

# **Muslim Community Organisations and Advocacy and Lobbying in Australia**

A report prepared for the General Delegation of Palestine to Australia,  
New Zealand and the Pacific

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## **Executive Summary**

The present report was drafted for the General Delegation of Palestine to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. It examines the largely unexplored domain of the advocacy and lobbying activity of Muslim community organisations in Australia. Interviews were conducted with key community and political representatives in order to address three specific questions.

In short, the study found that advocacy sits within the profiles of the Muslim community organisations investigated but lobbying generally does not; diversity among Australian Muslim communities poses a significant challenge to the formation of an effective national interest body; and, while increasing numbers of Muslim Australians are engaging in advocacy and lobbying, the majority are disenfranchised from political processes.

On the basis of these findings, the report recommends that the GDOP identify and build relationships with key Muslim community organisations; mobilise organisations to collaborate with APAN; provide practical education for communities to empower their political participation; and collaborate with high-profile Muslim Australians.

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## **Glossary of Acronyms**

AFIC Australian Federation of Islamic Councils

ANIC Australian National Imams Council

APAN Australia Palestine Advocacy Network

GDOP General Delegation of Palestine to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific

ICV Islamic Council of Victoria

LMA Lebanese Muslim Association

MCB Muslim Council of Britain

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## Introduction

In Australia, various groups and organisations engage in advocacy and lobbying to further their interests. Exactly what constitutes advocacy and lobbying is a debated question.

Confusion surrounding this terminology is common and, even among political scholarship, there is not a general consensus of definitions.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this report, lobbying will be defined as an “attempt by individuals or private interest groups to influence the decisions of government,”<sup>2</sup> where the lobbyist or lobby group receives payment for their actions. Advocacy will be defined as the act of representing another’s case, or speaking on their behalf.

While much data exists on the advocacy and lobbying activities of certain populations, such as Christians and Jews, when it comes to the advocacy and lobbying activities of Muslim communities in Australia, little is known. The most comprehensive study to date is Peucker’s 2017 report, “The civic potential of Muslim community organisations for promoting social cohesion in Victoria,” which found that the activities of Muslim community organisations in Victoria include religious services, community outreach, and educational services. Most organisations actively encourage the political participation of their members (80% “seek to empower Muslims to express their views and concerns;” 74% “encourage them to be politically active”<sup>3</sup>); however, “political advocacy and lobbying play only a minor role within the activity profile” of the organisations themselves.<sup>4</sup> This report provides a valuable starting point for discussion; however, further research is needed to confidently identify trends.

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<sup>1</sup> Baumgartner, Frank R and Leech, Beth L, *Basic Interests*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 33-36.

<sup>2</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Lobbying”. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc.* (2017) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/lobbying>.

<sup>3</sup> Mario Peucker, “The civic potential of Muslim community organisations for promoting social cohesion in Victoria,” *Victoria University and the Islamic Council of Victoria*, (2017), 47, <https://www.icv.org.au/vu-icv-research-report-launch>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

Overseas literature provides an insight for examining the activity profiles of Muslim community organisations. Radcliffe Ross examined the role of Muslim interest groups in the context of foreign policy lobbying in the US, Canada and the UK and found that a range of factors influenced the activities of the interest group.<sup>5</sup> Identity was important in determining its lobbying interests and activities: “Muslim minorities have organised politically *as Muslims*” to influence government policy, both foreign and domestic.<sup>6</sup> However, identity alone did not determine the group’s activity: competition between interest groups, current foreign policy, public debate, and organisational resources and structure were also significant factors.<sup>7</sup> This study points to the following conclusions. Firstly, the groups studied were chosen specifically because of their role as lobby groups, which indicates that some Muslim organisations do engage in advocacy and lobbying. Conversely, the research is unable to provide a picture of how advocacy and lobbying form part of the mandate of Muslim community organisations that are not specifically oriented towards foreign policy change.

Given this limited data, again, we must extrapolate from related studies. Studies of political and civic activities of Muslim individuals, as opposed to organisations, have found a relationship between Muslim religious engagement and active citizenship. This is the case both in Australia and overseas. Active citizenship “refers to a notion of citizenship that emphasizes the performative dimensions of a person’s membership of a society and political community”<sup>8</sup> as opposed to one’s legal status. In the United States, Jamal found that Arab Muslims’ engagement in mosque activity correlated with increased political activity, civic

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<sup>5</sup> Liat Radcliffe Ross, “Muslim Interest Groups and Foreign Policy in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom: Identity, Interests and Action,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 9 (2013), 289.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 290, 302.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 302.

