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Stereotypical Threats: ignorant security

by Philip Baum



I flew into Tirana, Albania's capital city, feeling somewhat apprehensive. After all, if friends, business associates and the media were to be believed, I was heading to a bastion of organised crime, where the men are gangsters and the women prostitutes.

Despite the fact that more than two decades have passed since Enver Hoxha's death and his isolationist regime commenced its demise, Albania is still struggling to shrug off its legacy of being perceived as being the ultimate xenophobic state. The reality is that Albanians are some of the most friendly people one could hope to meet and the country has a wealth of cultural and natural sites that, together with its Mediterranean climate, I am convinced will prove a draw to international tourists in the not too distant future. The challenge is to quash the stereotypical image of the country and its nationals.

Yet Albanians are not alone in facing the challenge of having to counter misguided international perceptions. Nigerian men are fraudsters and Thai women are hookers. Scottish people are mean, Colombians are drug traffickers, Chinese are gamblers and Germans are racists. Jews are the perpetrators of white-collar crime, blacks culpable for street violence and Arabs are international terrorists. Of course, such generalisations are utter nonsense.

Perceptions, based on ignorance, are a challenge for the security services. For all of us, attempting to

evaluate those of a different race, religion or creed can be difficult. We are forced to operate outside our own comfort zones and interact with those whose background, mentality and lifestyle may even conflict with our own.

Whilst we are more comfortable with our own ilk, this does not mean that we are either intolerant or racist by default. It does mean that our decision-making processes may be affected by the extent to which we have remained within our own social ghettos.

This became very apparent during the voting process of this month's Eurovision Song Contest (an annual competition whereby each European

country submits a song to be performed live on television and then viewers, across the continent, vote for their favourite song from other countries). The aim is that the best song is chosen, but the reality is that it has become an exercise in ghettoisation. The United Kingdom's entry only received support from Ireland and Malta; Sweden's greatest support came from Denmark, Norway and Iceland; and the Balkan states traded voting compliments. Whilst one of the best songs (from Serbia) may have been a worthy overall winner, the voting pattern demonstrated that we are not quite the global (or even European) citizens we perhaps wish we were.

So how do we ensure that our security decisions are based on actual data rather than on unintentional racial or ethnic stereotyping?

Unfortunately, due to the limitations of the salaries offered and the basic educational requirements demanded, the airport security services attract precious few worldly individuals. Accordingly, we cannot simply select those who may have had greater international cross-cultural and cross-religious exposure; there are simply insufficient such applicants. Therefore it is up to us to educate those who we do take on to better appreciate the basic tenets of the different religions or cultures that they may encounter.

Furthermore, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that the case studies we utilise in training courses do not

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contribute to increased suspicion of persons from certain ethnic groupings. I was horrified, when review the training materials one company was using, to find that every example of aircraft hijacking and sabotage discussed related to the Middle East; there was no reference to examples of terrorism from other parts of the world, no reference to asylum seekers and no reference to the numerous examples of psychotic behaviour that have been displayed in-flight.

In August 2002, my Lead Editorial referred to something I entitled “September 11th Syndrome”, being the perception that the only challenge is that of Islamic fundamentalist suicidal hijackers wishing to gain access to cockpits armed with box-cutters. Five years on, the constant references to the events of that one day, to the exclusion of the more mundane run-of-the-mill incidents that plague our industry on a daily basis, has done more to harm community relations than it has to increase the effectiveness of our security regime.

We need to create a sense of balance. We cannot ignore the very real threat posed by extremist groups; equally we must appreciate that there exists a very real danger from other elements of society.


On the 16th April this year, Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people at Virginia Tech. Cho was a South Korean student studying English at the university, with a known history of mental illness. Yet, he

would not fit the stereotypical profile of a terrorist. True, he was not a terrorist and true he was not attacking the aviation industry. But security, whether on a university campus or at an international airport is not just about counter-terrorism. However, attend an aviation security course and one could be forgiven for believing that many instructors believe otherwise.

Such exaggerated emphasis on the murky world of international terrorism results in the aforementioned stereotyping of who can and who cannot pose a threat to the industry. It also deprives our operatives of celebrating their successes in the identification of common criminals, psychologically disturbed individuals and Americans (or am I stereotyping?) who have forgotten to remove their handguns from their briefcases before setting out to the airport.

We should be going out of our way to ensure that those we deploy at our checkpoints appreciate the broad range of “causes” which they are expected to identify. Arguably, the media sufficiently indoctrinates us as to the threat posed by fundamentalist ideology to warrant reduced focus on that topic in the classroom – it’s a given, a known entity. The often overlooked or underestimated threats are those in need of being brought into focus.

Over-emphasising the threat from one element of society is not only wrong, it’s also poor security practice and downright offensive. The Australians are as drunk as the Swiss are boring; Swedes are as promiscuous as the Irish are stupid; Russians are as cold as the English are hooligans; and, an Arab is as much a terrorist as an American is culturally deprived.



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