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Australian Government  
Australian Security  
Intelligence Organisation

# **ASIO submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee**

## **Inquiry into the issues facing diaspora communities in Australia**

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## Introduction

1. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee inquiry into the issues facing diaspora communities in Australia.
2. As Australia's security intelligence service, ASIO engages with diaspora communities as part of its remit to protect Australia and Australians from threats to their security.
3. Diaspora communities contribute to Australia's security by providing ASIO with advice on potential threats to national security and informing our contextual understanding of these threats. Our engagement is confidential and provides an avenue for communities to raise issues with representatives of the Australian Government.
4. This submission is divided into four parts:
  - **Part 1** describes ASIO's role and accountability framework.
  - **Part 2** outlines the current security environment.
  - **Part 3** provides a summary of ASIO engagement with diaspora communities.
  - **Part 4** provides an overview of foreign interference with diaspora communities.

## Part 1—ASIO's role and accountability framework

### Role of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation

5. ASIO protects Australia and Australians from threats to their security. This includes protection from violent, clandestine or deceptive efforts to harm Australians and compromise Australia's sovereignty, economic wellbeing and national security. We counter these threats through our strong partnerships with governments, law enforcement and national security agencies, industry, academia, international counterparts and Australian communities.
6. ASIO's key priorities are:
  - a. Counter Terrorism—Protecting Australians from politically motivated and communal violence;
  - b. Counter Espionage and Foreign Interference—Protecting Australia from espionage and foreign interference;
  - c. Border Security—Supporting whole-of-government efforts to protect Australia's border integrity, including from people smuggling;
  - d. Reform Program—Accelerating our mission delivery through digitisation; and
  - e. Governance and Accountability—Commitment to continual improvement of enterprise management and government practices.

### Oversight and accountability

7. ASIO's role and functions are determined by the *Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Act 1979* and other relevant legislation and guidance. ASIO must act with propriety: our activities must be conducted effectively, efficiently, ethically and without bias.

8. ASIO operates under a comprehensive accountability framework, with robust and extensive oversight of both operational and non-operational activities.
9. ASIO's key oversight body is the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security (IGIS), an independent officer with powers akin to those of a royal commission. The IGIS scrutinises the operational activities of intelligence agencies to ensure they operate with propriety, according to law, consistent with ministerial guidelines and directives, and with due regard for human rights.
10. The Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor and the Independent Reviewer of Adverse Security Assessments also provide wide-ranging oversight of ASIO's activities. ASIO's ministerial accountability is to the Minister for Home Affairs, who exercises all ministerial powers and functions under the ASIO Act except those that are explicitly with the Attorney-General.
11. ASIO engages fully with its oversight and accountability mechanisms to provide public assurance of the legality and propriety of ASIO's actions.

## Part 2—The security environment

### Terrorism in Australia

12. The national terrorism threat level for Australia remains at PROBABLE—credible intelligence, assessed to represent a plausible scenario, indicates an intention and capability to conduct a terrorist attack in Australia.
13. ASIO assesses that the principal source of the terrorist threat remains Sunni Islamist extremism, emanating primarily from small groups and individuals inspired, directed or encouraged by extremist groups overseas. The violent ideology of groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant continues to inspire attacks globally, including against Australia. Individuals motivated by other forms of extremism and ideology are increasingly present in Australia, including those drawn to and adopting extreme right-wing ideologies.

### Communal violence

14. Communal violence—activities that promote violence between different groups of people in the community—is infrequent in Australia. Where communal violence has occurred, the incidents involving diaspora communities were reflective of conflicts from originating countries, specific international events or historical conflicts.
15. The impact of COVID-19—including a potentially declining economy and increased public anxiety—could motivate disaffected demographics to violence. Groups or individuals promoting communal violence could exploit the pandemic to target specific ethnic communities.
16. In the past six months, there have been no large-scale incidents of violence between groups in the Australian community. While community cohesion has been tested by COVID-19 and local reactions to recent overseas protest movements, we do not expect large-scale incidents of communal violence in Australia.

## Foreign interference

17. Foreign interference in Australia is extensive. It involves clandestine or deceptive activities relating to Australia conducted by, or on behalf of, a foreign power. Those activities are conducted to achieve intelligence objectives and/or to affect political or governmental processes, and they may involve a threat to a person, whether or not this act is covert. These activities are detrimental to the interests of Australia and undermine Australia's sovereignty, and they can prejudice our values, interests and security.
18. We expect foreign interference activities will continue to be directed at Australians and Australian interests, including at Australia's diaspora communities. If foreign interference is left unchecked, Australia faces the prospect of diminished sovereignty, economic disadvantage, lack of public confidence in its political and government institutions, loss of its allies' confidence, compromised military capability, and erosion of Australia's societal values.

