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Social Integration of Muslim Settlers in Cobram

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Executive summary

This project explores issues, challenges and successes surrounding the settlement and social integration of Muslim settlers in Cobram, Moira Shire in Victoria. It looks at relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims particularly in regard to services, programs and resources that have been offered to assist settlement and promote social cohesion. The area has a long history of multiculturalism and a number of projects have been undertaken to help assist the new wave of Muslim settlers and raise cultural awareness.

Despite the best efforts of the Moira Shire Council, Muslim community leaders, and a range of NGOs and philanthropy initiatives, there have been some difficulties in integrating Muslim migrants in Cobram. The first problem relates to outdated data which does not reflect the growing size of the Muslim migrant community and its needs. A substantial increase in migrant settlement in Cobram between 2001 and 2006 is not reflected in official statistics. As a consequence community funding devoted to Cobram by Shepparton is grossly inadequate to address the needs of the Cobram Muslim migrant community.

The provision of English language teaching and translation services is another problematic area. Acquisition of English language skills is important for successful settlement and integration. However, interpreting services and funding for adequate English classes and ESL support for youth in Cobram is limited and in some cases non-existent. Nevertheless, philanthropic intervention by the Myer-Fairley Trust Fund made a difference in the provision of English language teaching.

Another area of concern is with mismatched employment expectations for Cobram's Muslim migrants, many of whom come from high educational backgrounds. Unemployed women in particular often carry a heavy burden.

Mental health issues are of concern with many in the community having been victims of torture and trauma and/or unable to find meaningful employment in their fields of choice. There is stigma attached to mental illness and a lack of specialised health services and awareness of how to seek and receive help.

There are notable assimilationist expectations among some sections of the community, comparing the "difficulties" of Muslim settlement with "success" stories about the older Italian community. The Moira Shire Council and local service providers have been active in responding to these expectations by launching projects to raise awareness of the value of cultural diversity. Projects to promote multiculturalism in Cobram have been welcomed by the Muslim community and have generally helped make bridges of understanding.

This project identified certain areas of need addressed in the recommendations. These include increasing English language classes and resources; cultural awareness training and interfaith/cultural meetings; provision of specialist health services and promoting awareness and access to health services; retraining and re-certification for skilled migrants; update demographic information about Cobram; promote compliance with legal obligations; extend funding for projects and build upon previous successes; as well as direct funding to Moira Shire for projects targeting Muslim settlers.

Introduction

Muslim contact with Australia is known to have predated white settlement, with Macassan traders having contact with Indigenous tribes in the north. Although a small number of Muslims sent to Australia as convicts and Afghan cameleers helped open the forbidding Australian interior, large scale Muslim migration did not occur until the end of the White Australia policy in the middle of the twentieth century.¹

Today, there are around 300,000 Muslims in Australia, forming about 1.5 per cent of the total population. Australian Muslims come from a wide variety of ethnic, educational and socio-economic backgrounds. They speak diverse languages and hold a full spectrum of theological, sectarian and political views. Thus, it is problematic to speak of a "single Muslim community with uniform needs and aspirations."²

Despite the relatively small number of Muslims, this community has attracted a disproportionate amount of media attention and public scrutiny in recent years, due to terrorist events overseas and the involvement of Australian forces in combat situations in the Muslim world. Some commentators have questioned the political loyalty of Australian Muslims and the adverse effects of growing unease about Muslims have resulted in a rise in racially and religiously motivated discrimination, intimidation and even physical attacks on Muslims in Australia.³ There has been a corresponding increase in initiatives to address misconceptions about Muslims in Australia and to restore trust and goodwill between Muslims and the broader community. The need is especially important in localities that have witnessed a rapid demographic rise in Muslim numbers through immigration and natural growth.

In little more than a decade, the rural Victorian town of Cobram has become a place of settlement for an increasing number of Muslim migrants, the largest

majority of whom are Iraqi Shi'i Muslims who were given temporary or permanent humanitarian visas. This program has not been easy. Some members of the wider non-Muslim community have felt unsure about the culture and customs of the new migrants and a number of incidents occurred including a work and school strike by Iraqis due to perceptions of racism and the burning of an Iraqi-run shop.⁴

However, Cobram has a history of multicultural settlement, with a significant Italian population having settled in the area in the post-World War II period. Over the last few years, a concerted effort has been made to help settle Cobram's new migrants, including the running of specific projects and activities addressing their needs and promoting multiculturalism. As such, Cobram may prove instructive in how a community deals with the social integration of a culturally and linguistically diverse population.

The purpose of this research is the exploration of relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim residents, community leaders and service providers in Cobram, Victoria. It aims to uncover impressions of successes and difficulties with migrant integration and discover how Muslim settlement is perceived by individuals from different sections of the community. It makes recommendations to assist and promote multiculturalism as an approach for managing culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

1 B. Cleland, *The Muslims in Australia: a Brief History* (Melbourne: Islamic Council of Victoria, 2002), p.1.

2 A. Saeed and S. Akbarzadeh, 'Searching for Identity: Muslims in Australia', in A. Saeed and S. Akbarzadeh (eds), *Muslim Communities in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001), p.2.

3 S. Poynting and G. Noble, *Living with Racism: the Experience and Reporting by Arab and Muslim Australians of Discrimination, Abuse and Violence since 11 September 2001*, 19 April 2004, at: <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial%5Fdiscrimination/isma/research/UWSReport.pdf>, accessed 27 June 2006.

4 Anonymous, 'Iraqi Racism Claim', *Cobram Courier*, 19 March 2003, at: <http://archives.mcmedia.com.au/story.asp?TakeNo=200303191670707>, accessed 4 July 2006; and Anonymous, 'Shop Destroyed', *Cobram Courier*, 15 October 2003, at: <http://archives.mcmedia.com.au/story.asp?TakeNo=200310152704000>, accessed 4 July 2006.

Methodology

Description of research design

The freshness of research on Muslim settlement in rural communities, coupled with the need to explore meanings grounded in data drawn primarily from semi-structured, in-depth interviews, meant that it was only natural to choose the qualitative paradigm as the research framework. According to Lawrence Neuman, qualitative research is non-positivist in character focusing on subjective meanings drawn from the data to generate themes and motifs, which are analysed to present a coherent picture.⁵

Data was obtained through fieldwork in the form of participant-observation and in-depth interviews that took between half-an-hour to an hour long. Construction of meaning was realised by second-order interpretation of data given by participants (who themselves interpret meaning at a first-order level), with some third-order implications presented in the conclusion of the report. Triangulation to validate findings occurred through a follow-up group meeting with participants to present and discuss themes generated from interpretation of the data.

Letters of invitation were sent to Muslim and non-Muslim community leaders in Moira Shire as well as service providers to the Muslim community in Cobram inviting them to an introductory meeting with the research team: Prof. Gary Bouma, Dr Shahram Akbarzadeh and Ms Rachel Woodlock. At the introductory meeting the proposed study was presented and discussed with members of the Cobram community. This was followed up with phone contact and the distribution of invitations to participate.

Interviews were arranged with purposefully selected participants representing various groups in the community, namely council members; employers, Muslim and non-Muslim community leaders; male and female Muslim migrants; police; and service providers to the Muslim community. Although most participants were happy to be named as participating in the research and/or to be directly quoted, to protect the privacy of those that requested anonymity, identifying details of participants have generally been obscured.

The exception to this is where it would have been impossible to relate informed perspectives without identifying the individual involved – such as that of the Arabic-liaison police officer – and they specifically gave permission to release their identity.

Taped interviews were transcribed and mind-mapped, along with observation notes. Responses were coded to generate themes, which were presented to participants in a follow-up group meeting; a narrative emerged with the writing of the final report.

Delimitations

The qualitative research paradigm requires that delimitations and possible biases are identified in order to help verify the trustworthiness of the research. In the present study, a non-random sample group of limited size was purposefully selected to gather data from informed individuals. Furthermore, it was decided to limit interviews to adults who had at least a basic competency with English language skills. Although perspectives of non-English speaking Muslims, or children and youth were not directly sought the issues raised in this report have direct relevance to these groups.

⁵ L. W. Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994), p.317.

The research team comprised of two professional academics with a strong background in research and publications on interfaith relations and Muslim communities in Australia, and interviewing was done by a research assistant who is a Muslim of Anglo-Celtic Australian background. As well, regard for Australian multiculturalism informed the undertaking and presentation of the research, namely the four principles outlined in the federal government's most recent policy statement on multiculturalism:

Responsibilities of all – all Australians have a civic duty to support those basic structures and principles of Australian society which guarantee us our freedom and equality and enable diversity in our society to flourish;

Respect for each person – subject to the law, all Australians have the right to express their own culture and beliefs and have a reciprocal obligation to respect the right of others to do the same;

Fairness for each person – all Australians are entitled to equality of treatment and opportunity. Social equity allows us all to contribute to the social, political and economic life of Australia, free from discrimination, including on the grounds of race, culture, religion, language, location, gender or place of birth; and

Benefits for all – all Australians benefit from productive diversity, that is, the significant cultural, social and economic dividends arising from the diversity of our population. Diversity works for all Australians.⁶

As Bouma notes in *Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia*, multiculturalism recognises more than one “normal” cultural and religious way of being, although this can be discomfiting for those belonging to the “formerly entrenched dominant groups” who view themselves as normative and others as needing to adapt, change and assimilate.⁷ Nevertheless, the sense of inclusion that multiculturalism fosters is vital for generating an Australian Muslim identity that can transcend ethnic and language barriers. As Akbarzadeh writes:

This sense of inclusion is, in fact, important for the well-being of Australian society. It fosters commitment and social responsibility among Muslim residents, facilitating the emergence of an Australian Muslim identity.⁸

Cobram represents a microcosm of Australia. All the issues that affect the social integration of Muslims in Australia are present in Cobram. This study therefore presents a snapshot of multiculturalism and integration with obvious pointers for further research. In this sense this project is a pilot study of Australia's achievements and limitations in absorbing Muslim migrants.

