avoid or minimise.”* (Community leader)

*“I’d like to see more of a partnership between communities and police and government. We don’t want a ‘dob in a terrorist’ campaign, but we do need stronger relationships. So a person who’s embarking on the radicalisation spectrum, his or her own community is best placed to identify what is happening well before any action by that person is taken and it becomes a real problem. We need to help at-risk people before they become a problem.”* (Government stakeholder)

Hand in hand with this concern went a desire for better communication channels to be established between police and local communities around initiatives and developments in relation to countering violent extremism:

*“And we need feedback, we never know what happens with things, with information about what we said, but in general, things that happen with the police, we need to know.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Some people came and talked to parents about teenagers and then nothing came of it, we want to know if anything changes or not, we want to hear.”* (Focus group participant)

### Bring more Muslims into the law enforcement fold

In addition, participants wanted to see police engage in more education and advocacy around reducing mainstream community fears that Muslims pose a ‘*threat to a community or society more generally*’ (government stakeholder). Some respondents felt one effective way of doing this was to make Muslims police and intelligence ‘insiders’ by bringing more Muslim-background recruits into law enforcement roles and highlighting this as an explicit goal of police agencies:

*“There’s the idea of having Muslim people within the police which would be useful, and within security agencies as well and in government. It’s about not having them just as external to the decision making and law enforcement processes but having them very much in the fold.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“[Police] should actively recruit people from other cultures and religions.”* (Community leader)

### Providing alternatives to violent extremism

Finally, government stakeholders from various policing jurisdictions around Australia emphasised the importance of police involvement in promoting and resourcing alternatives to violent extremism. The most common approach suggested was to balance the criminalisation of radicalisation and violent extremism with the resourcing of *'other activities as alternatives to violent extremism. We need to attract people away from visiting those sites and becoming involved in extremism'* (government stakeholder – police agency).

### The role of government in preventing or mitigating violent extremism

While a very small minority of community-based participants saw the role of government in preventing or mitigating the threat of violent extremism in traditional terms -- for example, by maintaining surveillance of suspicious people and groups and/or denying entry to those of existing or potential concern to security and intelligence agencies – the vast majority of participants across all cohorts offered perspectives on the role of government that are much more closely aligned with social cohesion and community strengthening agendas. As one focus group participant commented, the real task facing government and also communities lies not in the statistical measurement of Australia's cultural diversity, but how that diversity is managed with respect to social cohesion and improving intercultural awareness, tolerance and respect: *'I think very often we see political leaders using statistics and figures, but it's overkill – they just quote so many nationalities, etc. but that doesn't mean you have successful migration.'*

Three strong overarching themes emerged from the data exploring perceptions of what governments should be doing in the area of prevention and mitigation strategies for countering violent extremism. These are:

- Empowering communities to identify how they can best help reduce the risk of violent extremism.
- Educating communities to understand and respect each other's cultures and beliefs.
- Engaging communities in the process of social cohesion and community resilience.

### Empower communities to identify how they can best contribute

This theme relates to how government can most effectively empower communities themselves to assist in preventing or mitigating the threat of radicalisation and violent extremism. There was very strong support across all cohorts for the role of government in facilitating community initiatives and learning from communities about what works best in this context. There was a clear sense that 'top down' initiatives from government are less likely to have impact than 'bottom up' or grassroots initiatives that are owned by entire communities with a reasonable level of consensus.

### Communities are best placed to identify and support at-risk individuals

A number of government stakeholders suggested that relevant local community groups are more knowledgeable and better placed than government representatives can ever be to produce meaningful impacts in relation to stemming radicalisation and extremism in local settings:

*"I think the government should be making available to the community what it needs to do it itself. If it's going to have any weight or credibility it needs to come from the community. It's not enough for the government to say, 'This community needs to do something about its radicals' – it doesn't work that way. The government needs to enable the community to help at-risk people."* (Government stakeholder)

*"I know there are some activities being undertaken around the country with a view to identifying people who may be involved in the early stages of being radicalised encouraging their own community to identify them and get that correction of views they need, and we could do a lot more on this – but it involves a lot of money. I think countering violent extremism in that sense is worth doing, though, because I think that their own community is best placed to identify those people who are at risk. They would know when a person has got material that's a bit out there or is knocking around with people who are out there."* (Government stakeholder)

However, the perceptual problem of 'tainted' government funding and support in the eyes of communities who receive indirect resourcing through such community empowerment initiatives was once again raised by some Islamic community leaders:

*“Yes, the Muslim community has a responsibility to have this discussion. But when it comes from the government which is responsible for the foreign policy that is the problem, how can you take them seriously? If there’s funding available, organisations would make up reasons to get hold of that funding. The infrastructure the Muslim community has currently is more than sufficient – the mosques, the university campus clubs, etc. are strong enough to get the message across.”* (Community leader)

### **Education and understanding can best counter violent extremism**

The second strong theme relates to the government’s role in facilitating education and understanding between mainstream and culturally diverse communities to mitigate the risk of violent extremism.

#### **Educate for social cohesion and alternatives to violence**

Government stakeholders, community leaders and focus group participants were virtually unanimous in their perception that greater investment by government in educational mechanisms focusing on tolerance, inclusion, understanding of other cultures and religions, and non-violent alternatives to conflict resolution and political dissent were paramount in transforming the underlying cultural drivers that support violent extremism and social alienation, as well as fostering greater resilience to the impact of radical or extremist viewpoints. Many respondents provided personal examples of transformative encounters with members of other religions and cultural backgrounds both for themselves and for their children, but felt that broad access to formal and informal educational pathways around social cohesion were necessary to disseminate such change more widely:

*“The government needs [to promote and resource] much more education, when people are growing up, what’s Islam and Christian, they need to know what Islam means and not just what Al-Qaeda do.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Perhaps the role [of government] should be in supporting and receiving education about Islam. I went to a school where there were no dark-skinned people. One of my dad’s neighbours fostered a dark-skinned child when I was about 9 or 10 at the time. All I could call on at the time was what I’d heard, which was very negative. Then I played with him in the backyard and I couldn’t reconcile what I’d heard with my own experience.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“In Australia, when international people come, we need to make sure they know about Australian culture so they don’t get offended, and at the same time make sure Australians know what other cultures are like so they don’t get offended.”* (Community leader)

#### **More emphasis on cultural diversity and integration in schools**

A number of focus group respondents were also concerned by what they saw as the lack of formal educational opportunities to help people learn more about non-Western cultures and belief systems that are integral components of contemporary Australian society. This was particularly the case for those who felt their experience of discrimination or bias in Australia could be traced directly to ignorance about other cultures on the part of long-established Australian communities:

*“A lot of it comes from ignorance. People don’t know – we were in Shepparton once, and we were playing pool and this white kid comes up to me, ‘Are you Sudanese?’ I was like, ‘No, man, I’m not’, but he wouldn’t give it up – kept telling me I’m Sudanese, and I said to him, ‘It’s close to my country, but I’m not Sudanese’, and he said, ‘Aren’t you from Africa’, and I said, ‘Yeah, but there’s lots of other countries there’ and then I realised – he doesn’t know.”* (Focus group participant)

*“The problem with policy is that people are not involving religion in schools, because religion is considered something that can’t be taught in schools, but they need information in schools.”* (Focus group participant)

Accordingly, many participants felt that the best way to improve social cohesion and cross-cultural exchange was to normalise cultural diversity, not only through transformative education content and curricula, but also by bringing young people from a variety of backgrounds into contact through the mainstream schooling system at all age levels:

*“More education, break the stereotypes and myths. It is difficult to change the older generation but the younger generation are interacting and living in Australia from a young age.”* (Focus group participant)

*"I'm a real advocate of government schooling, not private, and my daughter went to Perth Modern School, and there were 74 nationalities there. That's a little unusual, but that happens a lot in primary schools in government schools – important because children can get on, at that level when they're younger, it helps. So I don't believe in segregating schools – schools are one of the biggest communities we have, and we haven't appreciated that. And what you experience as a child becomes the norm, so it is better not to segregate. I am a strong advocate of that."* (Focus group participant)

### **Government can be educated by culturally diverse communities**

However, there was also recognition that learning from and about each other to prevent or mitigate extremism in the context of cultural diversity is a two-way street, and participants felt government had an important role to play in not only supporting but actively participating in such exchange, especially for those who think they already 'know it all':

*"Part of what I do in my daily life and the work we do here in [state government] is, while not presenting any particular view, to try to get across that understanding is the key to acceptance and tolerance and we need to understand what people are thinking and saying and not assuming that we know, and appreciating diversity and difference. But this is sometimes a difficult message to put out there when people think that they already know what you're on about."* (Government stakeholder)

*"Listen, listen, listen from the heart – not just another meeting. The government spends a lot of money and thinks everything is okay. It is a safe environment now but it won't be [in future] because people get very upset here and no one listens. It is very frustrating. I can see if things go on as they are, there could be a problem here."* (Community leader)

And some participants stressed that professional educators themselves are not immune from the need to develop stronger skills around intercultural diversity and understanding:

*"I think the education system here for the new arrivals, it's a bit harsh, because when someone comes from outside, they are basically put in separate classes from Australians and in a way it discriminates. Also, with the schools personally, I went to see the course counsellor to ask him about getting into medicine, and he had this smile on his face, and told me about other courses – basically that smile meant you can't get in, because it's hard for you."* (Focus group participant)

*"There was a leadership program at two schools, they are sister and brother schools and they bring the school leaders together with the vice-principal. One thing [the vice-principal] said was jihad is trying to destroy everyone. I couldn't believe when she said that, it shows how the principal doesn't understand jihad. We were shocked, I didn't know what to say [at the time], and I really regret it, but it's hard to defend yourself, and you need the language to do it."* (Community leader)

### **Engaging communities in the process of social cohesion**

A key role for government in the eyes of virtually all participants across the study was that of promoting social cohesion as a community-driven process, rather than merely an aspirational condition or state of being.

