

## Defending Muslims in Wollongong

*Muslims in Australia are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment and attack, especially since September 11 and the Bali bombing. It is useful to develop and share skills, for example on how to deal with racist comments. It is valuable to know who is available to give advice and support. It is important to understand racism and how the mass media operate. It would be valuable to prepare to respond to attacks and to work on ways to build a compassionate society.*



Schweik Action Wollongong is a small voluntary group that promotes nonviolent alternatives to aggression and repression. Since 1986, some of our work has involved interviewing people about how to defend against attacks. For example, we've interviewed telecommunications workers about how to defend against a military coup. We've developed exercises to help groups build stronger internal communications.

Since the September 11 attacks and the Bali bombing, we have been concerned about the potential for government repression in Australia, especially against minority groups, and government tolerance of racism. This could easily become an even more urgent matter if, for example, a new terrorist attack occurs in Australia. At the beginning of 2003 we decided to interview people in Wollongong to find out what they thought would be useful to defend against attacks.

We approached some Muslim friends, and obtained further names from them. We

interviewed about 15 people: men and women, prominent and less prominent, from different countries. Although this is a small number of interviewees, it was sufficient for our purpose: we were seeking ideas, not carrying out a survey or opinion poll. Because we talked to many of the most prominent Muslims in Wollongong, plus a selection of others, we feel we can safely draw general conclusions about the level of organised skill-sharing, information networking and strategic planning. We hope that Muslims will consider taking initiatives in all these areas. As importantly, our suggestions apply equally to most activist communities in Wollongong.

We promised confidentiality to all interviewees. We did not include names even on our own interview notes.

None of us in Schweik Action Wollongong is Muslim. However, we believe that Muslims deserve the same freedoms, human rights and quality of life as everyone else.

This report is an attempt to provide helpful suggestions to Muslims and non-Muslims in Wollongong. We are aware that with more time and understanding, much more could be said. We offer the report as a preliminary set of ideas for Muslims and anti-racists to consider and to use as they see fit.



### **Experiences of discrimination, harassment and attacks**

As a background to our main questions, we asked about personal experiences of discrimination, harassment and attacks. These included a range of problems, of which the most common was racist comments. Women wearing the hijab are especially likely to be targets of discrimination and abuse. We know from media stories and elsewhere that there have been some serious assaults, though none of our interviewees reported being assaulted themselves.

Subsequent to our interviews and linked to the second anniversary of September 11, Dr Munir Hussain, a prominent Muslim community leader in Wollongong, was assaulted outside his chemist shop in a racist attack.

Subtle forms of discrimination can be just as damaging as verbal and physical attack. Quite a few interviewees emphasised the adverse psychological impact of the mass media, especially television. Since September 11, Muslims have often been portrayed in the media, directly or by implication, as dangerous and threatening, indeed as terrorists. This stereotyping can be quite frightening and upsetting for Muslims, and it undermines the valuable contributions of Muslims to the community. It was reported to us that many Muslims now avoid going out in public as much as before. The media, by presenting images of Muslims as people to be feared, ironically have caused much fear among Muslims.

### **Skills**

We asked what skills would be useful to defend against attacks, for example skills for dealing with racist comments.

Several interviewees told us how they responded personally to racist comments. The technique most commonly recommended was to ignore the comments or to laugh them off. Responding emotionally and aggressively was likely to escalate to a confrontation.

There was some informal sharing of experiences of racism and how to respond to them, but there seems to be no organised system for developing skills.

An Arabic community programme on local community radio station 2VOX-FM is highly valuable for fostering community identity. Producing radio programmes requires specialised skills that only a few people currently have.

Many interviewees emphasised the crucial importance of education. It was reported that quite a few older members of the Muslim community do not have formal education. Being able to read and write English opens many opportunities in Australian society.

### *Suggestions*

It is worth developing or improving several types of skills:

- conflict resolution skills, especially for dealing with hostile or threatening situations;
- interpersonal skills, for interacting with others;
- reading skills, for accessing and understanding relevant information;
- verbal skills, for speaking to individuals and groups;
- writing skills, for producing letters, reports and articles;
- media skills, for being interviewed, producing media releases and producing radio programmes, for example;

- documentation skills, to record threats or attacks by making written statements and perhaps audio or video recordings;
- financial skills, for obtaining and managing funding;
- emotional skills, for dealing with comments, media images and challenging situations in effective ways;
- self-defence skills, for defending against physical attack and raising self-confidence, especially for women who might be harassed.