## Part 3—ASIO engagement with diaspora communities

19. ASIO maintains a longstanding program of engagement with a broad range of leaders and representatives of diaspora communities. ASIO currently has contact with over 100 different ethnic and religious groups.
20. Australia's diaspora communities are diverse, and the issues concerning them originate from a variety of sources—longstanding religious and/or ethnic conflicts, international events, social and economic inequalities, perceived political injustices and the difficulties faced by migrant communities with integrating into Australian society. ASIO's engagement provides diaspora communities with an opportunity to raise matters affecting their community and to seek advice on potential mitigation measures and resources available to them.
21. For ASIO, our engagement is a critical component of scanning for future threats, both locally and within the communities' countries of origin. Our engagement supports advice on threat assessments, strategic analysis, border integrity, special events, counter-espionage and foreign interference and counter-terrorism matters, as well as providing community-based situational awareness.

### Case study 1: Allegations of politically motivated violence

In 2014, ASIO investigated a report of links between al-Qa'ida and members of a small diaspora Muslim community in Australia. This community was not previously known to ASIO.

ASIO's initial contact with members of this community found a small, isolated and poor community in often insecure manual employment (or none at all). The community was isolated from mainstream Muslim society by culture and language. Unsurprisingly, many members of this community were suspicious of outsiders and especially wary of government.

ASIO's engagement with a small group of community representatives resolved the 2014 reporting of the group's links to al-Qa'ida. ASIO was confident the group did not pose a threat to Australia.

Continued contact with members of this community in subsequent years meant that in 2019, when potentially more serious information was received involving a second-generation member of this community born in Australia having links to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ASIO's engagement had overcome some of the earlier suspicion towards government—and a security service in particular. Utilising the strong relationships which had been built in the intervening years, ASIO was able to directly explore the circumstances of this matter without divulging the sensitive source of the information, enabling us to refine the investigation and better understand the nature of the threat. ASIO's engagement with the community on this matter is ongoing.

### Case study 2: Concern over potential communal violence

The Muslim community of Australia comprises a diverse group of people of different nationalities and ethnicities engaging in a variety of religious practices, most of whom are not of security interest. ASIO has enjoyed longstanding engagement with Muslim community leaders over many years. This allowed ASIO to respond to community anxiety over the Christchurch terrorist attack in 2019, when Muslims in Australia feared being targeted by right-wing extremist elements.

In one example, during engagement with a South-East Asian community, ASIO was told that many women in particular had been terrified by the Christchurch attack and were especially fearful of attending the local mosque with their children. ASIO spoke to many of its contacts in the Muslim community, including the South-East Asian community, to explain the nature of the extreme right-wing threat in Australia and to reassure them of the seriousness of the government's response and concern. ASIO was confident, based on statements made by this community in ASIO interviews, that much of this advice provided a measure of assurance to the community.

## Part 4—Foreign interference with diaspora communities

22. Australia is a multicultural society with a diverse range of diaspora groups. These diaspora groups are often the victims of foreign interference.
23. Some foreign governments seek to interfere in diaspora communities to control or quash opposition or dissent deemed to be a threat to their government. Such interference has included threats of harm to individuals and/or their families, both in Australia and abroad. In some cases, foreign governments will seek to use members of the diaspora community in Australia to monitor, direct and influence the activities of the same diaspora communities.
24. ASIO actively works with diaspora communities to help protect them from attempts at foreign interference.

### Case study 3: Diaspora communities and foreign interference

ASIO is aware of numerous individuals from a range of diaspora communities who reported being subject to threats against themselves and family members due to their voicing of opinions on political and ideological issues which a foreign country deemed to be a threat to their government. These threats have come directly from foreign government representatives and also from other members of the diaspora communities themselves, acting at the direction of the foreign government. These activities against diaspora communities have related to issues including overseas electoral events, pro-democracy movements, and human rights, as well as issues associated with protecting the image of the foreign country.

## Conclusion

25. ASIO's key priorities are:
  - Counter-Terrorism—Protecting Australians from politically motivated and communal violence;
  - Counter-Espionage and Foreign Interference—Protecting Australia from espionage and foreign interference;
  - Border Security—Supporting whole-of-government efforts to protect Australia's border integrity, including

from people smuggling;

- Reform Program—Accelerating our mission delivery through digitisation; and
- Governance and Accountability—Commitment to continual improvement of enterprise management and government practices

26. To fulfil this role, we engage closely with Australia’s diaspora communities.

27. By providing ASIO with advice on potential threats to national security, diaspora communities assist in protecting Australia and Australians from violent, clandestine and deceptive activities that threaten our people and undermine our sovereignty.