Whether through sport, (multi) cultural events such as festivals, service provision, employment programs, media and public interest campaigns or education and training, government was seen as the key player in helping to bring people together in order to reduce disengagement and alienation and promote greater community resilience and identification with Australian norms and values through social inclusion. While protecting democratic and secular rights was seen by many respondents as a core role for government, a number of participants acknowledged the challenges of doing so in the context of significant cultural diversity and the uneven distribution of economic and social capital. As a recent arrival to Australia succinctly put it, *'We have to get everybody together first. Otherwise, we build big house, but one person can bring it down'*. (Focus group participant)

*"Australia is lucky because we're so diverse and we're educated, so I think for example, the police and federal government, they need to engage with the Muslim community more positively. When people feel the government is taking care of them, they will speak up if they think about something is happening, because these operations aren't very big."* (Focus group participant)

*“The social cohesion strategy is also important – to create a space where some of the risks aren’t permitted to flourish. Being exposed to racism and feeling disengaged from your community is one of them. Our communication strategy should target both the broader community and people at risk. We should not create an environment where the issue is made worse. We should certainly focus on both the smaller community and the general community and we do have this in our strategy.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“The main issue is that service providers and local government don’t have a continuous dialogue and the public service doesn’t always know what’s happening. We need to build confidence between communities and government, and we need continuous dialogue so people are not scared of each other.”*  
(Community leader)

### **Strong and consistent political leadership in support of multiculturalism**

Closely aligned for participants, particularly those from focus groups, with the key role played by government in promoting and engaging communities in the process of social cohesion is the need for strong and consistent political leadership that is unified in its support for a culturally diverse and tolerant Australia. There was concern about inconsistent messaging in relation to Australian multiculturalism from various political leaders and parties; lack of understanding by politicians of the complexities of how radicalisation and extremism can take hold and grow; and the quality of debate and discussion around how best to tackle issues relating to cultural diversity, extremism, social cohesion and securing the safety of Australia as a nation:

*“We need leadership around multiculturalism – demonised one minute, sought after the next. We need consistency about that.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“Our political leaders have a role to play too. We talk a lot in Australia about debates, but we very rarely have a true political debate or discussion; generally we seem to pit one personality against another. The language they use is important and that’s providing leadership, you do have influence and you can change people’s perceptions. I have never believed you can legislate to change people’s views, but I strongly believe political leaders have a role to play.”* (Focus group participant)

### **The role of government in translational communication**

An essential component of such political leadership for participants was the role of government in strengthening broad public communication and media strategies to help shift what many considered formidable obstacles to shifting public consciousness about social cohesion and mutual acceptance of cultural difference. Participants noted that specific projects, programs and studies can come and go but rarely reach broad sections of the public, whereas public interest media campaigns that translate the insights and findings of such initiatives in meaningful and accessible ways for the community at large are seen to have real penetration and depth as an agent of social change:

*“What federal government can do is to try to untwine some of the things people link together, such as immigration, refugees and terrorism, as if they’re all similar. There are lots of things that get published saying these are completely different things and shouldn’t be conflated – but it is still difficult to have that discussion.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“Most of the people, the way they treat you, or the way they treat a group of people, is mostly what they get from the TV or from the internet, so that’s another way to teach them. If they can get wrong information from TV, they can get right information from TV [from the government].”*  
(Focus group participant)

### **Narrow the trust gap between communities and government**

All of these strategies rely on narrowing what some participants saw as a perceived ‘trust gap’ between government and communities. Respondents with this perspective stressed the importance of establishing and maintaining strong relationships between governments and communities at all levels of Australian society, despite some cynicism or doubt amongst Muslim participants about whether governments remain trustworthy in the post-9/11 environment:

*“I think that since September 11, the trust between the community and the government is not there, and more and more the media make things worse and people feel the injustice [of this]. You feel you have been marginalised, you feel you are not trusted at all, you try to be a good Muslim [but you are] labelled just because something happened overseas, and they don’t appreciate what you’re trying to do.”* (Focus group participant)

*“Early on after 9/11, governments intervened in a heavy-handed and not always helpful way. The message was, ‘This is your problem as much as ours, get on with it’ – but the message was so heavy-handed it put people offside, so nothing happened for about 5 years because of the gulf in trust and communication. Something much quieter and subtler was required. We are beginning to get there now, with imams now saying, ‘We know there is a problem, can you help us?’ There are some good relationships between police and community leaders, so that if people ask for help they actually get it. The signs are hopeful and once these things get underway then government assistance can be provided by facilitating spaces, etc., but we haven’t got there yet.”* (Government stakeholder)

### **Greater recognition and support for moderate Muslim groups and communities**

A critical part of rebuilding that trust in the view of some participants was the government’s role in offering greater recognition and support to moderate Muslim groups who are trying to contribute constructively to anti-extremist agendas. Greater government acknowledgement of non-extremist Islamic community initiatives was seen as a central plank in gaining cooperation and strengthening the diversity of moderate Muslim voices as part of the national dialogue:

*“[For] young people so they are sent to the right people for the right information, you need to have programs where they can learn those things – like the Mercy Mission Islamic Conference, that was held recently, there were huge young crowds, some of us from Aussie Muslims Forum went, and in one, this guy was talking about non-Muslims, and the amount of respect he showed, and was telling them, show non-Muslims love, who are you to judge anyone, and people came out with a different view. It’s very important to have that view.”* (Focus group participant)

### **Avoid social enclaving**

Still in the realm of social cohesion, a few community leaders spoke of the challenge for government of influencing state-based social housing and employment policies to avoid ethnically-based social enclaving, particularly for new arrival communities in large capital cities and regional centres who have limited economic options in choosing where to live. These respondents argued that such enclaving may risk increasing the likelihood of incubating radicalisation and extremism because of the proximity of people and ideas that can be exploited by extremist elements within communities:

*“In places like Sydney and Melbourne certain kinds of ghettos or enclaves have been formed and people have been chunked in one place – certain ideas feed each other. Here in [names state] we don’t have that here because the communities are too small – we all mix together. Asians, Americans, Africans all come together and we get to broaden our views as a result. If we could prevent enclaving and feeding off each other’s extremist ideas and expose people to more moderate parts of the population – that to me is true integration.”* (Community leader)

*“Seeking security, many new arrival communities stick only to each other but this creates problems.”* (Community leader)

*“Start in early childhood, if you send your child to a Muslim school, they don’t mix, if children mix they will be friends and won’t want to blow each other up later, and make a little Iraq or Iran in Sydney.”* (Focus group participant)

Participants also pointed out, however, that issues such as language barriers and lack of education were more significant barriers for the process of broader social integration beyond one’s own cultural group.

*“[Lack of] English, that’s why they don’t want to get involved. ... The reason people isolate themselves is because they are uneducated, they don’t speak.”* (Focus group participants)

### Government should support families to help kids stay on the right track

Finally, a significant issue for new-arrival participants from the focus groups, particularly from the African countries of Sudan, South Sudan and Togo, was what they saw as the obstacles they faced in trying to prevent their children from becoming involved in groups or activities of concern because of perceived government restrictions and interference in their parenting styles. While this issue was highly specific to these cultural groups in the study, it is important as a signpost of the challenges – and opportunities – that government faces in considering how best to respond to the needs of those still transiting the processes of social inclusion in a new environment. These participants make various points about the role of government in their efforts in managing issues around parental control, monitoring and guidance of children, particularly adolescents, who cause them concern:

*“I have another worry – in Australia, we found that if a child is 18, he can be independent, so parents should back off, but sometimes this can be dangerous for the family and country, if my child is associating with someone dangerous from where I came from, I will get uncles and aunts and discipline the child, what you are doing is not good, but here the child is considered mature so there is no control of parent, so if he step deeply in the wrong thing, I can't do anything, and that's dangerous not just for me or my family but for the whole country.”*  
(Focus group participant)

*“I think it's a different culture, in our culture back home, even if a child is a grown up person, he will stay with his parents and listen to what his parents say, but in the western world there is individualisation. When a child is grown up here, they can go wherever they like and do whatever they like. The government can have more connection with parents and communities and when these problems happen they need to consult the community and parents about the background of children, why children do this, what government can do, or what community can do.”*  
(Focus group participant)

### Change Australian foreign policy

Finally, several participants from within the community leader and focus group cohorts felt that the primary role of government in combating the threat of radicalisation and extremism should be to focus on changing Australian foreign policy. As one community leader put it, ‘Governments should, number one, stop the foreign policy, but so far most haven't even acknowledged that it's the problem, let alone addressing it. If this doesn't happen, nothing else will solve the problem.’

