



ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

**To:** Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee  
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**By:** Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV)

**Brief:** Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia, with particular reference to:

- 1) Support offered to diaspora community associations and similar organisations, including government grants and other funding;
- 2) Safety concerns among diaspora communities, and means for strengthening the protection and resilience of vulnerable groups;
- 3) Barriers to the full participation of diaspora communities in Australia's democratic and social institutions, and mechanisms for addressing these barriers;
- 4) Opportunities to strengthen communication and partnerships between government and diaspora communities in Australia; and

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## Introduction

The Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback and recommendations to the Senate Inquiry into the issues facing Diaspora Communities belonging to the Islamic faith in Australia.

By comparison to European diaspora communities, which have been studied prolifically, Islam and Muslims in Australia have yet to receive sufficient attention from both Government, academia, social research and social services. Hence, we hope the ICV Submission's Recommendations are given good considerations and look forward to working with the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for further discussions.

## About ICV

The ICV is the peak Muslim body in Victoria representing an estimated 200,000 Muslims (ABS Census 2016 data) with over 70 member societies from over 50 diverse ethnic and cultural communities.

The ICV offers advocacy and social welfare services, while also leading state and national initiatives on social cohesion through community consultation and provides advice to



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government at all levels. The ICV also offers socio-religious leadership by our welfare services, community engagement of people of all faith communities, and contributing to building a more cohesive society.

### Diaspora Definition

From the outset, it is important to establish a definition of the term 'diaspora'. It is primarily used to refer to a group of people, bound together by a common ethno-linguistic and/or religious identity, who no longer reside in their home country. Though once specific to groups of people who had fled their home country due to fear of persecution, the term diaspora has progressively adopted a far broader definition to reflect the contemporary trends of globalisation and transnationalism.

Globalisation has further contributed to the emergence of modern-day diasporas on the basis of opportunity rather than displacement. These opportunities include the pursuit of work and study in a host country likely to have better outcomes than those available in the diaspora's home country.

The ICV defines diasporas as constituting all identifiable migrant and refugee communities settled in a host country. In our case, diasporas refer to any of Australia's settled CALD communities as well as Australia's own expatriate population currently living abroad.

The term 'Australian Muslim Diaspora' is used to represent a collective of migrant and ethnic communities of Muslim background who have settled in Australia, and who maintains their heritage and religious values.

### Executive Summary

It is our view that the Australian Government has been underutilising the potential contribution of settled diasporas. The Muslim communities are one particular diaspora group experiencing a range of settlement issues which limit its potential overall contributions and participation in Australian society.

The ICV makes a total of 20 (twenty) recommendations which we hope will overcome many obstacles and challenges and enhance Australian Muslim diaspora's contributions to Australia, which can be summarised in 4 broad categories;

- 1) Research
- 2) Funded Programs for Capacity Building
- 3) Establishing new Working Groups, Networks and Centres
- 4) Explore and enhance the opportunities for trade, commercial and diplomatic relations with Muslim nations.



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We recommend to shift the thinking about ‘diaspora communities’ away from the traditional multicultural narrative, important as that is, and towards seeing Muslim communities as a network which can enhance the community’s capacities in enabling greater social cohesion and harmony, help navigate new opportunities, and open doors for it to contribute to Australia’s business, trade and diplomacy with both Muslim-majority nations and countries of birth.

### The Australian Muslim Population

Australia is a land of migrants and minorities, with over 25 million population from some 300 ancestries. Muslims in Australia are a community within a landscape of minorities. The Australian Muslim population is increasingly diverse coming from over 50 Muslim-majority nations.

According to the ABS Census 2016, there were over 600,000 Muslims in Australia, composing 2.6 per cent of the population, making Muslims the second-largest religious group in Australia. With an annual increase of 8% p.a., it is forecasted that by the ABS Census 2021 (next year) there will be an estimated 850,000 Australian Muslims. And by 2023/24 it is estimated there will be one million Muslim Australians.

Australia’s Muslim community is comparatively young in relation to the broader population with two-thirds (67%) of Australia’s Muslims under 35 years of age; half (47%) are under age 25 and one-thirds (29%) are under age 14 i.e.) children.

Migration from both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority nations to Australia increased dramatically between 2006 and 2016, from many continents and countries. Which saw a surge in education-related and skilled migration coincided with a period of significant labour shortages across the economy.

