

SBS report by Frank Robson on Toowoomba Mosque

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Grainy CCTV shows the man police believe set fire to a mosque – twice. Who is the arsonist targeting Toowoomba’s Muslim community?

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On a cold and starry night during the holy month of Ramadan, wind whistles through the fire-damaged timbers of Toowoomba’s Garden City Mosque. Once a Christian church, the brick and timber chapel with its distinctive arched roof became the city’s first mosque amid much rejoicing early in 2014.



CCTV released by Queensland Police shows the suspected arsonist.

At the time, there were predictions “10,000 rednecks” would oppose the mosque, set on a large corner block in a leafy residential suburb near the CBD. But it didn’t happen. Apart from some neighbours' complaints over parking problems, and a few obscenities shouted from passing vehicles, peace and harmony prevailed in the Darling Downs city once described as “the buckle on Queensland’s Bible belt”.

Then, in January and April last year, the mosque in West Street, Harristown, was hit by two still unsolved arson attacks. The first, in a wooden outbuilding, did little damage. But the second effectively destroyed the interior of the mosque, rendering it unusable. Both fires were deliberately lit between 1am and 2am, probably by the same person, but despite an ongoing investigation, police admit they’re no closer to making an arrest than when they began.

Imam of Garden City Mosque, Abdul Kader, explains what happened.

Inevitably (although there are other theories), the arson attacks are widely assumed to be religious “hate” crimes. “The Muslim community are living in constant fear,” said Islamic Council of Queensland spokesman Ali Kadri after the second fire. “There are people who are motivated by hatred of Muslims.”

The stink of the charred building was still in the air when Queensland’s then police minister Jo-Ann Miller rushed to Toowoomba, 90 minutes drive west of Brisbane, to hold a media conference outside the mosque. “We are totally disgusted by it,” she railed to the crowd. “We’ve come a long way in Australia... we will not tolerate this any more. It is shocking, it is outrageous.”

The city has been seen as hostile towards "your so-called f...in' multiculturalism," as one public bar drinker puts it.

Underlying such emotion is the changing nature of Toowoomba itself. Long a conservative political stronghold, elements of the “Garden City” and its satellite towns around the Darling Downs have been seen as intolerant of change, suspicious of outsiders, and downright hostile towards “your so-called f...in’ multiculturalism”, as one public bar drinker puts it.

Toowoomba is the city where it took Aboriginal activist Stephen Hagan eight years to get the “E.S. Nigger Brown Stand” sign removed at a local sports field; the city where Sudanese refugees who began arriving in the late 1990s were abused and jostled on the streets; the city where whispers of a Ku Klux Klan presence in neighbouring towns persisted until a few years ago.

Of course, most of Toowoomba's 165,000-odd residents are no more or less prejudiced than other Australians. Stories abound of their warmth and generosity towards the waves of refugees resettled there over the past two decades. But perceptions stick, which is why religious, refugee and social groups are involved in a concerted effort to replace the "redneck" taint with a more enlightened image. Especially since 2013, when the city was officially designated a local government "Refugee Welcome Zone".

A Christian woman in a wheelchair arrived at the burnt-out mosque with wood, a hammer and nails to "help with the rebuilding".

As it turns out, the mosque fires provided the first real indication of how Toowoomba people feel about the estimated 3000 Muslims now living amongst them. Within hours of the second fire, mosque leaders and Muslims generally were overwhelmed by sympathy and offers of help.

Politicians lined up to condemn the crime; Christian church leaders offered alternative venues for prayer; ordinary non-Muslim Australians invited mosque worshippers into their homes, or volunteered to escort Muslim women frightened by the fires around the streets. A Christian woman in a wheelchair arrived at the burnt-out mosque with wood, a hammer and nails to "help with the rebuilding", and complete strangers from wildly diverse backgrounds took to embracing in public.

Yet for Muslims, the unsettling fact remains: someone still at large crept through the night, twice, intent on destroying their place of worship. (Some non-Muslims suggest it may not have been a hate crime at all but random vandalism, or the work of a pyromaniac. Others go off-record to tell me they've "heard" the fires were set by someone involved in a "factional dispute" within the Muslim community.)

Across the street from the mosque is an all-night service station, whose CCTV cameras captured a grainy image of the man police suspect set both

fires. About 180 centimetres tall with a medium to slim build, he is apparently Caucasian, although a grey hoodie covers much of his face.

Despite the posting of a \$25,000 reward, no trace of the suspect has emerged.