### The role of communities in preventing or mitigating violent extremism

#### All communities

#### Normalise cultural difference and community cohesion

In thinking about how communities can help prevent or mitigate violent extremism the majority of respondents focused similarly, as they did when considering the role of government, on the goals of strengthening social cohesion, accepting the cultural differences of other groups, and fostering understanding and acceptance of culturally diverse perspectives:

*“Both the general and Muslim communities have a role to play, but we must first minimise the levels of animosity between the two. If you talk about issues of conflicts or problems all the time, people's perceptions become very negative and hatred breeds. You have to present things in a responsible way.”* (Community leader)

*“There is a misunderstanding of what the moderate mainstream Muslim community is like. If there is an understanding there will be better education. A lot of the moderate Muslim community just want to go about living their lives – they don't want to be out there defending themselves or their beliefs all the time whenever something is presented negatively in the media.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“As an Islamic studies teacher, if you promote hatred against Christianity or Jews, then you are promoting hatred in the same way the other side promotes hatred against you. If you promote Islam as backward and violent, then you are just disabling the prospects for harmony.”* (Community leader)

However, they also stressed the importance of ensuring such approaches are consistently encouraged at the grassroots community level, rather than directly imposed from above, because of the potential for backlash when people feel an attitude or behaviour is being forced upon them:

*“The trouble is that if you turn this into a kind of conscious approach, rather than saying let’s just be a community, that in itself, that normalised context, should be better than forcing it down people’s throats. The demand to treat people well can backfire and produce the opposite effect.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

Similarly, the favoured implementation approach consisted of operating at the micro rather than macro level when driving community cohesion: ‘A very large number of very small things are important, and the role of government is to understand and support that [within communities]. And individual acts are very important. None of them individually are game-changers, but collectively they add up to something.’  
(Government stakeholder)

### **Encourage intercultural contact and reduce community insularity**

In the context of broadening acceptance and normalising diversity, there was very strong emphasis placed by government stakeholders and community leaders on the need to facilitate greater intercultural contact and exchange for communities that may otherwise be insular and resistant to other cultural groups for reasons of geography, mistrust, overreliance on media, limited education or lack of experience. This applies equally both to non-Muslims and Muslims from various cultural backgrounds. However, they also felt the challenges of achieving this should not be underestimated:

*“There isn’t a lot of cultural mixing here, outside of young people at the university. If we have all the different community representatives coming together that would help – and it is the responsibility of the ethnic communities to make this happen. Multicultural communities are not very inclusive sometimes – they want to keep their own positions and they don’t want new people coming into these positions.”*  
(Community leader)

*“Getting people to understand and be tolerant when they don’t have the experience or the exposure to the people in question [can be] very difficult.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

### **Muslim Australian communities**

#### **Equipping Muslim communities to recognize and respond appropriately to emerging extremism**

There were also a number of specific points raised by Muslim-background participants in relation to what Islamic communities across Australia can do to help reduce the threat of radicalisation and extremism. Chief amongst these was the importance of better equipping Islamic communities, including families, community groups and moderate religious leaders, to recognize and respond appropriately to emerging radicalisation and extremism. In order to do this, it was suggested that greater openness in dialogue between communities and government about the risks and threats of extremism and its consequences was necessary. As one government stakeholder argued,

*“We need to equip communities in which radicalisation might take place with an understanding of what’s going on and to have more of an open discussion than previously. To say, ‘This might happen, you need to be aware, can we talk about it if it does?’ How does a family recognise that something is happening and what they can do about it? Some of what the government can do is to offer things such as the imam workshops. If someone comes to them and says, ‘I think my son is getting involved in this stuff and what can I do?’ I don’t think most imams are equipped to know what to do or how to help. There may be a tendency to try to deal with it in-house, even if an imam is more aware. Being an extremist is not a criminal act and often police knocking on the door can make it worse. But there need to be some strategies for people to intervene and to have the authority to intervene.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

There was some evidence from community leaders that such cooperation can work well if there is mutual trust and reasonably open dialogue between all parties:

*“We are prepared to sit and talk and we can sometimes ensure things happen differently. Discussion and cooperation with police can really help.”* (Community leader)

### **Challenges for Muslim communities in cooperating with counter-extremism initiatives**

However, significant challenges both for intra-Muslim community cooperation and also for cooperation between Muslim communities and government were also identified by respondents in all three cohorts.



One of these challenges was the perception of mutual distrust between some government stakeholders and Islamic community leaders, with each group feeling that the other tends to treat these relationships as a one-way street rather than a process of mutual exchange, information and strategy sharing. This has created some tension and uncertainty in perceptions of how well these relationships are working. Community leaders in particular wanted to be seen by police and other government authorities as assets to be worked with, not around, in countering violent extremism:

*“There is a bit of a mantra from communities about getting them involved earlier and being given more help. But they are also saying if we had a concern about someone we’re not going to tell you, we want to deal with it in-house. You could say it is as much of a one way street as their complaints are that we are one way with them.”*  
(Government stakeholder)

*“This whole relationship between the police and community leaders needs to be a two-way street. If the police just regard community leaders as a source of intelligence, there is no point. The police need to regard community leaders as assets, not just intelligence sources. We should be able to have a two-way reporting system that means we can involve the authorities when we also have suspicions. But if they don’t trust us as community leaders to do that, the reality is that extremists and terrorists who think that everyone in the Western system is a fair target, they hide within the Muslim community. If you are going to flush them out, you will need the assistance of the community. Without that you won’t be able to do it.”* (Islamic community leader)

### **Diversity and disunity between different Islamic religious and cultural groups**

Another challenge identified by focus group participants centred on managing the diversity and dissent that can obtain between different religious or political factions within Muslim communities. This can weaken or dilute efforts to forge a consensus around how best to address emergent radicalisation and extremism. Generally speaking, participants in focus groups favoured culturally diverse Islamic congregations that minimised the incidence of perceived ethnic enclaving:

*“As there is only one mosque here, the congregation is really diverse. Everyone has to mix, there is no segregation of cultures at the mosque. However down south the mosques are more ethnically based. Here it helps communities to mix and to get on with each other.”* (Focus group participant)

There was also a contrast drawn by focus group participants between varieties of religious teaching in developed versus underdeveloped countries:

*“Mostly you find that in the developed countries, the ulamas are better, they have a more polite view towards the communities. ... Also the way the ulamas teach the khutba is far better here than the ulamas in underdeveloped countries. ... Back home, the ulamas are not like that, they only preach one thing, what they are told, and it’s all the same.”* (Focus group participants)

In addition, a significant number of community-based respondents in Tasmania identified their concerns with recently arrived Muslims from particular regions, particularly those who come to Australia as international students, as being extreme in their cultural and religious views, robustly anti-Western, and difficult to engage or include within more established local Islamic community networks:

*“The division started about a year ago with the influx of Middle Eastern students, Wahabis, Saudis, Qataris. They all stick together, and this time of year they all go back home together, and they want everything – and I mean everything – in the mosque to be in Arabic, and to be strong, like with more leadership, anti-west, anti-Israel, wearing the burkha; most of their women wear the full burkha here.”* (Focus group participant, Tasmania)

*“And the Saudis are students, but they bring their whole families, and over the last year and a half we’ve had about 300 Saudis [in Hobart], 2 years ago we had about 2 Saudis, and they don’t like to get involved in Muslim activities at all, every month we have a get-together, and have food and prayer and meet and greet, but they don’t like that, they have their own functions. Before them it was Malaysian, and Imam [name] was towards there, but there were tensions between Saudis and Malaysians but he quashed that, but now, more Saudis are coming.”* (Focus group participant, Tasmania)

*“They had a committee on who wants to be imam, it was between [a Saudi man] or another Bangladeshi man, and this [Saudi] guy, he gave a nice speech in English to sugar-coat everything and then an extreme speech in Arabic. But I can speak Arabic so I know what he’s saying.”* (Focus group participant, Tasmania)

### Communities are just as responsible for preventing extremism as government

Despite the challenges identified above, there was strong consensus on the theme of community responsibility for preventing extremism. While many participants had suggestions about how government could support communities in tackling the emergence of and vulnerability to violent extremist ideologies, they saw community measures to address these issues as equally if not more important than government-based initiatives. One participant summed up this view in the following way:

*“The government is there only to put it out there, but it is the community who has to enforce these things. If the community doesn’t enforce these things the government can’t do much about it. It’s the community and the people who have to learn and teach other people.”* (Community leader)

### Australian Muslims need to speak out publicly against violent extremism

A number of community leaders felt that Muslim religious and community leaders were not doing enough to voice their opposition to or condemnation of violent extremism as a means of addressing political or religious grievances. They wanted to see moderate Muslim leaders take a public stand against extremism and saw this as a core community responsibility:

*“Open condemnation [of extremism] has been very sparse from the Muslim community. From a theological perspective, I think the imams do not know whether to condemn outright or whether this is a legitimate thing being done by extremists, to bomb, etc. Because of that theological confusion, some people think we shouldn’t be public, or else fear that they themselves will become targets if they speak out. But we owe it to our community to speak out if we think others are wrong. Until we talk about it openly and confront it as a community it is just going to continue to be pervasive, like a cancer in the body, until it is dealt with.”* (Community leader)