<sup>8</sup> Mario Peucker and Rauf Ceylan. “Muslim community organizations – sites of active citizenship or self-segregation?” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, (2016), 3, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2016.1247975.

participation and group consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Ayers and Hofstetter found that mosque attendance among American Muslims increased their political participation<sup>10</sup> and Read found that “religious identity enhances civic engagement” among American Arab Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

There are similar trends across Europe. In Britain, McAndrews and Voas found “religiosity promotes civic integrations” among Muslims; although political engagement was significantly lower among groups studied.<sup>12</sup> Fleischmann, Martinovic and Bohm’s study of Turkish and Moroccan Muslims in the Netherlands found “increased civic participation and political trust among those affiliated with ethno-religious organisations.”<sup>13</sup> Peucker and Ceylan recently examined the “citizenship-enhancing effects” of Muslim community organisations in Australia and Germany and found that they “act as accessible entry point[s] for Muslims’ civic participation, facilitate cross-community engagement and provide gateways to political involvement.”<sup>14</sup> Such organisations were a crucial gateway for “a subsequently unfolding and intensifying career as active citizens.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, evidence suggests that Muslim community organisations act as gateways to increase the civic and political engagement of community members, both in Australia and overseas. It must be noted again, that with only one exception, all of these studies focused on the activity of individuals and did not measure the activities of the organisations themselves.

Social theory also provides reason to believe that collective political action, of which advocacy and lobbying are a subset, forms part of the activity profile of Muslim community

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<sup>9</sup> Amaney Jamal, “The Political Participation and Engagement of Muslim Americans: Mosque Involvement and Group Consciousness,” *American Politics Research*, 33:4, (2005), 537.

<sup>10</sup> J.W. Ayers and C. R. Hofstetter. “American Muslim Political Participation Following 9/11: Religious Beliefs, Political Resources, Social Structures, and Political Awareness.” *Politics and Religion* 1, 3-26. (2008).

<sup>11</sup> J Read, “Gender, Religious Identity, and Civic Engagement among Arab Muslims in the United States.” *Sociology of Religion* 7, 30-48, (2015).

<sup>12</sup> S McAndrew and D Voas. “Immigrant Generation, Religiosity and Civic Engagement in Britain.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, 99-119, (2014).

<sup>13</sup> F. Fleischmann, B. Martinovic, and M. Bohm. “Mobilising Mosques? The Role of Service Attendance for Political Participation of Turkish and Moroccan Minorities in the Netherlands.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, 746-763, (2016).

<sup>14</sup> Peucker and Ceylan, “Muslim community organizations,” 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 9.



organisations. According to collective action theory, political activation occurs “when a substantial minority population finds itself facing discrimination in a pluralist polity.”<sup>16</sup> As a population that fulfils both of these criteria,<sup>17</sup> Australian Muslims would be expected to engage in collective political action.

This raises the question of large-scale, i.e., national level, Muslim collective action. In Australia, other minorities facing discrimination appear to have organised nationally. There does not appear to be equivalent national-level representation for Australian Muslims. Studies overseas have identified similar phenomena. In Germany, Pfaff and Gill found that large-scale political activation is difficult for Muslim communities. Division and diversity between groups undermines such activity; thus, political activation is limited to small-scale, localised groups.<sup>18</sup> In Britain, after deliberate “efforts to unify the Muslim community under a single umbrella organisation [sic] repeatedly failed,”<sup>19</sup> the MCB came to act as the de-facto national body representing British Muslims, although this organisation was largely powerless in affecting policy change.<sup>20</sup> Further research is needed to examine the factors behind this apparent trend of inability to effectively organise at a national level.

Interestingly, Radcliffe’s study also raises the question of the role of political and social structures in determining the political participation of Muslim community organisations. Radcliffe identified a paradox: that the MCB maintained regular consultation with federal government but was ineffective in influencing British foreign policy.<sup>21</sup> Radcliffe attributed the lack of effectiveness to the British government’s prioritisation of the US alliance and

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Pfaff and Anthony J Gill, “Will a Million Muslims March? Muslim Interest Organizations and Political Integration in Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies* 39:7, (2006), 805. DOI: 10.1177/0010414006287237.

<sup>17</sup> According to the 2016 Australian Census, 2.6% of the Australian population is Muslim. Cf., Derya Iner (ed.) “Islamophobia in Australia: 2014-2016,” *Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation, Charles Sturt University*, (2017), <https://arts-ed.csu.edu.au/centres/cisac/publications>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 807.

