



Australian Federation
of Islamic Councils

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE ON THE INQUIRY INTO IMPROVING CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TO CALD COMMUNITIES

**Submission: by the Australian Federation of
Islamic Councils (AFIC)**

June 2022

PARLIAMENT HOUSE, MACQUARIE ST

SYDNEY NSW AUSTRALIA 2000

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils

*The peak body for Australian Muslims representing
State and Territory Islamic Councils and Societies*



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Submission made by the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) for the Parliamentary Committee on the Inquiry into improving crisis communications to CALD communities

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils

The Australia Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) is Australia's internationally acclaimed peak Muslim body. Established in 1964, AFIC serves and inspires the Australian Muslim community to build a society free of discrimination, where all people are empowered to fulfill their potential as Australians while enriching the community with great Islamic values. We advocate for the oppressed and weak; build pathways and opportunities for the young to succeed; provide services that meet the needs of our ethnically diverse community and educate Muslims and non-Muslims on the true beauty of Islam.

AFIC Values

- Accountability
- Trust
- Respect
- Justice
- Mercy
- Sincerity

AFIC values all lives and wants a safer and more inclusive Australia. Helping in a time of crisis is what would be required of AFIC as the peak national body that represents Muslims in Australia. AFIC's submission in dealing with crisis is based on firsthand responses with the community.

Acknowledgment of Country

AFIC acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land we work on. We recognize the continuous Cultural History of the land, water, and community.

We pay respect to Elders, past, present and emerging; and to their memories, dreams and hopes.

Acknowledgement of the role of faith in a time of crisis

AFIC apprises that one of the most remarkable features within the Muslim community is the way it comes together in a time of crisis; it is in these times that more and more people resort to faith teachings for comfort and support.

Acknowledgement of the need to be transparent with the community and of the value of communication

AFIC values give rise to the need for clear and transparent communication. Many actions within Islam revolve around communication and give heavy weight to written communication. This is especially when information is to be preserved for posterity. Communication plays a very important role in everyone's life, it acts as a source of information, it helps people socialise, and it can alter individuals' attitudes, and much more. The best example of preserved, protected and faithfully

conveyed information in Islam is the holy Qur'ān (the word of God), the holy Qur'an is even more heavily consulted in times of crisis.

We ask that when communication or updates are being received from the government, that it be precise, quick and clear. During any type of crisis, emails may not be seen in a timely manner. It may be more appropriate to use a multimedia communication client that includes text, mobile apps, voice, email, and business communication platforms. If changes and updates are made – any changes need to be to the point, highlighted, and on a regular basis. AFIC is able to keep the community up to date as long as we receive the information in a timely manner. We appreciate that communication is made in all languages. Mainstream media tends to be more sensational and not always an accurate source. Directly communicated updates from government can help overcome any potential misunderstandings or hysterical reactions.

AFIC's Identification of the Needs of the Muslim Community in times of crises

Medical support

Muslims strongly support our Medicare system. However, like all systems, there is always room for improvement. Like others, Muslims are also affected when it comes to sourcing medical care. This is particularly so for first generation migrants who are not yet familiar with the system or, the complex procedures that are in place in order to have access to facilities. Those from a low socio-economic, non-English background are more impacted in crises, as they struggle to find medical help. COVID restricted access to loved ones, this had an additional impact on Muslims because of the significance of being with those who are unwell in our faith tradition.

Food and Basic Needs

Through its member societies, AFIC has arranged for meals and food supply during Covid lockdowns and during bushfires. Access to food is a significant complaint during crises.

Muslim food needs and dietary requirements from a cultural and religious perspective are specialised. Restrictions are placed on the type of meat we consume, we are also prohibited from alcohol, intoxicants and pork. In a time of crisis, care must be taken to ensure that dietary requirements are met.

Education

For Muslims, faith and education are intertwined. Seeking education is considered an act of worship. AFIC has over the years established nine mainstream Muslim schools. Learning systems for all Australians get adjusted in times of crisis. Virtual classrooms during Covid lockdowns, whilst good, were not capable of meeting the needs of students. Virtual classrooms needed to be supported with additional tutoring.

Spiritual Support

AFIC and its member societies continued to provide spiritual support during the Covid crisis, efforts included virtual services and phone support.

Looking to Islamic scripture is another way in which response to crisis can be made. For instance, Prophet Muhammad advised on quarantine:

“If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place.” For that reason, many Muslims aimed to strike a balance between taking precaution and reliance on God.

In times of crisis, the demand for faith leaders, counsellors, chaplains, and others involved in decision-making at houses of worship, hospitals, and universities increased as they were able to provide for better community leadership and individual support, this continued even as houses of worship were forced to close their doors due to COVID-19 lockdowns.

Spiritual care included providing care for patients who were sick and dying, imams consoling families and visiting neighbours, and others advocating for and participating in online gatherings like Quranic reflections to help fill the gap left by houses of worship ceasing in-person services and activities or events.

Safety and Medical Supplies

AFIC and member organisations have contributed funds for flood and bushfire support. Some of our members are experienced SES volunteers. Covid lockdowns proved the need for more trained and experienced SES workers and volunteers.

The disasters that we have experienced over the past few years have proved that our distribution networks and infrastructure must improve, our stocks in storage must be enhanced and we must develop a better system of renewal and reuse for emergency supplies. Society cannot afford to see prices of disinfectant and hygiene products (as an example) soaring during emergencies.

Medical testing was also an issue, sometimes exacerbated by public scare-campaigns and at other times, the necessity to ensure that one has not contracted the virus. Australia experienced testing periods where waiting times in long queues reached several hours, shops and pharmacies ran out of test kits and those kits were beyond the means of many working-class Australians. We need to find a balance, address the panic that can exacerbate long queues and ensure that we employ and train sufficient medical personnel for the purpose.

