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A/Prof Mehmet Ozalp is an Islamic theologian, intellectual and community leader. Mehmet was one of the co-founders of Affinity Intercultural Foundation in 2000, an organisation dedicated to intercultural and interfaith harmony in Australia. Mehmet was a member of Harmony Reference Group established by the NSW Premier Bob Carr in 2003. In 2009, Mehmet founded ISRA Australia – Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia. He established the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation at Charles Sturt University, Australia. Under his leadership the centre pioneered undergraduate and postgraduate Islamic Studies programs. Mehmet is a prolific speaker on Islam and Muslims in Australia. He was awarded Australian Muslim Role Model of the year in 2012. He is the author of three books: 101 Questions You Asked About Islam, Islam in the Modern World and Islam between Tradition and Modernity: An Australian Perspective.

### **Barriers to Social Cohesion in Western Societies and Their Manifestations in Islam-West Relations**

There are four concentric issues at the core of Western civilisation that, unless addressed, not only prevents the establishment of a genuine social cohesion but also pose as barriers to the advancement of multicultural society. First, in Western societies, there is no historical experience where large populations of people who are culturally and religiously different having lived amongst the dominant populations. Second, even though secularism is the dominant paradigm, the Western civilisation is defined as a Judeo-Christian civilisation, hence everything else is seen as alien to it. Third, Western societies dominate the world culturally, economically and politically. In this domination, the West shows two contradictory faces – one at home and one abroad. These two manifestations eventually ricochet back to effect social cohesion at home soil. Fourth, there are no channels of communication other than print and online media between Western societies and others who are culturally and religiously different. Media is limited as a source of communication and actually serve to highlight the previous three barriers to make matters worse. Collectively, these four issues pose as significant barriers for social cohesion. Policies developed and applied without addressing these only waste valuable time and resources. If these barriers are not recognised and addressed in social and educational policy, they pose to threaten the very fabric of Western societies. This paper will explore these issues in the backdrop of Islam-West relations in modern times.

