

Islamophobia envoy calls for apology over Sydney prayer incident; Minns defends police

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February 9, 2026



Australia's special envoy for Islamophobia, Aftab Malik, has called for an investigation into NSW Police's use of force during a Sydney rally opposing Israeli President Isaac Herzog's visit on Monday evening, after officers intervened while a group of Muslim protesters were praying.

Footage circulated on social media, and shared by Greens senator David Shoebridge, appeared to show a group of about eight Muslim men kneeling in prayer during the demonstration outside Sydney's Town Hall.

Several NSW Police officers were seen physically moving two of the men away from the group and trying to drag another to his feet as others continued praying.

The men were reportedly undertaking a five-minute prayer which under Islamic beliefs has to be done at a certain time and cannot be disrupted.

Thousands gathered at Sydney Town Hall on Monday night to protest Herzog's arrival, despite a court decision that upheld the [police powers to restrict protests](#), and 27 people were arrested.

More than 100 Muslim organisations, including the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, Lebanese Muslim Association and the Islamophobia Register Australia condemned the incident in a joint statement, describing it as "completely unacceptable".

Malik has called for NSW Premier Chris Minns to publicly apologise to the Muslim community in one of the envoy's strongest rebukes yet against a government official since being appointed the role in September 2024.



Islamophobia envoy Aftab Malik has called for the NSW premier to apologise to the Muslim community after police were depicted disrupting a group praying at a Sydney protest against Israeli President Isaac Herzog's visit. Credit: SBS

Before Malik's comments, Minns broadly defended police actions, saying officers were put in an "incredibly difficult" situation.

"Context is important," Minns told a press conference.

"And the circumstances facing New South Wales Police was incredibly difficult. It was, in effect, in the middle of a riot. Police have to make critical early decisions in those circumstances."

Minns said the police response "wasn't designed to pick on or target a particular community" and not representative of the "strong and co-operative" relationship police have had with Sydney's Islamic community.

"There was absolutely nothing on the face of the earth that could warrant police to break up people who are praying in a quiet, non-threatening, peaceful manner, and to punch and to grab and to throw individuals onto the concrete," Malik told SBS News.

"The police have to acknowledge that what happened was unprovoked, unnecessary and disproportionate, and if they do not come out with that recognition, it will irreparably damage relations between Muslims and the NSW Police."

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese created Malik's role in 2024, as well as a special envoy to combat antisemitism, Jillian Segal, following heightened reports of Islamophobia and antisemitism in the wake of the latest escalation of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas from October 2023.

NSW Police commissioner Mal Lanyon said the incident occurred "long after the violent aggressive crowd had started to be moved on police".

"When I say you need to take into context, another angle where you can see the police line moving forward, moving those protesters out. At that stage, we were dispersing the crowd for community safety," he told reporters.

