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Paris attacks: Ingrained culture of complaint in Muslim community

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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke Source: Supplied

After last week's police raids in Saint-Denis (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/paris-terror-attacks/paris-attacks-paris-mastermind-abdelhamid-abaaoud-killed-in-raids/story-fnyenpo3-1227616134458?sv=d6a7afcc8eff6164a2f7a66ee029a2cf>), **just outside Paris, and in the Brussels district of Molenbeek** (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/paris-terror-attacks/paris-attacks-how-brussels-has-become-a-jihadi-hotbed/story-fnyenpo3-1227610573652?sv=22da8a10994b89c93c53a37d57411be6>), **it is only natural for**

Australians to wonder whether it could happen here.

Yes, Saint-Denis and Molenbeek have very high levels of migrant concentration; but those levels are only slightly greater than Sydney's Lakemba, Auburn and Wiley Park, or Melbourne's Dandenong South, Dallas and Meadow Heights.

Indeed, the degree to which foreign-born Australians are geographically concentrated is high by international standards. Berlin, for example, is the city with the greatest share of Germany's Turkish residents; but only 7 per cent of the country's Turkish population lives there. In contrast, just two suburbs — Auburn in Sydney and Hume in Melbourne — are home to nearly a third of Australia's Turks.

With similarly high levels of geographical concentration for Lebanese Muslims, it is unsurprising that Islamists have found it relatively easy to melt into the background, while reaching out to their target population.

And as radicalisation into jihad overwhelmingly occurs through direct personal relationships, it is also unsurprising that a few suburbs have generated the bulk of Australia's disproportionate contribution to the foreign fighters in Syria and almost all our cases of homegrown terrorism.

To say that is not to suggest that areas such as Lakemba or Dandenong South suffer social problems anywhere near as acute as those of Saint-Denis or Molenbeek.

After all, in the highly regulated labour markets of France and Belgium, where restrictions on the right to hire and fire create steep barriers between insiders and outsiders, nearly a quarter of all young second generation migrants are unemployed.

Moreover, 23 per cent of migrant households in France, and 27 per cent of migrant households in Belgium, are in the lowest income decile, while 40 per cent of Belgian migrant families and just over 30 per cent of French have incomes which are less than 60 per cent of the national median.

And the disadvantage also extends to education, with PISA reading scores for second generation migrants in Belgium and France that are significantly below those for non-migrant children, even taking socio-economic status into account.

The Australian results are starkly different. Unemployment rates are lower for young second generation migrants than they are for the native-born offspring of native-born parents. As for incomes, migrant families are slightly over-represented in the lowest income decile, but the gap is small and often transient.

And second generation migrants in Australia not only perform better on the PISA assessment than their native counterparts, but do so to an increasing extent, with the scores of 15-year-old locals falling by 19 points since 2003, while those of the children of the foreign-born have risen by 12 points.

Of course, those results mask significant differences between Australia's ethnic communities and between humanitarian and skilled migrants. For example, unemployment rates among Muslims are some 4 percentage points higher than the national average, while close to 50 per

cent of working age Muslims are not in the labour force, compared to around a third of the working age population as a whole. Even so, on virtually all indicators, our outcomes, compared to Europe's, are stellar.

But it would be foolish to draw much comfort from that fact. There is, in effect, no reason to believe social disadvantage explains terrorism or that its absence prevents it.

For example, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the presumed planner of the attacks in Paris, came from a prosperous family and attended one of Brussels's best private schools. And broader statistical analyses, such as a 2015 RAND report on Islamist radicalisation, find that "the profile of European second generation extremists goes against the stereotype of economically marginalised Muslims".

Rather, RAND's conclusions, like those of most studies, echo the views of Markus Kerber, the former planning director of the German Interior Ministry, that far from being poor, the typical Islamist is a "young man of middle-class origin who believes he deserves better".

Social realities therefore count for far less than the sense of grievance; and on that score, unfortunately, we have plenty to worry about.

It is, for instance, striking that a recent OECD survey, while highlighting just how good our performance is, reports that the proportion of migrants in Australia who believe they suffer from discrimination on racial grounds is more than twice that in Belgium and well above that in France. And it also finds, as did a detailed study of Sydney's Lebanese Muslim community, that better educated migrants are more dissatisfied than their less educated counterparts.

There is, in other words, an entrenched culture of complaint; and never was it more sharply on display than in the statement **the Grand Mufti of Australia made** (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/paris-terror-attacks/paris-attacks-grand-mufti-must-condemn-paris-killings-say-libs/story-fnyenpo3-1227612989844?sv=f19a89f3f926cfe203d0df85240cf710>) after the Paris attacks.

No doubt, that culture partly reflects broader attitudes in the Islamic world, with the Pew Research Centre finding that more than half the Muslims it polled believe the West is primarily to blame for the lack of prosperity in Muslim nations. But it has been worsened by the willingness of our political leaders to pander to the disaffected, instead of taking them to task.

Molenbeek and Saint-Denis provide chilling lessons in that respect. In Molenbeek, the socialist mayor, supposedly so as to prevent "Islamophobia", elevated the funding and standing of the local imams after each terrorist attack, who then exploited those positions to entrench their authority. As for Saint-Denis, exactly the same bargain was made by the far left, with the result, as summarised by the leading French scholar Gilles Kepel, that the township has become a "separate Islamic society", undermining the very integration the policy was intended to promote.

Perhaps it is too late to prevent that occurring in our suburbs as it has in France and Belgium. But with Brussels and Paris yet again in lockdown, it is surely not too late to ask whether that is really where we want to go.