6 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity*, 2003, p.6, at: http://www.immi.gov.au/multicultural/_inc/pdf_doc/united_diversity/united_diversity.pdf, accessed 27 June 2006.

7 G. D. Bouma, *Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994), p.89.

8 S. Akbarzadeh, 'Unity or Fragmentation', in A. Saeed and S. Akbarzadeh (eds), *Muslim Communities in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001), p.229.

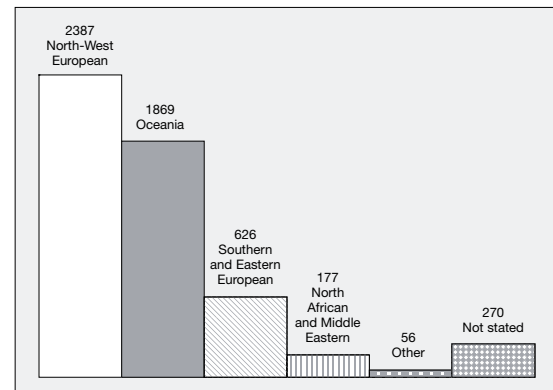
I. About Cobram

Cobram is the largest township in Moira Shire, located on the northern Victorian border around 220 kilometres from Melbourne and 56 kilometres from Shepparton.⁹ The river-border separates Cobram from its sister city Barooga in New South Wales, although they share the same Victorian postcode of 3644.

It is believed the original occupants were Bangerang Aborigines who lived in the Murray Goulburn area. In 1845, Octavius Phillpotts took up the Cobram pastoral station. By the 1870s and 1880s, settlers were farming wheat and later irrigated orchards. The railway line was extended to Cobram in 1888 and a year later a river punt began operating. Cobram Shire was created in 1953, which was later incorporated into Moira Shire in 1994. Today, the area's industries include agriculture, horticulture, viticulture and tourism.¹⁰

In the 1920s, Italian migrants moved to Cobram, their numbers increasing with post-war migration to become a significant minority. According to the most recent census of population and housing taken in 2001, the total population of Cobram was 4542 (not including 12 overseas visitors). Although Oceanian and North-West European origins accounted for 79 per cent of responses to the question of ancestry, 10 per cent indicated an Italian background and 305 people reported they spoke Italian at home (see Figure 1).¹¹

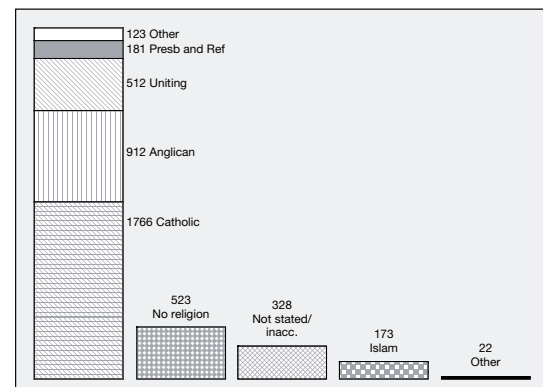
Figure 1: Responses to the Question of Ancestry for Residents in Cobram



Source: ABS, Cobram, 2002.

The largest religion in Cobram is Christianity. In 2001, there were 3494 people who indicated they were Christians; 77 per cent of the total population (not including 12 overseas visitors). Of the various denominations, the Catholics are the biggest group, followed by the Anglicans; the Uniting Church; the Presbyterian and the Reformed Churches; and then a number of other Christian denominations (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Religious Affiliation in Cobram



Source: ABS, Cobram, 2002.

Since the late 1990s, Muslim migrants began moving into the area and the same census recorded

9 Geoscience Australia, As the Cocky Flies, at: <http://www.ga.gov.au/map/names/distance.jsp>, accessed 26 June 2006.

10 Bangerang Cultural Centre, Bangerang, the Tribal Country / Culture of the Murray /Goulburn Aborigines, 2004, at: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~bangercc/histbangppl.html>, accessed 26 June 2006; Cobram Victoria, November 2004, at: <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/ncas/multimedia/gazetteer/list/cobram.html>, accessed 26 June 2006; Moira Shire Council, About Moira, at: http://www.moira.vic.gov.au/council_government/council05.html, accessed 26 June 2006.

11 Because it was possible for a respondent to nominate more than one answer to the question of ancestry, with a maximum of two being coded by the ABS, the number of responses does not match the number of people. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cobram (Vic) (Urban Centre/Locality) Basic Community Profile, 2002, at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@cpp.nsf/8ca62bfefad503cca257059000a1d99/1a84a986b8cb4c4eca25710a001e8d78!OpenDocument>, accessed 14 June 2006.

173 respondents with the religious affiliation of Islam (see Table 1).¹²

Table 1: Population figures^a for Cobram, postcode 3644 and Moira Shire

	Area	Total Population	Muslim population	%
Cobram	7 sq km	4 542	173	3.8%
Moira Shire	4 045 sq km	25 401	183	0.7%

Source: ABS, Cobram, 2002 and ABS, Moira, 2002.

^aFigures do not include overseas visitors.

The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) Settlement Database indicates that from the period of 8 August 2001 to 9 June 2006, a total of 43 new settlers who voluntarily described themselves as Muslim moved into Moira Shire.¹³

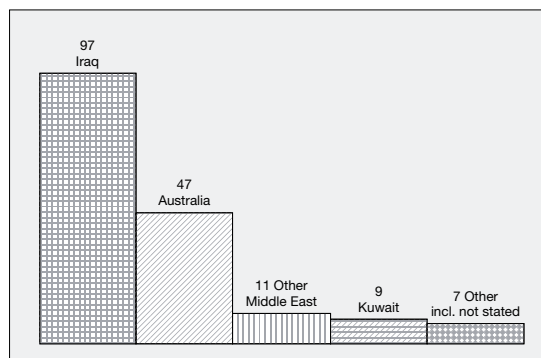
As of June 2005, it was estimated there were around 80 refugees with Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) in Cobram-Barooga, 60 of whom were Iraqis and 20 were Afghan Hazara.¹⁴

From this and anecdotal reports, it is estimated that the Muslim population has increased since the last census and a variety of sources place the number

of Muslims in Cobram at around 450, edging closer to 10 per cent of the population.¹⁵

For those Cobram residents who reported a religious affiliation of Islam, two thirds of responses nominated Iraqi ancestry according to the 2001 census data. The majority of Muslims were born in Iraq, although the second largest group was Australian born and two thirds of Muslims had Australian citizenship (see Figures 3 and 4).¹⁶

Figure 3: Birthplace of Muslims in Cobram



Source: ABS, file generated from 2001 Census data.

12 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cobram, 2002; Australian Bureau of Statistics, Moira (S) (Local Government Area) Basic Community Profile, 2002, at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@cpp.nsf/Lookup/LGA24900Main%20Features12001?OpenDocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=LG A24900&issue=2001&num=&view=&>, accessed 14 June 2006.

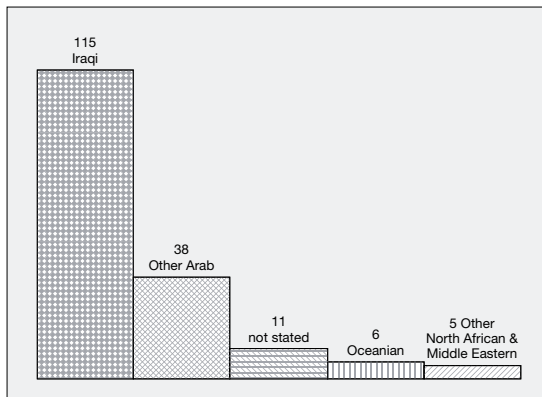
13 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Settlement Database, 9 June 2006, at: <http://www.immi.gov.au/settle/data/index.htm>, accessed 27 June 2006. It should be noted that providing information about religious affiliation is voluntary. As well, DIMA gathers its statistics as part of the processing of migrant applications. Although some data is obtained through Adult Migrant Education enrolments and through citizenship applications, generally the figures do not reflect secondary movement of settlers (ie if a migrant first settled in Shepparton and then later moved to Cobram.) As such, accurate statistics about the current population of Muslims in Cobram will not be available until the release of information from the upcoming 2006 Census.

14 Ecumenical Migration Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Closing the Gap for TPV Refugees in Victoria: A State-wide Action Plan, 2005, p.3, at: http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/TPV_action_plan_2005.pdf, accessed 27 June 2006.

15 Victorian Multicultural Commission, Snapshots of Victorian Local Government: Good Practice in Cultural Diversity, 2 October 2003, pp.17-19, at: <http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/news/items/Analysis%20of%20Local%20Government%20Areas%20files/Diversity%20Conference%20Presentation.doc>, accessed 14 February 2006; Sidney Myer Fund and The Myer Foundation, Annual Report 2004-2005, p.31, at: http://www.myerfoundation.org.au/upload_files/attachment/2004-2005ar.pdf, accessed 12 March 2006.

