

Submission to the DFAT White Paper

This submission focuses on the political Islam (mainly Salafi-Jihadism) and how Australia should redirect and refocus its measures for combating the growth of Islamism and radical jihad. It also comments on Australia's relations with the Middle East, particularly in the context of the change in US administration, which will bring about not only a changed dynamic in the Middle East but also the rest of the world. My own view is that the incoming administration, as with the neo-cons under George Bush, has no interest in learning the lessons of history and will sadly commit the same blunders. Only this time Trump administration's anti-Arab rhetoric will alienate its many allies in the Middle East, and this includes key allies such as Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain. To counter this, his ingrained suspicion of Iran will please many Gulf Arabs and the Israelis. Unlike President Obama, President Trump equates Islam with terror and has a deep held suspicion of all Muslims. In addition, Trump's blatant and one-sided support of Israel will also alienate the US from the Islamic world and has the potential to radicalise a new generation of Muslims, both in the Middle East and the West.

Since 9/11 both Western and Arab governments have been endeavouring to develop a counter narrative in the hope of defeating jihadist ideology. It should be noted that Jihadi-Salafist expansion in the Middle East is more a product of the region's instability and discord rather than its primary driver. I should point out that this counter narrative has been extremely simplistic and represents only a small part of the story. Islamism is a multifaceted and complicated social movement, which has different world views, references, leaders and advocates, and whose constituencies have varied hugely over the last two centuries. It has always reflected social phenomena with deep historical and cultural foundations.

In contrast to the political Islamists (the MB, Hamas, Annahda in Tunisia, PJD in Morocco), The Salafi-Jihadis have not progressed beyond the old notion of *deen* (religion) and *dawla* (State). They have remained strongly attached to Islam as the **sole** social and legal framework for their societies. There is no spectrum, unlike in the West, of ideas, ranging from conservative to liberal. It is clear and uncompromising and all laws, regulations and rules should follow the Islamic jurisprudence.

At the heart of the issue is the West's perception of Islamic societies and Islam itself. And there is no single perception. All the attempts of the past 150 years have been to separate Islam from the state and to enrich Islamic identity by infusing it with various cultural and nationalistic components. Unlike Christianity, Islam by its very nature demands to be Islamism. The key is to separate Islam from Islamism.

The West has rather naively believed that to counter violent jihad the best way forward is to help Arab countries democratise by accommodating Islamic parties within the political process. However, instead of creating a level-playing field in

the Middle East the West has assisted in rigging the political system against Islamic parties. It has not recognised the election of Hamas in the Gaza Strip (on the pretext that Hamas is a terrorist organisation rather than a resistance organisation), supported the Egyptian dictator Al-Sisi to overthrow the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood (MB) government in Egypt and supported the military led dictatorship in Algeria. I should note that the coup and repression in Egypt under Al-Sisi has propelled the country in a still more perilous direction and will have ramifications for the immediate region. This repression has led a few supporters and segments of the MB to seek violent solutions to uprooting the Al-Sisi government.

The contradiction is that the West, when it has suited them, has also resorted to supporting (or remaining silent) the status quo in many Arab countries that have a poor human rights record. Many in the West have not accepted the fact that the MB and its variants take a more gradual approach, embrace parliamentary politics and endeavour to work within the existing state structures. In other words they have attempted to reconcile pre-modern Islamic law with the modern secular state. This also distinguishes the MB, at a doctrinal level, from terror organisations such as ISIS and AQ given the former's flexibility and pragmatism. I should also note that making enemies of non-violent Islamists (e.g. MB), who as indicated earlier are prepared to accept political and religious pluralism, is somewhat self-defeating.

There is an essential difference between democracy and Islamism that will never be resolved. Democracy is based on the integrity and the free choice of the individual whereas Islamism is an ideology that strives to drive legitimacy from Islam. At some point of time, however, Islamists will be forced to reinterpret democracy like the Catholic Church which ended up accepting democratic institutions even though its own practices remained an oligarchy. Islamism (or Salafism) has come to pose a formidable challenge to Western and Middle Eastern governments alike. This challenge is also related to social peace. The most dangerous aspect of Islamism is that it is now political and transnational, mostly aided by the new media. Radical clerics (mainly Sunni) that support Islamism now compete with State sponsored religious institutions such as Al-Azhar in Egypt and the Nahdlatul Ulama networks in Indonesia to spread their violent and radical brand of Islam. In this context, I refer to Islamic Defenders' Front's (IDF) social media campaign to stir up vitriol and hatred aimed at ethnic Chinese community in Java.