Technology and Innovation

Australia has no shortage of innovative minds, however, historically, these minds have found more fertile and welcoming environments for their research and marketing in other countries. Australia needs to invest more in innovation and technology and ensure that our pioneering scientists can grow their research and market their products in Australia and from Australia.

Civic and Community Leadership

Leaders and activists representing our member societies and AFIC worked hard to ensure that there is always direction and help in times of crisis. Typically, Muslims look to us for guidance as their peak body. AFIC can influence community decisions when it comes to impacting public safety; from the closing of worship spaces, to facilitating voting by mail and census completion, to increasing understanding of new federal and state laws. AFIC can readily workshop and prepare teams from within our membership to address issues across the country.

Mental Health

As we've seen Australians articulate mental health concerns with more courage, Australia has rightly begun to remove the stigma and allocate more funding for this area. However, we still experience that the need is greater than the demand. We find that those working in the frontlines are overworked and therefore require more emotional support and those who cannot work in the frontlines experiencing fear and helplessness which end up spiralling into depression. The latter needs more mental-health support, they require more experienced psychologists and counsellors who can help them wade through times of crisis. This problem can impact the young to an even greater degree. There is also a greater need for refugees and migrants who come from war-torn countries or who have lived under repressive regimes. This problem also arises with victims of

xenophobia and Islamophobia, sometimes to a larger extent if they don't find appropriate redress within our systems.

AFIC has found that members of the community required more counselling and support during these periods.

Economic Security Support

Generally, minorities are less socio-economically advantaged, in many cases, the living standards of many borders on subsistence. Crises impact minority groups more than the average Australian.

Fundraising to support those in need and providing service is enmeshed with AFIC values.

We saw the Australian government increase financial assistance to the unemployed during the first year of COVID, however, this did not reach pensioners and seniors. While the logic might be that those who lost their job require compensation, the increased cost of essentials also filtered to seniors who in turn also needed financial assistance packages.

Social support

Migrant families generally tend to put more emphasis on family relations and connections. This is more so for Muslims. Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, encouraged Muslims to keep strong family ties. The Quran inspires Muslims to be generous to kin (16:90) and treat the elderly with compassion (17:23).

These teachings have resulted in Muslims either living together as large families or keeping regular weekly visits and gatherings of extended family members. Many Muslims feel conflicted about the need to apply social distancing and the need to be close to family and relatives for comfort and support during a time of crisis. Family gatherings are interconnected with good mental health. Romantic introductions were also severely stifled and Muslims were especially impacted during extended lockdowns.

Visiting the sick is considered a good deed in Islam. However, in the case of COVID-19, such visits are not possible. This issue reached extreme levels when immediate family members were prohibited from being with their loved ones in hospital. It was also exacerbated in cases where loved ones were not allowed to recover the body of a deceased loved one to give it its final rites. We are aware of situations where an individual sought legal professionals in order to gain access to his deceased wife. Such situations could be handled better and with less trauma. The effect of these traumas filter to other areas of life and can lead to a complete breakdown.

Access to Courts and Justice

Muslims generally seek arbitration and mediation before going to court. In the cases where they do go to court, the burden of cost is overpowering. Legal costs (including court fees) are making access to the legal system exclusive to wealthy members of society. There are cases that can only be resolved through the legal system. Victims of overzealous policing of lockdowns were not always able to seek the redress of the courts. Some of the problems maybe resolvable through additional review officers or an ombudsman being able to take and resolve complaints. Migrant communities must be alerted to all services and alternatives.

Policing in the Muslim community

The covid lockdowns demonstrated more heavy-handed policing in Sydney's Southwest. There were a number of reported cases where police exercised excessive zero-tolerance. This was seen as double standards by many in society. It gave the impression that the police were clamping down on

the Southwest to show the rest of the state that they have power, but these powers were not implemented in wealthier areas where they could be successfully challenged in court. This overzealous heavy-handedness led to AFIC issuing strong media statements in support of equality and respect of minorities. It is crucial that in times of crises, all Australians feel that they are treated equally and that we are all in the crisis together.

Travel Bans

State border closures should have been less restrictive. Muslims did observe the double standards in lifting international restrictions for some and not others (eg returning Indian Australians). The standard should have been the same. The Australian government should not capitulate to foreign pressure (in this case from India), thereby exposing Australians to the Delta strand and leading to more loss of Australian lives.

Conclusion of submission

For more information, the committee is invited to contact AFIC's Chief Executive Officer Mr Keysar

Trad on ceo@afic.com.au

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Rateb Jneid', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr Rateb Jneid

AFIC President

FURTHER READING RESOURCES AS PROVIDED BY AFIC:

Policing of Muslim Communities

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/people-fear-police-leader-says-decades-of-collaboration-are-being-undone-20210825-p58lr1.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/sep/16/despicable-sydney-police-stop-muslim-mourners-from-watching-funerals-from-cars>

<https://adi.deakin.edu.au/news/australian-muslims-experiences-of-policing-and-surveillance>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/10/4/pandemic-policing-in-multicultural-australia>

<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/unlocking-doors-audit-initiatives-related-police-and-muslim-communities>

Human Rights Perspectives from Australian Muslims

https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/ahrc_sharing_stories_australian_muslims_2021.pdf

AFIC Website Publications

<https://www.facebook.com/AFICOfficial/posts/1217187282111554>

<https://www.facebook.com/AFICOfficial/photos/a.310976946065930/1215146545648961>

<https://afic.com.au/2021/07/looking-after-your-spiritual-mental-and-physical-wellbeing-during-lockdown/>

<https://www.facebook.com/AFICOfficial/posts/894351567728462>

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=684579132098027>