16 Australian Bureau of Statistics, file generated 17 March 2006 from 2001 Census of Population and Housing, ABS data available on request.

Figure 4: Ancestries of Muslims in Cobram



Source: ABS, file generated from 2001 Census data.

Summary

Cobram is a large rural town situated on the Murray River border, north of Shepparton. It is home to approximately four and a half thousand people, the majority of whom come from Oceanic and North-West European roots, but with sizeable Italian and Iraqi populations. The majority of residents in Cobram are Christian, but over the past decade a number of Muslim migrants, most on humanitarian visas, have settled in the area contributing to the multicultural, multi-religious characteristic of the society.

II. Settling in Cobram

Choosing Cobram

The first theme to arise from interviews conducted with participants was that of Cobram as a place of settlement. One participant recalled that the first Muslim family to arrive in Cobram in the 1990s was sponsored by a doctor. This family became established in the community and was a point of connection for later migrants.

When asked why migrants might be choosing Cobram, a number of responses arose from the interviews:

- Perceptions of Cobram as a safe, multicultural, tolerant community with small-town benefits such as ease of accessing local amenities.
- Previous settlement by Muslim relatives and friends who then encouraged more new migrants to come to Cobram.
- Encouragement by immigration officials on the basis of availability of seasonal work and public housing in Cobram.

The Moira Shire is a centre for tourism as well as agricultural, dairy, horticultural and viticultural industries and seasonal work such as fruit-picking and pruning is plentiful. Combined with the precedent of previous Muslim settlement, this may well lead to further expansion of the Muslim community in the future. Retaining Muslim settlers, however, has proved somewhat of a challenge. Cobram has seen a shifting migrant population, with new migrants moving on to large cities such as Melbourne and Sydney due to a lack of employment in their fields of choice; difficulty dealing with language and cultural barriers; and for study opportunities not available locally. Three of the Muslim interviewees expressed their own plans to move away from Cobram in the near future and one non-Muslim participant noted:

In the early days it was a bit of a revolving door, but it seems to be more settled now. People who have come have stayed, friends and connections being made. Lack of work opportunity has been the biggest frustration.

It is unclear whether DIMA has been actively promoting Cobram as a potential place of settlement, but that was the impression given by several of the non-Muslim participants. Contrary to this suggestion, however, a Muslim community

leader narrated a story in which he was specifically discouraged from moving to the town. Before coming to Australia in 2000, Sheik Yassin Al-Karawi – a trained imam – had inquired from friends if there were any places with Iraqi communities lacking an imam, so that he could offer his services; he was told that Cobram was just such a town. After he and his family were successful in their visa applications, Al-Karawi informed a DIMA official that they wanted to live in Cobram. According to him, he was informed they would not get any support in Cobram, and that instead the family should move to Wagga Wagga in New South Wales, which boasted, among other things, an Iraqi association.

I ask, before I came to Australia, is there any city or town there is no imam there. And this man, my friend in Melbourne, told me there is a small Iraqi community in Cobram without an imam. But the Australian immigration advised me to live in Wagga Wagga. I asked 'why?' They said: 'Because there is a community and an Iraqi association in Wagga Wagga and it's better for you.'

Instead they found only a few Muslim families of different backgrounds and there appeared to be no Iraqi association.¹⁷ Fifteen days after arriving in Wagga Wagga, the family moved to Cobram as they had initially desired, and which actually did have an Iraqi association. Today, the Sheik acts as the imam for Cobram's Muslim community and is active in promoting inter-cultural and religious harmony.¹⁸

¹⁷ According to the 2001 Census, Muslims make up just under 0.2% of the Wagga Wagga population with 93 Muslims out of a total of 50,439 people. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Wagga Wagga (NSW) (Statistical Subdivision) Basic Community Profile, 2002, at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@cpp.nsf/Lookup/15005Main%20Features12001?OpenDocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=15005&issue=2001&num=&view=&>, accessed 14 June 2006.

¹⁸ These activities include mediation meetings and Al-Karawi has been interviewed a number of times for local newspapers explaining the beliefs and customs of the Muslim community. See Appendix C for examples.

Settlement assistance

The Muslim interviewees were asked whether they had received help settling in Cobram, and if so, who had helped them. The following affirmative responses were generated describing assistance received from:

- The settled Muslim community.
- Support workers at the local Community House.
- Nurses from the Maternal and Child Health Service.
- Government funds for immediate settlement needs such as buying furniture.
- Programs such as the 'A Country Welcome' project run by the Moira Shire Council and English classes via the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP).

From accounts given, the local Muslim community has provided a great deal of friendship and support for new migrants. This has included activities such as visiting new settlers; driving them to Shepparton to access Centrelink; taking them to the local hospital and generally welcoming them to the area. For example, in response to the question of whether they had received any help from local Muslims, one interviewee said:

Yes, yes. Because we have my brother-in-law here, we didn't need any help, but they visited us. The family of my husband, brought some things, introduced us. And my brother-in-law took us to Shepparton to finish all the papers, Centrelink, Medicare, Health Care Card.

In the interview with Sheik Yassin Al-Karawi, he touched on the friendly nature of the Cobram Muslim community: "One day I arrived from the travelling, from *hajj*, and the same day or next day, many people come to my house, they are very happy, they ask about their people." He explained that unlike communities in the bigger cities, the Muslim residents in Cobram see each other regularly:

You can't see this in Shepparton or Melbourne. Maybe for the big cities, no-one can go every day to the place to pray, but Cobram, because it is small, everyday you can go to pray, and we saw each other.

Establishing a place of prayer

Muslims are required to perform ritual prayers at various points throughout the day, and congregational prayers are considered an essential Islamic activity, therefore the mosque is an important feature of any Muslim community. It is particularly so for those living as minorities, not only as a place of prayer and education, but as a specially dedicated niche for Islamic customs and traditions to be observed. Bouma notes that for Muslim settlers, a mosque provides:

... a symbolic focus of identity, a physical location around which [the] faith is centred, a group of like-minded and similarly experienced people, a place where they can seek advice and support, and which they can support by giving their time, energy and money.¹⁹

Early on, an important need for the Muslim community in Cobram was to establish a place for regular communal prayers. Initially, the community gathered together in private homes or in the meeting room of the council offices. Later, they hired a former squash club. Two years ago, Dr Sami Abed (a local physician) offered the use of a rent-free property as a prayer hall. Volunteers renovated the property and now regular prayers are held in the evenings and important Islamic commemorations are observed.

When Cobram hosted the multicultural festival 'Celebrating Diversity, Our Community Mosaic' in November 2005, the prayer hall was opened to members of the public to learn about Islam, the history of Iraq and to hear the life stories of local Muslims. About sixty people attended and the event received positive media coverage.²⁰ One non-Muslim respondent described the event, saying:

¹⁹ Bouma, *Mosques*, p.62.

²⁰ Anonymous, 'New Friendships', *Cobram Courier*, 16 November 2005, at: <http://archives.mcmedia.com.au/story.asp?TakeNo=200511165852562>, accessed 4 July 2006.

At this session they had three or four of the other men talk about their experience here in Australia, and their hopes and dreams. And that was great. That's the sort of stuff. For someone to say, 'I'm struggling at the moment, I can't get a job because my English is poor. But I want a job. I want a life in Australia.' That's what everyday people here, wanted to hear.

Providing opportunities for local Muslims and non-Muslims to learn about each other is an important part of promoting multiculturalism and social harmony.

Summary

Muslim settlement in Cobram can be attributed to a number of factors, but primarily it appears to be the result of encouragement by family and friends already settled in the area, particularly given the strong community ties evident amongst Cobram's Muslims. Already-established migrants are an important source of support for new settlers, and harnessing their cooperative spirit could also be beneficial to the wider community.

The availability of seasonal work and public housing may have contributed to an increase in Muslim settlement in the area, although in at least one case DIMA did not recommend the town, and there has been some difficulty in retaining settlers, a number of whom move on to the bigger cities after briefly spending some time in Moira Shire.

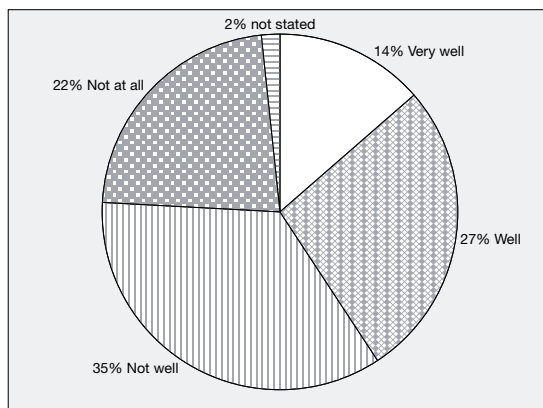
Once Muslims began settling in Cobram, it became important for them to have access to a place in which they could perform congregational prayers and gather to celebrate festivals and commemorations. After a number of temporary locations, a permanent location for a prayer-hall was donated by a philanthropic member of the community. An open event at the prayer-hall has allowed Muslims an opportunity to inform the wider community about their history, beliefs and customs: an important step in promoting social cohesion.

III. English language learning

English language issues

Of the 169 responses to the question of English language proficiency by Muslims in Cobram in the 2001 Census, around 40 per cent indicated they could speak English well or very well, and around 57 per cent indicated lower levels of English proficiency (see Figure 5). This indicates an important need for English language services to be provided to migrants in Cobram.

Figure 5: Levels of English Proficiency among Muslims in Cobram



Source: ABS, file generated from 2001 Census data.