*“The vilified communities themselves also have a responsibility. Sometimes their leaders can become very kneejerk and not realising they are reinforcing the stereotype. Australia is increasingly secular and atheist and hearing that Islam is perfect – people just aren’t interested. There are much more sophisticated strategies they could adopt. For example, [names Sydney-based Muslim community spokesperson] – with respect, I think he’s set things back by being a repeated apologist as a spokesperson for the Mufti. He capitalised on a love affair with the media and consequently hogged the limelight. His is all a paper community – just on paper. But the media portrays him as the official spokesperson for all Muslims.”* (Community leader)

There were mixed views, however, amongst government stakeholders. While some strongly supported the efficacy of local community involvement in combating violent extremism, others questioned whether such proactive approaches should be encouraged and how well communities would cope with the actual demands of this:

*“Like child abuse, stamping out extremism and radicalisation requires the help of communities, neighbours, relatives, etc. otherwise we can’t address the problem.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“There’s an issue with the model of community self-policing that I know there are question marks around as well. I’m not saying communities don’t have a role but I think it has to be very carefully thought about as to how you don’t play into the very problem you are seeking to resolve.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“It’s the general community’s relationships and knowledge of people that means they are in a prime position to observe changes in behaviour and identify concerns. They have the best access to people at risk. Building their capacity to identify that and to find the courage and capability to respond to what they see is important. Community leaders have indicated preparedness to do this, but I’m not sure how they would handle it if it actually came to pass.”* (Government stakeholder)

### The role of ordinary people in preventing or mitigating violent extremism

Participants were asked to think about what ordinary people can do in their everyday lives to prevent or mitigate the threats of radicalisation and violent extremism. Responses to this question overlap with many of the themes that emerged during the discussion about the role of communities. However, a few of the key themes worth noting include a focus on the importance of people being prepared to speak out and intervene against violent extremism; the role of families; and local efforts to foster social cohesion and intercultural contact through getting to know others in the community.

### Be prepared to speak out

Several participants said that being prepared to intervene and challenge extremist ideologies and values within communities by focusing on positive alternatives was one of the most important things ordinary people could do:

*“It’s probably about naming what you see, acknowledging that there is an issue in the community, in your family, in your school group, whatever, and challenging it. Challenge the narrative by discussing the right path to be taking.”* (Government stakeholder)

For government stakeholders, the education system, including the higher education sector, was seen to have a particular role in fostering the development of skills in critical analysis and independent thought that could promote resilience to extremism.

*“Become more critically astute. Study humanities! It is about fostering skills in analysis, critical thinking and intellectual challenge as the antidote to black and white dogmatism. The university sector has a responsibility in this regard to enhance the ability of students, who are also citizens, to be able to do this, and how to promote a critical discourse that rejects oversimplified solutions and views, especially in relation to promoting a range of beliefs.”* (Government stakeholder)

*“Rub shoulders with someone who knows a bit about things and ask them a lot of questions; get out of your box.”* (Government stakeholder)

### The importance of families

Family support and intervention were also seen as critical elements of everyday responses to preventing radicalisation and extremism, and some participants identified the intergenerational gap that can accrue between migrant-background parents and children as an additional risk factor in this regard:

*“If parents can communicate properly with their children this would help. Poor parents – they are working, busy, and the cultural gap is so great between first and second generations – the parents don’t change but the kids do change, and so the gap becomes greater and greater. But in the second and third generations it is different, and it is harder for them to influence their kids. But if they keep their channels open, this would help. Most parents are protective and want the best for their kids; they don’t want anything to do with violence or terrorism.”* (Community leader)

*“The people closest to that individual are more likely to see that change over time, unless you’re talking about the frog in the boiling pot. It is those closest who are more likely to detect changes.”* (Government stakeholder)

### Get to know more Muslims in your local community

Contact with and respect for people from other cultural backgrounds, not marginalising people on the basis of cultural difference, recognising that there is diversity of viewpoints within particular cultures and not judging an entire community by the actions of a few were all prevalent perspectives in relation to how ordinary people can strengthen community cohesion:

*“Not everybody is the same. This applies to Muslims as much as to anyone else. You have Cathy Freeman on the one hand and people who sleep in the park on the other within the Aboriginal community – why is it different for Muslims? They are not more responsible for what some Muslims say and do than all Aboriginals are either for Cathy Freeman or for Aboriginal homelessness.”* (Community leader)

*“It’s probably building up our knowledge of what’s right and what’s wrong through an understanding of other people’s points of view. It’s about understanding other people’s cultures and beliefs so that while you get that what someone may be doing is wrong, you know that this doesn’t represent the community as a whole; it is more of an isolated incident.”* (Government stakeholder)

Participants also thought it was important for mainstream Australians to get out and get to know Australians from different cultural backgrounds personally rather than through the media:

*One of my friends, I got to know him three years back when I started at university, he was very extremist – he had many negative thoughts about Muslims, but now he is very changed, he has talked a lot with us, he has even shown interest in going to Afghan parties and communicating with them. As you say, it’s knowing people – not accepting blind-eyed what the media shows them.* (Focus group participant)

Finally, many respondents again focused on the importance of highlighting what binds us together as Australians, rather than emphasising things that divide or separate us on the basis of cultural background or identity:

*Treating each other as Australians as the main basis or criterion for how we treat each other is the answer. As long as we segregate our thinking about other cultures and people then this will not work. Cross-cultural education about acceptance and tolerance can quell many feelings of being marginalised that can lead to extremism and that lack of a sense of belonging. (Community leader)*

## Conclusion

### Counter-narratives

There was a strong view amongst many government stakeholders and community leaders that government agencies are not the appropriate or best source of counter-narratives, particularly when these are trying to intervene in religious debates or perspectives. In general, most participants felt that Muslim communities themselves are in the strongest position to develop, disseminate and reinforce counter-narratives against violent extremism where religious ideology is used to justify these actions. Muslim-generated counter-narratives were seen as more credible with those whom such narratives are aimed at influencing. There was a strong call for encouraging further cooperation and support for Muslim community-based counter-narratives in this context.

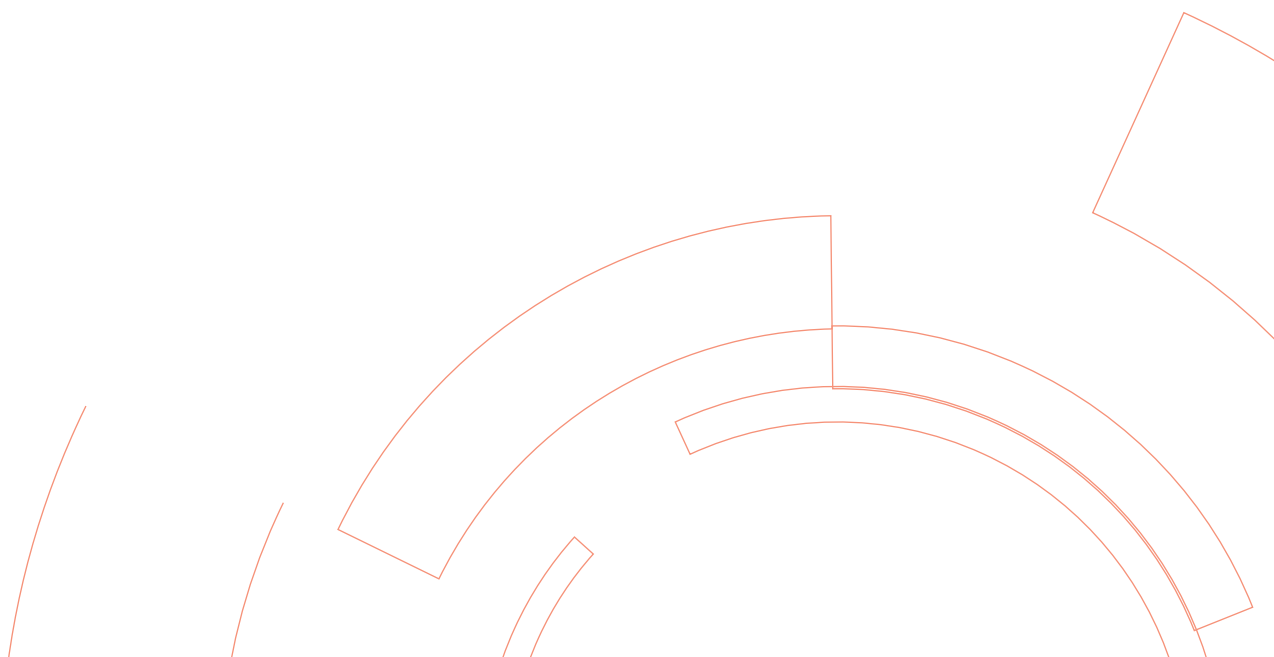
More cooperation between Muslim communities and government in general was also seen as important by a large number of participants across the cohorts. The role of Muslim leadership in developing and promoting counter-narratives was seen as vital. However, doubts and concerns around the quality, orientation and public profile of Islamic religious and community leaders both in Australia and overseas were raised by focus group participants in particular, who worried about the lack of formal accreditation, education and training for Australian imams at present.