In trying to democratise Arab governments the West should recognise that separation of religion from politics is not only impossible but also that there is a strong interconnection between the state and Islam in Muslim countries. The key factor in this is accommodation of Sharia law. For instance, in "Muslim countries" the school curriculum includes inescapable religious instructions in every grade about servile role of women in those societies, homophobia, the duty to defend Islam against the infidels and fight its enemies. However, it should be noted that not all Islamic countries impose Sharia totally, some of them just apply it to family law. Or as in Pakistan and Malaysia, as a mixture, with Western law predominant.

What is required in modern day politics in the Middle East is not the separation of politics from religion as understood by many politicians, including former PM Abbott. The much-anticipated reformation of Islam, as called for by Mr Abbott, will sadly and understandably not happen. The West wrongfully assumed that Islam will experience a religious reformation before it could embark on political democratisation. As it has turned out liberal Muslim intellectuals have had very little influence in either inspiring or directing the Arab uprisings. Several polls have shown that many Muslims are opposed to corrupt regimes, US policy in the Muslim world, Israel's treatment of Palestinians and the perceived discrimination of Muslims living in the West.

The Shia-Sunni divisions will continue for some time and the Sunnis will see the West's geo-strategic accommodation of Iran as essentially siding with Iran and propagating Shia Islam. At the geo-political and economic level, the bitter rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran will exacerbate societal conflict on the ground in many countries. The advent of ISIS has already exploited this acrimonious Shia-Sunni split. Many Islamists thoroughly despise the Shia, who they believe are a threat to the Sunni. Sunni Islam has entered a highly contentious age. The essential difference between Shia Islam and Sunni Islam is that in the former the system for obtaining authority is based upon a recognised and accepted hierarchy of religious education. Furthermore, Shia Islam, which is more complex, survives robustly in the world today, compared to Sunni Islam. The essential problem is that within Sunni Islam the new media has opened the way for any Sunni religious leader to lay claim to religious interpretation. This is in stark contrast to Shia Islam. Furthermore, Sunni societies feel threatened by the changed political dynamics. As states fail, many Sunnis, are trying to look to other kinds of social organisation – tribe, clan, religion, sect – for protection and representation. In most Sunni countries, particularly in Egypt and the Gulf, where Shia's are a minority, religious authorities announce from the pulpit that Shi'ism is a moral and security threat.

ISIS may be down but not out. Many Sunnis will continue to see ISIS as the only organisation that takes the battle to the growing Shia influence in the region. ISIS propagates a violent and almost messianic reading of the faith assuring followers and recruits that its version of Islam is the authentic one, untainted by corrupt politicians and a compliant and feckless religious establishment. Without having forces on the ground, it will be difficult to defeat ISIS, particularly its ability to influence and radicalise Muslim youth around the world. As it loses more territory in Syria and Iraq it will morph into a "virtual ISIS". The essential idea of the existence of a Caliphate will remain, and ISIS will continue to radicalise young Muslims in the West, a modus operandi that Al-Qaeda has adopted since the organisation was taken over by Al-Zawahiri.

We should also not overlook the fact that Al-Qaeda (AQ) is still a potent organisation and is still strong in the Maghreb, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. AQ has been quietly rebuilding itself, honing its capabilities in multiple theatres to stage its comeback. ISIS and AQ-linked groups are amongst the most powerful protagonists in many of the world's crisis hotspots and exploit divisions beyond

the Middle East, particularly in Pakistan, Nigeria and countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Both AQ (and ISIS) are united in doctrine, while they disagree at the leadership level. This includes, expelling Western countries (and Russia) from Muslim lands, destroying Israel, and denouncing local regimes as un-Islamic. They both aspire to revive the Caliphate.

The Shia-Sunni proxy wars will continue in the region contributing to its destabilisation. Syria (the Assad rump), Lebanon and Iraq will continue to come under Iranian influence. Saudi Arabia will prolong its war against the Houthis in Yemen, continue to fund the Sunni factions in Iraq and Lebanon and its army will continue to occupy Bahrain. In many respects Saudi-Iranian rivalry drives Sunni-Shia extremism, develops crisis across the region and is a grave threat to international peace. Other tensions in the Middle East include the enmity between Turkey and the Kurds.