Interviewees in 2006 indicated that a similar proportion of English language proficiency still prevails.

Many interviewees discussed the lack of English skills being a major barrier to successful settlement and integration of migrants. Issues that arose included:

- Feelings of embarrassment due to low level English skills, leading to hesitation in interacting with non-Arabic speakers.
 - Lack of English hindering employment opportunities.
 - Lack of English hindering efforts for settlers to start up their own businesses.
 - Lack of English as a barrier to understanding legal rights and duties in areas such as tax, welfare, and the general practicalities of filling in forms and reading important documents.
- Feelings of being “too old” to learn English by some adult migrants, leading to isolation from the community.
 - Having to rely on limited access to interpreters with both service providers and migrants becoming frustrated with communication difficulties.
 - Victims of domestic abuse not being aware of how to obtain help due to language barriers and lack of awareness of resources and services.
 - Lack of English skills in, and ESL support for, school-age children contributes to their failing subjects and year levels, which can lead to their leaving school early.

While several service providers felt that not enough hours were funded for non- or low-level English speakers, some of the Muslim women felt that three sessions of three hours per week suited their needs and it might be difficult for them to arrange time from their busy lives to attend more sessions. Alternatively, other Muslims expressed a strong desire for more English classes, with one participant moving to Melbourne shortly after being interviewed in order to take advantage of increased hours offered at TAFEs in the city.

Interviewer: “Would you prefer more English classes?”

Respondent: “Yes I like that more, because of that I decided to move to Melbourne. Classes are available from 9 to 3.30 in Melbourne.”

Interviewer: “Are you and your husband happy to move to Melbourne?”

Respondent: “Yes, very happy. Yes, because there are more opportunities to study, and I would like to study medicine, but here in Cobram there is no college or university.”

English language projects

One interviewee, Moira Shire Mayor Ed Cox, was involved in proposing a project to provide English language education to parents of school children. The proposal involved an after-hours program in the local school with volunteer teachers, but it did not receive support and the project was aborted. He explained:

We tried to set up a program where the kids came in and they brought mum and dad in after school, so we could teach them English...got knocked on the head from the Education Department. Because of insurance problems and all this sort of thing. It was four or five years ago. We had teachers that were committed to run it. Just for half an hour, 'cause they just wanted to make it happen, and it just got pooh-poohed.

It was expressed by a number of participants that promoting the learning of English and providing more and varied opportunities to learn English would help ensure successful integration for their migrant Muslim community. This included the suggestion that more experiential teaching was needed and more and better teaching resources be made available for teaching English.

One project recently initiated in April 2006 is an interpreter's course funded by the Myer Foundation and run by Deakin University. Sixteen people were tested and fourteen possibly suitable candidates were found to learn how to interpret. It is hoped that this project will help address the shortage of available interpreters for the Arabic speaking community in Cobram. As one participant noted:

Hopefully we'll get some locally-based interpreters. Because we do have to rely on interpreters and half the time you can't get them. This is half the problem for the Arabic community, going to the doctors etc for the women especially. 'Why should I go, because they won't understand me.' So there's that negative beforehand.

Summary

English language skills are vital for the successful settlement and integration of new migrants. A significant number of Muslims in Cobram have low-levels of English proficiency, which contributes to feelings of frustration and embarrassment as well as negatively impacting on their ability to operate successfully in the broader society. Some interviewees felt that the amount and type of English language learning opportunities are not meeting the needs of Cobram's migrants; however there have been some attempts to address the English language needs of settlers.

IV. Service provision and funding

Funding biases

A strong theme that came through the interviews was the statistical and geographical biases that have disadvantaged Cobram in receiving appropriate government funding to help with the influx of new settlers. There is a lack of accurate data on the number of Muslims living in Cobram due to an increase in migration to the area since the collection of the most recent census in 2001 and DIMA statistics do not reflect secondary settlement. This problem was noted in a report produced for the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI). In *Supporting Migrant and Refugee Youth in Shepparton & Cobram* it was reported that the lack of accurate knowledge negatively impacts on the provision of services to (in this case) culturally and linguistically diverse youth.²¹

Cobram is the largest rural town in Moira Shire but it does not have offices representing government agencies such as Centrelink, nor specialist health services, such as gynaecologists, obstetricians, psychiatrists etc. These are available in Shepparton, but the distance (close to 60 kilometres) makes accessing them a hardship for many new migrants. There is limited public transport, and often new settlers have to rely on family and friends to drive them to Shepparton. The distance also means that to attend a Centrelink office for a simple appointment might take a good part of the working day. As one service provider elaborated:

Now you could have an appointment in Shepparton tomorrow; that causes them [new settlers] some grief. ... We have outreach posts, but we don't have a Centrelink officer. So if you have problems with Centrelink, you have to go to Shepparton. Same with specialists; from mental health, to gynaecologists to ophthalmologists. You have to go to Shepparton. You can't get those sort of services here.

One of the Muslim participants noted that Cobram provided good general health services for the Arabic speaking community, and that midwives were extremely helpful, often coming to women's homes when needed, but that trying to access more specialised services was difficult:

I think the people in Cobram are happy, but the women – especially the pregnant women – suffer because no doctors deliver babies here in Cobram. ... There is a good centre for the children and always the midwives come to the house, if the woman can't go to the centre or if she doesn't have a car. They are helpful, they are good. And we have about three doctors that speak Arabic: one Syrian, two Iraqi. They are good. The only problem is about delivering the babies.

There is also a statistical bias that disadvantages Cobram. Nearly all of Moira Shire's Muslims live in Cobram, which has a total population of around four and a half thousand. It is estimated that around 450 people or close to 10 per cent of Cobram's population is Muslim, the majority of whom are new settlers. However, Cobram's council, Moira Shire, covers a geographic area of 4057 square kilometres, including Yarrowonga, Numurkah, Nathalia and eighteen smaller towns and communities totalling a population of more than 26,000.²² Thus, only 1.7 per cent of Moira Shire's total population is Muslim, and government funding to support migrant services is based on shire-wide statistics based on the 2001 census, reducing the figure to a mere 0.7 per cent. As such, the social and economic difficulties that Cobram faces as a host community for new migrants are not being fully addressed due to the statistical bias.

Several participants expressed the view that the Ethnic Communities' Council of Shepparton and District, as the regional centre that receives and distributes government funding, does not recognise the specific needs of Cobram, and thus appropriate funding is not provided to the Shire. As one non-Muslim community leader noted:

[We are] not particularly well-served by the Multicultural Committee in Shepparton, you can quote me. They didn't understand our problem or address it as well as they could have. Might have been money constraints, but we weren't recognised as a small community struggling with a big problem, and we're still not.

21 S. Prideaux, *Supporting Migrant and Refugee Youth in Shepparton & Cobram* (Melbourne: Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2005), p.22.

22 Moira Shire Council, Moira Shire: On the Murray, at: <http://www.moira.vic.gov.au>, accessed 4 July 2006.

Funding English classes

Lack of funding was also a problem in the provision of English classes in Cobram. Currently, the Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE (GOTAFE) funds one teacher to provide six hours a week of English for the men, run in two three-hour sessions in the evening, and nine hours of English for the women run in three three-hour sessions during the day. A number of interviewees expressed the opinion that this was not adequate to meet the needs of migrants lacking English skills. Furthermore, unlike in larger cities and regional centres, Cobram does not have an intensive language centre for school-age children, which means that some children are being placed in mainstream classes with little or no English language skills. With no English as a Second Language (ESL) support in classes, some young migrants are failing two or three school years in a row. As noted in the CMYI report looking at youth from culturally and linguistically diverse communities:

There is a concern that if young people are not given adequate opportunities to build a strong command of English that we will create a class of disenfranchised youth because their opportunities in relation to employment, training and education and overall community integration will be severely limited.²³

Some dissatisfaction with the provision of English classes for adults was resolved after the Myer and Fairley Foundations grant for English House. Until that point, English classes had been variously offered at the Community Centre and the Scout Hall, which participants found disruptive and difficult. The Community Centre was not always available and had limited childcare, which affected women's ability to access English classes and the Scout Hall was not a comfortable venue. As one Muslim respondent noted:

Before that [the use of English House] we were confused where we were going to have the English classes. The Community House is always busy for the disabled people, for meetings, and it's a small building. And then we had the English class at Scout Hall which is too hot, and not good.

²³ Prideaux, *Supporting Migrant and Refugee Youth*, p.16.

The Myer and Fairley Foundations initially agreed to provide funding for GOTAFE to lease English House from the Cobram District Hospital for a year, at the end of which both foundations agreed to fund English House for a further twelve months. This funding period was due to end in June 2006.

An issue that arose in the interviews, as well as being noted in the CMYI report, was the short-term nature of funding opportunities that are used to run programs for migrants in Cobram. Several service providers expressed frustration that the "wheel was being reinvented" with relatively self-contained projects being funded for only limited amounts of time, rather than for extended periods, or for projects to build upon each other. As well, research on the needs of communities in northern Victoria was being conducted (a positive thing) but there appeared to be little action taken as a result.²⁴

Summary

A number of statistical and geographical biases have disadvantaged Cobram in the provision of services to Muslim migrants. These include a lack of accurate statistics on the number of Muslims in Cobram; the size of Moira Shire in comparison to the percentage of Muslims as a significant population in Cobram; the large distance that migrants have to travel to access government agencies and specialist healthcare; Shepparton agencies responsible for distributing funding not recognising Cobram's needs; as well as lack of adequate English classes and ESL support for youth. Furthermore, limited funding cycles and the apparent lack of results from research conducted on the needs of communities in northern Victoria has been frustrating for service providers and locals.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.21.

