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By Mohamed Nassir

SYNOPSIS

In a report published in September 2025, Australia's Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia, Aftab Malik, reveals that anti-Muslim prejudices have been increasingly prevalent in Australia in recent years. He finds that these issues have been exacerbated by geopolitical events such as 9/11 and the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict. Malik's Report attributes this to factors such as negative media coverage and "divisive comments by politicians". It concludes with 54 recommendations for the Australian government to consider in combating Islamophobia.

COMMENTARY

In his report published on 12 September 2025, Australia's Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia, Aftab Malik, describes the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in Australia as "pervasive and, at times, terrifying". The report entitled, [*A National Response to Islamophobia: A Strategic Framework for Inclusion, Safety and Prosperity*](#), argues that, despite there being no universally accepted definition of Islamophobia, it should be acknowledged that incidents of privilege and discrimination against Australian Muslims are increasing.

The report begins by examining the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments in Australia in recent years and identifies some of the key factors that explain the phenomenon. It concludes with 54 recommendations aimed at addressing the problem. These recommendations are a valuable resource for countries like Singapore, which value social harmony and strive to protect vulnerable groups and foster inclusivity.

The Growth of Anti-Muslim Hate

Malik demonstrates, with statistics and case studies, how incidents of Islamophobia have become a regular occurrence for many Muslims in Australia. Although anti-Muslim sentiment predates the US "War on Terror", the report cites the 9/11 attacks

as one of the key driving factors behind the increase, finding that, in their aftermath, there was an “overwhelming proliferation of publications that contributed to narratives depicting Islam as intrinsically associated with violence, extremism and terrorism”. More recently, the conflict in Gaza has resulted in unprecedented levels of Islamophobia.

Muslim women, particularly those who wear a *hijab*, are disproportionately targeted. Malik explains that hijabs act as “visual markers of the Islamic faith”, which trigger Islamophobic responses and, therefore, mean that Muslim women are more likely to be targeted. Malik’s report describes several incidents in which women have been spat at, punched, choked and had their hijabs forcibly removed. In his foreword to the report, Usman Khawaja, an Australian international cricketer, recalls an incident where his hijab-wearing mother was verbally [abused](#) while attending one of his matches.

The psychological toll on Islamophobic victims is devastating, leading to persistent distress, anxiety, and depression. Malik’s report cites the Islamophobia Register Australia’s [data-driven account](#), which reveals that 92 per cent of Islamophobic victims experience long-term mental health effects such as fear, humiliation, and despair.

The report also cites findings by the [2024 Mapping Social Cohesion survey](#), published by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, which found that one in three Australians holds negative views of Muslims, an increase from 27 per cent in the previous year. Overall, studies cited by the report found that Muslims were viewed more negatively than all other “out-groups” in Australia. The report concludes that the impact of anti-Muslim sentiment across Australia has led to “persistent psychological strain, resulting in anxiety, depression and suicide ideation for many victims”.

The Factors Fuelling the Rise in Islamophobia

The Malik Report identifies several factors that, in combination, have created what it terms a “social licence to hate Muslims”.

First, the frequent portrayal of Muslims as a threat to national security by [negative media coverage](#) results in the “othering” of Muslims and undermines their sense of belonging. It notes the increased frequency of harassment of Muslims and attacks on mosques in the aftermath of negative media coverage or political commentary.

Secondly, the climate of suspicion, traceable to the 9/11 attacks, has fostered a lasting misunderstanding amongst many, leading to a “malaise experienced across the Western world”, often dubbed “[Islam anxiety](#)”. Khawaja highlights an important example of this phenomenon, citing the tendency of the media and politicians to mislabel crimes committed by Muslims as a “terrorist attack” and thus create a “false narrative which further fuels Islamophobia”. In contrast, crimes committed by non-Muslims are rarely categorised in the same way.

Thirdly, the report highlights that anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab sentiments following Hamas' October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel have contributed significantly to the latest wave of anti-Muslim feeling. The dehumanisation of these communities, particularly on social media, has reduced them to "abhorrent stereotypes". Malik's report argues that this dangerous framing "triggered, but most certainly contributed significantly to, the wave of Islamophobia following the 7 October attacks, and indeed, has sustained it".

Since Hamas' attacks, Australia has experienced a surge in Islamophobia, with huge increases in both in-person and online incidents. Some critics believe that Malik's report falls short of addressing a key institutional driver of Islamophobia – Australia's "[hyper-securitisation of Islam and Muslims](#)". Research indicates that the significant expansion of counterterrorism legislation, surveillance capabilities, and security rhetoric has ingrained suspicion of Muslim communities and Islam.

A Roadmap for Change

In addition to outlining the scale of the problem and identifying some causative factors, the report also proposes 54 recommendations for the Australian government to consider in dealing with Islamophobia. Malik explains that anti-Muslim sentiment "engenders social exclusion" and "corrodes a sense of belonging, citizenship and government" and, more broadly, that it "undermines Australia's core values such as mutual respect, inclusion, fairness and compassion".

The Malik Report highlights that combating Islamophobia requires a "multifaceted, multisector, whole-of-society" approach to be effective. Its recommendations are categorised and explicitly addressed to the relevant federal agencies. For example, it recommends that the Department of Education develop a national Anti-Racism and Inclusivity Framework for all educational institutions.

This would involve a review of their curriculum to ensure that information taught about Islam is accurate and ensuring that training is provided for educationists and schoolteachers on Islamophobia, the commonalities between the three Abrahamic religions, and the history of exchanges and encounters between Islam and the West. This highlights how Malik envisages that tolerance and inclusivity are achieved partially through increased knowledge and an education system which considers the similarities and relationships between groups, rather than focusing exclusively on differences between them.

Lessons for Promoting Social Harmony and Inclusivity

Despite the racial and religious harmony that exists in Singapore, it is important to learn from Australia's experiences in dealing with Islamophobia as detailed in Malik's report. Recent events in Singapore underscore the urgency of taking this step.

In September 2025, a man was charged with sending an [envelope containing pork](#) to the Al-Istiqamah Mosque in Serangoon North, Singapore, with the intention to [wound racial feelings](#). This was an example of the hateful actions that can stem from religious prejudice and intolerance. By targeting a place of worship – a potent visual

symbol of the Islamic faith – this act demonstrates that Singapore is not immune to such provocations. It is an assault on the very values of respect and understanding that form the bedrock of Singaporean society.

The Malik Report demonstrates how divisive stereotypes and narratives can dehumanise individuals and grant a “social licence to hate”. This reinforces the importance of the strict regulations in Singapore that prohibit acts prejudicial to social harmony. The report also highlights how global events require careful local management. As a globally connected city-state, Singapore must continue to take the lead in framing these events within the local context, encouraging empathy while reinforcing our shared national identity.

Of particular interest in Malik’s report is the emphasis on improving education in his recommendations. These recommendations provide a valuable tool for considering how measures to target Islamophobia and vulnerable groups more generally can be incorporated into the education system to promote inclusivity and tolerance amongst individuals from a young age.

Finally, the data from Australia reveals a significant discrepancy between the lived experiences of minorities and the majority’s perception of them. It is thus crucial that Singapore remains vigilant against casual prejudice and continues to foster a culture in which minorities feel able to speak about their experiences. Malik’s *National Response to Islamophobia* is a timely reminder that social harmony is not a destination but a journey, one that requires unwavering commitment from all segments of society.

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