On the one hand, many participants felt that broad-brush counter-narratives were not successful in achieving their aims and diluted the message being sent. On the other hand, some participants felt that counter-narratives are in fact everyone's business, and should be both embraced by mainstream Muslims but not aimed at Muslims alone. There was concern that continuing to target Muslim communities exclusively or even primarily risked a backlash response from Muslims. Yet this view was contradicted by government stakeholders, who felt strongly that counter-narrative messages needed to be more localised and personalised if they were to be effective.

There were questions raised by participants about how effective counter-narratives were because they focus on what can be called the 'negative case' in relation to violent extremism. These participants – which included government stakeholders as well as community leaders and members – wanted to see more 'affirmative' narratives that emphasise what binds us together rather than what separates us as a culture and a society in Australia. The most popular version of such an affirmative narrative was one that moves from 'us and them' to 'we' in how it constructs Australian identity and allegiance.

### Making violent extremism less appealing

Education was the key approach for all participants. Promoting moderate Islam through curriculum development in secondary and tertiary education and various mechanisms for community education were all identified as crucial in demystifying some of the 'romance' around violent extremism in order to reduce its appeal. Education was also seen as important in helping develop and sustain the kinds of critical thinking skills and understanding of social norms that support resilience against violent extremist ideology and suasion.



By contrast, focus group participants in particular did not feel that counter-radicalisation programs were particularly effective, particularly because they were perceived to be 'tainted' by Western ideologies and funding sources. Peer based activities that de-glamorise violence and offer other alternatives for conflict resolution and managing political and ideological dissent were considered to have greater potential efficacy.

Some community leaders and a large number of focus group participants stressed that the only viable way to reduce the appeal of violent extremism was to address the impacts of foreign policy that were perceived to drive people toward violent extremism.

### **The role of police in preventing or mitigating violent extremism**

The main mechanisms for police to enhance their effectiveness were identified by participants as: building trust with communities; minimising police social distancing, particularly with culturally diverse communities; strengthening their communication and feedback skills, especially in the context of keeping communities informed about local developments; and bringing more Muslims into the law enforcement fold so that the 'insider-outsider' gap around approaches to countering violent extremism was reduced.

### **The role of government in preventing or mitigating violent extremism**

The vast majority of participants saw the main role of government in preventing or mitigating the threat of violent extremism in terms of **empowering, educating and engaging** communities by strengthening social cohesion and building intercultural capacity and resilience. The primary role of government was identified as facilitating rather than dictating policy and initiatives in this context.

#### **• Empowering communities**

Bottom-up grassroots initiatives 'owned' by entire communities are perceived as far more effective than top-down approaches. Communities were also seen as better able to identify and support at an early stage at-risk individuals, and the role of government should be to support such interventions.

Yet there was also acknowledgement that governments must balance this facilitative role with the perception by at least some within the community that any government support for programs that counter violent extremism – even when these are driven by local communities themselves – can reduce their legitimacy and appeal.

#### **• Educating communities**

Educating communities for social cohesion and alternatives to violence was central in the thinking of many participants around this theme, as well as increased emphasis on cultural diversity and critical thinking and analytical skills in classrooms and other educational settings. In addition, there was a strong sense that government should foster openness and receptivity to being educated by communities in order to learn more about the best ways to develop effective strategies for countering violent extremism.

#### **• Engaging communities**

The key elements emphasised by participants under this theme included making social cohesion a community-driven rather than aspirational process, showing strong political leadership for multiculturalism, doing a better job at translational communication of government objectives around social cohesion and community strengthening, and narrowing the trust gap between at-risk communities and government.

In particular, community-based participants wanted to see much stronger recognition and support for those Muslim groups and communities who share a commitment to countering violent extremism. Gaining the cooperation of these communities in pursuing such an agenda was perceived as pivoting on acknowledgement that the social and political project of countering violent extremism was not just the province of government but one that belonged to and was embraced at community level.

Social enclaving was also seen as a risk factor in encouraging exposure to violent extremist ideologies, interactions and activities. Community-based participants felt this could be better dealt with by government through understanding and action in the economic and social policy and planning domain to reduce structural disadvantage in housing, employment and education.

The role of government in supporting families to help young people to stay on the right track by avoiding or rejecting violent extremism was emphasised by many participants. This was a particular concern for some members of new arrival communities from overseas who felt that tensions between traditional cultural approaches to managing their relationships with their children were fraying in the Australian context, reducing their influence over and knowledge about the lives their children are leading and increasing their children's risk of being absorbed into radical or extremist groups as a result.

### **The role of communities in preventing or mitigating violent extremism**

Both the general community and Muslim communities in Australia were perceived by a strong majority of participants to have both a key role and a key responsibility to play in preventing or mitigating the threat of violent extremism.

The role of the general community was perceived by participants to revolve around normalising cultural difference and community cohesion; and encouraging intercultural contact and reducing community insularity. A range of strategies and approaches were canvassed in these contexts, including being friendlier, becoming more knowledgeable and tolerant of other cultures and religions, and becoming involved with different groups of people within local community settings.

The role of Muslim Australian communities was the focus of more sustained and detailed discussion. Participants identified a strong need for governments to appropriately equip Muslim communities to identify and respond to emerging radicalisation and extremism at the local level. It was suggested that greater openness and dialogue between communities and governments about the risk, threat and consequences of extremism and terrorism was needed to support this endeavour. There were consistent views expressed by community leaders and focus group participants that Muslim communities need to be more outspoken in countering the religious, cultural and political justifications for violent extremism and in promoting alternative views that help counter the legitimacy of violent extremism as a response to dissent and dissatisfaction with foreign policy.

However, a range of challenges in fostering such cooperation and dialogue were also identified by community based participants. This included lack of trust; the perception that cooperative relationships between communities, police and security agencies were a one-way street; and disunity and disagreement between different Islamic religious and cultural groups, which can make managing and progressing such relationships difficult.

## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION: CROSS-CUTTING THEMES AND PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY AND RADICALISATION

The findings of *Community and Radicalisation* are based on extensive national consultations conducted with over 500 community members and government stakeholders. As one would expect when exploring the perceptions and beliefs of a broad and diverse range of participants, discussion around each of the project's central themes revealed highly variable views and understandings for each one of the study's major themes. At times, many of the concepts and key terms explored throughout the study were interpreted differently by respondents within the same cohort and also across the three main cohorts of community participants, community leaders and government stakeholders.

A few participants were by turns frustrated, sceptical, hostile or guarded when discussing particular themes or topics, especially around issues such as the perceived impacts of social exclusion, foreign policy, government responsibilities or drivers for radicalisation and extremism. However, the vast majority of participants displayed a great deal of thoughtful analysis, candour, good will and sensitivity in thinking about the topics they were asked to consider. Their openness in discussing uncomfortable or difficult issues that can generate significant emotion and tension, particularly in group settings, indicates that such discussions are seen as constructive and worthwhile by Australian communities, and that those who contributed to the study valued the opportunity to have their voices heard and their views taken into account by government policymakers.

A summary of the key findings of *Community and Radicalisation* across its eight chapters appears in the Executive Summary at the beginning of this report. Here, however, we want to tease out some of the cross-cutting themes and insights generated by these findings. We also want to explore further some of their implications for, first, how communities currently perceive issues related to radicalisation and extremism, and second, what this means for future directions and strategies when engaging communities in the challenge of preventing or mitigating radicalisation and extremism in Australia.

### **Uncertainty around the relationship between radicalisation and extremism**

While there was a general perception that radicalisation was a process of incremental influence and development, this study found little consensus around the relationship between the concepts of radicalisation and extremism. Some government stakeholders and community leaders felt that radicalisation led to extremism, while for others extremism led to radicalisation, and for still others there was little meaningful distinction, to the extent that the terms could be used interchangeably. Especially notable were the divergent understandings for government stakeholders in particular around the meanings of and relationship between radicalisation and extremism.

This would suggest that at present there is no unified narrative within government at state and federal levels about the meanings of radicalisation and extremism as either theoretical or operational concepts. While this may signal a healthy climate of informed democratic debate about the terms ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’ based on different strands of theory or practice, it can also lead to confusion and to disjointed or contradictory understandings and approaches when thinking about how best to operationalise these concepts for counter-extremist and counter-terrorist initiatives at national, state and local community levels. This is particularly the case when trying to implement national dialogues with Muslim and other religious and cultural groups about what radicalisation and extremism mean for government and communities in both Australian and international contexts.

While debate can and should continue to be encouraged around how best to deploy these terms both conceptually and operationally, greater shared understanding, particularly between government agencies and between government agencies and communities, would help bridge this gap and reduce the current definitional uncertainties identified in the findings.

### **Extremism and violence**

There was also little agreement about the role of violence in relation to extremism. It would be inaccurate to advance a definition of extremism that locates violence as a *necessary* precondition of extremist perspectives and ideologies. However, a large proportion of government stakeholders offered a working definition of extremism that did place violence at the core of how they understood this term.

