The impact of 9/11 on Australian Muslim civil society organisations

Nora Amath

Abstract
As a consequence of 9/11, Muslims living in Western countries faced complex and major challenges that Muslim civil society organisations (MCSOs) then had to confront and provide appropriate responses to. Studies focusing on the responses of Muslim organisations and individuals to 9/11 revealed that many MCSOs were ‘obligated’ to participate and engage in three main activities: interfaith dialogue, media engagement and consultation with all levels of government. What is lacking in the literature is reflection on the impact these engagements have had on the organisations a decade after 9/11. Using descriptive phenomenology inquiry as the research approach, this study is based on 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 MCSO actors in Australia. The key themes that emerged from these interviews about the impact 9/11 had on MCSOs were: a shift in focus; mistrust and criticism from within the Muslim community; being ill-equipped to deal with the frenzy; exhaustion; resilience; creating a more open, transparent community; emphasising pluralism and universal values; and asserting the Australian Muslim identity. These findings have also revealed how Islam has manifested within these contexts.

Keywords: 9/11, interfaith dialogue, Islam, Muslim, phenomenology

Introduction
As a consequence of 9/11, Muslims living in Western countries faced complex and major challenges. In Australia, research shows that many Australian Muslims struggled with prejudice, discrimination and vilification in the post-9/11 context.1 As a result, many did not feel accepted as Australians and frequently had to prove their loyalty to Australia (Deen 2003). Others retreated from society, as they felt unwanted, insecure and fearful about their safety (Mason 2004). The backlash faced by Muslims in Australia saw Muslim civil society organisations (MCSOs) having to provide urgent yet strategic responses to assist both the Muslim community and the wider community to build better relations. The scholarly literature on MCSOs’ responses to 9/11 identifies three main forms of interaction with the wider society: interfaith dialogue, media engagement and consultation with government.

One of the most common responses to 9/11 was the need for MCSOs to engage in interfaith dialogue (Bullock 2005; Khan 2002; McGinty 2012), a practice that, as several scholars note, has not always been prominent in Muslim culture. Eyadat (2012) observes that for over a thousand years dialogue has been...
relatively absent from Muslim practice. If there was any type of Muslim dialogue with non-Muslims, Takim (2004) states, it was more about preaching and converting or debating and refuting the belief of the other. But in recent times, particularly after 9/11, interfaith dialogue has become a necessary intellectual interaction and engagement to facilitate better intercommunity relationships (Salem 2010; Barkdull et al. 2011).

MCSOs not only participated in interfaith dialogues, but they were also instrumental in establishing a number of initiatives globally post-9/11. Some of the better-known initiatives include ‘The Amman Message’, ‘A Common Word between Us and You’, ‘Better Understanding for a Better World’, and the Interfaith Youth Core. The latter two stress not only interfaith knowledge and dialogue, but also interfaith service and action.

Although a small number of Australian Muslim initiatives and organisations—such as Affinity Intercultural Foundation and the Australian Intercultural Society—were dedicated to interfaith activities prior to 9/11, the tragedy provided the much-needed impetus for more MCSOs’ leaders and activists to become engaged in interfaith activities. MCSOs across Australia, including mosques, participated in interfaith exchanges and forums, and organised open mosque days and visits to each other’s places of worship (Abdalla 2010; Yasmeen 2007). Deen (2003, p. 387) observes:

Almost overnight Muslims had become the most unpopular group in Australian society and they were coming to an understanding that they needed to emphasise to fellow citizens a sense of shared values. They needed deeper and more regular dialogue instead of the occasional fending off of criticism.

Like other Muslims living as minorities post-9/11, Australian Muslims engaged in interfaith initiatives as an intellectual way to dispel misconceptions about Muslims and Islam, supported by like-minded people. Moreover, because these dialogues were designed to create bridges of understanding for better religious coexistence, they provided increased visibility for Muslims in the Australian religious milieu.

Another disruption to MCSOs’ normal activities was the constant need for media engagement. Even a decade after 9/11, MCSO leaders have had to be available for interviews about not only the basics of Islam, but also issues such as human rights, gender relations, politics, the economy and other social issues. MCSO leaders have had to be confident, charismatic and articulate voices for Islam—a role they did not necessarily train for. They have had to publicly and repeatedly distance themselves from the ‘ubiquitous’ extremist, terrorist, jihadist, fundamentalist and militant Muslim.

In America, Muslim public relations campaigns specifically related to 9/11 appeared nationally on television and radio, in newspapers and magazines, and on billboards, declaring Muslim patriotism and loyalty to America (Alsultany 2007). For example, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the largest Muslim civil rights advocacy group in the US, ran the billboard campaign ‘I am an American Muslim’ immediately after 9/11; more recently, it showcased American
Muslims—an NYPD sergeant, a human rights activist, an athlete, an academic, as well as an attorney. These 15-second, ‘I am an American. I am a Muslim’ ads were played every hour for 18 hours a day for three weeks. CAIR-NY director at the time Faiza Ali stated in a press release:

This public service advertisement features ordinary American Muslims whose everyday lives are dedicated to building community and serving the country. This initiative is part of our ongoing effort to ensure that a fair and accurate portrayal of Islam and Muslims is presented to the American public.

