



# about Australia

## Muslims in Australia

### A long and vibrant history

- Muslims in Australia have a long and varied history that is thought to pre-date European settlement. Some of Australia's earliest visitors were Muslim, from the east Indonesian archipelago. They made contact with mainland Australia as early as the 16th and 17th centuries.

### Early Muslim visitors— the Macassar traders

Fishermen and traders from what is today the Macassar region of Indonesia arrived on the northern coasts of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. The Macassarese traded with local Indigenous people and fished for 'trepang' (commonly known as sea cucumber), which they sold as a delicacy on the lucrative Chinese market.

Evidence of these early visitors can be found in the similarity of certain words that occur in the languages of the Macassarese and of the coastal Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal cave paintings depict the traditional Macassar vessels or 'prau' and a number of Macassan artefacts have been found in Aboriginal settlements on the west and north coasts of Australia. Marriages between Indigenous people and Macassarese are believed to have taken place, and Macassan grave sites have been found along the coastline.

### Afghan cameleers and the colonial era

Muslim immigrants from coastal Africa and island territories under the British Empire

came to Australia as sailors and convicts in the early fleets of European settlers during the late 1700s. The first significant semi-permanent Muslim population was formed with the arrival of Afghan camel drivers in the 1800s. Coming from the Indian sub-continent, these Muslims were vital in the early exploration of inland Australia and in the establishment of service links.

One of the major projects involving Afghan cameleers was the development of the rail link between Port Augusta and Alice Springs, which became known as the Ghan. The rail line was extended to Darwin in 2004. Cameleers played an equally important role in the development of the overland telegraph line between Adelaide and Darwin during 1870 and 1872, which eventually linked Australia to London via India.

Through these early exploits, a string of 'Ghan' towns were established along the railway. Many of these towns had at least one mosque, usually constructed from corrugated iron with a small minaret. However, the advent of the motor vehicle and the introduction of motor lorry transportation signalled the end of an era for the cameleers. While some returned to their homelands, others settled in areas near Alice Springs and other parts of the Northern Territory. Many married

local Indigenous people. Descendants of the Afghan cameleers have since played active roles in numerous Islamic communities in Australia.

Small numbers of Muslims were also recruited from Dutch and British colonies in South-East Asia to work in the Australian pearling industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Australia's first mosque was built at Marree in northern South Australia in 1861. The first large mosque was built in Adelaide in 1890, and another was built in Broken Hill (New South Wales) in 1891.

## Post–Second World War—towards a diverse modern-day community

Australia's modern-day Muslim population increased significantly following the Second World War. Between 1947 and 1971, the Muslim population increased from 2704 to 22 311. This was largely due to the post-war economic boom, which created new employment opportunities. Many European Muslims, mainly Turks, took advantage of these opportunities to seek a new life and home in Australia. At the 2006 Census there were 23 126 Turkey-born Muslims in Australia.

Bosnian and Kosovar Muslim migrants who arrived in Australia in the 1960s made important contributions to modern-day Australia through their role in the construction of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electricity Scheme in New South Wales. Lebanese migrants, many of whom were Muslims, also began arriving in larger numbers after the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon in 1975. According to the 2006 Census there were

7542 Muslim Australians born in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 30 287 born in Lebanon.

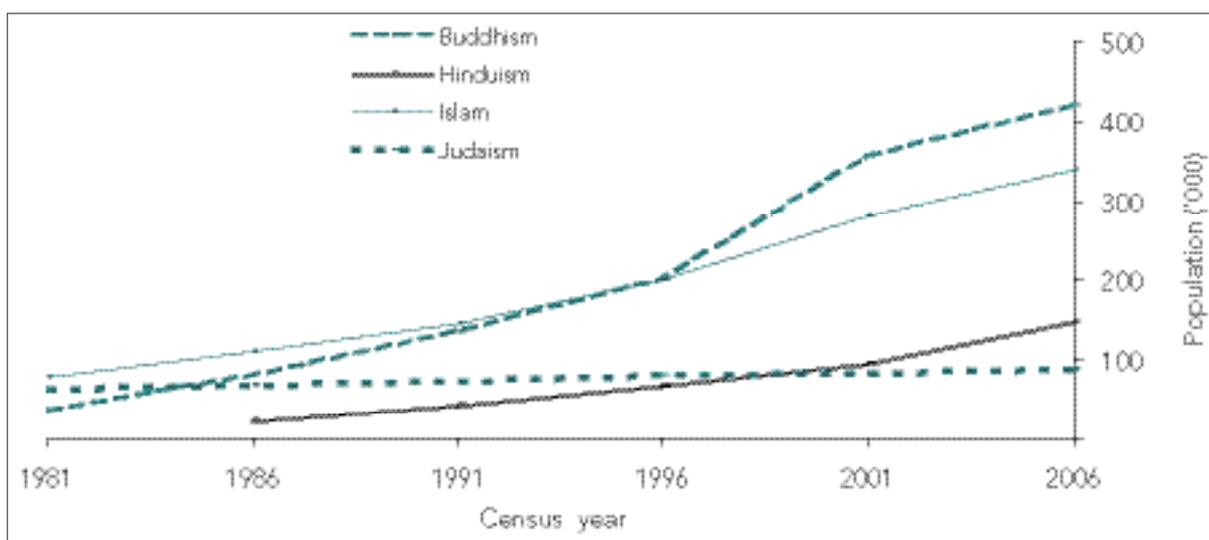
Muslim Australians are an extremely diverse group. At the 2006 Census there were more than 340 000 Muslims in Australia, of whom 128 904 were born in Australia and the balance born overseas. In addition to migrants from Lebanon and Turkey, the other major source countries are:

- Afghanistan 15 965
- Pakistan 13 821
- Bangladesh 13 361
- Iraq 10 039
- Indonesia 8656.

In the last three decades, many Muslims have migrated to Australia under refugee or humanitarian programs, and from African countries such as Somalia and Sudan.

Australia's Muslim communities are now predominantly concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne. Since the 1970s, Muslim communities have developed many mosques and Islamic schools and made vibrant contributions to the multicultural fabric of Australian society.

## Growth in Australia's Muslim and other non-Christian religious affiliations 1981–2006



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1981–2006 Census of Population and Housing

### Further information

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils  
[www.afic.com.au](http://www.afic.com.au)

Department of Immigration and Citizenship  
[www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au)

Last updated March 2008

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