V. Employment

Mismatched expectations

The Muslim population of Cobram reportedly has a high unemployment rate, although it should be noted that the area's Muslim community is little more than a decade old with only twenty-four of Cobram's Muslims having arrived in Australia before 1996. A sizeable proportion of Muslims in Cobram have come to Australia on humanitarian grounds and now also on TPVs.

As mentioned previously, lack of English skills has been a barrier to improving rates of employment, both with settlers reluctant to seek work due to feelings of embarrassment, and a real or perceived view that employers are reluctant to take on workers with limited English skills. The work that is available is manual labour, yet a substantial proportion of Muslim migrants are highly educated, many having obtained tertiary qualifications in fields such as medicine, engineering and law prior to coming to Australia. Being unable to obtain employment in their fields of choice, can lead to feelings of alienation, frustration and depression. Mismatched expectations on the part of government agencies, employers and employees has led to a perception that Muslims are "lazy" or that they do not want to "start at the bottom to work their way up."

One participant recollected:

There is a doctor, he lived here in Cobram, he tried to stay in Cobram, he liked Cobram, the community. But because he's a doctor from Iraq he asked 'how can I stay here?' And because they don't accept him to work directly, he wanted to qualify his study and have a test, he go to Melbourne and Sydney, he's now I think in Melbourne.

An employer interviewed for the report also felt dissatisfied with the situation and expressed frustration by wondering if the migrant population is too highly educated, then perhaps they should move to Melbourne and a different group of migrants be "sent" to Cobram. Such a notion reflected both a genuine frustration as an employer not able to attract workers to the jobs on offer, and also an unfortunate perception that migrant settlement is primarily about filling employment gaps.

Mental health and employment

Another barrier to employment has been the experience of mental health problems in the Muslim community by survivors of torture and trauma. A number of the participants fled Iraq in fear of their lives or after having been imprisoned by Saddam Hussein, including Sheik Yassin Al-Karawi who spent ten years in the now infamous Abu Ghayb prison.²⁵

According to various respondents, mental health among the Muslim community in Cobram is affected by:

- A stigma associated with seeking help.
- Unemployment seriously affecting men's self-esteem particularly as "father-providers".
- Frustration with lack of English.
- An increased burden for women having to act as carers for their relatives leading to their own depression.
- Previous experiences of torture and trauma.
- A "stuck" mentality resulting in a loss of desire to learn English or integrate into the wider community.
- Distrust of government agencies, particularly with real or perceived "harsh" decisions by agencies such as Centrelink.
- Lack of specialised mental health services specifically suited for the migrant population's needs.

Cobram lacks specialists trained to deal with the specific mental health problems suffered by refugees who have been victims of torture and trauma. Even access to the counselling services that are available can be hindered by lack of translators or by confidentiality issues in a small community where everybody is known to each other. As well, men's mental health is a sensitive topic in the community, generating feelings of embarrassment and failure, particularly when unemployed men do not feel they are living up to expectations of being the "providers" for

²⁵ K. Ryan, 'A Tortured Life Told', *Cobram Courier*, 27 June 2001, at: <http://archives.mcmedia.com.au/story.asp?TakeNo=200106272093851>, accessed 4 July 2006.

their families. This accords with findings published in a report commissioned by the Islamic Council of Victoria that studied the services and needs of the Victorian Muslim community. It was found that stigma about mental illness was exacerbated by refugee experiences:

Case workers acknowledged that there was an increased level of stigma among Muslim asylum seekers. The traumatic experiences endured by asylum seekers had brought about an increased sense of fear and alienation, acting as fuel for stigma.²⁶

One participant felt that Iraqi men's depression was being interpreted by members of the established community as laziness, or that the migrants are "milking" the welfare system. This was reflected in the number of times different participants related the perception that many in Cobram feel the Muslims are not living up to the image of successful settlement that the Italian community pioneered in the post-World War II period.

There have been some initiatives to address adult mental health problems include the 'Past Pieces, Positive Futures Network', a state government funded program co-ordinated by the Goulburn Valley Community Health Service to help victims of torture and trauma living in the region;²⁷ the council's adoption of wellbeing indicators; and the recently initiated 'Men's Wellbeing Project' including finding ways for migrant men to "tell their stories".

With incidences of mental illness being affected not only by torture and trauma experiences prior to coming to Australia, but also by an inability to find meaningful employment once settled, successfully addressing mental health issues would be a necessary step in lowering unemployment rates among Muslims in Cobram.

Employment projects

Projects to encourage employment have had mixed success. As part of the 'A Country Welcome' project, various employment manuals were translated into Arabic as part of a drive to encourage people to apply for casual labouring jobs at the orchards. One issue that arose was with some migrants filling in forms with incorrect tax-file numbers, not providing tax-file numbers or only working for employers who pay cash-in-hand. One explanation given is that members of the migrant population can be very suspicious of government agencies, due to negative experiences had before coming to Australia. Issues with unreliability – such as not informing employers of changes to intended working hours – has also caused some reticence for major employers to take on Muslim labourers.

Funded by the Myer-Fairley grant, a men's employment project is currently under planning to address issues such as finding meaningful employment in the Work for the Dole scheme. As well, governance training for Muslims is being planned. It is expected that the result of such training might inform migrants how to set up their own businesses as well as encourage incorporation of the men's Al-Amen association and the women's Al-Howra association to be able to apply for funding for their activities.

However, one issue that has not been addressed in a specific fashion is women's employment. Contrary to a popular perception that most Muslim women are primarily homemakers, many of the migrant women are also highly educated or aspire to paid employment. One participant told a humorous anecdote when she approached some local Muslim women to ask if they had skills that could help with fixing up English House. She related:

[I thought] 'Maybe I'll talk to the women and there might be a dress-maker etc who could sew some nice curtains.' So I went to the women's classes and I explained we're looking for women with different skills, and they're saying 'I'm an engineer' and 'I'm a lawyer' and I thought, 'maybe I'd better rethink this one, and not presume they're all home-makers.'

26 M. Keskin, 'Muslims and Mental Health', in B. Aktepe (ed.), *Services and Needs Audit of the Victorian Muslim Community* (Melbourne: Islamic Council of Victoria, 2003) p.32.

27 Department of Human Services, 'Iraqi Refugees Face Bright Future', February 2004, at: <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/humanservicesnews/feb04/refugee.htm>, accessed 4 July 2006.

Summary

Barriers to Muslim employment are a significant issue in Cobram, although the community is young and in transition from being a dependent settling population to an established minority group in the area. One issue is the problem of mismatched expectations between those encouraging settlement in Moira Shire and lack of recognition of the high educational background of the Muslim migrant settlers moving to Cobram.

As well, problems with mental health issues – particularly given the high number of refugees that have been victims of torture and trauma before coming to Australia – is a barrier to lowering unemployment rates among migrants in Cobram. This is partly due to a “feedback loop” where unemployed migrants suffer low self-esteem and depression, which affects their ability and reliability in seeking work, which then gives the impression they are unemployable. Suspicion of officialdom is also a possible factor in some migrants seeking cash-in-hand work.

There have been various initiatives to address the mental health problems among the Iraqi community as well as employment drives; governance training and the ‘Men’s Wellbeing Project’. It appears that women’s employment has not received significant attention, and many women act as carers for ill relatives.

VI. Perceptions of Muslim settlement

Isolation and integration

Isolation in parts of the Muslim community was a theme that arose from the data, including migrants expressing feelings of frustration with their lack of English skills, and an inability to engage with members of the wider community. One perception among non-Muslim interviewees was that some members of the Muslim community have adopted stricter religious practices (such as male/female segregation, observing strict prayer times etc) as a coping mechanism. Alternatively, a number of responses indicated evidence of successful integration on the part of a number of migrants. Activities that promoted and evidenced integration include:

- The participation of Muslims in community activities.
- The development of friendships among individual members of the community, particularly among the women.
- Police and community leaders organising mediation efforts between individuals from different communities to resolve problems.
- An expressed desire to learn English and Australian cultural patterns.
- Local Muslims' efforts to denounce terrorism reported in the media.

The Cobram police have recently established an Arabic liaison officer, Acting Senior Sergeant Garry Barton, who is available to facilitate information about the role of the police to the Muslim community, and to act as a point of contact.²⁸

A number of positive interactions have occurred as a result of the appointment of the liaison officer including a successful mediation between an Iraqi youth and an Australian youth, and the willingness of the Muslim community to approach police to seek information.

Spectrum of attitudes

There appears to be a spectrum of attitudes in regard to the Muslim minority population in Cobram ranging from openness and acceptance to frustrated ambivalence to ignorance, resentment and hatred. A variety of views that exhibited ignorance or limited understanding about Muslim cultures, customs and beliefs were expressed in interviews or related by both Muslim and non-Muslim participants as existing in the community:

- The notion that the Italians were more successful at integrating particularly due to their being European; sharing the established community's Christian religious beliefs; the lack of food prohibitions for Italians; a willingness to intermarry; and also their not receiving hand-outs from the government.
- Restrictions on Muslim women, such as the wearing of Islamic clothing, are oppressive and hinder integration.
- The Muslim community is unwilling to compromise and adopt some Australian cultural patterns such as attending events where alcohol is served.
- Muslims have more children so as to receive more welfare payments.
- Muslims should be lucky for what they get.
- Muslim welfare recipients are sending money "back home".
- The Muslims keep to themselves and are isolated from the established community.
- Muslims think that Western or Australian culture is loose and immoral.

²⁸ In 1983, Victoria Police established the first multicultural liaison unit in Australia. Victoria Police, Multicultural Advisory Services, 17 May 2005 at: http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?Document_ID=290, accessed 12 July 2006.

A number of Muslim interviewees related incidences of prejudice and racism as well as concern they would be blamed for terrorist incidents that occurred overseas. One Muslim respondent said: “we are worried if something happens to Australia or another European country because that reflects on us. Some people just think we are terrorist.” Members of the community have been active in denouncing terrorism in the local newspaper. Immediately after the bombings on 11 September 2001, both the Iraqi women’s and men’s associations wrote letters to the *Cobram Courier* expressing shock and disavowal. As Najat Al Hassan wrote:

I hope everybody in the community understands the Moslems here want to be part of the community. We always try to be friendly to everyone and we feel very positive about living in this town. It is difficult for me to express myself in English, but this is very important for me to say. I want to thank the people of Cobram for welcoming us and ask them to remember that we do not agree with terrorism or violence anywhere in the world.²⁹

For the women, being visibly identifiable as Muslim has, at times, made them targets. Incidents of being verbally abused or intimidated in the street were related by a number of the female Muslim participants:

- “Last week, I went to the supermarket and there were bad guys, rough, and dirty. They said bad word, with his friend, ‘there are terrorists in Cobram!’”
- “Sometimes at the shop, when I am sitting [in my car] some bad kids knock the glasses, the window, hard.”
- “When I was in Cobram I walked to the mosque, and two or three eggs were thrown at me. They hit me. I didn’t know where they came from. I was angry, why? Because I was new; one week after I first arrived.”

Rather than being a problem specific to Cobram, a rise in experiences of prejudice and racism since the terrorist attacks in the United States has been experienced by Muslims in Australia generally. In 2003, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) organised for research to be conducted on racism, abuse and violence experienced by Arab and Muslim Australians. It found that women in particular had experienced a rise in incidents and disturbingly, that these were accepted as inevitable. As well, the most common site of experiences of prejudice was the public street, which correlates with interviewees’ experiences in Cobram.³⁰

At the other end of the spectrum, a number of positive attitudes were expressed about Muslims in the interviews:

- Most people are friendly to Muslims.
- The Muslims try to represent themselves as respectful, gentle and friendly.
- The Muslims have formed a supportive community.
- The Muslim women have been proactive in reaching out to the broader community.
- Events such as the fashion parade and the prayer-hall open evening have allowed the broader community to empathise with
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²⁹ N. Al Hassan, *Cobram Courier*, 19 September 2001, at: <http://archives.mcmedia.com.au/story.asp?TakeNo=200109192083892>, accessed 4 July 2006.

Assimilation versus multiculturalism

There exists a tension between assimilationist attitudes still prevalent in some sections of the community and those advocating a more pluralistic vision of society. Until the mid-1960s, Australia pursued an assimilationist policy in which migrants were expected to conform and blend-in with the dominant white Anglo-centric culture.³¹ Since that time, the government has adopted a policy of Australian multiculturalism in which “all Australians have the right to be active and equal participants in Australian society, free to live their lives and maintain their cultural traditions”.³²

Moira Shire Council has encouraged cultural diversity in regard to their Italian residents, forging links with sister cities in Italy and running 'ItalFest', a festival of Italian culture. That there is an Italian community that has maintained its distinct cultural identity over the eighty years since market gardeners from Italy first settled in Cobram, demonstrates the multicultural reality of the society. This is despite the establishment of the Italian community during the period in which Australia advocated assimilation. Such tendencies do not seem to help the social integration of Muslim migrants. Instead assimilation could potentially hamper social cohesions.

Summary

There is evidence of both isolating and integrating trends in the settlement of Muslim migrants in Cobram. Lack of English is a major barrier to engagement with the broader community and some Muslims have responded to feelings of isolation with increased religiosity. However there is evidence of integration with participation by Muslims in wider community events; the development of friendships; liaising between police and community leaders, and Muslims expressing a desire to learn English and Australian cultural patterns. As well, Muslims have been active in denouncing terrorist acts that have occurred overseas.

There is a spectrum of attitudes towards Muslims, with interviews demonstrating evidence of both prejudice and acceptance. Reports of racism and prejudice were narrated by interviewees, with Muslim women in particular attracting negative attention. However, a number of positive attitudes towards Muslims also surfaced from the interviews and despite tensions between assimilationist attitudes and those holding more pluralistic perspectives, Moira Shire Council has a track record of promoting cultural diversity.

31 National Multicultural Advisory Council, *Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness*, April 1999, p.20, at: <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/nmac/index.htm>, accessed 26 June 2006.

32 DIMA, *Multicultural Australia*, p.5.

VII. Promoting multiculturalism in Moira Shire

The 'A Country Welcome' project

In 1999, the Moira Shire Council decided to apply for funding for what would become the 'A Country Welcome' project. The initiative began with local children's services and schools in Moira Shire discussing how to meet the needs of new arrivals, particularly given the high number of migrant families with young children, many of whom were unaware of local services and resources.

In late 2001, the Moira Shire Council received funding from the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) for the project to cover a period of eighteen months and a Cultural Development Officer, Ms Lisa Jobson, was employed. Partners to the project were Cobram Community House; Cobram Secondary College; Cobram Consolidated School; Cobram and District Hospital; Department of Rural Health, University of Melbourne; Centrelink and Moira Shire.³³

The project's initial priorities were to raise cultural awareness, overcome language barriers and to provide opportunities for access to employment and education. Activities included:

- Production of Arabic language resources such as a service directory brochure; a community newsletter; and the translation of Moira Shire Council customer service brochures.
- New settler training including running a leadership skills program and an interim project focusing on settling youth, in partnership with Cutting-Edge Youth Services.
- Forging community links by promoting cultural awareness at various forums; hosting a Harmony Day cultural awareness celebration; and organising a Settling Youth presentation to the Moira Shire Council.
- Promoting positive media coverage in the local media as well as on national television and radio.
- Organising events such as a Ramadan and the Islamic Way of Life workshop and women's fashion parades.

- Service provider training including the provision of cross cultural communication skills for reception and client services staff and Cobram service providers; police multicultural awareness visits; cultural awareness training for Citizens Advice Bureau volunteers; running working with people from traumatic refugee backgrounds workshops; and support of a locally developed volunteer tutor program.³⁴

In October 2001, 'My Dress, My Image, My Choice', was run in Cobram as part of 'A Country Welcome'. A women-only event, the fashion parade was designed to increase understanding of Muslim female dress and what it means to practice Islam in Australia. In May 2005, Arabic speaking women in Cobram re-ran the fashion parade/information night. The women had received a grant from the Rural Women's Network to complete a four-day leadership and public-speaking course, and the 'Women's Business' fashion parade resulted after a committee was formed by the course participants.³⁵

As a result of the project, there have been a number of positive impacts including:

- An improved uptake of Maternal Child and Health services.
- A shift in awareness by local organisations to the needs of new arrivals.
- A direct link made between organisations and the Arabic speaking community.
- Strengthening of language skills in new arrivals.
- Newly arrived migrants have been identified as a "population with specific needs" in the Moira Shire Health Plan.
- Increased cultural awareness by the established community.

33 Minister for Health, Media Release, 11 October 2000, at: http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/domino/Web_Notes/MediaRelArc02.nsf/17ed9415cb17e3d34a25682500254734/4d26d3d22736fb914a25697600119c4b!OpenDocument&Click=, accessed 4 July 2006.

34 VMC, Snapshots, pp.17-19.

35 E. Craven, 'Women's Business in Cobram', in *Newsletter of the Rural Women's Network*, 3 (2005), pp.5-6.

- Positive media coverage and recognition through local and state awards including winning the Premier's Award for Community Harmony in Victoria's Awards for Excellence in Multicultural Affairs 2002.³⁶

Since then, the council decided to continue funding the position of Cultural Development Officer and recently a Cultural Diversity Advisory Group was setup.

Philanthropy

In late 2003, the Sir Andrew & Lady Fairley Foundation Trust provided funding for a pilot project looking at Iraqi children, youth and parents in northern Victoria. They were particularly interested in the experiences of Iraqi women and the way their lives could be enriched. The aim of the project was to assist the integration of Iraqis into the Australian community and to promote relationships and cultural understanding. Joined by the Myer Foundation in mid-2004, funding was received to establish an Iraqi women's club that facilitates local migrant women to visit local service providers, and to run English classes for men and women. Both foundations agreed to fund a second year of the project.³⁷

Andrew Fairley and Lady Southey, representing the Myer and Fairley Foundations, visited Cobram in early August 2005 to open Cobram's multicultural learning centre: English House. They met with the Moira Shire Council and visited the Cobram District Hospital, which runs the pilot project.³⁸ English House has also been the location for children's weekend Arabic classes.

Some of the activities supported by the foundations include the 'Beyond Australia' photo exhibition, which also received funding from the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal. It was first launched in May 2005 at the Cobram Rotary Art Show, exhibiting photographs of lives of culturally and linguistically diverse residents in Moira Shire. Each photograph had a story attached in English and the first language of the subject pictured.³⁹ As well, a two-day twilight soccer carnival was held in July 2005 with support from the foundations. Matches were held between teams involving the Cobram Soccer Club, the Victoria Police Soccer Club and representatives from the Iraqi and Italian communities. Italian and Iraqi women cooked meals for participants and spectators and the event was reported in the local newspaper as a success.⁴⁰

36 Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, *Promoting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of New Arrival Communities: Learnings and Promising Practices, 1999-2002*, pp.46-50, at: http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/New_Arrivals.pdf, accessed 14 February 2006; Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, *Annual Report 2001-2002*, pp.26-27, at: http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/AnnualRep01_02.pdf, accessed 14 February 2006.

37 Sidney Myer Fund, *Annual Report*, p.31.

38 N. Stava, 'Opening of New Centre', *Cobram Courier*, 17 August 2005, at: <http://archives.mcmedia.com.au/story.asp?TakeNo=200508175453910>, accessed 4 July 2006.

39 Moira Shire Council, *Cultural Photo Exhibition on the Move in Moira Shire*, 6 June 2005, at: http://www.moira.vic.gov.au/press_releases/PR318.html, accessed 4 July 2006.

40 Anonymous, 'Tournament a Success', *Cobram Courier*, 13 July 2005, at: <http://archives.mcmedia.com.au/story.asp?TakeNo=200507135346561>, accessed 4 July 2006.

Multicultural festival

From 6-13 November 2005, Moira Shire hosted the 'Celebrating Diversity, Our Community Mosaic' multicultural festival, with the aim of promoting acceptance of diversity and its positive affects in the community. It was funded by the Victorian state government, organised by Ms Jobson, and its focus was on Italian, Chinese, African and Arabic cultures. Festival activities included live music, a film night, open prayer sessions, a picnic in the park, window displays, food from around the world and multicultural dance performances.⁴¹

The Muslim community participated in a number of ways including opening up the prayer-hall for an information session, and holding a stall at the festival. Feedback about the multicultural festival was extremely positive, a selection of comments included:

- "The multicultural festival was a great thing. I hope we can get the funding to do it again ... The open-day at the prayer-hall, the men were very open and keen to talk to us [non-Muslims]."
- "A large number [of Muslims] came with their children and actively took part. [They] were members of the community taking part in a community celebration. It was beautiful. Great."
- "Graham, the editor [of the *Cobram Courier*] here, he portrayed our multicultural festival very well. He put lots of pictures in, even two and three weeks after."

Summary

Moira Shire Council has run a variety of programs to promote multiculturalism and to assist in the settlement process for new migrants. The biggest project was the VicHealth funded 'A Country Welcome' initiative which started in 2001 and ran for eighteen months. A Cultural Development Officer was employed and a variety of activities were run to assist the Arabic speaking community and to raise cultural awareness.

Another significant endeavour came with funding from the Fairley and Myer Foundations, beginning in 2003. English House, hosting language classes for settlers and children's Arabic classes, was opened, and the 'Beyond Australia' photo exhibition and a twilight soccer carnival were run with assistance from the Myer-Fairley Trust Fund.

A multicultural festival, 'Celebrating Diversity, Our Community Mosaic', was held in late 2005. The Muslim community was involved in a number of ways and the festival received widespread positive attention.

⁴¹ Moira Shire Council, *Celebration of Diversity is Coming to Cobram and Barooga*, 20 October 2005, at: http://www.moira.vic.gov.au/press_releases/PR379.html, accessed 4 July 2006.

Concluding summary

Cobram is a fast-growing rural Victorian town with a multicultural history that has recently seen a rapid demographic rise in Muslim settlement. Although there has been a fluctuating characteristic with some migrants only settling for brief periods of time before moving onto larger cities in search of employment and study opportunities, there is now a well-established and supportive Muslim community in existence in Cobram.

The migrant community has received assistance from a number of sources including through programs organised and funded by different levels of government, local support workers and service providers, philanthropic organisations and from the established Muslim community that has rallied to provide support in less quantifiable forms, particularly to overcome problems resulting from the lack of specialist services and resources typical of many rural towns.

An early need for the Muslim community was to establish a permanent place of prayer, not only for their religious and social needs, but another benefit has been with the prayer-hall serving as a place for non-Muslim residents to learn more about the emerging Muslim community in their midst.

One of the most important issues for successful integration of the Muslim migrant community is the acquisition of English language skills. Around 57 per cent of Muslims indicated low levels or no English proficiency on the 2001 census, and many participants discussed problems arising from lack of English in the Muslim community. This included feelings of embarrassment leading to frustration and an inability to engage with members of the wider community, employment problems, and a lack of interpreters hindering communication between service providers and their clients. As well, lack of ESL support for school-age children contributes to performance problems and failure rates.

The provision of English classes has had a chequered history in Cobram, although an injection of funds from the Myer-Fairley Trust to secure a location for classes has been an important improvement in the quality of delivery of English language learning services for migrants. A problem with funding for adequate classes is part of a larger problem in which a statistical and geographical bias has resulted in the needs of Cobram as a host community for settling migrants not being properly met.

Another area of concern is with mismatched employment expectations for Cobram's Muslim migrants, many of whom come from high educational backgrounds. Without recognition of prior education and experience, and no local institutions overseeing retraining and re-certification for skilled migrants, the expectation that Muslims would simply fill employment gaps in seasonal work and manual labour has resulted in frustration from employers, service providers and not the least, migrants themselves. Unemployed women in particular often carry a heavy burden, with many acting as carers for ill relatives.

Mental health is a problem due to many in the Muslim population being refugees who have suffered experiences of torture and trauma. This is compounded when, for various reasons, migrants are unable to find meaningful employment in their fields of choice. As well, there is a stigma associated with mental illness and a lack of specialist resources to deal with torture and trauma victims, has resulted in mental health needs amongst Muslims in Cobram not being met.

Depression being interpreted as laziness is also a problematic issue for the settling community. A common perception among some members of the wider community is that Muslim settlement is not going as well as Italian settlement did, despite (or in some cases because of) government assistance for new migrants. In contrast with the Italians, who are perceived to have become successful through sheer hard work and gritty determination to overcome the challenges of adopting a new country and a new Australian identity, Muslims are seen as being more alien than the Italians. They are seen as less willing to “become Australian” and therefore harder to integrate, although there is some acknowledgement of the difficulties that Iraqis in particular have had to face being refugees and often victims of torture and trauma.

There is a tension between an assimilationist discourse (Muslim migrants need to become Australian by adapting and changing to the dominant white Anglo culture) prevalent among some sections of the community and those advocating a more pluralistic paradigm (Muslim cultures add to the fabric of the already diverse community and need to be acknowledged and respected alongside Indigenous, Anglo and Italian cultures etc). However, Moira Shire Council has a track record for promoting multiculturalism, and fledgling efforts to welcome and extend recognition for the new Muslim community in its midst is encouraging.

The largest program run was the VicHealth funded ‘A Country Welcome’ project, recognised at the local and state levels, including winning the Premier’s Award for Community Harmony in Victoria’s Awards for Excellence in Multicultural Affairs 2002. The ‘A Country Welcome’ project was an innovative and comprehensive initiative addressing the need to raise cultural awareness, overcome English language barriers and to assist migrants in gaining access to employment and education. Muslims participated in a number of ways, besides being direct beneficiaries, including running a highly successful women’s fashion parade and information night. Members of the wider non-Muslim community had the opportunity to learn about Islam and Muslims, increasing cultural awareness.

Moira Shire has received assistance for the settling community from philanthropic organisations, most notably the Sir Andrew & Lady Fairley Foundation Trust and the Myer Foundation. A joint project by the foundations has seen the establishment of English House, a multicultural learning centre that hosts English classes for the migrant community and a number of other activities.

Another encouraging development was the running of a multicultural festival in November of 2005. As well as providing an opportunity for Moira Shire locals to discover and celebrate the diverse cultures that exist in the area, it was the first major community activity in which the Muslim community became actively involved as participants themselves.

Programs, such as the ones run in Cobram, are vital in assisting migrants to make the adjustment from being dependent new settlers to fully-fledged members of the community. As well, they help people in the host society to accept settlement of culturally and linguistically diverse groups in their environs and make the shift from viewing the culture of the dominant group as the normative paradigm to a more pluralistic vision of community.

Recommendations

Education

- Increase in English language classes, teachers and English teaching and language learning resources.
- Volunteer tutor scheme matching local English speakers with new migrants to develop English language skills and build social networks.
- English language classes specifically for children and youth and English as a Second Language support for school-age children including the establishment of an intensive learning centre in Moira Shire.
- Program to combat perception that education finishes with leaving school, and encourage life-long learning.

Cultural Awareness Training

- Encourage local Muslims to contact and interact with local media (such as by submitting articles and letters for publication to the Cobram Courier, and advertising upcoming events) to address perceptions of community isolation.
- Organise interfaith and intercultural meetings for community and religious leaders to get to know each other for possible future co-operation.
- Promote opportunities for non-Muslims and Muslims to meet and mix.
- Extension of the cultural awareness programs developed in 'A Country Welcome' into cross-cultural training workshops to be made available to service providers, community leaders, residents of Cobram etc.

Health

- Provision of specialist services for victims of torture and trauma, particularly in regard to meeting their mental health needs.
- Provision of interpreters for counselling sessions.
- Translate medical information and service directories into Arabic to increase knowledge of services available.

Employment

- Facilities for retraining and re-certification for skilled migrants.
- Provide DIMA with correct and regularly updated information about Moira Shire and employment opportunities to assist them in making recommendations for settlement.
- Promote compliance with legal obligations on the part of employers and employees.