(CAIR 2009)

While there is ample research on Muslims and media engagement in other Western countries, the Australian experience is largely an unexplored area. Dreher’s (2010) work, however, is one of the few investigating this phenomenon. She outlines the Muslim community media interventions developed post-9/11, which include ‘media monitoring and complaints’, ‘media-skills training’, ‘media advocacy’, ‘training journalists’, ‘building relationships’, ‘comedy’ and ‘media production’. Dreher (ibid., p. 196) states that the active participation and engagement of Australian Muslims in the media has resulted in ‘an expanded media agenda and shifting representations of Muslim Australians and Muslim communities’ as well as ‘considerable changes and improvements in news media reporting since 2001’. Nevertheless, she cautions that these media interventions are not sufficient to dramatically change media conventions and agendas, and remarks that there are still many challenges that need to be addressed.

Literature on Muslims in the West post-9/11 also concentrates on Muslim consultation and engagement with the different levels of government (Choudhury 2011; Huda 2006; Spalek and Imtoual 2007; Yousif 2005). Much of the scholarship observes that because of the challenges faced by Western Muslims post-9/11, many MCSOs were keen to engage with the government. Huda (2006, p. 189) argues that in America ‘greater surveillance ... [and] discriminatory statements against Islam have created instant challenges for American Muslims to develop coalitions, and partnerships with law enforcement agencies, politicians, and other organisations’. Commenting on the Canadian experience, Yousif (2005) adds that Muslim engagement with all levels of government is positive, as it has allowed for greater networking and lobbying on issues of importance for Muslims; it has also encouraged Muslims to enter the political scene themselves as candidates.

In the Australian context, one of the first major political engagements was the dialogue between members of the Muslim Community Reference Group (MCRG) and the Federal Government. Following this, each state and territory government established engagement with their own Muslim Reference Group. It is worth noting that many of these engagements were specifically related to counter-terrorism strategies; this is problematic on many levels, particularly since the agenda, terms of reference and even participants were set and chosen by the government (Spalek & Imtoual 2007).
Aside from these broad engagements, individual MCSOs also increased their political engagement in the post-9/11 context. Yasmeen (2007, p. 41) observes that quite a number of Muslim women’s organisations in Australia expanded their agenda and began to engage in ‘political activism and advocacy’. In particular, she cites one of the peak Muslim women’s organisations, where, after 9/11, Sydney-based Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia (MWNNA) had ‘representing the views of Muslim women to the federal, state and local government and to government agencies throughout Australia’ as their second most important agenda item, after networking.

While there is a significant body of scholarly literature exploring the discursive engagement of Muslims with the wider society post-9/11—interfaith dialogue, media engagement, and consultation with government—there is a notable absence in the literature investigating the impact these engagements have had on the organisations. The lack of study in this area does not match the importance of findings nor reflect the major implications the findings will have on intercommunity relations in Australia, nor does it reveal how Islam has manifested a decade after 9/11. Moreover, the findings from this research will help to better inform researchers, community developers and policymakers in their understanding of social mobilisation and change at the local level. It will also provide a more nuanced, comprehensive and holistic approach to studying Muslim communities in Australia, as well as an understanding of the longer-term impact of 9/11.

**Methods**

**The Australian Muslim context**

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census in 2011, there are 476,291 Muslims in Australia. While this is a marked increase of 69 per cent since 2001, the Census shows that Muslims make up only 2.2 per cent of the population, making Muslims the fourth-largest religious group in Australia. Despite the relatively small population, there are nearly 450 MCSOs in Australia dedicated to charity work, women’s empowerment, youth advocacy, religious education, mental health, civil and human rights advocacy, environmental sustainability, interfaith understanding, as well as providing for the social, recreational and cultural needs of Muslims in the West.

**Sample**

After identifying and mapping all possible MCSOs in Australia (through internet searches, Muslim newspapers in Australia, key contacts in all states and territories) into an ACESS database, 15 participants were purposively sampled, based on their qualities, experience and relevance to the research; each participant was interviewed twice. There were six participants from NSW, six from Victoria and three from Queensland. In total, 30 face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted across three cities: Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney.
Table 1: Participant details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mustafa Ally</td>
<td>Founder and President</td>
<td>Crescents of Brisbane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galila Abdel-Salam</td>
<td>Founder and Manager</td>
<td>Islamic Women’s Association of Queensland (IWAQ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salam El-Merebi</td>
<td>Founder and President</td>
<td>Al-Nisa Youth Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saara Sabbagh</td>
<td>Founder and President</td>
<td>Benevolence Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasneem Chopra</td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>Australian Muslim Women’s Centre for Human Rights (AMWCH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabah Hakim</td>
<td>Founder and President</td>
<td>Australian MADE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omer Atilla</td>
<td>Executive Advisor</td>
<td>Australian Intercultural Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerim Buday</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Australian Islamic Social Association (AISA) Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeynep Sertel</td>
<td>Founder and President</td>
<td>Sareera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zia Ahmed</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Islamic Foundation for Education and Welfare (IFEW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanan Dover</td>
<td>Founder and President</td>
<td>Mission of Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zubeda Raihman</td>
<td>Treasurer</td>
<td>Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia (MWNNA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maha Abdo</td>
<td>Executive Officer</td>
<td>United Muslim Women Association (MWA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuranda Seyit</td>
<td>Founder and Director</td>
<td>Forum on Australia’s Islamic Relations (FAIR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elias Attia</td>
<td>Public Officer</td>
<td>Islamic Society of UNSW (ISOC)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research design

