

The importance of recognising negative stereotypes
in a post September 11 world

Islam and its misrepresentation

As we move beyond the anniversary of the dreadful events of September 11, 2001 and look to the future of our enhanced counter-terrorism mandate in the War on Terror, we should perhaps reflect on the subtleties of the old adage that, "Truth is the first casualty of war", when we consider who we are tackling in this war. While truth per se may not have been a casualty in the War on Terrorism, it is incumbent upon us not to allow distortion and stereotypes to cloud our view that the actual enemy in this war is not those in the Islamic community here in Australia or abroad, or are even the majority of those Muslims tagged with the label, fundamentalists.

By Federal Agent Mark Briskey

The reality is that the target of our endeavours is but a small minority who, through their disproportionate acts, effect equally disproportionate views of Islam and Muslims. These individuals distort the tenets of Islam in similar manner to any terrorist or authoritarian enterprise in the past, whether that be the atrocities committed under the Serbian Milosevic regime against Muslim Kosovars and Albanians in the Balkans, to Apartheid, upheld in South Africa upon a skewed interpretation of the Christian Old Testament.

September 11 and stereotyping of Muslims

Unfortunately the perception of Muslims and Islam since September 11 has added impetus to an already negative distortion of Islam historically promoted

by some elements of the media. As a result, the perception of Islam has been distorted to an extent where Islam, a religion and way of life second in popularity only to Christianity, is categorised as fundamentalist, militant, anti-West and socially and politically repressive, without consideration of the reality of the fullness of Islamic expression within its nearly 1 billion adherents, of whom all except an inconsequential minority are terrorists or threats to the West or their own societies.

September 11, 2001 then, was a harbinger for a new era of vulnerability and an exponential expansion of revamped security patterns across the world including Australia. As reported in the September 2002 edition of *Platypus Magazine*, the global coalition has been tremendously successful to date, and will require further resolve to suppress and defeat terrorism.

What factors influence and promote a negative stereotype of Islam?

One of the problems we all face, in an information age that swamps us with a multitude of forms of information reporting, is the danger of reducing everything to a form of shorthand. If Islam and terror are routinely reported in the same breath, then Islam becomes an easy generalisation/shorthand/stereotype into which we dump all our presuppositions, all our assumptions, and all our prejudices.

How does this occur?

The selected coverage of a sometimes unfamiliar aspect of a particular Muslim country's social behaviour is projected as if it were a universally practiced tradition of Islam, and results in a failure to distinguish between cultural practices that are national or regional in origin, and what is not observed by Muslims in other countries. Similarly the reporting in the same breath of Muslims and terror fails to place either Muslims or terror into context, in that it fails primarily because it is not newsworthy to report on the millions of Muslims who go about their lives and, because it fails to report with the same intensity, all those other persons who are engaged in terror who are not Muslims, such as the FARC guerrillas in Colombia, the Basque ETA movement, the LTTE in Sri Lanka or the November 17 movement in Greece, the contemporary Christian fundamentalist God's Soldiers movement which has trickled over the border from the Sudan into Kenya, or even the historical realities of the IRA, Shining Path or a multitude of other purveyors of terror who are not Muslim.

Edward Said, the noted US academic¹, who has laboured to correct these distortions concerning Islam, provided succinct analysis upon the insidious nature of stereotyping of Islam and Muslims more generally when stating that, "... there seems to have been a strange revival of ... previously discredited ideas about Muslim, generally non-white people, ideas which have achieved a startling prominence at a time when racial or religious misrepresentations of every other cultural group are no longer circulated with such impunity. Malicious generalisations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West. What is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals or Asians²".

Even conventional news magazines distort views of Islam to sometimes significant degrees. *Time* magazine has, over the years, unfortunately published articles which, although relatively benign content wise, almost subliminally support Islamic generalisations through the accompanying images they present. The following relatively recent historical examples are proof that this distortion has been evident well before September 11, 2001. A 1998 feature in *Time Australia* titled *Stalking Satan*, featured an eye-catching double-page picture of President Khatami in his clerical robes against a clearly defined and superimposed backdrop of militant young men in camouflaged military fatigues raising their clenched fists. This image, by presenting the combination of a clerically-robed President Khatami and military-garbed, defiant young men presents a clearly distortive representation, which, instead of focusing on some of the liberal measures President Khatami was trying to promulgate, preferred to depict an image which could easily be construed as that of a militant, bloodthirsty and devious Muslim population³. Similarly, and more stridently promoting the nexus between Islam and violence, was the 15 June 1992 edition of

