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## **MARU executive director Zool Suleman seeks to establish national roundtable on reporting Islamophobia**

By Charlie Smith

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*MARU executive director Zool Suleman has been active in law, culture, and anti-racism for three decades*

Vancouver lawyer **Zool Suleman** knows that there are several definitions of Islamophobia. In a phone interview with the *Toronto Spark*, the executive director of the nonprofit MARU society points out that it can manifest itself in actions, behaviours, and denials of service based on the assumption that someone is a Muslim, even if they're not.

Moreover, Suleman says that Islamophobia can occur when the profiler draws conclusions on a person's characteristics, dress or body language.

“This profiling of people is all around the profiler's assumption of what Islam is,” Suleman says. “So, it is a race-based behaviour, an ethnicity-based behaviour, and, obviously, a religious-based behaviour that targets some of these attributes. And all of those together are elements of what we call Islamophobia.”

He believes that incidents of Islamophobia are “significantly underreported” in Canada.

“The reporting mechanisms are quite fraught and tenuous in terms of how data is gathered,” Suleman states.

In response, MARU aims to establish a national roundtable on reporting Islamophobia. It has also created a new website, [stopracialprofiling.ca](http://stopracialprofiling.ca), which includes a subcategory called [stopislamophobia.ca](http://stopislamophobia.ca).

“What we're trying to do is track the data flows from the time an incident occurs

until there is some kind of resolution,” Suleman says. “Our initial focus is municipal policing and K-12 schools because those are two sites at which we have stories of profiling happening and people being very unhappy with the kinds of resolutions they received.

“There is a need for a national conversation that is around data tracking so that we can better deal with incidents of Islamophobia,” he continues. “At the moment, there is no such roundtable to deal with Islamophobia data.”

## **MARU focuses on research and engagement**

He emphasizes that MARU is not operating an incident-reporting line. He’s on the steering committee of the [Islamophobia Legal Assistance Hotline](#), which currently takes complaints and refers them to lawyers if there’s a legal basis to pursue the issue.

Rather, MARU is focused on research. It also wants to engage with community groups, governments, and organizations that provide services such as policing, education, transit, and health.

“What we’re actually trying to do is better assess how the data comes into the system that other people rely on to decide if Islamophobia is on the increase or the nature of Islamophobia,” Suleman says.

MARU was established 20 years ago in response to rising racial profiling following the 9/11 attacks. It worked with former Vancouver East NDP MP Libby Davies when she was developing a [private member’s bill](#) to eliminate racial profiling.

“In a way, having that 20-year time frame gives us a bit of distance to focus not

on the episodic ruptures that are horrific and galvanize public attention, but rather the longer arc of the problem,” Suleman says. “That’s what we’re trying to do: deal with the longer arc of the problem.

“Governments are very receptive now to data collection,” he adds. “They’re receptive to recognizing that islamophobia is a very distinct thing. Racial profiling, of course, is a much larger umbrella, but islamophobia has become a distinct scope of investigation within that larger umbrella.”

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Toronto Spark editor Charlie Smith has worked as a journalist in print, radio, and television for more than three decades.

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