<sup>19</sup> Liat Radcliffe, “A Muslim Lobby at Whitehall? Examining the Role of the Muslim Minority in British Foreign Policy Making,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15:3, (2004), 367.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 370.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 374, 376.

other international priorities; competition with other domestic lobbies; limited political strength of British Muslims (representing only 2.7% of the total population); and institutional weakness within the MCB.<sup>22</sup> Research within Australia has identified a growing schism that has emerged between a relatively small “civic Muslim elite” and the majority of Australian Muslims who experience socioeconomic disadvantage. Such disadvantage is a recognised obstacle to resources and participation in the civic and political arena.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it appears that there exist certain barriers preventing the full participation of Muslim communities in advocacy and lobbying.

To summarise, the study of Australian Muslim community organisations and their advocacy and lobbying activity is a new and unfolding academic domain with minimal information presently available. Limited studies in Australia and overseas suggest that some Muslim organisations do engage in advocacy and lobbying. In fact, given that the civic engagement of Muslim individuals has been positively correlated with their religious engagement, there is reason to believe that such organisations would have advocacy and lobbying in their mandates. Questions regarding the extent to which organisations engage in these activities, and their underlying influences, remain to be answered.

Furthermore, given the above, as well as social theory regarding behaviours of minority populations, we would expect to see large-scale collective action among Australian Muslim community organisations. Upon initial examination, effective large-scale collective action does not appear to have happened; although, research is needed to substantiate this claim. This raises the question of the role of social and political structures in enabling, or disabling, the political participation of such organisations. Thus, many questions remain unanswered and there is large scope for research in this area.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 377-382.

<sup>23</sup> Mario Peucker, Joshua M. Roose and Shahram Akbarzadeh. “Muslim active citizenship in Australia: Socioeconomic challenges and the emergence of a Muslim elite.” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 49:2, (2014), 298. DOI: 10.1080/10361146.2014.899967

This project aims to contribute to the beginnings of such research, by addressing three questions:

- Do advocacy and lobbying form part of the activity profiles of Australian Muslim community organisations?
- Why there is no national Muslim lobby?
- What role do political and social structures play in enabling or hindering the participation of Australian Muslim communities in advocacy and lobbying?

It is hoped that this report will make a small contribution towards the full representation and participation of Muslim communities in Australian public life.

## Method

Given the minimal existing data on Australian Muslim community organisations, this study conducted original research in order to obtain new data. A semi-structured interview method was adopted to enable the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The researcher employed specific interview techniques in order to best address limitations to the interview method.<sup>24</sup> Existing literature was examined for trends, which then informed the nature of the interview questions.

Due to the small scale of this project, data was primarily sought from organisations representing Muslims of Arab background. A cross-section of key Muslim community organisations and representatives was identified, as was a cross-section of political representatives with electorates or portfolios significant to the interests of Muslim Australians. From these cross-sections, nine interviews were conducted.

The interviews were conducted personally, either face-to-face or via phone. Responses were then analysed for trends and compared with existing research and social theory, in order to develop recommendations for the General Delegation of Palestine to Australia.

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<sup>24</sup> Beth Leech. "Asking Questions: Techniques for Semistructured Interviews." *Political Science and Politics*, 35:4, (2002), 665-668, <http://jstor.org/stable/1554805>.

## Findings and Recommendations

The present study investigated three questions. Firstly, do advocacy and lobbying comprise part of the activity profiles of Muslim community organisations in Australia? Secondly, what are the contributing factors behind the lack of an effective national Muslim lobby? Thirdly, what role do political and social structures play in enabling or hindering the participation of Australian Muslim communities in advocacy and lobbying?

In summary, the study found that:

- advocacy sits within the profiles of the Muslim community organisations investigated but lobbying generally does not;
- diversity among Australian Muslim communities pose a significant challenge to the formation of an effective national level interest body;
- increasing numbers of Muslims are engaging in advocacy and lobbying; however, the majority are disenfranchised from political processes.

The following three sections explain these findings in greater detail and provide corresponding recommendations. It should be noted that these recommendations are specifically addressed to the GDOP in order to facilitate effective engagement with Muslim community organisations. In short, this report recommends that the GDOP:

- identify and build relationships with key Muslim community organisations;
- encourage Muslim community organisations to advocate for Palestine through APAN;
- educate communities regarding practical ways constituents can engage with democratic processes;
- collaborate with Australian Muslims in positions of influence.