After the first fire, the CCTV footage shows the man crossing from the mosque side of West Street towards the servo, before disappearing down a side street. Police say a male of similar appearance was seen near the mosque at the time of the second fire. Since then, despite the posting of a \$25,000 reward, no trace of him has emerged.



The man behind the mosque is Shahjahan Khan, a well-connected local academic who was among the first Muslims to settle in Toowoomba. In his office at the University of Southern Queensland, the professor of statistics

talks of his childhood in Bangladesh, when it was “difficult to tell the difference” between local religions.

“The whole world was like that before 9/11,” he says. “But of course 9/11 changed everything, and caused a big damage to mankind.”

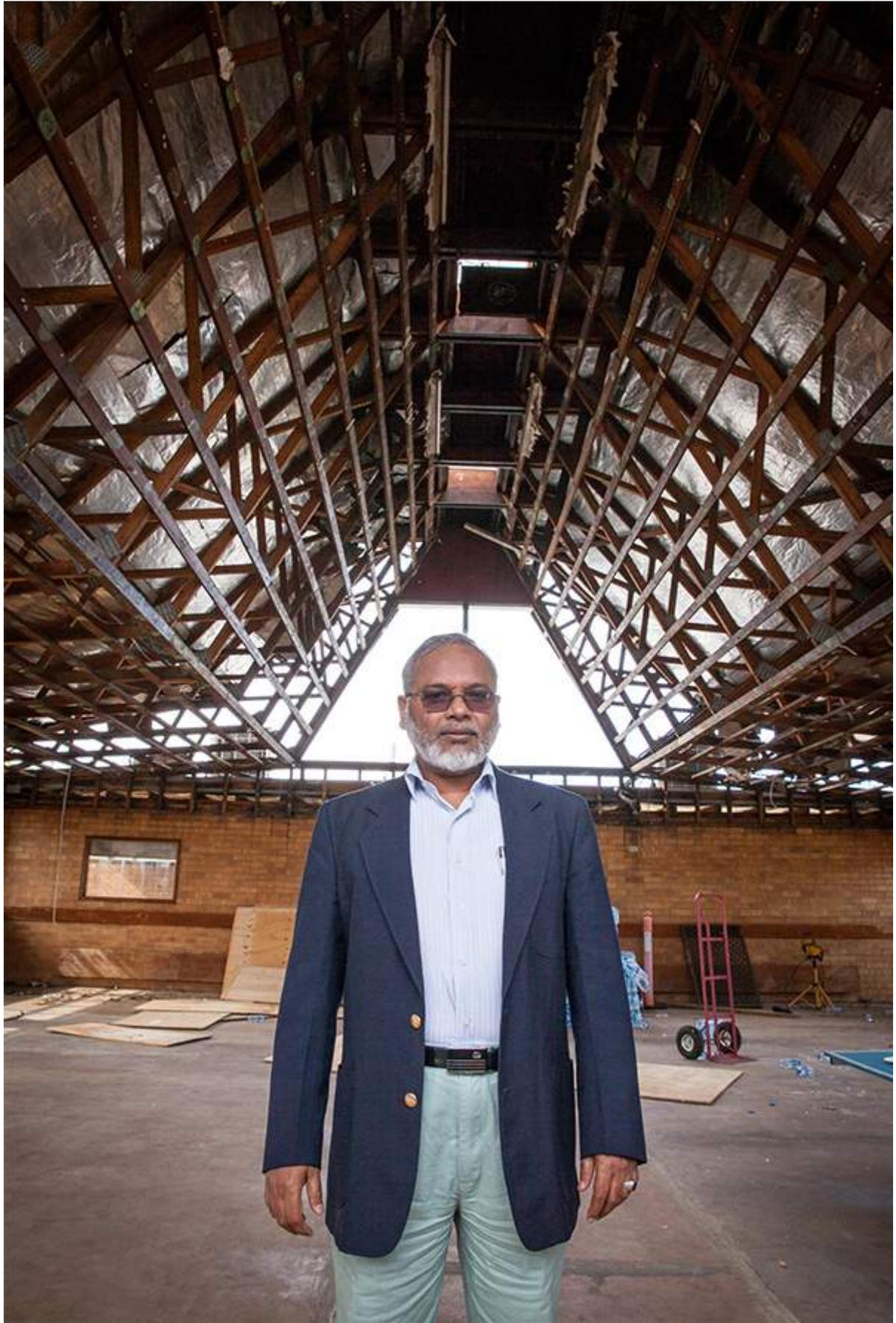
In 1993, when Khan arrived in Toowoomba with his wife and three young sons to take up a position at the then-fledgling USQ, there was almost no provision for those of his faith. Khan and a handful of other Muslims prayed in the university’s Christian chapel, slaughtered their own halal meat at a local farm, and grew accustomed to strangers shouting abuse at them in public.

“It still happens,” Khan says, “but not as frequently.”

Someone left a pornographic image of “a black boy sleeping with a white girl” in Khan's letterbox.

In 1994, he became founding president of the Toowoomba Islamic Society (he’s now vice president), a milestone someone celebrated by leaving a pornographic image of “a black boy sleeping with a white girl” in his home letterbox. By then, the USQ had provided a below-ground prayer room for Muslims, which Khan dubbed The Bunker. As their numbers grew, Muslims formed an Islamic Centre in another part of the uni, used until Khan’s long search for a full-time mosque led to the purchase of the West Street complex from the Uniting Church in 2013.

“I’m actually a scientist,” he reminds me, “but I felt that someone had to do something to bring Muslims together, and not to get them on the wrong directions.” He says some local Muslim refugees come from “very closed” cultures: “As a community activist, I think it’s my responsibility...to [help] them engage, and become part of the one community here.”



Muslims sometimes face abuse, says Professor Shahjahan Khan.

Khan's pride over his good relationships with a number of the city's Christian leaders is evident. "I was the only Muslim invited to the ordination of [Toowoomba's Catholic Bishop, Robert McGuckin]," he notes. Both McGuckin and the city's then-Anglican Bishop, Robert Nolan, attended the wedding reception of one of Khan's sons in 2013. "People were joking that the Muslims brought the Catholic and the Anglican to sit at the same table," he laughs.

Khan recalls how a local journalist, interviewing him about the newly acquired mosque, predicted the "10,000 rednecks" would oppose it when they read the news. "But there was nothing," the professor says. "That [prediction] came from a perception of the old Toowoomba... There were no public protests and [an online media poll] showed 86 per cent of people in Toowoomba supported the mosque."

In the end, all it took to "oppose" the mosque was one redneck with a match.

In the end, it seems, all it took to "oppose" the mosque was one redneck with a match. In the first fire, gas in one of the outlying buildings was turned on, and a pile of toilet tissue set ablaze in a plastic bin. Amazingly, the fire burnt through the floor and went out without the gas igniting.

In the second blaze, on April 17 last year, the arsonist broke a window in the office at the rear of the mosque to get in then lit a fire that ran up into the ceiling, burning wiring, melting windows and destroying most of the interior.

On that unhappy Friday, Khan and others held their pre-dawn prayers in a room at the university. "I was quite horrified and shocked," he says. "People had tears, and I had tears, and we said to each other, 'We will rebuild it. God willing, we will rebuild it.'"

More than a year later, some among the Muslim community have grown sceptical about the police investigation. “We appreciate all the [goodwill],” says Khan, “but in the end the [culprit] has not been caught. And that is a big frustration for us. It makes Muslims fearful it will happen again.” Khan adds that a “big issue” for Islam in Australia is convincing the community to have confidence in the machinery of government, and showing them that it operates without discrimination.

Some say "If this was done to a church by a Muslim, he would have been caught the next day."

“But now some people are saying, If this was done to a church by a Muslim, he would have been caught the next day. But if this is done to a mosque by a non-Muslim...” Khan lets the sentence hang.



The entranceway to the sprawling USQ campus is lined by the flags of many nations, reflecting the diversity of its international students (drawn

from almost 100 countries), and its commitment to “harmonious” multiculturalism.

A signatory to the Australian Human Rights Commission’s “Racism. It Stops with Me” campaign, the university plays a key role in Toowoomba’s efforts to cast itself as a “safe” and welcoming city. (Of course, there’s also an important economic factor at play. “If Toowoomba is not a welcoming city, international students will choose to go elsewhere,” reasons Mark Copland, executive officer of the city’s Catholic-based Social Justice Commission.)

According to Professor Jan Thomas, USQ’s vice-chancellor and CEO, the Islamic community’s search for its own place of worship was driven mainly by overcrowding at the university’s own prayer facilities, which became “woefully inadequate” as local Muslim numbers grew. “I spoke to the community leaders, including Shahjahan [Khan], and said, ‘Toowoomba’s big enough, grown up enough, to have a mosque of its own. Let’s look around for a mosque.’”



"Let's look around for a mosque." USQ Vice-Chancellor Professor Jan Thomas.

Surprisingly, given Khan's account of having searched for a suitable mosque since 2007, Thomas says it was she who found the West Street church property on his behalf in 2012 - just months after suggesting they look for one. "I said, 'Shahjahan! I've found the best place for you! It's for sale... it has parking, and it's already zoned for worship.' Community leaders had a look at it and found it suited their purposes."

"It would be good for everyone to have closure with an arrest."

Thomas says the mosque arson was a traumatising event for the Muslim community. "I think it would be good for everyone to have closure with an arrest. It's clearly a very violent thing that someone has done."

Hopes of a breakthrough rose a month after the second fire when a 26-year-old Victorian was charged for spraying graffiti on the outside of the damaged mosque. "He may not be involved [in the fires]," said detective inspector Dave Isherwood at the time, "but there's a lot of coincidences." But in the words of Professor Khan, the man turned out to be "just an idiot" who defaced a mosque. "And by the way," adds Khan, "he is a Muslim."

The culprit attended a prayer meeting at the mosque before defacing it; he's since pleaded guilty to wilful damage and left Toowoomba. I ask Isherwood what the man sprayed on the mosque. "Oh, it was some Arabic thing," he says. "We thought it might have been derogatory, but it wasn't...it meant nothing really."

In late June 2016, political and religious leaders joined in condemning another mosque attack in Perth's south-east, where a vehicle was firebombed outside the Thornlie Mosque and Australian Islamic College, and an anti-Islam message was sprayed on a wall. In 2001, just days after

the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the Kuraby Mosque on Brisbane's southside was burnt down by 24-year-old Terence George Hanlon, later sentenced to six years' jail for the arson.



At 4pm on a Tuesday, imam Abdul Kader conducts prayers for a handful of male worshippers in the community's makeshift chapel, an old church hall within the mosque grounds. Later, showing me through the mosque's gutted interior, the young religious leader suggests the uniting effect of the fires more than made up for the damage caused. "I don't consider the fire something bad," he says. "It's just part of life."

Born in Bangladesh and educated in Egypt, Kader lived in the UK, Malaysia and Darwin before coming to Toowoomba two years ago with his wife and three children. "I have a travelling nature," he smiles. "I may keep travelling, but I don't know. Nothing is certain."

Has he encountered hostility in the Garden City?

"My dress is not common here, people are not used to it."

Kader: "No, no, apart from when I used to come walking on West Street. And then it was just a few times of shouting and the beep beep, and on one occasion someone has thrown a banana... But this is just fear of the unknown. My dress is not common here, people are not used to it."

In Darwin, he says, strangers always responded to his greetings. "And here, even if you say hello, maybe 50 per cent will reply, and 50 per cent will not. I think they need a bit of time to get used to things."

About 300 Muslims attend prayers here each Friday; the biggest turnout of around 1000 comes at prayer meetings on Christmas eve. The mosque rebuild, to cost about \$700,000, will see the original building extended to include separate ablution facilities and worshipping space for women, none of whom have been evident during my two days in Toowoomba.

How many women worship here now?

"Not many, not many," says Kader, staring off into the damaged ceiling.

A dozen or so?

“Yeah.”



The down-to-earth farmer presiding over the complexities of refugee resettlement on the Darling Downs is Toowoomba Mayor Paul Antonio, who knows a thing or two about prejudice. Born at nearby Millmerran,

Antonio is the descendant of a Portuguese “refugee of sorts”, and the product of a then-controversial marriage between a Catholic and a Lutheran.

“I understand bigotry, I understand religious hatred, I understand every bit of it,” he tells me over breakfast in a local café.

Antonio heaps praise on those who helped the Muslim community after the mosque fires, and refugees who’ve worked hard to forge new lives here. Yet like many Australians he’s troubled by the risk of extremism.

“Many Muslims have embraced our culture,” he says, “but not all, and I think that’s the issue that worries some people... that some of the more extreme ones could be dangerous. We are very dependent on the Federal Government, as they bring [refugees] in, to bring in the right people. And I dunno how the hell they do that.”

(“Lots of Muslims came here through the university,” I’m told later by the Reverend Dr Jonathan Inkpin, rector at Toowoomba’s Anglican parish of St Luke. “So you’ve got professional people, and intelligent, educated people. [Others come] from uneducated circumstances, where they’ve been taught some fairly barbaric stuff - not necessarily through religion, but just by their culture. Then they struggle and have disadvantage, and then you’ve got problems.”)

Some locals are worried by the size and elaborateness of the proposed \$700,000 rebuild.