Saudi Arabia has not been very enthusiastic in restraining this dangerous sectarianism. Mounting enmity between states (e.g. between Saudi Arabia and Iran) only serves to benefit the Salafists.

Today Saudi Arabia is the home of some of the most influential Salafist Sheikhs who have millions of followers and supporters on Twitter. They spread anti-Shia rhetoric and use the wars in Syria and Iraq to inspire their followers to fight against what they believe to be the growing Shia supremacy in the region, driven by Iran. One such example is Mohammed Al-Arefe. This is a prime example in which the Saudi Government gives space to the fermentation of sectarianism. A-Arefe is a popular Saudi cleric, part of the Saudi establishment. He is a Professor at King Saud University in Riyadh, the Imam of the King Fahd Academy of the Saudi Navy and a preacher at Al-Bawardy mosque in Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia should be urged to tone down this sectarianism and to seek a more constructive relationship with Shia Iran, even though this relationship will not be close or productive. Saudi Arabia should also be informed that it would be ill-advised for private Saudi money to spread the influence of Salafism through funding mosques and madrassas from London to Sydney that propagate the virulent Wahhabi variant of Islam, which encourages and nurtures extremists. This variant of Islam, et al, preaches a servile role of women in society, spread homophobic propaganda, and takes a hard line against apostasy and the opposes the existence of other religious faiths.

Events in Iraq and Syria will cross-infect each other. Unlike Yemen and Libya, Iraq and Syria are at the heart of the Middle East where it is impossible to move one piece of the political chessboard without impact on the others. Iraq borders 6 other states and Syria borders 5 other states. The lasting conflict in Syria and the possible dismemberment in Iraq will no doubt have a durable impact on borders and societies adjoining these 2 countries. The balkanisation of Syria and the potential dismemberment of Iraq will mean uncertain borders and societies. The potential for instability in Iraq and Syria has been established by the colonial powers themselves, with the French colonials dividing Syria (and Lebanon)

along religious and ethnic lines in the 1930s and the British combining the three Turkish Villayets to form the modern state of Iraq.

The Government and the Minister should finally recognise that Assad regime's victory in Aleppo has the potential to transform both the conflict in Syria and the balance of power in the region. This victory will most likely impose new security architecture in the region for several decades. This includes Lebanon, Syria (the Assad rump) and Iraq, all which now could be pro-Iranian regimes with substantial Russian support. What we will have here is a Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut (Hezbollah) axis with Russian support against mostly Sunni Gulf powers backed somewhat uneasily by the West. Russian involvement in Syria has changed the dynamics in the Middle East with its international support for the Assad regime (i.e. vetoing Security Council resolutions), supporting the Assad regime with its airpower and directing the war on the ground by providing military advisors and arms. It is left to be seen whether the level of support by the incoming Trump administration will accentuate this divide.

The political void in Syria and Iraq will also increase the competition between Iran and Turkey and this competition will escalate in northern Syria and in northern Iraq. Turkey will focus on establishing its sphere of influence and containing Kurdish separatism while Iran will try to defend its own sphere of influence by supporting the Shia government of Iraq, the Assad rump and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The US will continue to remain a formidable military presence in the region, despite the Trump rhetoric of cooperative isolationism and allies paying their own way on security. The US has close alliances with Israel, Turkey (despite the more authoritarian streak undertaken by Erdogan), Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. However, anti-Jihadist alliances tend to be flimsy as the US and Europe focus on threats to their own countries by Islamic terrorist while Arab countries are more concerned with their own political survival.

The war in Syria will not end with the fall of Aleppo, and the US has been left with much weaker options on the ground. What we have in Syria is essentially a stalemate, with the rebels now holding the North-Western province of Idlib, and Assad too weak to exert influence over the rest of the country, at least in the short to medium term. In the short term, Assad will try in addition to holding his territory in the north, will attempt to clear the rebels located between Aleppo and Damascus and around Damascus itself. It should be noted that the Syrian rebels will be relegated to a rural insurgency that will be more alienated and radicalised now that their foreign backers, the US, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are scaling back support. Unless invaded ISIS will continue to rule Raqqa and the surrounding areas of northern Syria. With ISIS relegated to Raqqa and under pressure from all sides, it is unlikely that ISIS will advance into Iraq's Shia and Kurdish heartland or mount serious assaults on Damascus and/or the Alawite regions. By the same token Assad, who is essentially a Secularist, should balance the competing interests of Shia-Iran and Secular-Russia if he is to maintain the Alawite stronghold in his part of the former Syria.

