

Religious leaders reject negativity directed at Australian Muslims



Michael Koziol, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 2014



Sheikh Yahya Safi, the Reverend Andrew Dutney and Rabbi Zalman Kastel at the Lakemba Mosque. Photo: Michael Koziol

Religious leaders of multiple faiths gathered at Lakemba Mosque on Friday to express solidarity with Islam and reject what they called a "barrage of negativity" directed at Australian Muslims.

Local imam Sheikh Yahya Safi was joined by Rabbi Zalman Kastel, Father Patrick McInerney and the Reverend Andrew Dutney, president of the Uniting Church. They called upon political leaders to avoid language and policies that could marginalise or vilify the Muslim community.

"Demonising Muslims is wrong on so many levels," Rabbi Kastel said. "We want everyone to feel that they belong here, that they are valued members of – yes – the same team."



Religious leaders unfurl their sign calling for unity. Photo: Michael Koziol

Outside the mosque, the leaders unveiled a banner headlined "We'll love Muslims 100 years", in a format copied from News Corp-owned *The Weekend Australian*. It was a pointed reference to that newspaper's provocative August 9 front page "We'll fight Islam 100 years".

The Abbott government has foreshadowed a suite of beefed-up counter-terrorism measures in light of a number of Australians having travelled abroad to fight with the Islamic State.

Sheikh Yahya opposed the government's plan to make it a criminal offence to travel to designated areas without a "legitimate purpose".

"We said clearly we need to have freedom in this country," Sheikh Yahya said.

"We are against violence, we are against terrorism. Let them, the ones who make mistakes, let him pay the price."

Reverend Dutney said he was confident the Australian community would continue to celebrate its cultural and religious diversity, but was concerned to see international events "spill back" into domestic politics. He argued the government's focus on counter-terrorism created a false impression that Australians were in danger and would sour community relations.

"When people feel that there's a greater risk, they're more likely to turn their neighbour into an enemy," he said.

"I've never quite warmed to the term 'Team Australia', I'm not entirely sure what it means. But I think what we're doing [today] is at least consistent with it."