By contrast, community members were more circumspect on this subject, citing many instances of extremist thinking or belief systems that either did not involve violent action or that explicitly rejected violence as a legitimate means of pursuing extremist goals. Moreover, it was clear to some participants that violent action against individuals, communities or the state might not involve extremist thought or belief at all, and many such examples of non-extremist violence were canvassed throughout the project. The relationship between extremism and violence is complex, and further disentangling this relationship at the levels of both ideology and practice would help communities better understand key government concerns about how extremism and violence may be linked through terrorist or other frameworks.



### **The convergence of drivers for radicalisation and extremism**

Despite the lack of consensus around the place of violence in relation to concepts of extremism, the vast majority of participants agreed that a convergence of personal, socio-cultural and political factors were needed to understand the many different pathways by which an individual or a group begins the journey toward radicalisation or extremist thought and action. This is not new knowledge, but it does confirm the importance of continuing to assert the complex nature of how radicalisation and extremism develop, persist and strengthen. This assertion is needed particularly at times of pressure by communities or others to simplify or streamline both the explanations and also the strategies brought to bear on these issues. However, saying things are complex is not enough. The data from this portion of the study helps pinpoint the extent to which the convergence paradigm holds true in the Australian context, and what varying emphases and nuances can be teased out that help illuminate the precise nature of how these factors may interlock with one another on the ground in a range of settings and circumstances.

As a preliminary response to this, the current study's findings suggest that, in the eyes of participants, social exclusion, discrimination, racism and marginalisation are a major element in making people more susceptible to radical or extremist suasion. This is particularly true for young people. As a result, a great deal of emphasis was placed by participants on the importance of what might be called early-intervention strategies – in education, in supporting families, in strengthening local communities and in providing viable alternatives for the social and cultural frustrations that can lead to extremism. In this context, the role of local and state governments in developing cohesive and well-resourced interventions, particularly in the sphere of educational and family support mechanisms, seems clear. The study yielded much evidence of a strong desire on the part of communities, including Australian Muslim communities, to cohere, to cooperate, and to feel and be included within national frameworks of civic and social life that respect pluralism but strengthen identification with what it means to be 'Australian'. This is an important message from participants, and how both government and the general community at large respond to this will be critical in finding new ways to minimise or neutralise the potential for radicalisation and extremism in the Australian context.

### **Perceptions around home-grown extremism and terrorism**

Some participants were forthright in acknowledging the potential for radicalisation and violent extremism to occur in Australia, and a few pointed to the very difficult conditions in detention centres and also urban enclaves that concentrate poverty and disadvantage as 'ticking time bombs' because they lead to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, self-harm and desperation. These were seen as examples of the 'unfinished business' of social cohesion, social inclusion and the repeal of socio-economic disadvantage in contemporary Australia.

However, a significant proportion of respondents in focus groups thought the prospect of home-grown terrorism in Australia was fairly low. Reasons given for this included: Australia's relative geographical isolation; a sufficiently friendly and peaceful domestic culture; good access to democratic processes and freedom of expression; reasonable approaches to social inclusion despite some continuing challenges, and a relative lack of political aggression.

Only Western Australian participants spoke of the potential for non-Muslim violent extremism and terrorism emanating from the extreme right in that state, reflecting a particular history of social challenges, developments and influences in this region. However, there was also a broader view across project participants beyond Western Australia that it is very important to understand that the threat of violent extremism, where it is perceived to exist, does not emanate solely from Muslim communities and that diverse forms and sources of violent extremist ideology across the cultural and political spectrum need to be acknowledged and addressed.

The view of Australia as a country in which home-grown terrorism is a relatively minor threat is positive in the sense that it reflects broad appreciation for Australia's national approach to minimising social conflict and strengthening intercultural harmony and social cohesion. It is also a view that accords with the absence to date of any direct experience by communities of terrorist violence on Australian soil, in contrast to those in countries that have directly experienced the impact and consequences of extremist violence. This can pose a range of challenges for how public discourses around violent extremism and terrorism are conceptualised and driven. On the one hand, the lack of a discernible threat for the vast majority of Australians means that efforts to encourage people to be vigilant regarding early signs of radical or extremist activity may fall on deaf ears or else be regarded as a political or social overreaction by government, including police and security agencies. One consequence of such a perceived overreaction by governments is that it can make people more hostile to and suspicious of efforts to foster a higher degree of sensitivity to emergent radicalisation and extremism at the local community level. This can present challenges in relation to building relations of trust between government and communities. It may also mean that communities feel little urgency about the need to be resilient in relation to the potential emergence of violent extremism in Australia should such a threat become more prevalent.

On the other hand, however, too strong a focus on the potential for home-grown extremism and terrorism, especially at the level of counter-narrative and public information campaigns, risks further eroding what many participants have identified as an already fragile sense of social cohesion and intercultural harmony. The backlash against Muslim individuals and communities whenever heightened awareness or alerts about terrorism gain a foothold in public consciousness is well documented. This has been very well supported by the study's findings around the perceived role of media sensationalising around the links between Islam and extremism, which participants said risked driving less resilient members of Muslim communities further down the path of reactive radicalisation.

This also has some implications for how counter-narrative strategies are adjusted to reflect the reality that there has not to date been a catastrophic terrorist attack on Australian soil. Because extremist violence and terrorism are abstract concepts rather than concrete experiences for most Australians, the balance between narratives of 'reassurance' on the one hand and 'awareness' on the other concerning the possibility of home-grown terrorism needs to be carefully thought through and calibrated. This may extend to developing a multi-pronged counter-narrative strategy that can tailor the messages for different sub-groups within the general community.

### **Beyond counter-narratives**

Also significant in this regard is the emerging trend identified in the study for participants across government and communities to preference 'affirmative' narratives that help reinforce common Australian identities and values, rather than 'negative' narratives aimed at internal or external, potential or actual threats. The study's findings suggest that for at least some participants, reactive counter-narratives that focus on the negative case may have lost some effectiveness, whereas proactive narratives emphasising positive shared community bonds may help rejuvenate the effectiveness of current counter-narrative approaches.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that quite a few participants did feel that current counter-narrative strategies were effective and that it was important to continue with these, despite the almost universal view that counter-narratives seen to emanate directly from government were the least effective in reaching or influencing their target audiences.

### **The role of Muslim community leadership in countering extremism**

Participants across all cohorts saw it as a major responsibility of Muslim communities to generate both affirmative narratives *and* counter-narratives that are widely regarded as credible and authoritative. Both Muslim and non-Muslim participants thought that Muslim communities can and should play a pivotal role in speaking up and out in condemning extremist violence and in promoting a clearer understanding of Islamic religion, law and culture for non-Muslim Australians.

Muslim religious leaders in particular were expected to play a critical role and have a stronger voice in this space. Participants wanted Imams to cater more explicitly to young people in their communities by offering appropriate religious and pastoral support and guidance, while at the same time also responding to the needs of older members of their communities whose experiences can be very different. The influence and authority Imams carry in their communities was substantiated by the research findings, which suggest Australian Muslims will accept rulings, laws, and decisions when it has the weight of their Imam behind it.

Indeed, the question and role of leadership in Muslim communities was a constant cross-cutting theme throughout the study. Participant perspectives on these issues suggest that Imams can face ongoing challenges in relation to perceptions of authenticity, especially in terms of whether they are seen as valid interpreters of Islamic frameworks and as effective community leaders more broadly. This is exemplified by the tensions that can develop between Imams who are from, or financially supported by, Saudi Arabia and Imams from other groups and backgrounds. This was a particular concern for participants in Tasmania, who commented on what they saw as the cultural divisiveness and exclusionary tendencies of Saudi international students who come to Australia to study. While the message of Saudi-influenced Imams is often extreme, anti-West and intolerant, many members of Muslim communities beyond this base nevertheless perceive them as authentic because they speak Arabic and challenge Western social norms that continue to provoke ambivalence and unease for those Muslims still struggling to reconcile religious and secular ways of living.

Religious and community leaders who are considered ‘moderate’ and who may be favoured as the public face of Islam by governments are thus often seen as sell-outs because they model a form of Islam more suited to a plural diverse Australia and more accommodating of Australian values and lifestyles. In this sense, the challenge for both governments and communities is how to support the modulation of perceptions of what is and isn’t ‘authentic’ or ‘traditional’ Islam so that moderate versions of Islam do not become a form of debased currency. One way of facilitating this would be to advance the agenda of education and support for Imams that a significant number of Muslim community participants have called for. This would help further a constructive relationship between more conservative religious leaders, particularly those born overseas, and Australian Muslim communities better able to negotiate the intersection of religious and secular norms and expectations.

### **Putting the brakes on media sensationalism**

However, the strongest challenge facing Australian Muslim community leaders, and Australian Muslim communities more broadly, is the impact of the media in creating and promoting a highly sensationalised and often distorted representation of Islamic religion, culture and communities. The study’s findings offer ample support for how damaging the tendency of commercial media outlets in particular to focus selectively on the more extreme or outrageous statements of Muslim ‘community’ leaders – some of whom have no genuine legitimacy within communities themselves – can be for the project of enhancing social cohesion throughout Australia as a whole.