It is worth organising formal training as well as informal gatherings to share experiences and help people develop these sorts of skills. Role plays, in which situations are acted out, can build confidence as well as skills. Skill development is important for everyone, including those who are already highly experienced. For some skills, it may be useful for women to meet separately.

### **Contacts**

We asked who could be contacted in case of problems, especially in an emergency.

Some interviewees recommended going to the police, but others said that many Muslims were reluctant, for various reasons, to go to the police. Others recommended contacting leaders of the Muslim community in Wollongong. One person suggested having a special telephone number. It was our impression that there is no organised system for knowing who to contact in an emergency.

Several interviewees mentioned that various religious leaders had been very supportive. Sometimes it is easier for non-Muslim groups to act against anti-Muslim discrimination, because they can't be accused of self-interest as readily.

### *Suggestions*

It would be worthwhile developing a much broader range of contacts both within the Muslim community and beyond. These might include:

- police (especially those who are supportive of Muslims);
- journalists and editors;
- interpreters;
- lawyers;
- politicians;
- human rights activists;
- community leaders (for example educators, employers, religious leaders).

It would be useful for some Muslims and their supporters, especially those who are well known, to have extensive lists of contacts in different areas, and for others to know one or more of these well-connected individuals.

We know that there are large numbers of non-Muslims who would be most willing to assist Muslims. Individuals, especially those

with relevant skills, could be approached and asked whether they are prepared to help in a crisis.

Skill development can be linked with development of contacts. For example, skilled individuals could be invited to run workshops on dealing with harassment; these individuals could then become useful contacts in an emergency.



### **Understanding**

We asked what it would be useful to know in order to help defend Muslims, for example knowledge of how racists think and knowledge of how the media operates. Our interviewees did not suggest any other possibilities.

It is often difficult to obtain practical knowledge, because powerful groups have a stake in disseminating falsehoods, myths and illusions. Advertisers prey on people's weaknesses in order to get them to buy products. Governments hide the truth to protect their power. Managers cover up corruption and dangers to the public for profit and personal gain.

One interviewee told us that, after a hostile editorial in a newspaper, a group had gone to see the editor and spoken from the heart, and this had a beneficial effect on later reportage. Knowing what sorts of actions can make a difference is the most crucial type of understanding.

### *Suggestions*

It would be useful to draw up a list of topics where further understanding could help defend Muslims against attack. Some possibilities are:

- how racists think and how to change the way they think;
- how the structure of racism operates and how to change it;
- how government policies are made and how to intervene in policy-making;
- why media use stereotypes and how to counter them;

- what drives the “war on terror” and how to oppose its damaging aspects;
- how emotions are aroused and how to avoid emotional manipulation;
- what builds community solidarity;
- how different cultures operate.

For each topic that is considered important, a small group can seek answers by reading books, searching the Internet and consulting specialists. (It is important to note that experts are more likely to understand problems than solutions.) Often there is no simple or single answer. The key thing is to begin a process of searching for answers and discussing ideas, both within and beyond the Muslim community.

### Strategy

Strategy is a plan of organised action for getting from the present situation to a desired goal. For example, many Muslims now feel under threat and there is a danger of serious

attack. A desired goal might be a Muslim community that collectively has many skills for handling problems, has strong links with supporters in the wider community, and has insight into social processes. A strategy to achieve this goal needs to take into account sources of support and opposition, areas of strength and weakness, contingencies such as terrorist attacks, and the ongoing reality of systemic racism.

Very few Muslims or others in Wollongong are consciously developing a strategy to defend against attack and build a non-discriminatory society

### Suggestions

It could be valuable for a small group of concerned Muslims to hold discussions about strategy, to consider running workshops, to invite experienced community activists to advise about strategy, and to circulate their ideas to others in the Muslim community.




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<http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/others/SAW.html>

Schweik Action Wollongong group is named after the fictional character Schweik (or Svejik), a soldier who created havoc in the Austrian army during World War I by pretending to be extremely stupid. See Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War* (Penguin, 1974).

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