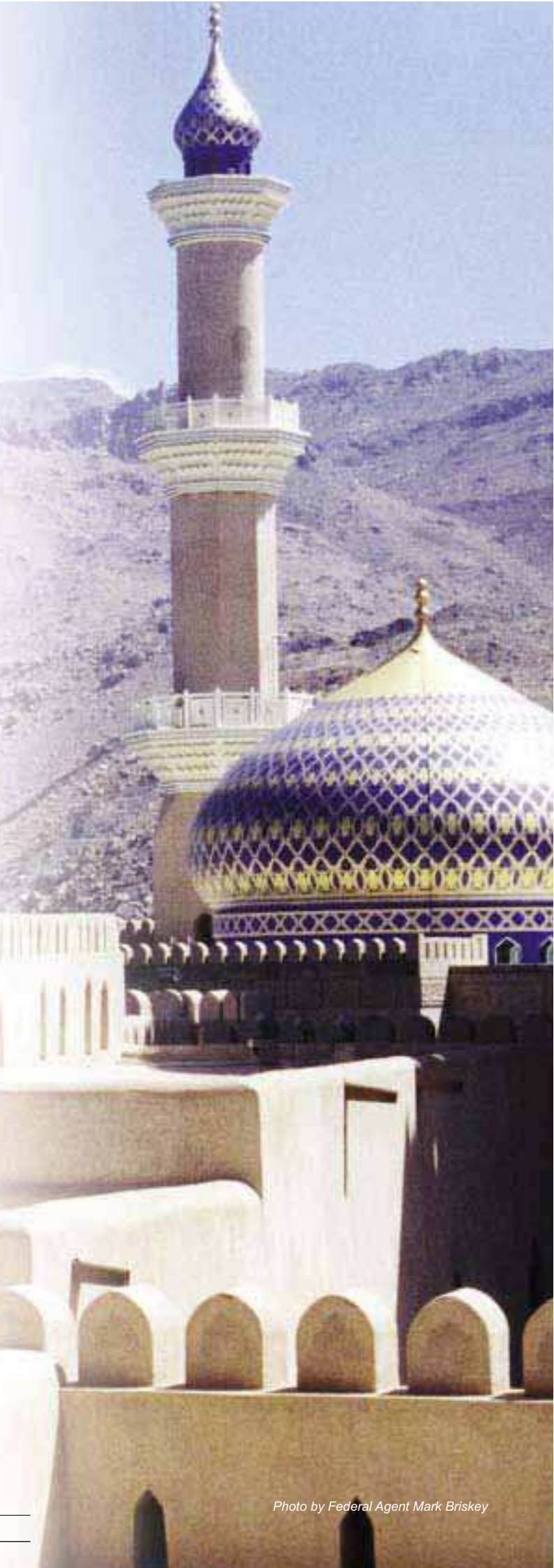




Photo by Federal Agent Gary O'Neill

Time Australia magazine with an image depicting a silhouette of a Mosque and a Kalashnikov rifle side by side on the cover in the immediate post Gulf War days of 1992⁴.

Unfortunately, contemporary examples of this type of distortion and reductionism of Islam is easily found in newspapers, the World Wide Web and from certain talkback radio celebrities in Australia.

Unfortunately, also, these unreasonable representations of Islam are probably even more stereotyped within the entertainment media. Filmmakers in Hollywood, with very few exceptions, have shown deep bias in presenting Arabs or Muslims of developing countries as violent and fanatical terrorists, or at the very least, as snivelling and treacherous rogues. Both glaring and subtle examples of this distortion are depicted in such recent films as, *Rules of Engagement* starring Samuel L. Jackson, Navy Seals starring Charlie Sheen and the popular *True Lies* starring film icon Arnold Schwarzenegger, who nonchalantly and imaginatively dispatches a number of fanatical terrorists with clear allusions to the fact they are Muslims, lead by the actor Art Malik. One of the primary stereotypically negative scenes in this movie depicts the Art Malik quasi-Muslim terrorist character and his terrorist henchmen fervently praying before a missile for a successful strike against America. The nexus between praying and the launching of a missile, naturally, does not

promote positive images of either Islam or persons with a sub-continental heritage such as Art Malik.

What then is Islamic fundamentalism and does it equate with terrorism?