## ***Finding I***

The first key finding of this report is that advocacy sits within the profiles of the Muslim community organisations investigated but lobbying generally does not. From state to grassroots levels, Muslim community organisations tend to engage in advocacy but not lobbying. At a national level, there are opportunities for organisations to become more effective in both of these practices.

In Victoria, the ICV incorporates over 60 member organisations and represents over 200 000 individuals. This umbrella organisation engages in advocacy but not lobbying. In interview, President Mohamed Mohideen emphasised that the ICV is unable to engage in lobbying due to its not-for-profit status. Instead, the ICV works with government at all levels, as well as with peak bodies, to advocate for its constituents by “being the voice of the community.”<sup>25</sup>

It should be reiterated that the key distinction between advocacy and lobbying is payment. Thus, in the case of the ICV, it is possible that the organisation could engage in a specific behaviour in the name of advocacy but not engage in that very same behaviour in the name of lobbying. For example, the action of organising a rally could be considered advocacy or lobbying. In fact, the ICV did organise a rally for Rohingya as an advocacy activity. The important point is that the activity represents the ICV’s constituents and is not done for payment. This means that, if an issue matters to the ICV’s constituents and the constituents communicate the matter, the ICV should take action.

However, advocacy sits within a diverse portfolio of the ICV’s activities. Interfaith initiatives; social services; consultation with other communities, services, media and the public; promotion of an accurate, informed and positive understanding of Islam; and advocacy for

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<sup>25</sup> Mohamed Mohideen, *personal communication (personally conducted interview)*, 27 September 2017.

Australia's first peoples are also priorities of the organisation.<sup>26</sup> Thus, advocating for Muslim communities comprises only part of the ICV's activity profile.

Many of the ICV's member societies also have not-for-profit status and, like the ICV, these organisations engage in advocacy but not lobbying.<sup>27</sup> An extensive study of the civic potential of 68 Muslim community organisations in Victoria found that "political advocacy and lobbying play only a minor role within the activity profile of the Muslim community in Victoria."<sup>28</sup> Such activities feature significantly lower on the activity profiles of Muslim community organisations in this state; although, the small proportion of organisations that do engage in such activity are highly active.<sup>29</sup> Generally speaking, activities such as religious services, outreach activities, and teaching services<sup>30</sup> take a higher priority than advocacy and lobbying for Muslim community organisations in Victoria.

There are some problems with drawing this conclusion. Firstly, this is a single study and it is hard to generalise beyond Victoria. Secondly, given the confusion surrounding definitions of advocacy and lobbying, it is possible that the Victorian community organisations studied defined such terms differently to this report. Activities such as legal aid and representation to social services can also be understood as advocacy; the organisations that were identified in this report may have engaged in these practices rather than advocacy to government.

In NSW, the LMA represents Muslims at both state and federal levels. One of the objectives of the LMA is to advocate for its community. In interview, Ahmad Malas, LMA Operations Director, described the organisation's advocacy role:

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<sup>26</sup> "About Us," Islamic Council of Victoria, accessed 20 October, 2017, <https://www.icv.org.au/about/>

<sup>27</sup> Mohideen, *personal communication*.

<sup>28</sup> Peucker, "The civic potential of Muslim community organisations," 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

*“Any organisation that has any issues normally comes to the LMA and we try to resolve those – political issues... a lot of the political stuff is behind the scenes, but our strength shows when we have celebrations like Eid, and we have a line-up of Labor and Liberal politicians on the day giving speeches.”<sup>31</sup>*

Much of the LMA’s advocacy activity occurs behind the scenes.<sup>32</sup> The nature of this activity takes varying forms, depending on the issue at hand. For example, on the issue of Islamic burial requirements, the LMA worked closely with the Jewish Board of Deputies to strengthen their case before government ministers. On the issue of Rohingya Muslims, advocacy took the form of official correspondence to the Prime Minister.<sup>33</sup>

In a similar manner to the ICV, the LMA’s advocacy work sits within a diverse activity profile. The first priority of the LMA is running its services and mosques for the community. These services include community, religious, financial and social assistance.<sup>34</sup> In addition to service delivery, strategic projects and political/media engagement are also key elements of the LMA’s activity profile.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the state-level organisations studied do engage in advocacy work and this work is recognised as important; however, it is not the top priority in terms of time and resources allocated.

