

Speech by

**The Hon Alexander Downer MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs**

To the

Centre for Muslim States and Societies, UWA

**Interfaith Dialogue
The Australian Approach**

Perth 21 November 2005

(Check Against Delivery)

Introduction

Thank you Samina Yasmeen for inviting me to speak at this function today.

I'd like to acknowledge Dr Ameer Ali, President of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils.

And Margaret Quirk, MP for Girrawheen.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Since the end of the Cold War, academics and commentators, politicians and statesmen, have been debating what the future would hold.

What would be the next big contest?

Francis Fukayama argued in 1989 that we had reached “the end of history” – that Western liberal democracy had won the battle with other ideologies and would reign supreme.

But these principles are by no means universally applied – although I strongly believe that they are universally applicable.

Samuel Huntington argued in 1993 that the future promised a “clash of civilisations.”

He thought conflict would be between the “West” and the “non-West” and conflict would be between cultures, and not about ideology.

I don't think that is correct either.

Clearly the key battle of this era is with global terrorism.

I would argue that this is not a battle of culture, nor religion – even though terrorists may attempt to couch their efforts in this way.

It's a battle of ideology, just as the Cold War was about ideology.

It is important to understand this.

It's important to make the distinction – the distinction between ideology and religion.

Because this distinction opens up the possibility of different religious communities buttressing themselves against the terrorist ideology.

And the way to do this is through dialogue and the building of mutual understanding, trust and respect.

Terrorist Ideology

Before we get onto interfaith dialogue, I need to say a few words about terrorist ideology.

Let's be crystal clear about what the terrorists are seeking.

Let's strip away the rhetoric and focus on the type of world they want to create.

Their goal is to create a new extremist Caliphate in the Muslim world – a Taliban style theocracy.

In South-East Asia they want to drive out western influence and establish a fundamentalist regime across Indonesia, Malaysia, Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines.

The same for the Middle-East – a Caliphate stretching from the Caucuses to North Africa.

They want to get rid of democracy in these countries and replace it with a puritanical regime that denies individual freedoms.

Nothing complicated about that ideology.

A perverted interpretation of Islamic law, no tolerance of diversity.

We've seen it before in totalitarian regimes around the world and through history.

These regimes enforce obedience through fear. A fear society not a free society.

And why do terrorists so actively resist democratic processes in places like Iraq?

Because they know that when people are able to choose freely their leaders they will not opt for a totalitarian state.

We see in Indonesia the outcome of genuinely free elections. It is the world's largest Muslim nation, and when Indonesians are able to choose freely they support the secular state.

Look also at Jordan.

People are protesting in the streets following the bombings there.

Another example that the terrorists do not have the support of the Muslim public.

A survey by Pew Research Centre earlier this year found that in most countries, public support for terrorism was falling...

... as was confidence in Osama bin Laden.

Fewer people think suicide bombings against civilians are justified in defence of Islam.

Vision of Freedom – Australian Interfaith Relations

Well, my vision is very different from this.

My vision involves freedom, mutual respect, tolerance and understanding.

But on these issues I can tell you there is strong support on all sides of Australian politics.

We reject the rhetoric of hatred and mistrust and look to promote mutual respect and understanding.

This is what interfaith dialogue is all about.

It strives to broaden, deepen relations among faiths, communities and societies that seek peace and stability.

In a spirit of openness, participants can converse frankly and freely, even tackling sensitive issues such as the role of education and religious conversions.

And I think we have a proud record in Australia of achieving interfaith harmony.

Since Muslims first arrived in this country in my home state of South Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century, they have made a valuable contribution to our society.

Now there are nearly 300,000 Muslims in Australia and Islam and Buddhism are the two fastest growing religions.

We vigorously respect people's rights to maintain and express their cultures and beliefs, within a framework of a commitment to Australia.

We do expect everybody to have an overriding loyalty to Australia and to respect our basic structures and principals as contained in the constitution.

I think those values are the very reason many people come to Australia.

The response of religious leaders to terrorist outrages has been very comforting.

Muslim leaders in Australia have been forthright in their condemnation of terrorism.

They point out that Islam is a religion of peace and these acts have no basis in the Prophet Mohammad's teachings.

Christian leaders made a point of going to the Lakemba Mosque in Sydney just after the September 11 attacks.

Christian leaders praying with the Muslim community to demonstrate solidarity – very positive.

This sent a strong message to the community – don't blame all Muslims for the acts of an evil few.

And I congratulate Dr Ameer Ali and the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils for taking the initiative on Interfaith dialogue.

I spoke at the Federation's "Peace and Harmony Conference" in early October.

Tragically, while delegates from the Asia Pacific region were gathering to forge stronger ties, terrorists that the very same weekend detonated suicide bombs, again targeting tourists in Bali.

The conference that weekend condemned the atrocities in Bali.

Muslim leaders, Jewish Leaders, Christian Leaders from Australia, Malaysia, Singapore...

... all came out and sent a clear message to their communities that violent extremism is something all people of goodwill and faith must resist.

The Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews provides another positive example.

Since 2003 the three Abrahamic faiths have been working together to promote understanding.

They try to reduce misunderstanding – for example by explaining to each other some core concepts of their faith.

They get young people together for camps to experience each other's religion and come to a deeper understanding.

At the political level the Government is also working to build understanding.

In August the Prime Minister met with local Muslim leaders.

He wanted to highlight the values we all share.

They talked about how Muslim leaders could work to prevent the promotion of intolerance and violence in this country.

Out of the summit came the Muslim Community Reference Group which is working with the Government on employment and educational opportunities for Muslim youth.

