

Foreword

In March 2003, I launched the IsmaU project to find out whether Arab and Muslim Australians had become targets of increased hostility since 11 September 2001. IsmaU means 'listen' in Arabic. In 2003, the Commission 'listened' to the experiences of over 1,400 Arab and Muslim Australians who participated in consultations around the country. We also commissioned researchers from the University of Western Sydney to survey and interview Arab and Muslim Australians in Sydney and Melbourne about their experiences.



Dr William Jonas, AM
Acting Race Discrimination
Commissioner

What we heard was often disturbing. Participants identifiable as Arab or Muslim by their dress, language, name or appearance told of having been abused, threatened, spat on, assailed with eggs, bottles, cans and rocks, punched and even bitten. Drivers have been run off the road and pedestrians run down on footpaths and in car parks. People reported being fired from their jobs or refused employment or promotion because of their race or religion. Children have been bullied in school yards. Women have been stalked, abused and assaulted in shopping centres. Private homes, places of worship and schools were vandalised and burned. 'Terrorist' 'Dirty Arab' 'Murderer' 'Bloody Muslim' 'Raghead' 'Bin-Laden' 'Illegal immigrant' 'Black c..t' are just some of the labels and profanities that we were told have been used against Arabs and Muslims in public places. Arab and Muslim Australians were told to 'Go back to your own country', even those whose families have been in Australia for many generations. Perhaps more troubling than the nature and intensity of discrimination and vilification is the impact such incidents had on participants. Many Arab and Muslim Australians said they were feeling isolated and fearful. 'I don't feel like I belong here anymore' was a common sentiment.

Yet not all participants experienced discrimination or vilification and those who did often qualified their comments by explaining that in the majority of circumstances, they were treated with respect. As one participant explained, 'Don't get me wrong, there are a lot of good people out there, but there are these very few people that are making a bad impact on a lot of us.' For most Arab and Muslim Australians, discrimination and abuse is not an everyday occurrence. However, when it does happen, it leaves a lasting impression that contributes to a sense of alienation, distrust and fear of future discrimination and attacks.

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The IsmaU project was as much about solutions as problems. Arab and Muslim Australians have not been passive 'victims' of discrimination – they have challenged negative stereotypes and misinformation about their communities in a range of positive and creative ways. Governments too have sought to quell the worst manifestations of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination. Nevertheless, there is still work to be done.

We can do more to counter anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice through education programs that promote positive awareness of cultural and religious diversity among Australians. We can also challenge negative stereotyping by encouraging better communication between government, non-government and media organisations and Arab and Muslim communities and assisting communities to challenge negative stereotyping. Supporting and strengthening Arab and Muslim community organisations to develop and participate in projects which address discrimination and vilification is essential. Ensuring that both Arab and Muslim Australians have adequate legal protection from discrimination and vilification is also vital. Currently, there is no federal law which makes discrimination or vilification on the basis of religion unlawful and only piecemeal coverage of religious discrimination and vilification across the states and territories. A federal law would ensure there is a national 'safety net' protecting everyone around the country from religious discrimination and vilification.

The need for action is urgent. In the current environment of fear and suspicion fostered by terrorism and the 'war on terror', our multicultural values of social equity and respect for diversity are at risk of diminishing. As one consultation participant cautioned,

the Australia which was the kind of society everyone would want to live in is slipping away from us ... The 'fair go' motto we always believed in has been replaced with the 'fear go' ... When fear is embraced, we all cling to what we have and society is tilted in a direction where the majority rules without the slightest regard or respect for the rest of society.

We need to confront the fears and uncertainties that have become part of our everyday lives post-September 11 and guard against prejudice and intolerance, not just towards Arab and Muslim Australians, but also against other culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Increased hostility towards particular groups produces a dynamic of exclusion that encompasses a range of vulnerable groups – attacking the very principle of respect for diversity has an alarming ripple effect.

Protecting the core multicultural values of our society is good reason for action. We need to ensure that all Australians, Arabs and Muslims included, have the opportunity for equal participation in Australian society. To do this, we need to listen to and acknowledge the kinds of prejudice, discrimination and vilification experienced by Arab and Muslim Australians post-September 11. We hope that the IsmaU project is an important step along this path.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "W. Jonas". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'J'.

Dr William Jonas, AM
Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner