

AUSTRALIAN

Mosaic

EXPLORING
Australian Values



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AUSTRALIAN VALUES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTING OUR CO-EXISTENCE



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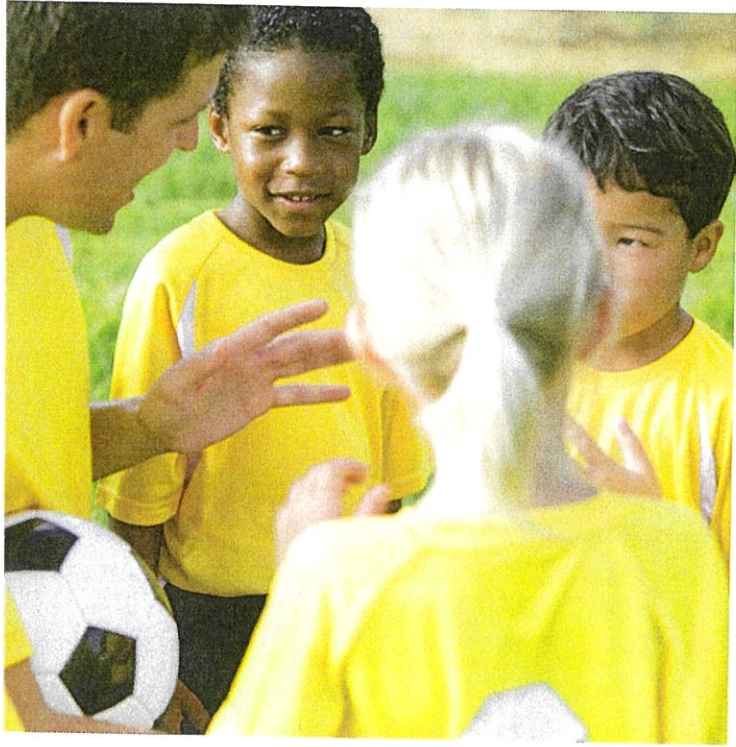
Professor Mohamad Abdalla is the Founding-Director of the Centre for Islamic Thought and Education (CITE) at the University of South Australia. Previously, he was the Founding-Director of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies and the Griffith Islamic Research Unit (GIRU) at Griffith University. His authored and co-authored books include *Islamic schooling in the West: Pathways to Renewal*; *Leadership in Islam: Processes and Solutions in Australian Organizations*; *Islamic Science: The myth of the decline theory*; and *Islam in the Australian News Media*. Professor Abdalla is one of Australia's most prominent and respected Muslim leaders, who held multiple distinguished community and academic posts, and received multiple civic awards, including the Ambassador of Peace Award, the Community Leadership Award, the Islamic Council of Queensland Community Service Award, and the Crescents of Brisbane Special Achievement Award.

I migrated to Australia with my family in 1985. My parents are Palestinian Australians and lived most of their lives in Jordan. I was born in Libya, simply because my father was working there. However, the first 15 years of my life were in Amman, Jordan. All my siblings were born in Amman, Jordan. I had a beautiful childhood and enjoyed every bit of it in Jordan.

My parents were doing very well in Jordan before migrating to Australia. My father is eighth Dan Karate Master, Chief, and Instructor. He had two thriving sport clubs with about 3000 students. He had few successful businesses also. Unfortunately, due to some political discord in Amman, he had to leave everything behind and migrate to Australia. We were not able to move with him immediately, but after three years of hard work, he saved some money to bring my mother, three brothers and two sisters to Australia. The first three years were in Sydney, and then we move to Brisbane. I completed my high school in Sydney and started, and completed, university in Brisbane. Of course, I did not speak a word of English when I migrated to Australia but picked up the language within six months.

We moved to Australia for a better life and greater opportunities. As a young man, I loved growing up in Australia. The country is beautiful. People were delightful. Importantly, I had made some good friends along the way. Life was not always easy, especially for my father and mother, but we managed to live a safe and happy life.

As a young man, the Australian values that resonated most with me were 'fair-go,' egalitarianism, fairness and justice. These are values that I recognised before reading about them or hearing them being discussed in media or other places. I experienced these values with my teachers at the Intensive English language Unit, Miller High School in Sydney, which I attended for the first six months at school.



I HAVE FOUND THAT THE VALUES OF 'FAIR-GO,' EGALITARIANISM, FAIRNESS, JUSTICE AND CO-EXISTENCE ARE ALIVE AND THRIVING IN THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF SO MANY AUSTRALIANS.

Although I later came to realise the existence of racism, prejudice and stereotyping of various people in Australia—especially the Aborigines—I continued to believe in the Australian values mentioned above. I recognised that we have institutions and laws that can protect against racism and prejudice. Overwhelmingly, I recognised the Australian values of 'fair-go,' egalitarianism, fairness, justice and co-existence.

The principle that all people deserve equal rights and opportunities is what I have experienced from the many people that I have met and befriended over the many years in Australia. It is these values, and the hard work of my parents and myself, that allowed me to prosper in my career, complete my studies, and establish myself as an academic within Australian institutions.

Over the years, I have established three academic centres and have led a team of researchers in a few Australian universities. I have participated in multiple events, forums, and conferences including Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2020 Summit, and spoke at St John's Cathedral in Brisbane to a packed audience alongside the Dalai Lama. I got married to a beautiful wife and have a lovely and polite young son. I am confident that I would not have had these opportunities and success in many other parts of the world.

The value that is most dear to me, however, is coexistence. Despite the challenges of racism and negative portrayal in the media of some communities, people of diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds coexist peacefully in Australia. This sense of peaceful coexistence is so valuable that it allows us to continue to prosper.

As Australians, we need to aspire and work towards protecting this coexistence by making sure that we diminish racism, stop portraying vulnerable groups and communities pejoratively, and embody the values of respect, recognition and mutual concern for people. I see coexistence as strength not weakness, and Australia—to a good extent—has demonstrated that coexistence can work. Importantly however, we must not be complacent and make sure that we work constructively to curtail hate speech, racism and discrimination.

Sadly, life became much more challenging after the tragic events of 9/11. Two weeks after these events, my Mosque in Brisbane, the Kuraby Mosque, was burned to the ground and for the last two decades, I have worked tirelessly to build bridges of understanding between the Muslim and wider Australian communities. I and many other Australian Muslims had to struggle with constant media misrepresentation and negative political rhetoric. This had a tremendous impact on the identity of many young people that I know and made many more feel that they do not belong to Australia.

Despite all of this, I have found that engagement with other Australians helps break down barriers and preconceived notions. I have travelled across Australia to indulge in conversations with various people and found that personal engagement is most powerful in enhancing our coexistence and multiculturalism.

I have found that the values of 'fair-go,' egalitarianism, fairness, justice and co-existence are alive and thriving in the hearts and minds of so many Australians, and this gives me hope for the future of this nation.