Antonio won’t talk about why it’s taking so long for the Toowoomba Regional Council to approve plans to rebuild the mosque, insisting he isn’t “involved”. But some locals are worried by the size and elaborateness of the proposed \$700,000 rebuild (as shown in an illustration in the local newspaper), a concern the mayor seems to share.

“I would have thought a bit of land [further out of town] near the university might have been the place to establish something grand,” he suggests, “but [Muslim leaders] seems pretty welded to where they are.”

Antonio’s preferred local Muslim seems to be Muhammed Haniff Abdul Razak, the Singapore-born coordinator of a Buddhism-based, multi-faith organisation known as the Pure Land Learning College Association (PLLCA). The mayor helped Razak find the site for a university the PLLCA is building near Toowoomba, and is a regular guest at its local headquarters near the mosque in West Street, but still struggles with terminology and detail.

"The [PLLCA has] got lots of money and they want to make Toowoomba a model city of peace and harmony. And no mayor is gunna argue with that!"

Antonio: “The head Poobah - I can’t think of his name... [“Master Chin Kung,” supplies his media advisor, with us at breakfast]...yes, Master Chin Kung, and he lives in Malaysia, I think... [“Singapore,” corrects the advisor]... and he’s seriously Muslim... [“Seriously Buddhist,” smiles the advisor]...seriously Buddhist,” repeats the mayor. “They’ve got lots of money...and they want to make Toowoomba a model city of peace and harmony, and virtually lead the world. And no mayor is gunna argue with that!”

In parting, Antonio urges me to contact Razak. But I don’t have to because 20 minutes later (having already been given my number by the mayor) Razak calls to invite me for a chat. The PLLCA centre is a busy complex where a monthly meeting of the 17-strong Toowoomba Interfaith Working Group has just concluded.

Razak - a small, bespectacled man with a can-do attitude - gives me a lavishly-produced publication, “Building a Model City of Peace and Harmony in Toowoomba”. (Opening with a profile of Venerable Master Chin Kung - “... advisor to over 100 Amitabha Buddhist Societies and Pure Land

Learning Centres worldwide” - it’s a slogan-packed exhortation for religious and social “unity”, illustrated by hundreds of glossy photos of smiling local community and religious leaders at PLLCA interfaith gatherings. “The Buddhists think they’re taking over the world,” one of the same leaders later grumbles off-the-record.)

"Angry is angry. How would you [the arsonist] like it if I came and burnt your church?"

Once a civil servant to the Singapore armed forces, Razak came to Toowoomba six years ago and is still angry over the burning of the Garden City Mosque, where he’s a regular worshipper. “People agreed to see the fires as the work of an individual, and not to blame or target any religion,” he says. “But of course angry is angry. How would you [the arsonist] like it if I came and burnt your church?”

When the far-right, anti-Islamic group, United Patriots Front, chose Toowoomba for the launch of its official political arm last February, community leaders agreed to “deny the group oxygen” by ignoring it and refusing to comment. “[The UPF] couldn’t get media coverage, couldn’t rally more members, couldn’t get any help at all,” says Razak. Trying to break through the wall of silence, several UPF members turned up uninvited at a PLLCA function.

“It was quite humorous,” chuckles Razak, “because when they came we gave them flowers. And they looked at them” - he tilts his head in imitation - “and said, 'Oh, flowers. Nobody gives us flowers.' I think they realised then that Toowoomba was not the place for them.”



My last call in the Garden City is at a new restaurant opened by Adnun and Albab Khan, the entrepreneurial sons of Professor Shahjahan Khan. "Primitivo" is the third restaurant the brothers have opened in their home

city, and they have plans to start more - first nationally, then around the world. "We're very proud Australians," says Adnun, 30, "and we hope to grow our business and hire more Australians."

"Being taught in a Catholic school with their doctrine was very close to what Muslims believe in."

He and Albab, 26, were educated at local Catholic schools. "At first, I was the only coloured person in the whole class," Adnun points out. "Now there are kids from 20 to 30 countries going to that school. It's amazing to see the progression." Although raised as Muslims, the brothers see nothing unusual in their father's educational choices. "I think he saw the link between Christianity and Islam as very close," says Albab. "So being taught in a Catholic school with their doctrine, which we respect, was very close to what Muslims believe in."

Restaurant owner Adnun Khan and Professor Shahjahan Khan talk about what happened after the fires.

They still hear occasional stories of newcomers to Toowoomba being abused from passing cars, but shrug it off.

"There's always going to be some element of bullying if you're different," says Adnun.

"You can't eliminate that. It's the same across the world."



Photography and videos by Paul Harris.