

Battling mistrust

Cops must work with community to thwart terror

Last month, we all thanked the RCMP — and rightly so.

In a race against time, the Mounties followed up on a tip received from the FBI and stopped Aaron Driver in his tracks as he attempted to leave his Strathroy home with a bomb.

This dramatic take-down of the ISIS sympathiser and terror suspect reminded many Canadians that we are not immune from threats of terrorism.

It should also help us appreciate the efforts of thousands of police officers in this country who risk their lives every day to live up to their oath to serve and protect.

Unfortunately, serious mistakes by some members of Canadian police forces are fuelling the mistrust toward



Guest Columnist

law-enforcement officials that is seeping over the border from the United States, following repeated killings of unarmed black men there.

The recent reprimand of the RCMP by a B.C. Supreme Court judge in an entrapment case, the sentencing of Const. James Forcillo in Toronto in the killing of Sammy Yatim, the bloody death of Abdirahman Abdi

in Ottawa and the practice of carding are just a few of the controversies reinforcing stereotypes of police officers as being manipulative, brutal and racist.

We all know that such stereotyping is wrong.

Yet, it's a reality that those who are stereotyped have to deal with on a regular basis.

Canadian Muslims know all too well how it feels to be stereotyped.

For years, we have felt the need to distance ourselves from the actions of those who claim to commit criminal acts of violence in the name of Islam by issuing statements and expressing our outrage at the hijacking of our faith.

Over the years, concern for

the well-being of our country and our fellow citizens, along with frustration over having our faith misrepresented by fanatics, has also led to widespread recognition within our community that violent radicalization is a real and serious problem.

The problem is serious not because it is widespread — people like Driver consist of a tiny minority that has been shunned by the overwhelming majority of Canadian Muslims.

The problem is serious due to the harmful and negative impact terrorist acts have on victims and on society.

Even one terrorist incident is one too many.

Although the mainstream

Canadian Muslim community has very little influence, if any, on violently radicalized individuals who usually live on the fringes of our community and society, we are trying to do our part by working with partners in government, law enforcement, social services and education to help address the root causes that lead to violent radicalization.

The tip that foiled the Via Rail terror plot in 2013 came from a Canadian imam.

Our experiences have shown that the best way to overcome public mistrust is to go through the difficult process of self-reflection and introspection, to have serious and some times challenging

discussions within one's own ranks and to speak publicly with honesty and compassion instead of opting for silence and denial.

Outspoken imams and community leaders (such as myself) are sometimes criticized for speaking out — not because the critics support terrorism — but because they feel such actions unfairly portray Muslims as being collectively responsible for the actions of a few misguided individuals over whom they have no control.

While this is a valid point, it is impossible for me to remain silent when my faith is misused to cause harm to others through actions which are legally and religiously prohibited.

Our faith teaches us to help others, whether they are the oppressed or the oppressor — in the latter case by helping them desist from their oppression.

I don't have any control over violently radicalized individuals, but the least I can do is speak out against their crimes and correct their misrepresentation of my faith.

We've also learned that shattering stereotypes is a collective effort in which all members of the community have a role to play by focusing on having positive interactions, at every opportunity.

Whether it's a smile, a helping hand or a friendly chat, practising our faith's teachings of kindness and cheerfulness help challenge stereotypes on an individual level.

The Canadian Muslim community is looking forward to continuing to build on positive relationships with government agencies and police forces as we continue to battle violent radicalization.

While a community like ours lacks the organizational structure of police forces, we hope our experiences in battling stereotypes and building public trust will assist our partners looking to do the same.

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From raising voter turnout to raising flags

MARYAM SHAH

TORONTO — A grassroots Canadian-Muslim organization that focused on raising voter turnout during the 2015 federal election has now turned its sights to raising Canadian flags in front of mosques around the country.

Afternoon prayers at a Thornhill mosque Friday were followed by the anthem and the raising of a Canadian flag, as part of a flag-raising campaign by Canadian-Muslim Vote.

The campaign hopes to see flags raised at mosques around Canada in the leadup to the country's 150th birthday celebrations next July.

The organization said the first mosque in Canada was built in 1938 in Edmonton.

Muneza Sheikh, spokesman for the non-partisan Canadian-Muslim Vote, said the group wants

to send a message to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

"Your Canadian identity and your identity as a Muslim is something that can actually co-exist harmoniously, contrary to what a lot of people have put out there in the media," she said.

The organization originally came to the forefront last year to get out the vote in the Muslim community, where voter turnout was as low as 30%-40% in the 2011 federal election, Sheikh said.

For the 2015 federal election, the group estimates 79% of Canadian Muslims in some ridings.

Now, the group wants to continue promoting civic engagement within the community.

"And then outside of the Muslim community, it's about dispelling some of the myths and some of the aggressive propagation of negative stereotypes around Muslims in general," Sheikh said.



A Canadian flag flies outside the Jaffari Community Centre in Toronto yesterday. A grassroots Canadian-Muslim organization has its sights set on raising Canadian flags in front of mosques around the country.

VERONICA HENRI