### Challenges faced by Australian Muslims

In the post-9/11 era, there has been much discussion in Australian society about the compatibility of Australian values and Islamic values. The impact 9/11 had on Australian Muslim communities was immense. There was a shift in focus towards mistrust and criticism from within the Muslim community. Community leaders found themselves ill-equipped to deal with the media and policy frenzy which led to many social stresses.



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In recent years Australia has experienced its fair share of xenophobia (aka Islamophobia), racism and fear and anxiety of Muslims and Islam due to the conditions of global extremism and terrorism. This continues to seriously challenge Australia's social fabric to the extent that some are attempting to undermine achievements in social cohesion, harmony and inclusiveness.

It is envisaged some, if not all, of the recommendations put forward below will be able to alleviate some of the social challenges being faced in addition to pioneering in new frontiers.

**Support offered to diaspora community associations and similar organisations, including government grants and other funding:**

Programs run by many agencies in partnership with Muslim organisations in the past has proven effective in strengthening the resilience of young Muslim participants and their respective ethnic communities through building their capacity to engage in civil society, increasing their understanding of human rights, and through intercultural and interfaith understanding.

Government funded (both Federal and State) ICV projects have enabled young Muslims to develop their advocacy skills, their understanding of and interest in media and political systems, and provide them with the skills and tools to advocate for their concerns and grievances through democratic means. They have encompassed concepts of participation, power, agency, identity and belonging, and included activities such as community service and volunteering. It includes structured forms of engagement with political processes, as well as more day-to-day forms of participation in society.

The ICV's experiences has been that Muslim-specific programs were much more likely to succeed when they were seen as community-driven, rather than government-initiated. Muslim-specific programs run by government, even when intended to benefit Muslim communities, can contribute to a sense of alienation, and the feeling that government regards Muslims as particularly prone to deficits or in need of surveillance.

The ICV is well placed to facilitate Capacity Building and Leadership Development Programs of its many and diverse member societies and their members. This can be achieved if peak Muslim bodies like the ICV are sufficiently resourced organisations and well supported by government and multicultural agencies.



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## Recommendations

- 1) Ensure adequate funding for grass-roots community programs that prepare and enable Muslims from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to participate in mainstream programs and events.
- 2) Actively recruit and engage a diversity of Muslims for multicultural programs so they are inclusiveness on the part of mainstream organisations or programs
- 3) Greater support mentoring and networking opportunities for young Muslim leaders, and build programs that embed opportunities for these to occur.
  - Mentoring emerged as an extremely important aspect of successful ICV Youth and Leadership programs. Participants in these various programs reported particular satisfaction with components that enabled them to meet active in the political space such as politicians, newspaper editors and journalists.
- 4) Consider women-only workshops on civics education, leadership and political participation in some areas as some Muslim women may prefer.

## Safety concerns among diaspora communities, and means for strengthening the protection and resilience of vulnerable groups:

The ICV envisages a confident and resilient Muslim community working together towards a safer, more cohesive, inclusive and respectful society. This can be achieved via continued ‘Capacity Building’ programs and ‘Social Participation’ opportunities, in particular amongst youth that encourages diaspora communities and stakeholders to develop initiatives based on local needs.

We recommend considering a revised version of the ‘National Youth Settlement Framework’, developed by ‘Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network’, which focuses on active citizenship as an important foundation for the well-being and engagement of young people.

Capacity Building Programs need to be aimed to increase young Muslims’ confidence, improve their networks, improve education and employment outcomes and develop essential leadership and advocacy capabilities.



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## Recommendations

- 5) Undertake extensive community and government consultations to develop a '[Strategic Framework to Strengthen Australia's Social Cohesion and the Resilience of its Diaspora Communities.](#)
- 6) [Help realise the ICV's proposal \(in partnership with ANU\) to establish the YCSS: Youth Crisis Support Service – see attached.](#)
- 7) [Fund ICV's proposed \(pilot project\) Youth Worker Training – see attached.](#)
- 8) [Develop and extend proven successful Leadership Mentorship and Resilience Programs](#) in all states.
- 9) Improved employment outcomes with young Muslims in low socio-economic areas and at risk-groups to fulfil their potential in the workplace and job market.
- 10) Organize a *Muslim Youth Summit* where young Muslim leaders from all states determine their own needs and ways of meeting these needs.

## Barriers to the full participation of diaspora communities in Australia's democratic and social institutions, and mechanisms for addressing these barriers;

Muslim communities in Australia lack effective presence and influence in higher levels of state and federal politics, policymaking, universities, large corporations and peak industry bodies. Australia needs to do more to encourage diversity in these areas. Increasing political representation in Australia on the part of the Muslim communities can potentially act as a driver of the bilateral relationships.