From the 1970s onwards, the world has witnessed a worldwide Islamic resurgence that has not been limited to the more newsworthy issues of a virulent Islam as displayed in the reporting of such issues as the authoritarianism of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the axis-of-evil label applied to Iran by the US, or the secular dictator Saddam Hussein, who has successfully cloaked himself with Islam as a natural tactic to engender support in the Islamic world in the impending conflict with the US. These apparent tangible examples of the horrors of a reinvigorated Islam, fail to take into account the enduring and pervasively mundane and positive effects Islam has had on Muslim countries and communities as diverse as Pakistan and Iran to the healing and regenerative effects of Islam to Muslim Kosovars.

What is this phenomenon popularly called Islamic fundamentalism, and should we be categorising it as a shorthand metaphor for terrorism, oppression and as a redundant and medieval way of living, especially with the vivid images that have confronted us since September 11, 2001, that seem to neatly dovetail into already existing perceptions of Islam that have existed in the popular media?

Federal Agent Mark Briskey with Lt-Col Jamal Al-Tamimi, a long-time friend of the AFP in the United Arab Emirates.



Photo by Mike Dalo, DEA

It is perhaps easiest to separate these issues by describing what Islamic fundamentalism is not. Islamic resurgence has been viewed by the West as being equated to fundamentalism and all the negative baggage that this definition applies, of submissive devotion, to literal understandings of scriptures, which do not promote any modification of the social system⁵. It is perhaps surprising to understand that most contemporary Islamic movements take after Christian (in particular Catholic) theologians who pursue employment of the earliest religious dogmas to improve their material and political lives in a contemporary world.

Any baseline understanding of Islam and its difference to both Christianity and Western secular forms of government must be underpinned with an understanding of a number of certain presuppositions which are true for Islam but not true for the West or Christianity.

First is the Western tendency to assume that secularisation is the only appropriate form of government and that there must be strict separation of religion from politics. Second is the realisation

for Muslims that Islam is and can be a total way of life that is inherently intertwined with politics, law, economics and social relations.

Why is it ethically and strategically important for the AFP to recognise the risks of negative stereotypes?

Part of the challenge for the AFP, described by Commissioner Keelty in the September 2002 edition of *Platypus Magazine*, included the critical importance of effecting a transition of the AFP into an organisation redefined by its increased role in all aspects of counter-terrorism. Post September 11 saw the AFP responding effectively to a rapidly changing environment where counter-terrorism investigations attained a prominence not previously encountered. Some of the *Operation Drava* and other ad-hoc investigations arising out of September 11, and investigated by the AFP and partner agencies, were subject to intense media scrutiny, concerning not only the rule of law but also the religious affiliation of those being investigated. Naturally the importance to the AFP in this respect is ensuring that core AFP values of impartiality and respect of diversity are in

Federal Agent Mark Briskey accompanies Pakistani Anti-Narcotic Force troops to a briefing in Baluchistan Province, southern Pakistan.



The author, Federal Agent Mark Briskey meets an Hazara tribal elder in Quetta Baluchistan, Pakistan. Hazara's are ethnic Afghans oppressed by the Taliban

no way subject to aspersions of any bias whether that be ethnically, sexually or religiously based.

The professional reputation of the AFP to both government and the varied groups that make up our society, will be underpinned on how we maintain our impartiality and respect of diversity within a post September 11 environment where AFP members will be required to be aware of the sometimes compelling but distorted arguments concerning Islam and terrorism in a post September 11 world. That the importance of members recognising these negative stereotypes and not allowing them to influence our relations either domestically in Australia or with our overseas law enforcement allies is probably an understatement.

The value to the AFP of our allies in Muslim countries cannot be underestimated. The importance to the AFP of enjoying harmonious and productive relationships internationally without any negative stereotypical baggage is fundamentally important. The breadth of AFP relationships with Muslim nations is both diverse and comprehensive, from the AFP post in the most populous Muslim country in the world – Indonesia – to the contemporary importance of our posts in Pakistan and Beirut, which both have

responsibility for maintaining productive relationships with the Muslim countries of South Asia and the Middle East respectively.

The successful outcomes from these relationships has been evident in everything from the successful signing of an MOU with Indonesia, to being able to successfully prevent people smuggling from Indonesia and South East Asia to preventing narcotics from South Asia arriving in Australia.

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² Said, E.W., *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts determine how we see the rest of the World*, – updated with new introduction, Vintage Books, London, 1997.

³ Paul Quinn-Judge, *Stalking Satan*, *Time Magazine Australia*, 30 March, No.13, pp.34-38.

⁴ *Should the World be Afraid*, *Time Magazine Australia*, 15 June 1992, (cover)

⁵ R.Wright, *Islam and Democracy*, *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1992, p.131.