Given the emphasis by participants on the importance of social cohesion and intercultural tolerance and understanding as a key element in reducing drivers for radicalisation and extremism, the extent to which sensationalised and imbalanced media stories around Islam and terrorism is perceived to have set back this agenda is troubling.

Distrust of and cynicism about media was very high for many respondents. While this is hardly limited to issues surrounding the role of media in linking Islam, extremism and terrorism in the public mind, the comments of many participants and the passion with which they spoke of this issue points to the ways in which such distrust and cynicism has become chronic rather than merely acute, especially for Muslim-background participants. The data gathered during this study points to a close correspondence between heightened levels of public cynicism concerning media and the perpetuation and reinforcement of cultural and religious stereotypes by media organisations. This trend needs to be stemmed if public confidence and trust, particularly amongst groups who feel they already have less access to representation via mainstream media outlets, is to be improved.

Media organisations have choices about how they design, shape and pitch their content and their focus in reporting on issues related both to aspects of Australian Muslim life and to extremism and terrorism at home and abroad. Pressure on media organisations from Muslim communities themselves has been limited to date, in part because of their sense that their concerns will continue to be trivialised or unheard in favour of chasing ratings and advertisers more geared to populist sentiment. However, this is starting to change as Muslim community leaders become more vocal on this topic, and these efforts should be vigorously supported by government.

Participants also said they wanted to see stronger political leadership in getting across the national message about cultural tolerance and respect. Linking this with political leadership in relation to media responsibility on issues of cultural pluralism, and rejecting knee-jerk assumptions about the always-and-everywhere link between Islam and extremism, would be one good place to start. A concerted focus on greater media accountability and responsibility through both government and non-government channels would also be relevant.

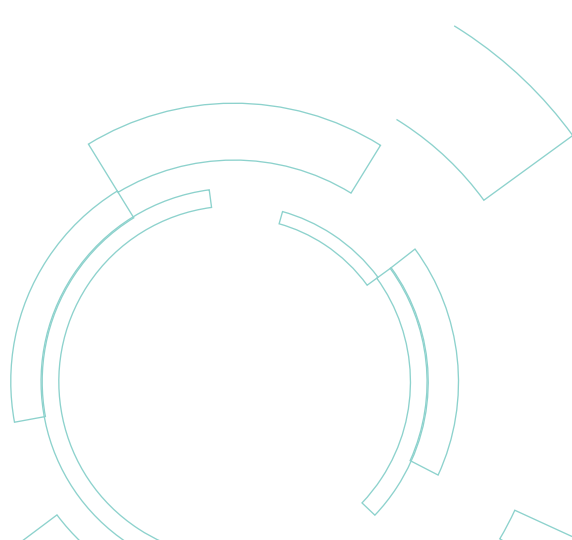
### Meeting the internet challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

There was very little support across the study for increased censorship of or control over the internet as a means of policing extremism, with many participants explicitly pointing to China and other authoritarian state regimes as examples of how *not* to approach the management of relations between civil populations and communication technologies. Nevertheless, despite the marked aversion to censorship – itself closely linked to the very social and political freedoms cherished by Western democracies – participants stressed the risks and challenges posed by the internet in relation to fostering rapid transmission of radical and extremist platforms and activities. In particular, the social and interactive dimensions of the internet and other relatively new social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, were seen by many participants as critical in shaping how discourses of extremism and terrorism are played out. These communication technologies were perceived as dynamic, fluid spaces in which radicalisation as a social process can be either reinforced or hampered by how users of internet and social media sites shape and direct flows of information, opinion and perspective.

Accordingly, the internet and other social media represented not only challenges but also opportunities for participants. The most important of these, in our view, was the strong emphasis on how the internet and social media can be used to counter as well as facilitate radicalisation and extremism. Participants wanted to see alternative internet and social media-based narratives and options more easily available to those who go to radical or extremist sites out of curiosity or uncertainty about who they are and where they belong. They also called for more proactive educational approaches to balancing the positives and risks of the internet and social media, particularly for new arrivals who may enthusiastically embrace new technologies but be less aware of their potential to deliver risks as well as benefits.

### Education is the key to preventing radicalisation and extremism

The emphasis on more and better education around internet use was replicated across a great many other themes addressed by the study. In fact, the most common response from participants when asked what the solutions were to preventing or mitigating the causes, drivers and risks of radicalisation and extremism and to fostering greater use of existing peaceful democratic mechanisms for resolving grievances was ‘education’ and ‘understanding’. In this sense, it is clear that participants, regardless of their own specific educational level or assets, placed enormous value on the *power* of education to transform or re-orient attitudes, perceptions and beliefs. The link between stronger social cohesion and stronger educational skills and capital was drawn by a great many participants in various contexts.



They believed that education – including, especially, the critical reasoning skills necessary for independent thought and analysis – were essential in helping people distinguish between rhetoric and reality, and in working systematically through ideas and claims in an environment in which communities are constantly bombarded with information, often packaged in slick marketing or other anti-reasoning formats. This is a very important point, because it demonstrates the extent to which Australian communities remain committed to the free flow of ideas and the free capacity to critically evaluate and assess them. Knowledge capital and skills in critical thinking are essential elements in supporting democratic systems and in building resilience to radical or extremist ideology. How communities and government, working together, can most effectively meet this challenge is a key question raised by the study's findings.

### **Cooperation and reciprocity**

A final issue arising from the study's findings relates to participants' strong emphasis on the importance of cooperation and reciprocity in strengthening responses to countering radicalisation and extremism. This cross-cutting theme relates to participant perceptions around the relationship between different religious, racial and cultural groups at the community level, and between police, government and communities at the national level.

At the community level, the improvement of cross-cultural and inter-faith tolerance and understanding was, unsurprisingly, a crucial element in the thinking of most participants. Both government and community respondents were adamant that grassroots initiatives are generally more successful, and also more sustainable, than large-scale, 'headline' programs or strategies that demand rather than encourage tolerance and cooperation between groups that may have structural, historical or other reasons for mistrusting or being wary of one another. As one participant said, it is a question of a series of small steps that make the difference. These add up to a bigger leap of confidence and security in working together towards common goals on the basis of shared values and principles. Such small steps need to be seeded and nurtured at the local community level, and there was a great deal of interest and support for how government might best facilitate this, while still allowing communities to lead the way.

In particular, there was a marked call for stronger steps to be taken to enhance cooperation between Muslim communities and government agencies in countering radicalisation and extremism. Participants wanted to see well-defined partnerships both between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, and also between communities and local, state and federal levels of government. To create meaningful community partnerships with government, participants felt that government agencies needed to acknowledge the power of communities to drive change, to respect communities, and to explicitly acknowledge their contributions. However, they also saw this process as reciprocal, stressing that communities also need to understand government concerns and where government is 'coming from' more generally.

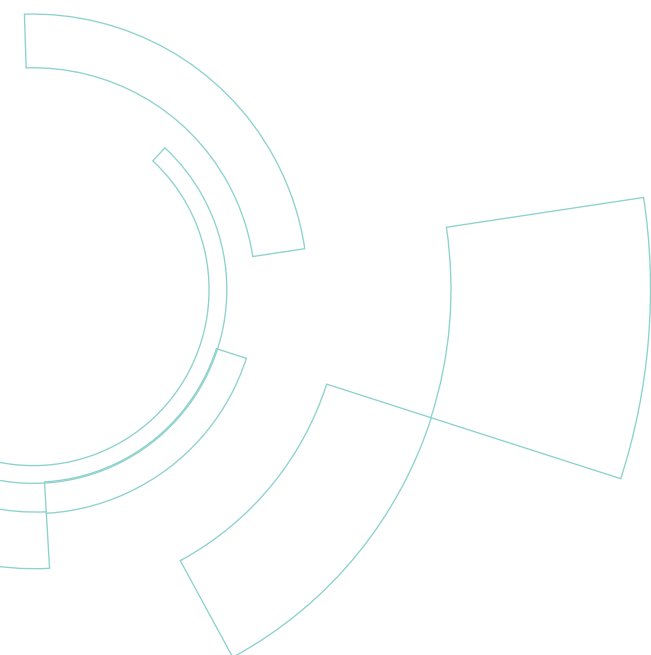
This was a particular issue in relation to policing approaches when dealing with emergent radicalisation and extremism at community level. Many Muslim-background participants wanted to see policing authorities and Muslim community leaders standing side by side in public. They also wanted the communication channels to be two-way streets, and this concern with reciprocal flows of information and exchange was echoed by government stakeholders within policing and security agencies, who also felt that at times the traffic could be unidirectional. Explicit strategies to promote and embed reciprocal communication and exchange pathways would help improve these relationships.

One issue emerging from government participants was the extent to which some questioned the value or viability of adopting culturally sensitive or responsive strategies in dealing with both the intervention and aftermath of anti-terrorist operations. This is a concern because it runs against the grain of Australia's commitment to working with cultural diversity and pluralism as an integral part of Australian society, rather than engaging in a 'sunny days' approach to multiculturalism that dismisses its significance in times of crisis or other political and operational pressure.