Funding

- Extended funding for longer-term projects and for projects to build upon each other.
- Reduce red-tape by directing government funding to Moira Shire for projects targeting Muslim settlers.

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Appendix A: Interview questions for Muslim participants

The interview will be conducted in a semi-structured format with the participant encouraged to articulate his or her own perspectives and concerns. Considering this, the questions listed below are prompting questions, ensuring that the participant (not the researcher) directs the interview. This will ensure individual concerns and experiences of Muslims and non-Muslims in Cobram are revealed in the project.

1. Residency

- 1.1. When did you come to Australia?
- 1.2. When did you begin living in Cobram?
- 1.3. Do you have Australian citizenship?
 - 1.3.1. When did you become an Australian citizen?

2. Integration in the Community

- 2.1. Did you receive help settling in Cobram?
 - 2.1.1. From whom?
 - 2.1.2. How?
 - 2.1.3. If you received help, how did it affect your perception of living in Cobram?
- 2.2. Do Muslims and non-Muslims interact with each other in Cobram?
 - 2.2.1. How?
- 2.3. Have you sought friendships with non-Muslims in Cobram?
- 2.4. Have you experienced any language difficulties living in Cobram?
- 2.5. What are the key issues that facilitate or hinder integration of the Muslim community in Cobram?

3. Services offered

- 3.1. Do you know of services that are currently being offered to the Muslim residents in Cobram?
 - 3.1.1. O'Dwyer Avenue House
 - 3.1.2. Arabic language in schools
 - 3.1.3. Wellbeing Program for women
 - 3.1.4. 'Looking Back and Looking Forward' project for men
 - 3.1.5. Men's Employment Project
 - 3.1.6. Interpreting Services

- 3.2. Have they been used by the Muslim community? No/Low/Medium/Fully
 - 3.2.1. Why?
- 3.3. How does the wider community support services being offered to Muslims?
- 3.4. What services should be offered to the Muslim community in the future?

4. Problems

- 4.1. Have you experienced any discrimination because of your religion living in Cobram?
- 4.2. Do you know of any incidents of discrimination against other Muslims living in Cobram?
- 4.3. Do you feel safe living in Cobram?

5. Practical Issues

- 5.1. How do you find living as a Muslim in Cobram?
- 5.2. Are there Muslim facilities and resources specifically available in Cobram?
- 5.3. Do you need / have access to a nearby mosque?
 - 5.3.1. Are you able to attend *jum'a* prayer?
- 5.4. Do you have access to *halal* food in Cobram?
- 5.5. Do you wear Muslim clothing?
 - 5.5.1. Have you experienced any reactions (positive or negative) to wearing Muslim clothing in Cobram?
- 5.6. Have your settlement needs been met?

6. Perceptions

- 6.1. How do you view the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia?

7. Any other comments

Appendix B: Interview questions for non-Muslim participants

The interview will be conducted in a semi-structured format with the participant encouraged to articulate his or her own perspectives and concerns. Considering this, the questions listed below are prompting questions, ensuring that the participant (not the researcher) directs the interview. This will ensure individual concerns and experiences of Muslims and non-Muslims in Cobram are revealed in the project.

1. Residency

- 1.1. Are you an Australian citizen?
- 1.2. Where were your parents born?
- 1.3. Were you born in Cobram
 - 1.3.1. If not, when did you begin living in Cobram?

2. Community Involvement

- 2.1. Are you involved in the local Cobram community?
 - 2.1.1. How
- 2.2. Do you have any interaction with Muslim residents in Cobram
 - 2.2.1. Socially
 - 2.2.2. Through volunteer / paid work?

3. Services offered to Muslims

- 3.1. Do you know of services that are currently being offered to the Muslim residents in Cobram?
- 3.2. Have they been used by the Muslim community? No/Low/Medium/Fully
- 3.3. How does the wider community support services being offered to Muslims?
- 3.4. What services should be offered to the Muslim community in the future?

4. Perceptions of Muslim Integration

- 4.1. Do Muslims and non-Muslims interact with each other in Cobram?
 - 4.1.1. How?
- 4.2. Do you feel that Muslims generally are integrated / integrating?
- 4.3. Do you know of any instances of discrimination against Muslims in Cobram?
- 4.4. Have you sought friendships with Muslims in Cobram?
- 4.5. What are the key issues that facilitate or hinder integration of the Muslim community in Cobram?

5. Any other comments

Appendix C: Newspaper articles

A tortured life told

By Kate Ryan

June 27 2001

Cobram Courier

After years of torture in an Iraqi prison, Yasseen Abbas Ali al-Karawi has made a new life for his family in Cobram.

He has told his story to *The Cobram Courier* in the hope of fostering understanding in the wider community toward the large population of Iraqi refugees in Cobram.

One of 10 children, Yasseen had a fairly typical life in Iraq until 1982.

He had finished studying at a Technology Institute achieving a qualification in mechanics and was then required to join the Iraqi armed forces.

"I had to go because otherwise I would have been killed," Yasseen said.

"In 1981, the first year of war, one of my brothers, who was an officer in the Iraqi army, disappeared. We heard nothing about him ever again.

"Then I decided to leave the army. This contributed to me being put in prison."

On August 2, 1982, he was arrested and severely tortured.

"It was because I escaped from the Iraqi army and I was one of the people involved in opposition against the Saddam regime," he said.

In December 1983, Baghdad Revolutionary Court sentenced him to life imprisonment in the closed section of Abu Ghraib prison.

"It was an underground prison. A secret prison," he said.

"You could hear people were playing sport and very happy above. They had no idea.

"The only sign the prison was there was some holes for air."

Conditions in the prison were severe. Yasseen was one of 50 prisoners in a cell, about 3 m by 6 m.

Torture was a daily occurrence.

Yasseen's family had no knowledge of where he was.

He had "disappeared" like his brother.

After seven years, Yasseen was freed with the help of an Iraqi nuclear professor.

"He was in the same prison," Yasseen said.

"He escaped and took the names of other prisoners. Then he and the United Nations negotiated to get us out.

"During the uprising in 1991, the United Nations started to visit Iraq and prisons. The professor had given them approximately 2000 names."

Once released, Yasseen was continually harassed and threatened by Iraq's security forces.

He realised he had to flee the country to save his life.

Yasseen was helped by some Kurdish people who had assisted one of his brothers to escape the country in 1989.

"I escaped Iraq to Syria and then Lebanon," Yasseen said.

In Lebanon, he waited three years to finally receive refugee visa status.

However, in that time he studied religion and became a Muslim sheik. He also met his wife, an Iraqi refugee.

On September 29, 2000, Yasseen and his new family arrived in Wagga Wagga.

Yasseen had received letters from friends in Cobram who described it as a wonderful place.

"I feel comfortable here," he said.

"The community is friendly and it is very comfortable to live here."

Cobram has about 40 Iraqi families living in the community.

Yasseen said many of these people had experienced great suffering and torture in Iraq.

"We escape because there is no human rights, no justice," he said.

"People who live here now are more comfortable and happier.

"They are still affected by the situation in Iraq. They are still suffering for those left behind."

Yasseen now lives in Cobram with his wife and his lovely daughter Zainab, with hope for the future.

Looming war brings fear for family

By Mark Fenn

February 14 2003

Shepparton News

As the spectre of war looms in the Middle East, members of the Goulburn Valley's Iraqi community are worried about what will happen to their homeland and the family and friends they have left behind.

Many want to see Saddam Hussein and his oppressive regime overthrown, but say a US-led war will lead to further misery and suffering for ordinary Iraqis.

"Saddam is a very bad person," Cobram resident Yassin Abbas Ali al-Karawi said. "We will be very pleased if Saddam is killed. But my mother is there, my brothers are there, and my sisters are there. If Iraqi people are killed, I will be very sad."

Yassin spent 10 years in an Iraqi prison, where he was tortured, for his opposition to Saddam Hussein. He escaped from Iraq and came to Australia as a refugee.

He said any military action against Iraq should not take place until after the annual Haj season, a holy time when Muslims make a pilgrimage to Mecca.

And although he hopes that Iraq will soon be a free and democratic country, Yassin is suspicious of American motives in going to war.

"Sometimes we think that America wants to change the map of the Middle East," he said.

"It is in the interests of America to make the war. If there is a change of regime in Iraq, maybe petroleum will be cheaper for America, maybe they will have many companies working in Iraq."

Yassin, who keeps in touch with his family in Iraq by telephone, said he would like to go back to Iraq one day to visit his family, but now he has applied for Australian citizenship. "I am an Australian person," he says. "And I am proud that Australia helped me."

Zarkawi response

June 14 2006

Cobram Courier

Members of Cobram's Iraqi community have responded to last week's death of Abu Musab alZarkawi.

Zarkawi – al-Qaeda leader in Iraq – was killed in an air raid north of Baghdad after being targeted by United States and Iraqi forces.

Sheikh Yassin Al Karawi said Zarkawi was a killer who ordered his followers to kill people.

"People in the Iraqi community are very happy about what happened to Zarkawi," Mr Yassin said.

"He was a bad person and we are all happy to save Iraq from dangerous people like him," he said.

"Iraqis will live quietly here - they have no problems here but they are worried about the people of Iraq.

"Their relatives are in danger.

"After Zarkawi they aim for the new government in Iraq to go ahead and manage the conditions in Iraq the best way.

"We don't accept terrorism – we are Muslim people.

"We are happy here in Cobram," Mr Yassin said.

"We thank the government for the help of the community," he said.

