

# Escalating attacks on Muslims and Arabs in Australia

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Verbal abuse and physical attacks against Arab immigrants and Muslim residents in Australia began soon after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11. During the past week, petrol bombs have been thrown at mosques and schools, while pre-schools and immigrant community buildings have been vandalised or deluged with hate mail and death-threat phone calls.

Arab community leaders report that the number of racist attacks has reached an unprecedented level. They have warned Muslim women to stay indoors or travel in groups after a molotov cocktail was thrown at one person in the West Australian city of Perth. Scores of Muslim women have been spat on or had their veils pulled off.

Telephone hotlines and support groups were established in NSW and Victoria after Arabic community organisations were swamped with phone calls reporting racist incidents. The NSW Community Relations Commission (CRC) has said that its 24-hour Arabic hotlines are receiving hundreds of calls every day and that the service, which had planned to operate for a week, will continue indefinitely. The CRC has also established a Punjabi phone service to cope with increasing incidents of physical attacks and verbal abuse of Sikh residents.

Perhaps the most cowardly attack took place on Thursday in the Brisbane suburb of Karawatha in the state of Queensland, where racist elements stoned a bus carrying primary school children with rocks and bottles. While no one was injured in the attack, the children, aged between five- and 10-years-old, were seriously traumatised and one side of the bus was badly damaged. The primary school, attended by 250 Muslim children, has been placed under 24-hour security.

The following day, two molotov cocktails were thrown at a mosque in Holland Park in Brisbane in the early hours of the morning. Police are also investigating an attempted petrol bombing of an Islamic centre on Queensland's Gold Coast. A fence outside the centre was spray-painted with the words: "You will die... Blood will be shed. We will kill all Arabs."

Last Friday over 900 people were evacuated from the

Auburn Gallipoli mosque in Sydney after bomb threats were made during a religious service. Bomb threats were also made against the nearby Lakemba mosque and the Islamic College of South Australia in Adelaide, which was forced to close. Break-ins were attempted at a Perth mosque and prayer meetings interrupted several times on the weekend in Darwin, in the Northern Territory, by car passengers shouting racist abuse and death threats.

Ali Roude, chairman of the Islamic Council of NSW, said that his organisation was deeply concerned over the escalating attacks and that a climate of fear, far worse than during the Gulf War, now permeated Arab and Muslim communities.

"We are under siege," he told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Muslim women are afraid to leave home because of harassment, while shopkeepers, small business people, workers, and of course children, are all being affected.

"We've been subjected to escalating racial abuse over the last six weeks, encouraged by talkback radio announcers intent on stirring up the worst kind of hatred. They are praying on people's emotions and winding them up to vilify Muslims or anyone from the Middle East. They have attempted to blame our community for gang rape in Bankstown, the Tampa refugee crisis and now the situation in the US. We regard the terrorist attack in the US as an act of criminality and have made this clear on every occasion. So why is this crime being attributed to us?" Roude asked.

Chadia Gedeon, a coordinator with the Lebanese Community Council in Bankstown in Sydney, told the WSW the council had been inundated with accounts of harassment. These calls, she explained, began to increase in late August, after a front-page story in the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph*, Australia's largest circulation tabloid. The newspaper claimed that gangs of Lebanese youth were involved in a wave of sexual assaults throughout Sydney's southwestern suburbs. She said that multiple copies of the newspaper were delivered to schools in these areas.

"Now we are being blamed for events in the US and are at the receiving end of all sorts of foul language and threats.

This includes women and children. Taxi drivers, especially those who display Islamic emblems in their cars or play Arabic music, have also been targeted. I know drivers who have had beer thrown in their faces and sworn at. We are all being put in the same basket and blamed for everything.” Gedeon said that Lebanese Community Council employees were forced to evacuate their office three times last week after several serious death threats.

Despite universal condemnation of the terrorist attack in the US and appeals for tolerance by Arab community leaders, senior figures in the Howard government are whipping up racialism, claiming that refugees and asylum seekers could have links with terrorists. Defence Minister Peter Reith made a number of press comments last week reiterating remarks by US Deputy Secretary of State, James Kelly, that Indonesia could be a launching pad for terrorist activity and that Australia should boost protection of its borders.

Attorney General Daryl Williams, the Minister responsible for domestic intelligence, has called for increased surveillance of immigrants while Queensland Liberal MP Peter Slipper claimed there was “an undeniable linkage between illegals and terrorists”. When asked what evidence he had to substantiate this allegation, all that Slipper could offer was that “many refugees came from Afghanistan.”

The tabloid press and talkback radio have maintained a steady stream of inflammatory comment. Hours after passenger jets slammed into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, talkback radio falsely reported that public celebrations were being held in the Sydney suburb of Lakemba. Alan Jones, a key supporter of Australian Prime Minister John Howard and 2UE talkback announcer, told his listeners that the terrorist attacks were “an act of religious war” and that “sleepers” or foreign terrorists were “infiltrating our communities and waiting, sometimes for years, to act on instructions.”

Jones singled out Afghan refugees in particular and then declared that Islam was responsible for a recent gang rape in Sydney. “Are the Muslim rapes of Australian women in the Bankstown area the first signs of an Islamic hatred towards the community that welcomed them here years ago? Have we now, because of multiculturalism, created an Islamic community in Australia that’s more aligned with Islam than it is with Australia?”

On September 13, Piers Akerman, a senior journalist with the *Daily Telegraph*, called for heightened surveillance of all under-developed countries and Muslims in Australia. “The spotlight must now be turned on the Third World which is responsible today for the delivery of international terrorism. ... How... do Muslim residents in Australia differ in their views from those of the Taliban or others capable of

ordering these atrocities? If we have to sacrifice some elements of our privacy in the interests of enhanced security, then so be it.”

Five days later in an article headlined “Opening our doors to a wave of hatred,” he described the terror attack on the US as a “wakeup call to Australia to reexamine its policy of multiculturalism”. Without any evidence whatsoever Akerman claimed Islam was a “separatist clique” operating in Australia and that non-Islamic residents were being “spat upon and cursed [by Muslims] for wearing ordinary clothing”.

While Prime Minister John Howard and some state leaders have issued statements condemning the attacks on mosques and Arab communities, their comments are thoroughly disingenuous. As Arab community leaders have emphasised—especially in Sydney, which is home to almost 200,000 Muslims—the death threats and physical attacks did not begin last week but are part of an escalating pattern of racist bigotry encouraged by government leaders.

Sari Kassis, NSW convener of the Palestine Human Rights Campaign, bluntly dismissed a public statement by NSW Labor premier Bob Carr late last week condemning racist attacks on Arabs. Carr is infamous amongst immigrant communities for his ongoing efforts to establish racial profiling of crime suspects and for a battery of laws, passed by his government, increasing the power of state police to harass immigrant youth.

“The person we must now look to, to end this cycle of racial vilification, is the same person who started it,” Kassis said. “Can Mr Carr tell any of us when the constant accusations and superstitions toward an entire community will end? We’ve borne the brunt of the Gulf War, gang rapes, ethnic crime, refugees, now terrorism.”



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