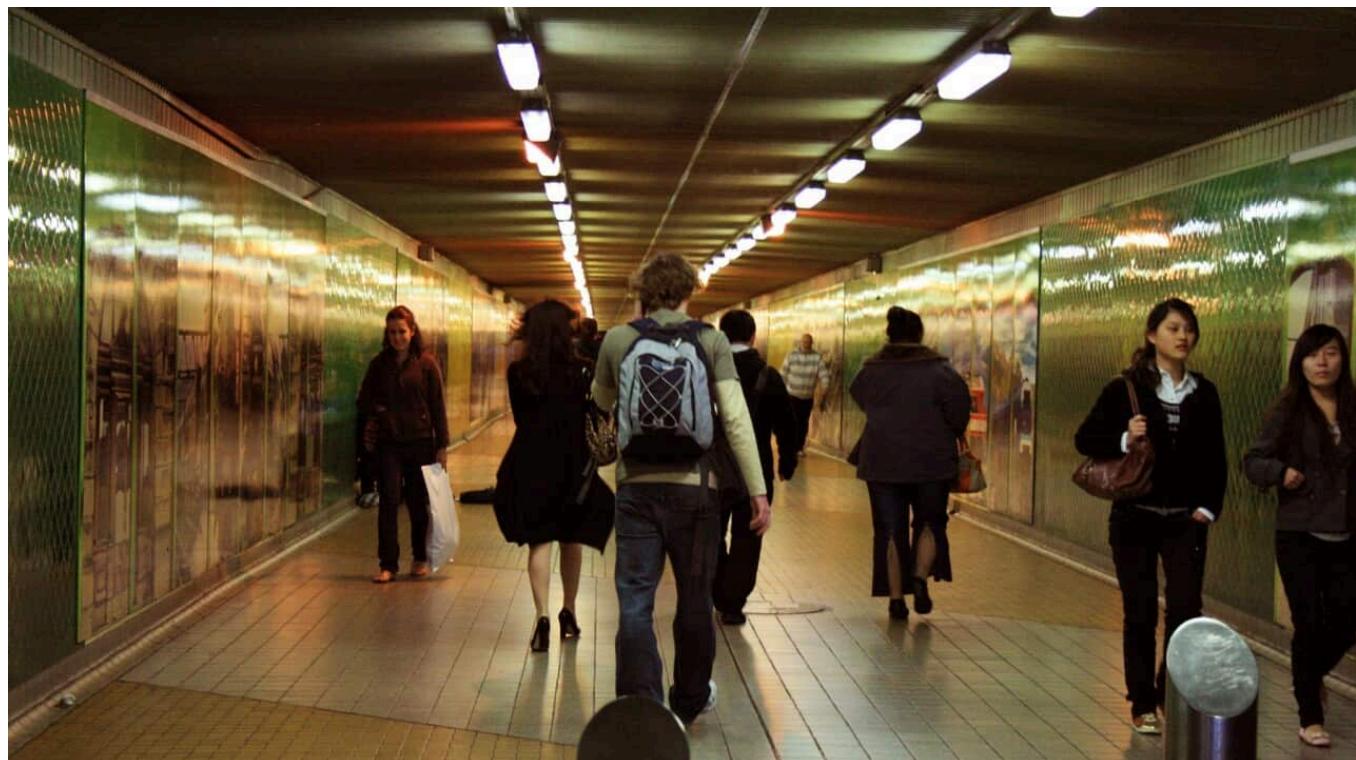
Lanyon said he had spoken to Muslim community leaders.

'This has taken us backwards'

The Lebanese Muslim Association said it was "appalled and outraged" by the incident and concerned about the impact it would have on social cohesion.

"At a time when for us as a country social cohesion is so important, this has taken us backwards," a senior adviser for the Lebanese Muslim Association said in a press conference on Tuesday morning.

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"It does not bode well for our social cohesion ... and, of course, the trust between communities and NSW Police," they said.

"It has undone so much of the good work done over many years to bring communities together."

The association said prayer was a "sacrosanct act" and said it was "un-Australian" and "abhorrent" to disrupt it.

Use of force sets a 'dangerous precedent', says Muslim organisations

Palestine Action Group, the protest organisers, said 30,000 people attended rallies, though it was not clear if this figure was from Sydney or nationwide, while NSW Police said "thousands" were present.

Clashes later broke out between pro-Palestinian demonstrators and police, with protesters pepper-sprayed, arrested, beaten and shoved by officers.

Demonstrators had sought to march towards NSW parliament, while police requested the crowd disperse after speeches concluded. Officers issued a move-on order, but many within the large, densely packed crowd appeared unclear on directions and the situation quickly escalated.

Greens MP Jenny Leong said people couldn't safely leave the area once the move-on order was given.



Organisers had hoped to march through the city, but a court decision upheld the police's ability to restrict protests. Source: AAP / Flavio Brancaleone

"There were so many people crowded outside of the police riot squad lines surrounding the square," Leong said at a press conference on Tuesday morning.

