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Certifying imams as a security measure: An imam's response

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The morning after the shooting on Parliament Hill, I found myself in downtown Ottawa for a television interview. I looked at the Peace Tower, a symbol that has given me a feeling of gentleness and comfort since childhood, and wondered how the tragedy that unfolded at that very tower would change my country.

I pointed out to reporters near the War Memorial that even with a heavy police presence, no one had stopped me – a brown man with a big bushy beard wearing traditional clothing – to ask me who I was, or why I was there.

This is what makes Canada great. I sincerely, but perhaps foolishly, hoped our legislators would ensure a balance between civil liberties and security in response to the shooting.

Last week's Senate interim report on national security and defence includes some impractical, and even unconstitutional, recommendations. One proposal is for the federal government to "work with the provinces and the Muslim communities to investigate the options that are available for the training and

certification of imams in Canada.”

Violent radicalization of some young Canadian Muslims is an issue that is sensationalized disproportionately. There are approximately one million Canadian Muslims. Authorities estimate that 130 have taken part in terrorism-related activities abroad, while 80 have returned. This represents 0.013 per cent of the Canadian Muslim population – based on numbers from Public Safety Canada, the percentage of Canadians who are members of youth gangs is higher.

Nonetheless, even one Canadian Muslim becoming a violent radical is one too many. Muslim communities are aware of this problem; many imams and community leaders have been speaking for years against terrorism and violent radicalization. Clearly, more needs to be done – but we need help.

Imams, who are usually hired by mosque boards, are often overworked and underpaid. They are expected to preach, lead daily prayers, teach children, conduct outreach, do interfaith work, handle media requests, engage youth and offer religious guidance. In short, it's a tough job.

Although no standard certification process exists, most mosques require imams to be trained in matters of faith, have memorized the Koran, be fluent in English and be familiar with Canadian culture. In the past, most imams were trained overseas, but that is changing. A desire is growing for imams to present faith in a way that is relevant to the Canadian context. The overwhelming majority of Muslim communities have no appetite for imams or preachers who spew hate and harbour animosity, let alone encourage violence.

The ethnic and cultural diversity of Muslims worldwide is reflected in Canada's Muslim communities. As in any other group, there is a wide spectrum of religious views and adherence, often shaped by cultural background. Consequently, some are more open to integration than others. The best way to help those who lag is engagement, which fosters understanding and respect. Alienation leads to the opposite. For the few who harbour animosity, we are ready to co-operate with authorities to ensure that they are not breaking any laws.

Regardless of background, all Canadian imams agree that attacking Canada and its citizens is Islamically forbidden, as is joining terrorist groups such as the Islamic State, whose depraved actions are so unequivocally un-Islamic that supporting them is widely seen as a sign of religious ignorance. If a self-proclaimed imam preaches the opposite, he is an outlier who holds no influence in the mainstream Muslim community. Parliamentarians who have trouble believing this should speak to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and the RCMP, who appear to have a good grasp of who's who in Canadian Muslim communities.

The Senate report comes across as patronizing to minority groups. This is not helpful. The best way forward is for parliamentarians to engage with Canadian Muslims through meetings and get their input on how to address violent radicalization. The Canadian Council of Imams, local imam groups and mosques look forward to hosting anyone who is interested in a good chat over coffee or dinner. Let's work together to make our country safer, fairer and more prosperous for all.

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