Nevertheless, state-level Muslim community organisations have had significant success in their advocacy work. For example, the LMA successfully advocated to the NSW Labor and Liberal parties in order to receive funding for an aged care project.<sup>36</sup> Advocacy work done by NSW Muslim communities has contributed to the current pro-Palestine movement within

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<sup>31</sup> Ahmad Malas, *personal communication (personally conducted interview)*, 18 September 2017.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*



the Labor Party.<sup>37</sup> At a national level, whether advocacy and lobbying constitute part of the mandate of representative organisations, such as AFIC, is unclear as information regarding their activity profiles was not available for this study. However, the general consensus among interviewees was that the most effective representation currently happens through state-level organisations that represent their constituents at both state and federal levels.

Thus, the data from this study paints a landscape of Australian Muslim community organisations that do engage in advocacy for their communities, but that this is prioritised after a range of other activities.

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<sup>37</sup> Maria Vamvakinou, *personal communication (personally conducted interview)*, 14 September 2017. Peter Khalil, *personal communication (personally conducted interview)*, 13 September 2017.

## ***Recommendation I***

*Identify and build relationships with key Muslim community organisations.*

As identified above, certain Australian Muslim community organisations do engage in advocacy for their constituents. The advocacy activity of these organisations may not be highly visible to the public; nonetheless, the organisations have large constituent bases that afford them a significant amount of political influence. The LMA regularly consults with both Labor and Liberal politicians, and MPs including Tony Burke, Jason Claire and Jihad Dib regularly attend the LMA's events. The ICV consults with state and federal government and there is also encouragement on the part of the government for the ICV to engage in advocacy for its constituents.<sup>38</sup> There are a small number of organisations within Victoria that are highly active in advocacy work.<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, not all organisations are equally active in this manner, so relationship building should be strategic.

Furthermore, a common theme across all interviews was that the issue of Palestine is very close to Australian Muslim communities. This is consistent with Rane et al's 2009 study that found 70% of Muslim respondents disagreed with Israel's policies and treatment of Palestinians, and that "the Israel–Palestine conflict ranks as the most important global issue for the Queensland Muslim community."<sup>40</sup> ANIC encourages imams to promote the Palestinian cause in their sermons.<sup>41</sup> In 2016, the LMA hosted a media panel where academics and imams spoke about the issue of Palestine. The LMA also has a strong relationship with the NSW government and 60 000 constituents who support Palestine.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Vamvakinou, *personal communication*.

<sup>39</sup> Peucker, "The civic potential of Muslim community organisations," 24.

<sup>40</sup> Halim Rane et al. "Towards understanding what Australia's Muslims really think," *Journal of Sociology*, 47:2, (2010), 136. DOI: 10.1177/1440783310386829.

<sup>41</sup> Sheikh Shady Alsuleiman, *personal communication (personally conducted interview)*, 14 September 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Malas, *personal communication*.

There is huge opportunity for the GDOP to network with key organisations in order to grow a critical mass with potential to influence public debate in support of Palestine.

## *Finding II*

The second key finding of this report is that diversity among Australian Muslim communities present a significant challenge to the formation of an effective national level interest body.

The broad diversity creates a challenge in that any organisation that claims to represent Australian Muslims must represent the full spectrum.

The current official national body is AFIC, whose role is to represent Australian Muslims to government and other organisations. AFIC has come under scrutiny after internal disputes in recent years<sup>43</sup> and, according to community advocate, Diana Abdel-Rahman, has lost the support of its constituents who do not feel that the organisation represents them effectively.<sup>44</sup> At present, AFIC appears to be inactive. Thus, the role of a national Muslim interest organisation remains vacant.

One of the key challenges to the formation of such a body is the huge diversity among Australian Muslims. Indeed, Australian Muslims come from 183 different countries, making them one of Australia's most culturally and ethnically diverse populations.<sup>45</sup> Contrary to stereotypes, more than 80% were born in non-Arab countries.<sup>46</sup> The majority are Sunni but there is a significant Shi'ite population as well as smaller numbers of Bektashis, Adhmadis,

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<sup>43</sup> "Keysar Trad, who said men should only hit women as a 'last resort', dumped as AFIC president," *ABC News*, 6 May 2017. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-06/keysar-trad-dumped-as-afic-president-after-emergency-election/8503214>.

Alison Branley, "Islamic Council to elect leader over weekend, as current chief vows to avoid 'controversy,'" *ABC News*, 5 May 2017. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-05/islamic-council-to-elect-leader-over-weekend/8498600>.