The Middle East will undergo the most radical shift in its borders since the imposition of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in the 1916. The recapture of Mosul and other towns and cities occupied by ISIS by the Iraqi Government will not end the bitter sectarian scars that the country has experienced since the US invasion. One of its first tasks for the Al-Abadi administration is the resolution of the Sunni problem. While the Al-Abadi administration runs a more inclusive administration than the previous Al-Maliki there are no cohesive and realistic plans in place for power sharing between the various warring communities. PM Al-Abadi is no match for the powerful forces that are attempting to retake Mosul, including his Shia Islamist Dawa party which is ultimately beholden to Iran. Now, the Iraqi government is pursuing, with support from Turkey, the US and Saudi Arabia a decentralisation policy with a Sunni majority enclave centred in Anbar province and extending this to Mosul after the city is liberated. This policy will be opposed by Iran and Russia. His efforts to restore power-sharing between Shia, Sunni and Kurds have so far failed. A sectarian political class, putting faction before state, has hollowed out Iraq into de facto partition. My own view is that decentralisation would need to be defined along administrative rather than sectarian lines.

The removal of ISIS from Iraq will not mark the end of Jihadism in Iraq. Disaffected Sunni elements formerly aligned with Saddam Hussain will continue operate as clandestine terrorist networks within Iraq. Even before the recapture of Mosul the various communities are preparing to carve out areas of Iraq. The Kurds will extend the KRG in areas that the Peshmerga has captured and hold on to Kirkuk. It is understood that Shia militias plan to annex greater portions of the Nineveh Governorate. The tenuous Sunni hold on Anbar will continue to create problems for the current Iraqi government.

Many analysts have predicted that situation in Iraq will deteriorate to point that the country will dismember, with the formation of a Shia-run Iraqi state, a Sunni rump in Anbar province and the creation of a Kurdistan with Erbil as its capital. What is mitigating against a united Iraq is that Turkey, the current Shia administration, Iran and the Shia militias and the Kurds (both the PKK and the KDP) are all determined to secure their own interests rather than support the national interests in Iraq. The current strategy in Iraq of destroying towns and cities to defeat ISIS in the hope that Sunni leaders can regain lost legitimacy though reconstruction is unlikely to meet long held Sunni grievances or create conditions that could forge a new political identity. The possible creation of a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq will provide a magnet for those Kurds in Turkey and parts of Syria that will want to their territories to be part of that state. Turkey will, however, resist any formation of a Kurdish state to prevent its own Kurdish population seeking statehood. This is something to watch as a more authoritarian Erdogan seeks to consolidate his hold on political and economic power in Turkey.

With respect to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict I refer to the following statement by Israeli settler Minister (Naftali Bennet) in the Nethanyahu government

“The era of the Palestinian state is over. Trump’s victory is an opportunity for Israel to immediately retract the notion of a Palestinian state in the centre of the country (the West Bank), which would hurt our security and just cause.....This is the position of the President-elect as written in his platform and this should be our policy, plain and simple”

The Palestine/Arab conflict remains unresolved and the new Trump administration has no interest in being impartial and fair minded in resolving this thorny issue. Unfortunately, the Obama administration tried to get parties to the table in 2014 failed because the issue of terms of reference for non-existent negotiations was rejected outright by both parties. The French initiative to hold a conference also failed resolutely. Resolution of this issue will do a lot to blunt the arguments of the radical jihadists and bring economic and political stability to the region. There is scope that intransigence on Israel’s part to genuinely negotiate an agreement with the PA will only serve to drive young and frustrated Palestinians into the arms of ISIS. As I said before ISIS thrives on frustration, alienation and disenchantment.

Let’s face it, the much vaunted Two-State solution is dead or on life support. In Israel, the state has systematically and legally reduced the occupied Arab population to misery and driving it a rage, where the only way the population sees any resolution or outcome is to resort to violence. Israel itself, is heading towards a demographic majority of ultra-orthodox and national religious Jews where the voices of liberals who want some resolution are drowned. The oleaginous Nethanyhu has over the last 4 years concentrated on his own survival rather than playing the role of statesman. He claims to be a “partner for peace” but is only playing for time to populate the West Bank with Jewish settlers to counter the demographic Palestinian time bomb. I understand that Trump’s nominated Ambassador to Israel has plans to move the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and there have been calls by former PM Abbott to follow US actions. An essentially meaningless gesture but it would probably provoke a third Intifada, adding to the misery and mayhem in the Middle East.

