



Executive Council  
of Australian Jewry Inc.

**MEDIA STATEMENT: ECAJ lodges formal complaint concerning  
Network Ten's 'The Project'**

**10 August 2020**

The Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the peak representative body of the Australian Jewish community, has lodged a formal complaint with FreeTV Australia, the industry body that represents the Free-to-air Australian TV network, about an interview that was aired on Ten Network's 'The Project' on Wednesday 5 August 2020.

One of the Project's panellists, Waleed Aly, interviewed Beirut-based photographer João Sousa about the massive explosion that rocked Lebanon's capital, Beirut, the previous evening. The blast and the shock waves from it resulted in at least 158 deaths, 5,000 injuries, US\$10–15 billion in property damage and an estimated 300,000 people made homeless.

The blast occurred after a fire broke out and ignited about 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate—equivalent to an explosion of about 1,155 tonnes of TNT—that had been confiscated by the Lebanese government from the abandoned ship MV Rhosus and stored in Beirut's port without proper safety measures for more than six years. This was despite repeated warnings from the Director-General of Beirut Customs about "*the extreme danger posed by the storage of the goods in the warehouse under inappropriate weather.*" (['A vast store of explosive material sat in Beirut for years despite repeated warnings', Washington Post, August 5, 2020](#)).

When asked by Aly if it is "*widely accepted by people there*" that the cause of the explosion was ammonium nitrate, Sousa responded by saying that "*99 per cent of the people I've spoken with*" do not believe this explanation, and that "*people are more likely to believe that this was an attack, a military attack, possibly by Israel*".

Sousa failed to point to any facts or evidence to support this view. Aly failed in his duty as a current affairs interviewer to question Sousa about the basis for his view, beyond Sousa's mere subjective impression that "*people are always expecting something like this to happen*".

As it has turned out, Sousa was utterly wrong not only about the cause of the blast but also about the perceptions of the people in Lebanon. Since the interview went to air, Beirut has been further rocked by massive anti-government demonstrations, with the

demonstrators blaming the explosion on corruption and incompetence by their own government, not Israel: '[Beirut explosion: Anti-government protests break out in city](#)', [BBC News, 7 August 2020](#).

*“Aly gave a platform for the airing of a baseless conspiracy theory, and then failed to contest or challenge it. It was bad journalism, and grossly irresponsible to allow Sousa without contradiction or challenge to stoke baseless suspicion, fear and hatred in the Australian community”,* said ECAJ co-CEO, Peter Wertheim.

The ECAJ complaint states:

*“The cause of the explosion in Beirut, and the popular belief in the city about the cause, were ‘material facts’ about the story within the meaning of clause 3.3.2 of the Free TV Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice 2018 (“Accuracy and Fairness”). Network 10 therefore had an obligation to present that content “accurately”, as required by clause 3.3.1 of the Code. Pursuant to clause 3.3.3, Network 10 “must make reasonable efforts to correct or clarify significant and material errors of fact that are readily apparent or have been demonstrated to the Licensee’s reasonable satisfaction in a timely manner”.”*

The morning after the interview went to air, the interview segment was deleted from The Project’s social media channels. In a statement, a spokesperson said, *“The Project rejects the suggestion there is any evidence the explosion in Beirut was a military attack. As our report last night clearly stated, this is a tragic accident resulting from the mishandling of dangerous chemicals.”*

*“This was far too little in the circumstances”,* Wertheim said. *“The Project has an audience of several hundred thousand people, many of whom would not be aware of the spokesperson’s statement. Further, the spokesperson does not have anything like the public profile of Waleed Aly. Nor was there any acknowledgement of the harm done by the airing of baseless suspicion, fear and hatred in the Australian community.”*

The ECAJ complaint calls for Aly to provide *“an unqualified, unreserved retraction and apology on-air during the program, and at the earliest opportunity”*.

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