<sup>44</sup> Diana Abdel-Rahman, *personal communication (personally conducted interview)*, 6 October 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Riaz Hassan, "Australian Muslims: A demographic, social and economic profile of Muslims in Australia," *International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia*, 2015, 14. <http://www.unisa.edu.au/Research/International-Centre-for-Muslim-and-non-Muslim-Understanding/Publications>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

Alawis and Druze.”<sup>47</sup> A consistent theme across interviews was the importance of recognising this fact:

*“The Muslim community is not homogenous... unfortunately, sometimes it is labelled as if it is one community but things are very different on the ground”<sup>48</sup>*

*“Islamic faith is not one size fits all – there are varying view points... until we get to a point where we have an organisation... that represents the broad views... it’s going to be a very long time”<sup>49</sup>*

*“The community is very diverse. We have over 70 ethnic communities in Victoria – over 200 000 Muslims living in Victoria”<sup>50</sup>*

*“There is a fracturing of views and opinions within Islam globally and in Australia... also culturally and ethnically there are huge gulfs... Can you even represent the Muslim community? What does that mean? There are so many different groups, sects, views, traditions – who is representing who?”<sup>51</sup>*

*“The Muslim community is very diverse and no one can ever really purport to speak for everyone... Trying to get communities together is not easy”<sup>52</sup>*

This diversity creates a challenge in that, for a national body to have credibility, all groups must be represented.<sup>53</sup> Thus far, it appears that this has not happened effectively and the most effective representation has come from organisations such as the ICV, which, although

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Mohideen, *personal communication*.

<sup>49</sup> Abdel-Rahman, *personal communication*.

<sup>50</sup> Mohideen, *personal communication*.

<sup>51</sup> Khalil, *personal communication*.

<sup>52</sup> Vamvakinou, *personal communication*.

<sup>53</sup> Malas, *personal communication*.

not a national-level body, advocates for its constituents to federal government. Maria Vamvakinou, federal member for Calwell, suggested that it would be very difficult for a national-level body to accurately represent all Australian Muslims, and attempts to do so risk perpetuating stereotypes. In her electorate, Ms Vamvakinou engages with Muslim communities as individual ethnic groups:

*“We’ve been forced to view those of Muslim faith as Muslims because of events that have taken place. So, in our language, we call everyone ‘the Muslim community’ when in fact it would be the same as constantly referring to the other communities in my electorate as ‘the Christian communities’... It’s subsuming their identity and saying that they don’t have any identity other than their faith. Do we want to perpetuate that branding at a national level?”<sup>54</sup>*

Indeed, many of the key concerns for Muslim communities are not managed at a federal level but rather at a state or local level. The LMA, for example, lists their top priorities as community services, running mosques, local programs and strategic projects such as aged care and foster care,<sup>55</sup> all of which fall under state government jurisdiction.

However, there is a recognised need and desire for a national Australian Muslim organisation to exist.<sup>56</sup> According to Diana Abdel-Rahman, this is needed because “it’s more effective if you can get a group – Muslims who represent each state – together, even if they’re not all one organisation, because it has more power”. Other interviewees highlighted that advocacy and lobbying through a single body gives organisations more power because government prefers to deal with one unified voice.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Vamvakinou, *personal communication*.

<sup>55</sup> Mohideen, *personal communication*.

<sup>56</sup> Malas, *personal communication*. Abdel-Rahman, *personal communication*.

<sup>57</sup> Vamvakinou, *personal communication*. Anne Aly, *personal communication (personally conducted interview)*, 14 September 2017.

The challenge of national-level representation is not unique to Australia. Muslims in Europe have had similar challenges with national-level representation. Efforts to represent Muslims under a national body in Germany have been unsuccessful. Pfaff and Gill attribute this to the relationship between the German political system and decentralised nature of Islam, which together undermine collective action and give rise to a situation where various Islamic “factions” act in “smaller, less diverse groups.”<sup>58</sup> In Britain, Radcliffe found that “the diversity and divisions within the Muslim community... give rise to a myriad of religious, ethnic, social and political organizations,” and repeated efforts to form a national representative body have failed.<sup>59</sup> “Ethnic, linguistic, generational and political divisions have hindered a strong and unified voice” in regards to lobbying on international issues and “the competition between organizations and individuals for the role of representative means that the British Muslim voice is weakened in the corridors of power.”<sup>60</sup>

Interviewees were optimistic that some form of effective national representation is possible and offered a range of suggestions regarding what such a body could look like. These ranged from a federation-type model of separate organisations uniting on certain issues to a national lobby for the rights of minorities (not Muslim-specific), to a top-down single-issue movement.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Pfaff and Gill, “Will a Million Muslims March?” 803.