We're looking for advice on how to provide positive values at schools and in mosques.

We don't want to see an occurrence here of the riots in France where disaffected unemployed youth took out their frustrations on the streets of Paris.

Regional initiatives

In our part of the world, a process of interfaith dialogue is taking shape.

I was proud to co-host with my Indonesian counterpart Hassan Wirajuda the Bali meeting last December that brought together religious and community leaders from thirteen countries.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono opened the conference – reflecting the importance of the event.

It was an enormously positive experience for those involved.

There are many lessons that can be learnt from the experiences of each country.

For example, the Philippines group spoke about Catholic NGO's doing relief work in Mindanao. A great example of interfaith cooperation at the grass roots level.

Singapore shared its experience over many years with building a tolerant multi-racial society.

A conclusion of the conference was that interfaith dialogue is an ongoing process.

So we are looking forward to the next meeting in the Philippines early next year.

Another conclusion was that education is one of the keys to success.

As a Government, we are promoting education and people-to-people links as a way to interfaith understanding in Australia and Asia.

We have an exchange program between Muslims in Southern Thailand and Australian Muslims.

The exchange program has brought teachers and academics to Australia to look at how Muslim schools manage to teach an Islamic curriculum in conjunction with the Australian curriculum.

The Australia-Indonesia Institute has an exchange program that brings Indonesian Muslim leaders here and Australian Muslims to Indonesia.

These programs help to dispel many myths that exist in each country.

Another aim is to strengthen the Islamic education system, by bringing Indonesian teachers and academics to Australia to do research on inter-faith understanding.

INTRA-faith Dialogue

Ladies and gentlemen,

The key to winning the battle of ideas, to exposing the terrorists' bankrupt ideology, will be the efforts of mainstream Muslims.

INTRA-faith dialogue is central to this battle of ideas.

Increasingly, the Muslim world is working to counter extremist interpretations of their faith.

King Abdullah II of Jordan has shown courage and leadership in his efforts to promote INTRAfaith dialogue within Islam.

The "Amman Message" issued in 2004...

... which promotes tolerance and humanity and rejects extremisms as a deviation of Islamic beliefs...

... is proving to be an important foundation for King Abdullah's ongoing dialogue with Muslim leaders and scholars around the world.

He convened the first International Islamic Conference in July 2005 that brought together Islam's eight main schools of religious law.

For the first time in history, consensus was reached on critical issues such as the illegitimacy of extremist fatwas justifying terrorism...

... and Muslim leaders condemned the practice known as 'takfir' – calling others apostates – which has been used by extremists to justify violence against other Muslims.

Other fronts in the battle

Now I wish that dialogue alone would be enough to defeat terrorism.

Unfortunately it is not.

Islamic values, Islamic concepts of law, Islamic banking – all of them could be debated and decided upon through dialogue and democratic processes.

But terrorists don't respect the rules.

They are not inhibited by what we see as appropriate legal or moral practice.

So dialogue is not enough, and therefore we need to confront terrorists on three further fronts.

First, military action is sometimes required.

It was required in Afghanistan to dislodge Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in response to the horror of September 11.

And whatever you think about the Iraq war, most people acknowledge that military action is required now to protect the emerging democracy in Iraq from the small and violent minority.

Second, regional and international cooperation is vital to disrupt terrorist networks.

The Government has committed \$250 million to regional counter-terrorism activities and these are meeting with some success.

Cooperation with the Indonesian police is resulting in many arrests and convictions.

Law enforcement bodies share information and training programs are strengthening police capabilities.

For example, Australia and Indonesia jointly run the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation, which has already trained close to 400 police officers from the region since it was established last year.

Third, we have been forced to strengthen domestic legislation to give police sufficient powers to prevent a terrorist attack in Australia.

We don't lightly introduce curbs on civil liberties, but I think people should clearly understand that these laws will apply in only a very narrow range of cases.

They will be closely supervised and they are a proportionate response to a very real threat – as has been highlighted by the recent arrests in Melbourne and Sydney.

And I emphasise whenever I have the opportunity – these laws are not targeted at Muslims.

They are targeted at a particular type of behaviour.

They are designed to prevent an atrocity.

And any atrocity will affect us all – Muslims as much as others.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have to tell you that I'm always asking myself whether we are doing enough to prevent terrorism in this country and in our part of the world.

And, just as importantly, is the Muslim community doing enough to show the rest of the community that they reject violence as a way to achieve an ideological outcome?

Do they reject the clash of religions rhetoric of the militant jihadists?

As leaders, political and religious, the answer is that we can always do more.

Interfaith dialogue is a great platform for sending these messages...

... for emphasising that people of faith have an obligation to argue for tolerance and peace.

The Koran encourages tolerance in many verses.

It states to Jews and Christians alike:

“God is our Lord and your Lord. We have our deeds and you have your deeds. There is no argument between you and us.” (42:15)

And while we may not be able to change the minds of die-hard extremists...

... I believe that we have the chance to make a difference with those who may be tempted by the ideology and the perverted utopia that the extremists present.

And that is why a Centre such as the Centre for Muslim States and Societies can make a very valuable contribution.

People-to-people links are critical and the academic community has a great role to play.

Government can only facilitate dialogue, we can't direct it.

Civil society needs to take it forward.

Mainstream Muslims are much more likely to have an effect on extremists, and potential extremists than people of other faiths.

And mainstream Muslims, I think, have a responsibility to challenge extremist interpretations of Islam.

Denying the problem is not an option.

Samina, thank you again for having me here today.

I wish you the best in the endeavours of the Centre.

And I look forward to an ongoing dialogue on these issues.

Thank you.