Circumstances in the home country can be considered a significant factor in Muslim migrants' political participation. Those who had lived in Australia for a long time or had come from countries with a robust democratic culture have been more ready to participate than recent arrivals or those who had come from situations of oppression.

Rather than specifically religion-based barriers to political participation, barriers related to ethnicity, English acquisition, income and time since settlement carry more weight.

Working off the above Recommended Programs ([Items 1 and 2](#)) the aim is to restore the confidence of the Muslim community in government and political processes. These programs should encourage not only running for office but also other forms of political participation, such as community organisation, mentoring, participation in youth activities (eg Youth Parliament), and making their views heard in the media.



## Recommendations

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- 11) Support existing and proven successful Leadership Programs and add a component on political participation civics, the Australian system of government, the workings of the public service, and strategies to influence policy development. Where possible, leadership programs should work to establish networks and mentoring relationships, and provide for ongoing engagement of participants.
- 12) Consultations aimed at increasing political participation should include not only 'official' community leaders representing cultural community and religious peak bodies, but also ensure a diversity of voices – in terms of gender, ethnicity, generation and geography (spread of representation of earlier vs recent settled communities).
- 13) Gathering opinions of local Islamic scholars on issues like voting and political obligations and working with them to disseminate Muslim perspectives on related issues.
- 14) Produce targeted educational strategies tailored to CALD groups in localities which have high levels of informal voting. Electorates with the highest proportions of recent migrants register the highest levels of informal and donkey voting.
- 15) Facilitate opportunities and encourage qualified individuals from CALD backgrounds to be appointed to boards, authorities and government advisory committees.

### Opportunities to strengthen communication and partnerships between government and diaspora communities in Australia

Australia tends not to use its domestic diaspora groups strategically to advance its foreign policy and trade interests. This for reasons has tended to fall on government's blind-side. The opportunity is ripe for Australia to capitalise on its Muslim diaspora, which should be seen as a national asset in the bilateral relationship and deployed accordingly.

The Government should undertake a comprehensive study in its potential engagement with Australia's Muslim diaspora as a resource to advance economic links and build transnational networks for trade, investment and innovation.

Diaspora communities have the potential to contribute to Australia's international relationships by:

- establishing and facilitating international trade, investment and commercial opportunities between Australia and their home countries; and
- strengthening Australia's bilateral relationships with other states and regions.



There are untapped potential opportunities of diaspora communities in creating business and bilateral trade opportunities in each State through their informal networks and community connections. However, the lack of empirical evidence makes it inherently difficult to quantify the extent to which Muslim communities contribute to Australian trade and investment flows.

## Recommendations

- 16) Research & Data: undertake greater qualitative and quantitative research on diaspora communities settled in Australia to better inform Government policy;
  - a. There is an acute absence of Government research, analysis and data collection on both the diaspora communities settled in Australia and the Australian diaspora living abroad - calls for greater research to address significant knowledge gaps
  - b. A dedicated study on Australian Muslim communities - by relevant institutions in Australia
  - c. A comprehensive nation-wide survey that aims to understand the experiences and perspectives of Muslim communities in Australia.
- 17) Establish a *Muslim Community Reference Group* to advise the government on Muslim affairs, social policy and opportunities.
- 18) Develop networks with diaspora professionals and companies who mentor students and create internship opportunities in key sectors.
- 19) Showcase diaspora achievements and leadership in Australia's competitive growth sectors and encourage opportunities for representation in organisational structures and on boards.
- 20) Engage CEOs of successful Muslim businesses and other senior professionals in high-level executive positions in Australian companies and agencies more closely

## Conclusion

Australian Muslim communities have the potential to play a significant role in Australia's international relationship with other countries and regions. They project a positive image of Australia as a tolerant, liberal and multicultural society through their informal networks across the world. Diaspora communities can also be a valuable asset for Australia's foreign policy engagement with neighbouring regions.

Australian Muslim communities can play an important role in facilitating and promoting Australia's cross border investment and commercial flows from other countries and regions. They can often be responsible for establishing important social, diplomatic and economic connections between Australia and their countries of birth.



Over time, as the Australian Muslim communities become more socially active and politically engaged, the impetus of Australian state and federal governments to promote the bilateral relationship will only increase.

Embracing the contributions of Muslim diaspora will further validate Australia as a diverse, safe and prosperous society, improve Australia's standing with many Muslim nations attract many tourists and international students whereby further contributing to Australia's economy.

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