<sup>59</sup> Liat Radcliffe, “A Muslim Lobby at Whitehall? Examining the Role of the Muslim Minority in British Foreign Policy Making,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15:3, (2004), 367.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 381-382.

<sup>61</sup> Abdel-Rahman, *personal communication*. Vamvakinou, *personal communication*. Malas, *personal communication*.

## ***Recommendation II***

*The most effective way for the GDOP to mobilise Australian Muslim community organisations to advocate for Palestine is through supporting their collaboration with an existing movement, such as APAN.*

While there exists desire for a national level Muslim body, the significant challenge of unifying the diversity of Australian Muslim communities is beyond the scope of the GDOP's mandate. However, interviewees unanimously reported that the Palestinian cause is important to Australian Muslims, and thus this issue unites across communities. This raises two possible courses of national-level pro-Palestine action: the formation a national Muslim single-issue interest group to advocate for Palestine; or the mobilisation of Australian Muslims to join forces with an existing pro-Palestine movement, such as APAN. The latter is the more favourable option for two reasons. Firstly, to join forces with an existing organisation requires less time and resources than forming a single-interest group, which would require significant top-down coordination on the part of the GDOP. Secondly, advocating for Palestine through APAN reduces concerns that Muslim communities may have about speaking out "as Muslims". In the current climate of Islamophobia, many Muslims are afraid to voice their concerns publically for fear of further alienating themselves from the broader Australian community.<sup>62</sup> The extent of this concern can be seen through the silence of Muslim communities on issues such as the current same-sex marriage debate.<sup>63</sup> In short, collaboration with an existing nationwide movement such as APAN appears to be the easiest and likely most effective method for engaging nation-wide support for Palestine from Muslim communities.

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<sup>62</sup> Cf., Iner (ed.) "Islamophobia in Australia."

<sup>63</sup> Malas, *personal communication*.



### ***Finding III***

The third key finding of this report is a sense of change in the landscape of Muslim advocacy and lobbying, as increasing numbers of Muslims become active in public life. Diana Abdel-Rahman describes this change:

*“Things are slowly changing. We have people like Anne Aly and Ed Husic in federal opposition; more people from the Islamic faith are working in politicians’ offices and bring a different perspective; there are more Muslims in high positions. Social media plays a role and there is more of a concerted effort to give Muslims a voice... A multitude of things are changing the face of advocacy and lobbying at different levels”<sup>64</sup>*

Research supports this trend. According to Peucker et al, a growing class of highly educated Muslims is emerging to claim a public voice and encourage civic participation within Australia.<sup>65</sup> However, this is not the full picture. At the same time, a schism is growing between this small, highly educated class and the socioeconomically disadvantaged majority.<sup>66</sup> When compared to the general population, Australian Muslims have significantly lower income, higher unemployment rates, and are less likely to own their home. Additionally, Australian Muslims are over-represented in prisons, under-represented in high-status professions, and 25% of Muslim children experience poverty compared to 14% of children in the general population.<sup>67</sup>

This disadvantage plays out in the sphere of advocacy and lobbying. Social and educational disadvantage have been recognised as factors for lower civic engagement as well as a

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<sup>64</sup> Abdel-Rahman, *personal communication*.

<sup>65</sup> Peucker, Roose and Akbarzadeh, “Muslim active citizenship in Australia,” 282.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 282.

<sup>67</sup> Hassan, “Australian Muslims,” 14-15.

decreased sense of both citizenship and belonging.<sup>68</sup> In fact, according to Peucker et al., “the most immediate consequence of socioeconomic marginalisation is limited access to the resources that facilitate civic and political engagement.”<sup>69</sup> Anecdotally, the interviews conducted for this report support this view: “People don’t know how government and democracy work. Here you can approach politicians, but people don’t always know that.”<sup>70</sup> This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews.

In addition to socioeconomic disadvantage, a sense of alienation from the broader Australian community may limit Muslim communities’ advocacy and lobbying. According to Sheikh Shady, political engagement among Australian Muslims is minimal because “we feel that our voice is very limited.”<sup>71</sup> He attributes this to inaccurate representation by the media, misunderstanding among some politicians, and lack of awareness within parts of the Muslim community.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, a recent study demonstrated that Islamophobia exists within Australian politics, media and social media.<sup>73</sup> Antagonism from the broader community has affected the activity of community organisations such as the LMA:

*“We offer counselling to our staff because of the things we deal with daily: threats, hate mail, this stuff takes a toll on staff... if you’re involved in the political process, it’s very difficult. The burden is so heavy that sometimes we choose to remain silent on issues.”<sup>74</sup>*

At the same time, such alienation is forcing Muslim organisations to advocate for their communities. This is where the emerging class of Muslim “elite” is active. According to Peucker et al., “the emergence of an articulate Muslim elite has made a difference in the public domain and helped challenge some of the most outrageous presumptions about

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<sup>68</sup> Peucker, Roose and Akbarzadeh, “Muslim active citizenship in Australia,” 285.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 298.

<sup>70</sup> Abdel-Rahman, *personal communication*.

<sup>71</sup> Alsuleiman, *personal communication*.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Iner (ed.) “Islamophobia in Australia,” 3.

<sup>74</sup> Malas, *personal communication*.

Australian Muslims.”<sup>75</sup> Interview findings were consistent with this picture. The LMA feels it has been forced to be politically savvy and advocate for its community because, in the words of Ahmed Malas, “if you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.”<sup>76</sup> Maria Vamvakinou stated, “they’re not as politically connected as some of the other communities. The Muslim community itself has now only come in later years into the political fray... they’re on the defensive because they have to be.”<sup>77</sup> According to Diana Abdel-Rahman, Muslims are gaining more confidence to advocate and resist pressure to apologise for problems for which they are not responsible.<sup>78</sup>

In summary, current research indicates the existence of divergent trends: increasing numbers of Muslims are becoming engaged in advocacy and lobbying, yet the majority of Muslims are disenfranchised from the political process.

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<sup>75</sup> Peucker, Roose and Akbarzadeh, “Muslim active citizenship in Australia,” 283.

<sup>76</sup> Malas, *personal communication*.

<sup>77</sup> Vamvakinou, *personal communication*.

<sup>78</sup> Abdel-Rahman, *personal communication*.

### ***Recommendation III***

*Provide practical education for Muslim communities in order to empower their political participation.*

As previously mentioned, interviewees unanimously reported that the issue of Palestine is important to Australian Muslim communities. However, given the high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage, which hinder political participation, the majority is disempowered from advocating for this cause. Perpetuating this disempowerment is a lack of knowledge surrounding democratic processes.<sup>79</sup> Thus, education of communities is crucial in order to empower them to engage in advocacy and lobbying. This report recommends that the GDOP work with key Muslim community organisations in the delivery of practical education programs for constituents.

*Identify and collaborate with Muslims in positions of influence.*

The growing numbers of Muslims in positions of influence also presents an opportunity for the GDOP to engage high-profile supporters. In addition to the gradually increasing presence of Muslim Australians in the political arena, more Australian Muslims are becoming visible in public life. For example, Waleed Aly, media personality and host of television news program, *The Project*, has been ranked as Australia's fourth most influential culturally powerful person according to the 2017 Australian Financial Review Magazine's Power List.<sup>80</sup> Aly is open

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

It is important to note that Ms Abdel-Rahman identified this lack of knowledge in both Australian Muslim communities and Australia generally.

<sup>80</sup> "From Waleed Aly to Nicole Kidman: Australia's most culturally powerful named," *SBS News*, <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/10/06/waleed-aly-nicole-kidman-australias-most-culturally-powerful-named>.

about his Islamic faith and his views in support of Palestine.<sup>81</sup> The increasing presence of influential Muslims in Australian public life presents an opportunity for the GDOP to collaborate with high-profile supporters.

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<sup>81</sup> Waleed Aly, "MH17, Gaza and the value of human life," *Sydney Morning Herald opinion piece*, 25 July 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/mh17-gaza-and-the-value-of-human-life-20140723-zw8jn>.

## Conclusion

The present report makes a small contribution towards understanding the advocacy and lobbying activities of Australia's Muslim community organisations. The researcher conducted interviews with a range of community and political representatives in order to address three specific questions:

- Do advocacy and lobbying form part of the activity profile of Australian Muslim community organisations?
- Why there is no national Muslim lobby?
- What role do political and social structures play in enabling or hindering the participation of Australian Muslim communities in advocacy and lobbying?

In short, the study found that advocacy sits within the profiles of the Muslim community organisations investigated but lobbying generally does not; diversity among Australian Muslim communities poses a significant challenge to the formation of an effective national interest body; and increasing numbers of Muslims are engaging in advocacy and lobbying but the majority are disenfranchised from political processes. On the basis of these findings, the report recommends that the GDOP identify and build relationships with key Muslim community organisations; mobilise organisations to collaborate with APAN; provide practical education for communities to empower their political participation; and collaborate with high-profile Muslim Australians.

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