Using phenomenology as the epistemology and descriptive phenomenology inquiry as the research approach, this study aims to gain a detailed and holistic understanding of the experience of MCSO actors in Australia post-9/11. At the core of phenomenology lies the attempt to explore and understand the nature and meaning of the phenomena. Unlike the positivist research paradigm, which ‘reduces the study of the human world to something that can be measured’ and thus ‘precludes researchers from focusing on the complexity and ambiguity of the world of human beings’ (Gibson & Hanes 2003, pp. 183–4), applied phenomenology is a research approach that directly aims to explore and gain that in-depth understanding of the complexities of human experience. This is an
import characteristic, as research approaches to the study of civil society organisations and their actors need to be able to respond to the rapid and complex changes occurring in the field. Gibson and Hanes (2003, p. 183) argue that because the phenomenological approach ‘has complexity as one of its foundational attributes … it is not constrained by limitations of traditional methods that tend to ignore the complex, evolutionary and systemic attributes of organisational context’.

**Theoretical approach**

Most literature relating to phenomenology discourages the presupposition of any theories or preconceived knowledge of the phenomenon, allowing the investigation to transcend subjectivity, and thus prevent any biases or premature conclusions the researcher may hold. Methodologists (like Giorgi [2008]) who employ this research paradigm also argue that it results in more scientifically sound research.

I approached this from an intermediate position. Consistent with this principle, no specific hypotheses or theories were developed prior to or during the engagement with the participants. However, in accordance with academic inquiry and for the specific purposes of this paper, it was necessary to initially explore the literature specifically relevant to the impact of 9/11 on Muslims in the West. This enabled the current investigation to be ‘grounded’ in a field (or fields) of knowledge, allowing for broad and specific research questions to be generated. Moreover, as Seidman (2006, p. 38) asserts, it is imperative to ‘read enough to be thoughtful and intelligent about the context and history of the topic’. Thus, I do not believe that ‘grounding’ the research in current theories negates Husserl’s (1963) idea of transcendental subjectivity; rather, I argue that it contributes to the extant knowledge. With this consideration, this study is grounded in current theoretical debates from sociology of religion and Islamic studies.

**Procedure**

The phenomenological, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted at a place of the participants’ choosing in their home city during the period of August 2011 until June 2012 in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. Two interviews of 90 minutes each were conducted with each participant over a series of two weeks to account for idiosyncratic days and for internal consistency. This also allowed for more in-depth follow-up. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

There are a number of different procedures in approaching a descriptive phenomenological inquiry, but most researchers agree on some essentials: 1) bracketing⁴, 2) analysing⁴, 3) intuiting and 4) describing (van Manen 1990; Moustakas 1994; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). It is important to note that while these steps are distinct, hierarchical components of the inquiry, the overall investigation requires the researcher to blend all four steps at each moment of the study. This allows the investigation to ‘produce a true understanding of the phenomenon of the study’ (Wojnar & Swanson 2007, p. 175).
Results

A total of 30 verbatim transcripts of 90 minutes each were analysed in accordance with the analysis process. The key themes that emerged about the impact 9/11 had on MCSOs can be divided into two categories: negative impacts and positive impacts. The negative impacts were: shift in focus, mistrust and criticism from within the Muslim community, being ill-equipped to deal with the frenzy and exhaustion. The positive impacts that emerged were: resilience; an opportunity to create a more open, transparent community; an emphasis on pluralism and universal values; and the ability to assert the Australian Muslim identity.

Negative impacts

Theme 1: ‘We are always in damage control’—Shift in focus
Responding to the backlash of 9/11 meant that many MCSOs had to shift their focus from being mainly internal to mainly external. Maha Abdo, executive director of the United Muslim Women Association (MWA) in Sydney stated, ‘the dynamics changed for us and how we were applying our resources’. In particular, Abdo spoke in detail about having to focus on security for their events post-9/11 and how it is a focus even a decade later. She explained:

When we do an annual leadership camp for girls, we would be very concerned about their safety and security for them, but before then it wasn’t really on our radar … every year we have to be concerned about where we would go with them—that it’s safe and it’s not open. It [9/11] created that awareness that wasn’t there before.