"We said it would not be safe and it was impossible for people of that number to leave the premises without walking onto the road, and we needed assistance to do so."

Muslim organisations said police reliance on public order and move-on powers did not justify intervening in a religious act.

"Police officers knowingly intervened in a moment of religious observance, forcibly interrupted prayer and used physical force against individuals who posed no threat to public safety," the joint statement read.

"Some worshippers were dragged away and thrown to the ground."

The statement said the incident amounted to an "abuse of power" and a "serious failure of judgement".

"If left unchallenged, this incident sets a dangerous precedent for the policing of lawful Muslim religious expression and raises serious concerns about the role of Islamophobia in operational decision-making."

"It unsettles Muslim communities across Australia and erodes trust in policing institutions meant to serve and protect everyone equally."

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The organisations have called for a public apology from the premier, the police minister and police leadership; the resignation of the police commissioner; the establishment of an independent inquiry into the incident; and for any officers found to have acted unlawfully to potentially face criminal charges.

Greens MP Abigail Boyd, who alleges she was assaulted by police at the protest, said she saw the incident.

"People were yelling at [police] and saying to just let them pray. They didn't have to go through the group of people who were praying," Boyd said in a press conference on Tuesday morning, alongside Leong.

"They then went in and grabbed these people who were praying — you can't get anything more peaceful than prayer — picking them up and just throwing them on the ground again.

"People were just treated so incredibly poorly. That is not social cohesion."

Footage 'out of context', says NSW Police

At a late-night press conference, NSW Police assistant commissioner Peter McKenna was asked about the video as well as footage that showed a man being punched by police officers. McKenna said the footage had been taken out of context.

"I would say out of context, on their own, without knowing what happened in the lead-up to them, that people shouldn't judge too quickly," he said.

Asked if he could provide the context, McKenna replied: "It's very early, but what I'll say is police were involved in violent confrontations throughout the night over a number of hours of sustained attacks and violence."

"If you just take 30 seconds of any video and then judge on it, well, you're probably not doing the right thing and probably not putting it all together the way it really needs to."