This response was all the more unexpected because a number of non-Victorian project participants across both government and community who were familiar with Operation Neath spoke highly of the success of Victoria's approach in dealing with the Somali community in the aftermath of this operation. Several government stakeholders saw this as a transferable model for other jurisdictions who may face similar operational and community engagement challenges in future. Yet it was clear that this was not a universal perspective amongst government respondents, and it raises the issue of how unified government representatives are in pursuing a culturally aware and tailored approach in these contexts.

Given these disparities, it may be worthwhile investigating whether a common approach to how counter-terrorist operations deal with the variable of cultural diversity can or should be developed, and what training, support and development needs might need to be resourced in order to achieve this.

Overall, the picture that emerges from these consultations around community perspectives on radicalisation and extremism is that community leaders, community members and government stakeholders are reasonably confident that Australia is in a good position to meet and address some of the continuing challenges presented by the threats of radicalisation and extremism to a peaceful and open democratic society. However, a range of concerns, strategies and solutions were offered by participants that help focus attention on what work still needs to be done, how this can best be pursued, and what innovations may need to occur to stay abreast of a social and political environment that is dynamic, fluid, occasionally volatile and still working toward broad-scale resilience and social cohesion in local, national and trans-national contexts.



## CHAPTER 10: CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The findings of *Community and Radicalisation* into the perceptions and beliefs of communities concerning radicalisation, extremism and terrorism offer a number of future strategic possibilities for consideration by government, policing agencies and communities. Below we discuss some of the findings' implications for actions, models, strategies, partnerships and policies that may be useful to think about for the future. The chapter numbers in parentheses at the end of each area of focus below indicate where the bulk of the findings supporting these discussion items are located.

## Considerations for governments at all levels

### Terminology

Definitional issues around radicalisation and extremism emerged as a prominent theme in the study. There can be confusion or disagreement at times amongst government stakeholders concerning the meanings of and distinctions between ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’. Governments may wish to consider developing a clear and common definition of both ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’ that can be accepted and used by the Commonwealth and all States and Territories across a range of policy and operational settings, including education and dialogue with communities and the general public (Chapter 1). In addition, it would be helpful to consider whether and how any such common definition of these terms could be inclusive of all forms of radicalisation and extremism to avoid targeting any specific culture, religion or ideology. This was a key issue for communities in particular (Chapters 2 and 8).

### Education

The research revealed strong support from communities for the values and benefits of democracy. However, younger participants across many States and Territories were less knowledgeable about democracy as a political system and less confident about expressing their views in relation to how democracy compares to other political systems. Government at all levels, in particular States through their education systems, may wish to think further about how best to support and strengthen the development of capacity building programs for young Australians through schools and other educational programs and pathways to improve understanding of democracy as a political system that delivers rights, freedoms and responsibilities for all Australians (Chapter 4).

It is important that young Australians in particular are better equipped with the skills, knowledge and resilience to negotiate a wide range of issues, claims and beliefs around culture, politics, ideology, religion and society. Strong support for disciplines and branches of knowledge – especially humanities and social sciences – that develop high level skills in critical analysis, cognitive reasoning and independent thought needs to be considered. Consideration can also be given to how best to embed these disciplines across all levels of Australian educational settings (Chapters 2 and 8).

### Counter-narratives and counter-radicalisation

A significant finding arising from the research was the perception, shared by both government stakeholders and communities, that existing counter-narrative strategies focused on radicalisation and extremism now need to be supplemented by proactive and affirmative narratives focusing on shared values, goals and identity as Australians in the context of cultural diversity and religious pluralism. In addition, communities have identified the benefits of personalising and localising the counter-narrative message so it is less abstract and more concrete. Local governments have a role to play in this context and can consider working in partnership with state and federal agencies to develop localised narratives and messages dealing with radicalisation, extremism and inclusive approaches to shared community life across cultures. There was also strong perception that Australian Muslim communities are themselves best placed to develop counter-narratives and affirmative narratives that can most effectively reach others within their community.

Accordingly, both governments and communities may want to further examine and invest in the critical role of Australian Muslim communities in developing and disseminating counter-narratives against radicalisation and extremism, and how this role can be explicitly acknowledged by government (Chapter 8).

### Strengthening community resilience

The internet and other social media are now daily parts of life for many, especially young people. Strategies and frameworks for how the internet and other social media can best be used to help young people and other social groups become more resilient in relation to extremist messaging via the internet can be considered, particularly in the context of actively promoting positive alternatives to extremist ideology (Chapter 6). This can go hand in hand with leveraging community support for early-identification and prevention strategies that draw on the in-depth knowledge and involvement of communities to intercept and re-route radical and extremist behaviour where it has not yet reached the threshold of criminality

In many ways, such activities would be most effectively conducted in the context of counter-radicalisation programs that are multi-dimensional, given the study’s findings around the widespread perception of convergent causes, drivers and factors leading to radicalisation and extremism rather than a single cause or driver (Chapters 2 and 8).



## Considerations for policing agencies

### Improving trust and good relationships between police and communities

The study's findings suggest that it would be helpful for policing agencies to consider developing a multi-jurisdictional counter-terrorism community engagement based on the identified successes of the Victoria Police approach to community consultation and engagement in the aftermath of Operation Neath. Aligned with this at the policy level can be a focus by policing agencies at state and federal level on strengthening the recruitment, training and retention of a culturally diverse police force to increase community trust in police and reduce the risk of negative impacts and reactions by communities targeted during such operations.

Local intelligence and cooperation with authorities is a key to early detection of potential extremist or terrorist threats. The research findings indicate strongly the benefits that would arise from policing agencies considering how best to develop systematic ways of reducing social distancing between operational police and local communities to enhance trust and communication and to reduce fear, suspicion and cynicism about the role of police at community level. This includes developing and sustaining explicit strategies to promote and embed reciprocal communication and exchange pathways to help improve these relationships (Chapters 7 and 8).

## Considerations for communities

### Social cohesion and cultural diversity

The issue of intercultural mistrust, suspicion and lack of knowledge between various sectors of the community emerged as a persistent theme throughout the report. This can lead to forms of alienation and disengagement that are drivers for radicalisation and extremism. Strategies that promote greater intercultural dialogue and understanding in order to dispel myths and prejudices between different ethnic, cultural and religious groups through more sustained and regular contact at community level are needed and can be supported by all levels of government working together with relevant community organisations (Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8).

Many Muslim community leaders who contributed to this project have called specifically for greater visibility and involvement by Muslim communities in reducing cultural and community isolation. Accordingly, strong consideration can be given to how best to support Australian Muslim community leaders and groups in developing sustainable mechanisms that promote active engagement, interaction and relationship between Muslim and mainstream communities. A critical aspect of this involves the need for Australian Muslim communities to openly acknowledge the wide diversity of views, beliefs and practices that constitute contemporary Australian Muslim life and publicly challenge characterisations of Islam that seek to narrow this diversity in the minds of Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Chapter 8).

Yet the research findings clearly demonstrate the belief that mainstream Australian communities also need to play a major role in and take responsibility for social cohesion and not expect others to bear this burden on their own. This means participating actively at local community level to develop better understanding of and tolerance for the diversity of Australian identities and cultures. It also means challenging inaccurate or misleading portrayals of other cultural groups when these arise in both public and private settings (Chapters 2 and 8).

## Considerations for government-community partnerships

### Improving understanding and acceptance of Muslims in Australia

The findings suggest strong support for coordinated strategies that can leverage partnerships between government and local communities, groups and organisations to increase intercultural contact between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in order to break down stereotypes and myths and increase social cohesion (Chapters 2 and 8).

In particular, many members of Australian Muslim communities are disturbed by the ways in which perceptions of Islam as a religion and a culture have seemingly become inextricably associated with terrorism. Commercial and public press organisations and broadcasters came under strong criticism from both government stakeholders and community members in relation to this perception. This has an impact on efforts to build trust and confidence between some Muslim communities and government agencies focused on preventing violent extremism.

Accordingly, there was strong encouragement from study participants on the need for media organisations to draw on a diversity of credible expert Muslim consultants to ensure a healthy flow of balanced information about Australian Muslim experiences and perspectives.

In addition, targeted communication strategies, including public interest advertising on television, radio and the internet, can be considered by government and communities working in partnership to promote balanced and accurate portrayals of Islam, Muslims and the diversity of Australian Muslim cultures and communities. There was also strong community support for seeing such strategies embedded in explicit policy frameworks (Chapters 5 and 6).

### **Equipping young people to become more resilient**

Communities have said they see their young people as especially susceptible to using violence as an answer to grievances and problems. Peer-based anti-violence and anti-extremism programs supported by joint community-government partnerships that encourage young people to reject violence and use alternative means of conflict resolution can be considered, particularly in relation to sustainable programs that are multigenerational (Chapter 3).

Susceptibility to internet-based extremism, particularly for young people, is also now a major concern for a broad range of community members, as well as government stakeholders. Strategies focused on young people to strengthen education about and resilience to internet-based extremism can be considered for joint development and implementation by government, educators and communities.

This includes a targeted focus on strengthening resilience to how people and communities respond to racial or cultural provocation via the internet and other social media (Chapter 6).

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Professor Grossman and Dr Tahiri are currently collaborating on a second project funded by the Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee titled *Harnessing Resilience Capital in Culturally Diverse Communities to Counter Violent Extremism* (2012-2013).