Another long-time MCSO actor, Tasneem Chopra, chairperson of the Australian Muslim Women’s Centre for Human Rights (AMWCH) in Melbourne, spoke about how the shift in focus meant that they could not devote all of their energy to doing what they were originally set up to do: serve the needs of Muslim women and their families. As a result of 9/11, they had to extend their services to providing appropriate and strategic responses. She stated that they ‘had to invest so much energy into damage control that [they] were not able to actively put [their] energies into positive stories and promote the success of the community’. Chopra consistently described the main shift from their normal activities as having to always be in ‘damage control’. Other MCSO actors interviewed voiced the same pervading concern. A number of them, like Salam El-Merebi, founder and president of the Al-Nisa Youth Group, talked about how difficult the shift of focus was for their organisation because ‘literally, committee members are all volunteers’.

Theme 2: ‘Creating the other within the community’—Mistrust and criticism from within the Muslim community
In this theme the MCSO actors spoke about the deep sense of mistrust they received from their clients and the Muslim community after 9/11. In particular, the concerns focused on whether the government-funded organisations or those...
that consulted and engaged heavily with the government post-9/11 were working for the government, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) or the Australian Federal Police; or whether these organisations were ‘spies’, ‘moles’ or even ‘sellouts’. This mistrust seemed to be aimed specifically at Muslim women’s organisations. Chopra described the situation:

... after September 11 came, there was the mistrust towards the Muslim community in general, but suddenly there was a perception that our organisation was part of a policing apparatus ... [The Muslim community] would presume we were part of the police, not even the government but the police. If you have money from the government you have money from the police; you are spying ... some rudimentary discrimination we were subjected to by the community because of their lack of knowledge.

The ramifications from that mistrust meant that ‘it undermined a lot of work [they] did’. Chopra said they first noticed it when ‘there was a decrease in women’s participation in projects, and programs’ where ‘numbers would go from being full-house to base’. She stated that they had to then bring their programs and activities to their clients rather than wait for their clients to come to them. It has taken AMWCH five to six years to ‘rebuild that trust and rapport with their clients’.

Abdo talked about the pain that the division and internal mistrust created for MWA:

... it has changed us, a lot more than we actually think on the surface. Really it has changed the social make-up of our community, it has created a lot of them and us ... We are becoming so quick to judge and I think that’s coming from being victimised.

MCSO actors said that at times they too were criticised for their interfaith engagement post-9/11. They were called ‘sellouts’ or were told they ‘were comprising [their] faith’ or ‘watering down’ Islam. Saara SABBagh, founder and president of Benevolence Australia, stated unreservedly, ‘many Muslims have said to us that we’re selling out and I am happy with that’.

Theme 3: ‘Like chooks with our heads cut off’—Ill-equipped to deal with the frenzy

Another significant theme focused on being ill-equipped to deal with the frenzy post-9/11. Kuranda Seyit, founder and director of Forum on Australia’s Islamic Relations (FAIR), explained that FAIR was established to deal specifically with the backlash of 9/11. He discussed:

There were a lot of issues arising and it was very evident that the Muslim community was not ready for it. They weren’t prepared; they didn’t envisage the type of backlash that was going to come out of September 11. I don’t think anybody did really, but if you compare it with the way America dealt with it or maybe the UK, Australia was really unprepared and really didn’t have the
personnel, the expertise, or the resources to deal with it, because they hadn’t been preparing for it, they hadn't been building institutions or cultivating a spokesperson, media strategies and so forth.

Abdo echoed the sentiments and said:

I see the weakness was in our community's response to the events because we were being put in a place of defending ourselves and I didn’t feel that we should be defending. Why, if I have not committed a crime? Why should I be defending something I had not done? We would go around like chooks with our heads cut off. In the end I would come back home and think: is it that bad, these events? Are they actually as bad as they are saying? These events have actually brought us out more, where we are now so exposed, but we weren’t ready.

A decade later, MCSO actors still feel like they are not equipped to deal fully with the aftermath of 9/11. Seyit explained that FAIR had to move on, away from engaging with the media, because they still ‘don’t have the manpower to deal with it all’.

Theme 4: ‘The 6 am phone calls’—Exhaustion

For MCSOs the engagements proved to be exhausting. Organisations now had to do more than what they were resourced to do, or work beyond set aims and objectives. Abdo spoke about exhaustion post-9/11:

It was hard … It was very difficult and we felt like we were the meat in the sandwich … We were continuously having to justify the actions of Muslims and Islam, and identify the difference between culture and religious practices … With the Muslim community, we had to bear the brunt of women who couldn’t bear to leave the home out of fear and anxiety.

Chopra explained the reasons for the exhaustion:

I think it exhausts us because we end up diverting so much attention to remedial representation and not enough to proactive. I think we will get to do more proactive when the world calms down a bit, and we can actually use our energy on being positive.

However, Chopra and other MCSO actors conceded that although the countless interfaith dialogues, media engagements, and consultations and engagement with government bodies were ‘exhausting’, they were ‘necessary’. El-Merebi, spoke honestly about wanting to walk away from her position with the Al-Nisa Youth Group a few times. She explained, ‘we are all volunteers … we had to deal with everything and it shouldn’t be like that’. El-Merebi further elaborated that the exhaustion ‘impacted on us in every way, not just physically, emotionally, psychologically; we’re affected in every way possible’.
Chopra, in particular, stated that even a decade after 9/11 she still gets calls from the media soliciting her opinion about this matter or that. She hoped that in a few years she would ‘not get any 6 am calls from the media’.

**Positive Impacts**

**Theme 5: ‘Just see them as challenges’—Resilience**
All of the MCSO actors interviewed spoke about the challenges faced by their organisations after 9/11. Abdo remembered:

> If you were walking, you were spat at; it was a really intense time. Mothers were saying it’s not safe because they all felt there was [a] negative vibe in the air and people were picking on Muslim.

However, Abdo explained that even a decade after 9/11, with the challenges still facing her organisation, they simply ‘don’t give up’. She expounded:

> You have all those incidents—we call them timeslots—that remind you of certain things that happened. There is good and not so good, and I am an optimist—I see that we learn from everything that comes our way. We are very strong; we are very resilient.

Mustafa Ally, founder and president of Crescents of Brisbane, also spoke about meeting the challenges post-9/11 with a resilient spirit:

> Take them on as [a] challenge, as a way of making us better human beings … You know the stuff that goes on television and it’s totally a lie and you know it beats you up, … it shouldn’t … you should do something about it.

Galila Abdel-Salam, manager of the Islamic Women’s Association of Queensland (IWAQ), stated that although the events of 9/11 still impact on their organisation and ‘it’s never been easy’, IWAQ has always responded to and met those challenges with a ‘resilient spirit and a will to overcome’ them.

**Theme 6: ‘We are here but we are not against anyone’—Creating a more open, transparent community**
Another theme from the interviews revealed that MCSOs’ involvement in the post-9/11 engagements created a more open, transparent community. Ally explained that it was necessary

> … to try and get the [Muslim] community to be more open, to be more transparent, to open doors at mosque and not just ourselves when we’re talking to people, so that the impression of us as a closed community, that we’re fermenting some sort of plot to change the world—take over the world—isn’t real.

Kerim Buday, president of Australian Islamic Social Association (AISA) Youth, also said his organisation’s engagements with the wider Australian community
have ‘let the wider community understand that we are here but we are not against anyone. We are Australian Muslims and what we do is this; there is no harm behind it’. When asked what he meant by being a more transparent community, he said:

I mean in terms of being more open and inviting, not to say that wasn’t the case previously; it’s not like the mosque doors were closed, but it’s definitely more emphasised now. I come back to that event we had, the street iftars [breaking the fast] … that’s something we probably wouldn’t have thought of fifteen years ago—this Garden of Paradise event grant received by the government to help prepare the mosaics outside the mosque. I struggle to think of things like this happening back in the 90s, but a lot of Muslim organisations are starting to receive government grants to organise these events and it’s actually a great thing because it has formed closer ties.

Like Buday, Zubdeda Raihman, treasurer and spokesperson for the Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia (MWNNA), stated that it was imperative for the Muslim community to be more inviting and open the doors of the mosque for all to attend. She said, ‘You know they thought the mosque was the place that people do political activities. When they come to the mosque they see it’s so spiritual, so peaceful’.

Zeynep Sertel, founder and president of Sareera, also insisted that her organisation’s involvement in post-9/11 engagements has helped create a more open community. Like other MCSO actors interviewed, Sertel insisted that creating a more open, transparent community is still as relevant now as it was then. Moreover, she added, the openness needs to not just be at mosques, Islamic events or even homes, but also ‘through manners and behaviours and dealings with people on a daily basis’.

**Theme 7: ‘God’s plan is diversity’—Emphasising pluralism and universal values**

The participants interviewed stated that post-9/11 their organisations heavily stressed aspects of pluralism and universal values—Islamic elements they considered to be completely compatible with Western values. In particular, a number of participants cited verses in the Quran to justify the emphasis. Abdo asserted:

And Allah talks to all humankind in that verse, not ‘Oh you Muslims’ but ‘you humankind, we have created you from a male and a female, made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another’. Early generations of Muslims in Australia survived and it’s because that has been their application.

Ally remarked that after 9/11 things dramatically changed:

There was an almost sort of arrogance and haughtiness about who we were as Muslims and suddenly it was like, ‘oh hang on, we do need to talk to other
people and they do need to be respected; they also have religious beliefs we should respect.’

In the post-9/11 era, there was much discussion in Australian society about the compatibility of Australian and Islamic values. Without hesitation, Abdo emphatically stated that these ‘Australian values are very much in line with Islamic values’. Rahiman argued that, after 9/11, values of ‘justice and non-destruction’ had to be stressed. She continued to also cite diversity and equality as major themes to emphasise, noting that, ‘if you look at all the religions, you will find that we are so similar … all the divine messages have a central theme and the theme is humanity … God’s plan is diversity’.

Hanan Dover, founder and president of Mission of Hope, spoke about the need for pluralism in terms of ‘collective self’. She elaborated on the importance of ‘looking after one another, not judging one another’. As evidence, she used the Quranic verse, ‘If you save a life, it’s as if you save the whole of humanity’. She continued, stating:

…it’s not about preaching Islam; it’s about preaching universal values across all systems … the principle of love for your brother, is love for yourself … that’s not just an Islamic principle; it’s a universal one.

