Of 'Middle Eastern Appearance':

Police and Muslim Communities in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Since the War on Terror was declared, old stereotypes and attitudes have returned to haunt the Arab and Muslim communities in Australia. The rate of racially motivated attacks is on the rise. How have the police responded? Mr. Dellal describes the efforts of police services to develop better communication and more satisfactory outcomes with regards to reported incidents of discrimination.

Following both the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre and the Bali bombings, and with the introduction of new federal counter-terrorism laws, Australian Arab and Muslim citizens have encountered increased hostility and suspicion. Many have felt unfairly targeted in the war against terrorism and that their communities as a whole were being discriminated against. Arab and Muslim communities have experienced the inequity of being unjustly suspected of aiding terrorists and of being anti-Australian, which resulted in the Australian Muslim community having to continually re-pledge and recommit their loyalty to Australia.

There have been some well-publicized arrests of suspected terrorists which have led to the old stereotypes of the 'Arab villain' re-emerging with full force. Racial profiling by the media using the phrase 'Middle Eastern appearance' created the usual negative stereotype and aroused undue suspicion and fear in the general population. While maintaining vigilance is of paramount importance, some of the official messages regarding security and being alert to terror were mixed and misleading. This can easily be construed as 'us versus them,' meaning anyone who may physically resemble a person of 'Middle Eastern appearance' was a potential suspect. Not only can such descriptions be misleading and inaccurate, but often inadvertently lead to the victimization of individuals and, in some cases, entire communities.

To demonstrate this, take for example an account by Dr. Joseph Pugliese who wrote an essay titled "I am of Middle Eastern Appearance and I am not Middle Eastern". He was born in a Calabrian village and grew up in Australia, and here he describes his experiences while travelling throughout Western countries:

> *At a cake shop, I am identified as a swarthy Turk. My ethnic identity assigned, I consequently become invisible and repeatedly fail to get served. A bank teller in San Francisco interrogates me as to whether I am a Palestinian before she deigns to proceed with my transaction. Visiting a friend in hospital I am identified as his Jewish rabbi. At a dinner party I morph into a Pakistani.*
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> *At the barber's, as my hair is cut, my exotic ethnicity is questioned and, before I can reply, my Syrian status is confirmed. In the electronics store, the sales assistant asks me a question that is really a self-confirming knowing statement: "You're Lebanese, aren't you?" On a train from Seattle to Vancouver, the ticket inspector inspects both my tickets and my ethnic identity: "Are you Iranian, and why are you travelling to Vancouver?"*

Dr. Pugliese adds that the figure of Middle Eastern appearance throws people into a state of fear, suspicion and anxiety. This geographically loose term has implicated entire communities rather than the few individuals who actually commit crimes. The term 'Middle Eastern appearance' has become synonymous with criminality and, particularly post 9/11, has provided a simplistic profiling tool for the global search for terrorists.

The solution

In Australia, community groups and the police have been very conscious of the need to connect to overcome the isolation and divisiveness created by recent events. Certainly, Australian Muslims believe that maintaining a positive relationship and cooperating with police and law enforcement agencies has been essential in overcoming negative elements surfacing through fear, ignorance and uncertainty. From both a police and community perspective, recruitment, information and education have been identified as key areas for further development to generate this 'connectedness' as well as increase police competencies in managing cultural and religious diversity.

It is fair to say that the recognition and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity has been the key element of Australian multiculturalism. But not since September 11 has religious diversity featured so prominently in Australia's Multicultural Agenda. With over eighty faiths, religious diversity in Australia has become a very important component of Australian multiculturalism because of its prominence in the lives of so many people. The recognition of religious diversity has required police to reframe concepts and to develop strategies in order to effectively deal with multi-faith elements and customs of the Australian community.

Part of this challenge for police officers is the increased need to ensure appropriate equity and diversity training. The value of comprehensive and on-going training in this area cannot be underestimated. It is also important to ensure continued modification and updating of relevant curricula in this area to ensure that the training context remains relevant and takes into account emerging trends and issues. Other initiatives include:

- Further introduction and expansion of the role of multicultural liaison officer, not only to link with communities but also act as an educator/ resource for other operational police working in the same communities or districts;
- Introducing program funding that encourages projects to be developed between community and police;
- Development of community help lines to monitor hate crimes and complaints;
- Jurisdictions setting up training programs for police to develop skills and recognize how to deal with racially motivated crime; and
- Communities providing lectures, forums and open-day events for police members and the general community to help with a better understanding of the community.

Dealing with diversity is probably one of the most sensitive areas for police. It has therefore been important for Australian police to incorporate into their repertoire greater levels of understanding, knowledge base, attitudes, perceptions and experiences of the community, particularly more recently arrived groups and refugees from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Africa.

Police need to be aware of how communities view and understand Australian law and the role of police. Information booklets such as "A Guide to the Role of Police in Australia" are very useful resources for communities.

Reporting of Incidents post-September 11

It was also considered important by police services to gain the confidence of those communities that were being vilified and discriminated against. However, this proved quite difficult. A recent community consultation conducted by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission found that some community members were reluctant to report incidents because of the difficulty of identifying the perpetrator, fear of retribution, a mistrust of government authorities and scepticism about obtaining a useful outcome. Some experienced a lack of interest from local police and a general approach of not taking hate offences seriously. Although most states in Australia have criminal sanctions against racial vilification and some against religious vilification, the statistical data on race hate crimes or of incidents is limited and varies from state to state. There is currently a recommendation from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission study "that State and Territory police consider reviewing current systems for recording incidents motivated by racial or religious prejudice with a view to ensuring greater consistency in the collection of data across Australia."

Ms. Joumanah El Matrah, from the Islamic Women's Welfare Council in Australia also pointed out that: "Although organisations have attempted to gather information about the nature and extent of attacks against Arabic and Muslim communities, there are no definitive reports or registering of attacks to date. Police reports and complaints made to the Equal Opportunity Commission do not reflect the level of attacks experienced by the affected communities. Even though a range of strategies have been implemented by community groups and police, it is difficult to gauge the impact of these strategies. Many forms of vilification and racist attacks do not easily sit under the powers of police and other statutory bodies. It is very difficult to prosecute crimes such as spitting or pulling off the hijab, because perpetrators do not generally remain to give their contact details. Accordingly to the report, one of the most disturbing factors of the last two years has been the gendered nature of the attacks against the community. Women have been overwhelmingly targeted in the violence."

We are hopeful future efforts to develop better communication between police and community and anti-discrimination agencies will help support Australian Muslims and others who have experienced discrimination or vilification and increase the chances that a satisfactory outcome will result from reporting an incident.