I am sure your diplomats in Tel-Aviv and Ramallah have told you that the number of settlers on the West Bank have by now reached a critical mass. No Israeli party in their right mind in Israel will evacuate them and without the courage to evacuate them there will be no viable Palestinian State. The beauty of the two-state solution was that it guaranteed justice to each side and a state for each nation. But Israel, under Nethanyahu, did its best to destroy this initiative via the settlement process. Israel now has a choice, Apartheid state or a Democratic state? Unfortunately, Israel is now laying the ideological and legal foundations for the creation of an Apartheid state, which is unfortunately supported by the current Australian Government. Previous Liberal Governments took an even-handed approach to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict but since John Howard this even-handed approach has been discarded, partly due to the flow of Australian Jewish money into the coffers of the Liberal Party and pressures from the Right-wing of the Liberal Party.

It was disappointing that the current Australian Foreign Minister sought to not support the Western consensus (including the former Obama administration) on the damage the building of settlements are doing to the peace process and is still naively insisting that both parties resort to the now failed and doomed two-state solution. Australia has not done itself any favours by taking this position and, while this issue may tear the ALP apart, it does not do anything to enhance and promote relations with the Arab and Islamic world. Be mindful that this statement will be remembered by the Arab countries and supporting third world countries in the UN, as Australia will have no prospects whatever of being elected to the future rotating post on the UN Security Council. New Zealand showed a lot more courage and fortitude in supporting the UN resolution during its tenure in its rotating seat in the UNSC.

Domestically, Australia may have to deal with the scourge of **Hansonism**. This will be very challenging and fraught with danger. Her anti-Islam message, however ignorant and ill-founded, will have some resonance abroad and Australian diplomats should be prepared to counter the accusations, perceived or otherwise, of anti-Islamic bias in Australian political system. I should note, however, that her anti-Islam messages has not had much resonance around the world as her anti-Asian message had in the 1990s.

One of the arguments used against Australia will be the way Australia counter's anti-radicalism domestically. Now, Australia has only formulated a one-track policy to deal with radical jihadists, the security strategy. But there needs to be a more concerted advocacy and advisory strategy. Any such strategy should be aimed at prevention on the one hand by eliminating the sources of extremism through "neutralising" their understanding of Sharia, though use of fast track dialogue, bridge building with communities and confrontation to encourage those who sympathise with the terrorists to question and alter their views. This latter approach should use all means of community, including the internet, discuss ideas and convince home grown terrorists to follow the right path. Locking up Australian jihadists in maximum security jails will only harden and embolden their radicalised view against the West society and values.

Australia should avoid getting trapped in the terminology that suggests that there is an essential religious or civilizational conflict and/or that Islam requires a reformation. Similarly, Australia is not in the best position to develop a counter narrative on religion. This will be counter-productive and seen by many Arab and non-Arab Islamic government's as an essentially hostile act. Australian diplomats should eschew trying to interpreting Islam. While these religious issues are critical to any understanding of Islam, they are not ones that Western Governments have the tools and capability to address directly. Attempts (particularly in relation to Indonesia) to find the right religious actors to engage with is likely to draw Australia not only into religious controversies where they have no role whatsoever but also be drawn into partisan political and religious struggles that they do not fully understand.

Western governments are widely seen in the Muslim world as not merely secular but also actively hostile to Islam. Addressing that perception are the realities that

underlie it and are useful task that will fall with the purview of Australian diplomats based in Islamic countries. Our diplomats will need a more sophisticated understanding of religious issues to be informed of more productive political and security approaches in Muslim countries. However, this should be not seen as a step towards endorsing any theological, jurisprudential or religious position or towards selecting actions to carry and promote a message that is in alignment with the man and women on the street in Muslim countries.

In concluding I should note that Australia adopt the following nuanced foreign policy changes:

- Not blindly follow US foreign policy approaches in the Middle East given the changed dynamics;
- Take a more even handed stance on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in an endeavour to temper the strident pro-Israeli line taken by the Trump administration;
- Adopt a carrot and stick, rather than just a stick, approach to countering domestic Jihad;
- Accept the current situation in Syria and reduce its anti-Assad rhetoric;
- Encourage the Iraqi Government to be more inclusive in dealing with its Sunni community.