

In wake of hostage crisis, Australian Muslims say no backlash to faith

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December 16, 2014

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Members of Australia's Muslim community were among thousands of people who laid flowers and other tributes at a makeshift memorial in downtown Sydney after a violent siege left two hostages and the gunman dead.

Muslim leaders said they were confident there would be no violent backlash against the community after details emerged that the lone hostage taker, Man Haron Monis, was on bail for a string of violent offenses including being an accessory to the murder of his ex-wife.

"The action of this man is the action of a madman and should not and is not reflected by the attitude among Australian Muslim community," Jamal Rifi, a Muslim doctor who has worked to create better relations between Muslims and the wider community, told SBS news.

As the 16-hour siege unfolded on Monday (December 15), Monis forced hostages to hold a flag against the cafe's window with a general expression of Islamic faith, the *Shahada*, printed on it: "There is no God but God and Mohammed is the prophet of God." Although the *Shahada* is a general tenet of the faith, it has been co-opted by various jihadist groups.

Monis also forced hostages to use social media to relay a number of demands including a live on-air broadcast with Abbott, a public declaration that this was an act of terror from IS, and to promulgate the image of the flag of the so-called Islamic State.

Special forces stormed the building shortly after 2 a.m. local time on Tuesday. One of the 17 hostages, Lindt cafe manager Tori Johnson, reportedly died while trying to wrestle the gun from Monis. The other hostage who died was Katrina Dawson, a Sydney lawyer.

Local Muslim leaders were swift to condemn the hostage taking. Ibrahim Abu Mohamed, Australia's grand mufti, said the Islamic community was devastated by the incident.

"The Grand Mufti and the Australian National Imams Council condemn this criminal act unequivocally and reiterate that such actions are denounced in part and in whole in Islam," he said in a statement.

Monis, a self-proclaimed Shi'a cleric, arrived in Australia from Iran in 1996 and was granted political asylum in 2001. He was known to security agencies for his extremist views. Two weeks ago he proclaimed on a radical website that he had converted to Sunni Islam and was supporting IS. Prior to that he was convicted for sending abusive letters to families of deceased Australian soldiers. Still, he was not on a national terrorist watch list.

New South Wales Attorney General Brad Hazzard said authorities were now investigating the man's past and why he was free to enter the Lindt Cafe in the heart of Sydney December 15, armed with a weapon.

"How can someone who has had such a long and checkered history, not be on the appropriate watch lists, and how can someone like that be entirely at large in the community?" Prime Minister Tony Abbott asked.

Despite reports of sporadic verbal attacks against Muslims in the aftermath of the siege, Silma Ihram of the Australia Muslim Women's Association said she was confident Australians would come together in the wake of tragedy.

"We really hope that Australians will stand strong together and look after each other, and that everybody will work towards preventing this kind of thing from happening again," she said.

Thousands of people adopted the social media message #illridewithyou and offered to meet Australian Muslims at their local train and subway stations and accompany them on their journey in case they are targeted as a result of the hostage taking.

While such initiatives have been broadly welcomed by Muslims, and Australians in general, experts say more still needs to be done to prevent homegrown terrorism inspired by global jihadi groups—though the number of those joining IS is believed to be less than 100. More than 70 Australians are believed to be fighting for Islamic

militants in Iraq and Syria and a similar number have had their passports cancelled to prevent them from traveling to conflict zones in the Middle East.

Peter Jennings, director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, said that law enforcement alone is not enough.

“What is necessary to deal with this self-radicalization phenomena is to have a sensible look at whether there is a possibility to involve schools, universities, mental health institutions in trying to identify more clearly what are the character traits that give rise to someone moving along a spectrum of increasing radicalization,” he said. “This is a much more difficult task. It is something that involves communities and a great deal of thinking about how people operate in social systems.”