Dover also explained that ‘the concept of justice is really important’.

Omer Atilla, executive advisor for the Australian Intercultural Society, also spoke about universal values and explained how important they were for the organisation:

… there is a thing called universal human values and no matter what part of the world you go, they do not change—do not steal—like in the Ten Commandments—do not kill, be good to your neighbour. You will see these in Christianity, Judaism, any religion, any community you go to. These are basically Islamic values and also fundamental values, which you find in all human values as well.

Atilla further stated there are ‘additional things, finer details that encompass Islamic values’, but in the end, he argued, these ‘Islamic values’ only help ‘improve Australian values and it will add to them’. This sentiment was echoed by all MCSO actors interviewed.

**Theme 8: ‘Islam is like the water stream’—Asserting the Australian Muslim identity**

One of the pervading clustered themes from the lived experiences of MCSO actors was the positioning of themselves in a post-9/11 world as Australian Muslims. For many of them, there was not even a question as to what and who they were and how they identified their organisation. Elias Attia, public officer of the Islamic Society of UNSW stated very clearly, ‘We are a community of Australians who also identify as belonging to the Muslim community’. Sabbagh deeply reflected about this in her role as an MCSO actor:
… [I had to] dig deep down inside of me and question, well, who I am and what my work is doing in the context of an Australian Muslim. I don’t think I had questioned myself as an Australian Muslim before that. Before that I was just working in the Muslim community.

For other MCSO actors, like Dover, there was no confusion about identity. She stated in very strong terms:

We are from Australia. We haven’t been exposed to anything else, so what we are doing is trying to marry our Islamic understanding of lifestyle, trying to adapt to living in Australia … There is no confusion; we don’t want identity confusion.

Dover also discussed the concept of integration, ‘… so we integrate … as long as it’s not a contradiction to the religion’. Quite a number of other MCSO actors used the term ‘integrate’ or ‘integration’. For instance, El-Merebi stated that although she did not believe assimilation was needed, it was important to integrate. She argued:

… we are a part of Australian society and we should be integrating … it’s part of being a Muslim. You have to work with your community, your Unmmah [nation or community] and the Australian public is part of community. It is part of the Unmmah.

Buday also stated that his organisation was not interested in facilitating assimilation but rather ‘something between integration and assimilation’. He explained:

It’s about knowing your role as a Muslim with an ethnic background, and being able to adapt that to Australian conditions. What a lot of that comes down to is just being a modern Muslim.

For Buday, being a modern Muslim goes hand in hand with being a ‘model citizen’—post-9/11, AISA Youth encourages young men to model this behaviour. He reflected further, ‘not only are they going to be doing their religion and their culture proud but they will also be doing Australia proud’.

Abdo also asserted that MWA did not encourage total assimilation. She described the integration of Islam into Australia and explained that ‘Islam can take the shape of Australia … we are all integrating of course. If we haven’t, then we wouldn’t be where we are. I don’t want to assimilate. I don’t want to melt’. She provided an Islamic reference to the concept of integration:

Islam has always blended into society. We know that Islam is like the water stream—it takes the shape of the vessel that it gets put into. It doesn’t change the taste or the principle of it; just like the water, it will always be water. In a blue cup, a green cup, a glass cup it will always be water. Even in a bottle it’s still the same as in a cup—that’s the essence of Islam.
Chopra, throughout the interview viewed the organisation she chairs as being part of the ‘Australian Islam’ landscape. When asked to elaborate, she explained, ‘it’s the Muslim who identifies as Australian and Muslim without compromising’.

Ally stated that it was essential for the relationship between Muslims and the wider Australian society to be reciprocal, particularly a decade on from 9/11. He repeatedly used the term ‘equal footing’ to emphasise how he felt Muslims should be received in the wider Australian community. He said that it was important for Crescents of Brisbane to help

... give a sense of self-worth to the community, self-confidence and a kind of feeling of belonging to the society, that they are part and parcel of it, not here for the handout—we’re not asking the government to give us things we don’t deserve. We’re getting on doing things, we run schools … and taking the load off the government by doing some of the stuff we do.

All MCSO actors interviewed stressed that it was important for their organisations to assist Australian Muslims in positioning, identifying and, therefore, integrating themselves in Australian society. As noted, however, they did not feel that Muslims needed to ‘assimilate’ or ‘compromise their Islamic values’ to be an Australian. A number of MCSO actors also defined the Australian Muslim identity as ‘fluid’. As Sabbagh explained, ‘we are still creating it. I think it will be quite nuanced and I don’t know what that will look like’. However, MCSO actors argued that at the heart of an Australian Muslim identity are the necessary values of good citizenry.