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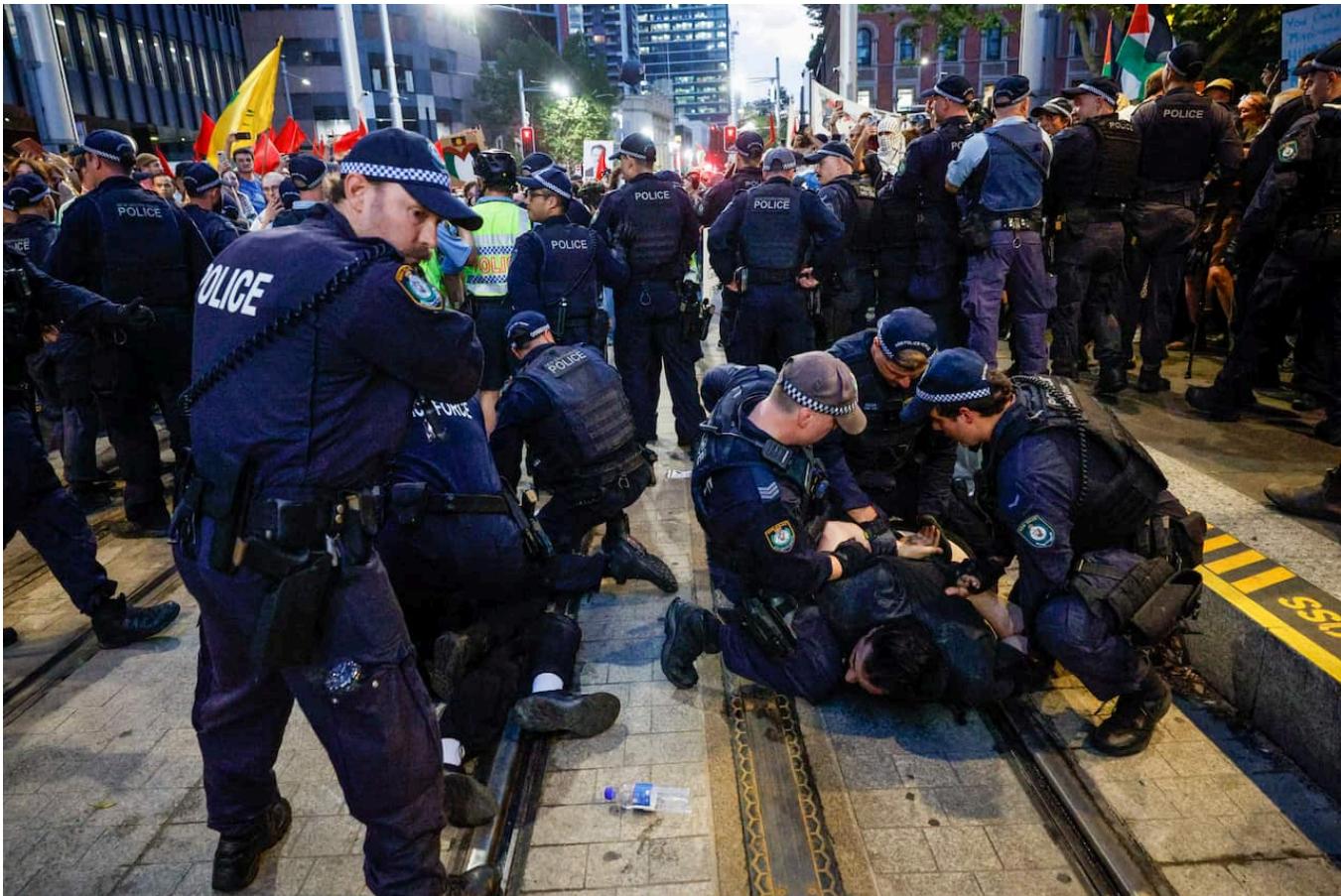


[Tensions linger as protesters gather outside Sydney police station](#)

On Tuesday morning, McKenna said he would not "judge" the actions of police officers because he "saw what they were up against".

"If their decisions were right wrong or otherwise, I'm not going to sit here and judge them this morning, because I saw what they were up against last night," McKenna told ABC Radio Sydney on Tuesday morning.

McKenna added that officers had shown "restraint" for hours before violence broke out.



Police arresting protesters near Sydney's Town Hall. Source: Getty / Izhar Khan

Albanese 'devastated' by protest scenes

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said all views on Herzog's visit should be expressed "peacefully" and described the scenes as "devastating".

"I'm devastated by it. These are scenes that I think shouldn't be taking place," Albanese told Triple M Hobart on Tuesday morning.

"So people should be able to express their views peacefully, but the police were very clear about the routes that were required if people wanted to march to go a particular route, and to ensure that this was done peacefully. But the causes are not advanced by these sort of scenes, indeed, they're undermined."

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The Greens condemned the prayer incident, saying police action amounted to "corporal punishment of peaceful community".

"I saw with my own eyes something I had hoped to never see, but the video footage that is spreading across social media is all the evidence that any of us need to see the descent of NSW into a police state," Sue Higginson, Greens MP and the party's spokesperson for justice, said.

"We saw people of the Muslim faith who were praying set upon, dragged, assaulted and thrown to the ground. We saw dozens of armed police charging at peaceful members of our community."

"Charging horses, chemical weapons, unprovoked assault and severe police violence. These should never be the tools of law enforcement and their presence on Sydney streets must be a wake-up call to all of us."

Protesters reported being sprayed by pepper spray.

Organisers Palestine Action Group have planned another protest to rally against police brutality outside Surry Hills Police Station on Tuesday.