Discussion

Leaders of MCSOs in Australia were forced to take more visible and vocal roles as voices and ambassadors of Australian Islam in the post-9/11 era; they had to engage in interfaith dialogue, represent Muslims in the media and consult and work with all levels of government. The key themes that emerged from this investigation revealed that these engagements had negative and positive impacts on MCSOs, even a decade after 9/11. It must be noted, however, that the bulk of the interviews, which were guided by the participants, focused on the positive impacts of these engagements. Indeed, as evident from the findings, there were not too many significant statements under the negative impacts key themes. However, one surprising negative impact was that for a number of these MCSOs, they had to deal with mistrust not only from outside the Muslim community, but also within it. In listening to the participants discuss this, it was obvious that this was a very painful experience and one that they did not anticipate. The MCSO actors dealt not only with the ‘double whammy’ impact of 9/11 as discussed by Barkdull et al. (2011)—dealing with a tragic and traumatic event as well as dealing with the backlash from non-Muslims—but they also had to deal with the extra backlash from within the Muslim community, their own clients. This resulted in a ‘triple whammy’ experience, which was greatly distressing for the actors. This
finding has not been reflected elsewhere in the literature to yield a comparative discussion and needs further research to understand the implications.

Yet, despite all the negativity, exhaustion, mistrust from within their own community, and limited capacity and resources available to deal with both the backlash and increasing Islamophobia post-9/11, this study found that, overall, there was an energised sense of positivity and optimism. Indeed, many of the interviewers referred to the post-9/11 milieu as not just a challenge, but also an opportunity to reframe the negative. Bearing the brunt of discrimination, fear and sometimes even hatred, MCSO actors further reported having a resilient spirit; they continued reaching out to the wider community while also becoming more introspective about their own faith and how it informed their organisation’s ethos, vision and practice. This finding is consistent with Barkdull et al.’s (2011) research investigating the experiences of Muslims post-9/11 in four Western countries. They report that their participants all echoed stories of resilience, expressed through acts such as finding solace through their faith; having a visible, public Muslim identity; resisting oppression; as well as actively engaging in community and bridge-building.

For many, this resilient spirit has inspired their organisation to think deeply, reflect and resolve how Islam informs their ethos, vision and practice in the public sphere. As many of the MCSO actors were ‘forced’ regularly to respond to issues on the compatibility of Western values and Islamic values, this was a crucial process. The MCSO actors reported, without hesitation, that their organisations emphasised the universal values of justice, fairness, pluralism, equality, love and compassion as espoused in the Quran and Prophetic Traditions. Interestingly, when asked how they approach their understanding of the Quran and Prophetic Traditions, no MCSO actor interviewed stated that their organisation approached their understanding from a literalist perspective. Some stated that their understanding of the Quran was contextualist, while a few discussed the maqasid [higher objectives] or universal approach.6 Quite a number of them listed the values or principles (maqasid) which informed their organisations. For these actors, framing the ethos, vision, objectives and practice of their organisation from a maqasid perspective allowed them to be flexible, fluid, universal and holistic in their service to not only the Muslim community, but also the wider Australian community.

The maqasid approach is also reflected strongly in relation to the issue of identity. All interviewees impressed upon the fact that, under their leadership, their organisations reflected an Australian Islamic identity and not, for instance, a Pakistani, Arab, Indonesian or Somalian one. While the formulation of this identity is a complex, ongoing and nuanced dialogue with their clients, others in the Muslim community and the wider Australian community, the actors felt that the universal values (maqasid) espoused and emphasised in their organisations were already reflected in Australian values. Accordingly, there was no need to dichotomise their identity.

Williams (2011, p. 128) explains that like American Islam or British Islam, Australian Islam ‘evokes a religiously authentic and culturally legitimate faith that
exists relatively unproblematically within its societal context, ... as part of the established religious mosaic’. Importantly, Williams observes that it is not just about Muslims negotiating and understanding their identity in their Western society; rather, it involves Muslims firmly laying their foundations in their society, making claims and demanding respect as equal citizens, as voiced by a number of participants in this study. Moreover, as a number of interviewed MCSO actors stated, the diverse, cultural identifications of Islam in its host societies are not new. Because Islam is not bound by a clergy or a centralised mosque association, it has ‘both influenced and been influenced by the place to which [it was] subsequently taken’ (Leonard 2003, p. 148). This is particularly evident in the West. As Patel (2007, p. 8) reflects, the identities of Muslims within Western nations are indeed ‘mutually enriching, rather than mutually exclusive’.

A decade after 9/11—Australian Muslim identity in the multicultural public sphere

A decade after 9/11, MCSOs have not only remained resilient, but are also more sophisticated, strategic and selective in how they engage. Dreher (2010), in her research on community media interventions, found that many Muslims became frustrated because they did not see a shift in the news framing of Muslims and Islam, despite all their efforts to train and educate journalists on pertinent issues related to their faith. Many involved in the process felt that they had to ‘merely respond to journalists’ predetermined questions and storylines’ (Dreher 2010, p. 202). That is not necessarily the case anymore. In April 2012 a popular Australian current affairs program on SBS, Insight, had invited representatives from the Muslim community to participate on a program to discuss polygamy. A few participants stated that immediately after 9/11 they would have participated because they felt like they had to get their voices across. Ten years later, however, the majority of organisations that were approached refused to participate on a program discussing such a sensational topic. Dover explained that leaders have become ‘smarter’ and more strategic about dealing with non-issues:

A lot of media-savvy people in our community … put together a letter [to the producer of Insight] to say that it’s [polygamy] not an important topic, so we don’t understand why you are doing it … Why is it given national focus?

While Dreher (2010) has noted that Muslim media advocates have found it difficult to set or influence the media agenda, Muslim leaders are optimistic. Mariam Veiszadeh of Australian Islamic Voice and a signatory of the protest letter to SBS wrote in Sultana’s Dream, ‘We are trying desperately as a community to influence how we are portrayed in mainstream media’. Encouraged by the Insight campaign, Veiszadeh and other MCSO leaders believe that future successful outcomes, including the ability to influence and set media agendas, can only be achieved if Muslims ‘stand together’ and provide a united voice.

Ten years after 9/11 a number of the organisations interviewed stated that after a decade of ‘forced’ external engagement, they were turning their attention back to their main priority: serving the internal needs of their community. Abdo explained
that so much emphasis went to dealing with the external backlash that they lost sight of the needs of the community. Seyit agreed and argued that refocusing all of their energy and resources internally, particularly in terms of capacity-building and nurturing youth leadership, will allow them to create a more harmonious relationship externally. He reasoned:

… well, it applies to Muslims only (the refocusing of activities) but its endgame is really creating harmony; so it’s really about engagement and dialogue and inclusivity and, I suppose really, integration. Its process involves working with Muslims and giving them the capacity and skills to engage and be effective in the wider community.

The participants reflected on this issue and many suggested that perhaps it was the events of 9/11 that prompted Australian Muslims to become more engaged in all areas of the public sphere, thus encouraging them to be more assertive about their Australian identity. Their stories echo research conducted by Cainkar (2009) and Bilici (2011). Other scholars like Williams (2011, p. 135) note that it is this particular social and physical space, that is, the intersection of civil society and identity, which allows Muslims to ‘express their fidelity to their religious tradition as well as work out the interpretations of that faith that allow them to live smoothly’ in their society.

**Conclusion**

In this study, MCSO actors revealed that the post-9/11 engagements have had both negative and positive impacts, namely: shift in focus, mistrust and criticism from the Muslim community, being ill-equipped to deal with the frenzy, and exhaustion; as well as resilience, the establishment of a more open community, and an emphasis on universal values and pluralism. This investigation has also demonstrated that more than ten years after 9/11, MCSOs have helped Australian Muslims negotiate their place and identity in the Australian public space. Indeed, it was emphasised by all MCSO actors that the Australia Muslim identity is one of fluidity and adaptation in accordance with the sociopolitical landscape. Further research will be needed to explore whether this development is indicative of a transition from multiculturalism to interculturalism, as can be seen already occurring in many parts of Europe (Emerson 2011; Bezunartea 2011).

**Notes**

1. In NSW, 400 reports were made alleging physical and verbal assaults on Australian Muslims (Legge 2002). Vilification post-9/11 was reported as 20 times higher in Victoria than in 2000 (Jabbour 2002).

2. Demographers note that the increase in population is due to recent increased immigration patterns and high birth rates.

3. The largest religious group is Christianity (61.1 per cent) followed by no religion (22.3 per cent) and then Buddhism (2.5 per cent).

4. This step is also referred to as the ‘epoche’ whereby the researcher sets aside all biases, presumptions, and pre-conclusions about the phenomena; of concern here is the
participant’s lived experience of the phenomena, not the researcher’s preconceived ideas. Phenomenologists recommend recording these preconceived ideas as memos or filed notes, which can be used later on in the describing stage.

5 Descriptive phenomenological inquiry involves analysing the interviews that have been transcribed verbatim; this process is also referred to by many as the process of explication. There are a number of methods that can be used. A detailed guide for this process is offered by Collaizzi (1978, pp. 48–71) (and modified by Moustakas [1994]), which many phenomenologists still employ. It involves a few readings of the verbatim transcript to acquire an overall sense of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon, then extracting significant statements. From these statements, meanings are formulated and categorised into clusters of themes that are common to the participants. Next, these themes are analysed and discussed in the context of existing literature. The final step involves a detailed description of the universal essence of the phenomena under study.

6 The maqasid, or higher objective approach, has also been observed by many Islamic organisations in Muslim countries (see, for instance, Rane [2010]).

References
Deen, H. (2003), Caravanserai, Fremantle, Western Australia, Fremantle Arts Council Press.


Author notes
Nora Amath is completing her PhD at Griffith University, looking at how Muslim civil society organisations have responded to the sociopolitical context in Australia. She is highly active in human rights advocacy and community work, including interfaith dialogue, and currently chairs AMARAH (Australian Muslim Advocates for the Rights of All Humanity) and Believing Women for a Culture of Peace. Nora has received many awards for her efforts. In 2006 she received the prestigious award of Australian Muslim Woman of the Year. In 2007 and again in 2013, she received the Australia Day Community Awards. Nora can be contacted at nora.amath@griffithedu.au.