ADF views on Islam: does cultural sensitivity training matter?

By Charles Miller

Abstract

Since the events of 9/11, the official line of most Western governments has been that the fight against Islamist terrorism is not a fight against Islam itself. Strategically, there are a number of reasons for this — successful intelligence cooperation with Muslim majority governments, civilians in Muslim countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan and in the West itself is seen as crucial for
success in the war. Consequently, states such as Australia have attempted to use ‘cultural sensitivity’ training to instil a greater understanding of Muslim cultures within military personnel. However, recent incidents have raised questions as to the extent to which the official narrative on Islam is widely shared by the ADF’s personnel. Given the disciplinary consequences for openly expressing so-called ‘Islamophobic’ sentiments, however, answering this question definitively is difficult. In this study, I use a technique designed to elicit frank responses to sensitive questions — the ‘list experiment’ — to examine ADF views on Islam. I find little evidence that the official ‘Islam as a religion of peace’ narrative is widely accepted, nor is there evidence that cultural sensitivity training has any effect, although limitations of the study design make it difficult to draw this conclusion for sure.

Introduction

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has recently faced a number of potential problems with some far right and (allegedly) racist views within its personnel and their involvement with groups promoting these views. An ABC News report, for instance, claimed that postings on a Facebook group for the Royal Australian Regiment referred to Muslims as ‘ragheads’ and expressed anti-immigrant sentiments. Similarly, the Royal Australian Navy launched an investigation into allegations that some of its members had joined the far-right Australian Defence League, an anti-Muslim group whose members hinted at committing acts of violence at Australia Day celebrations in Sydney.

As long as they do not conflict with professional behaviour, the private views of ADF personnel should not be of concern to the ADF or the Australian government. However, there are a number of issues which could arise if anti-Muslim sentiment is widespread within the defence force. First, there is the potential for damage to the image of the service, not only among ethnic minority Australians but also among many Australians who do not consider themselves from a minority background but who do not view racial prejudice kindly. This could in turn affect recruitment to the services and lower public support for the ADF overall. More importantly, if Australia’s Muslim community perceives the security services as inherently hostile, this may reduce the flow of intelligence on the activities of Islamic extremist organisations in Australia. Second, while organisations such as Reclaim Australia and the Australian Defence League have not yet spawned any
violent offshoots, this may not always remain the case. The danger that a similarly violent far right group may emerge in Australia and attract trained ADF personnel is a scenario that, while unlikely, nonetheless cannot be wholly ruled out. Third, and probably most important at present, hostility to Muslims in general could hamper the effectiveness of the ADF on deployment in the Greater Middle East in a number of ways. Most obviously, it could lead to ill-treatment of civilians. Many observers, for instance, have blamed abuses by US forces — such as the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal — on a general desire to seek revenge on Arab and Muslim peoples for the events of 9/11. Even if anti-Muslim sentiment does not lead directly to abuse, it may complicate attempts to work alongside allied forces in the Greater Middle East and elsewhere — for instance, in training and mentoring roles with the Iraqi and Afghan national armies, or exchanges and joint exercises with Muslim neighbours such as Malaysia or Indonesia.

At present, the principal means employed by the ADF to reduce prejudice against Muslims and outsiders more generally is cultural sensitivity training. This training attempts to familiarise ADF personnel with the main attributes of the culture of the nations to which they are to be deployed. Part of the goal of such training is simply to reduce the possibility of friction due to innocent misunderstandings (for instance, pointing out culturally appropriate gestures and means of address in addition to teaching a few useful phrases in the local language). However, cultural sensitivity training also aims to instil a sense of empathy towards civilian populations and potential allies. This in turn is driven, not by tender-hearted political correctness, but by a hard-headed realisation of the need to develop good relations with civilians and allied personnel so as to acquire the local intelligence crucial for success in counter-insurgency and stabilisation operations.

Gauging the extent of anti-Muslim sentiment in the ADF, and the effectiveness of cultural sensitivity training in combatting it, are both tricky undertakings. Given the ADF’s commitment to the principles of religious equality, soldiers may understandably be very reluctant to express similar views in public. This may, in turn, give outside observers the impression that these views are less widely shared than they actually are. Fortunately, researchers in the United States (US) have developed a technique, which I have applied to my research, to persuade individuals to freely express views which may be deemed socially undesirable or for which they could otherwise be punished. This technique — known as a ‘list experiment’
— allows researchers to gauge the prevalence of controversial opinions in a population in aggregate terms without attributing these opinions to any one individual in particular. Using this as a means to measure anti-Muslim sentiment in general, I can compare the group of individuals which has received cultural sensitivity training to the group which has not. This research produced a number of conclusions. First, anti-Muslim sentiments are probably quite widespread in the areas of the ADF which I studied, which include some of the most important front-line units in Australia’s ongoing commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, there is no evidence that cultural sensitivity training has done much to change this either way. However, unless and until the army is prepared to sponsor a trial in which individuals are assigned to such training at random, it is difficult to make a clearly causal interpretation of this finding. Put simply, cultural sensitivity training in the ADF does not appear to reduce prejudice towards Muslims, but because this training is also connected to a soldier’s unit and combat record, it is difficult to ascertain what is really producing the overall outcome. If the ADF wishes to investigate this issue further, a larger scale, randomised, controlled trial would be necessary. However, an alternative approach could be based more on continuing to reinforce the military discipline which prevents personnel from turning what might be considered unsavoury sentiments into real actions detrimental to the interests of the ADF and Australia. I will explore this possibility more in the conclusion. First, however, I will describe the methods behind my research, explain how the research was conducted and report and interpret my results.

Research

As noted above, the open expression of anti-Muslim sentiment in the ADF can and has led to disciplinary charges and dismissal. To simply administer a survey in which ADF personnel are asked outright whether they are hostile to Islam could lead to a misleadingly low number of positive responses as individuals misrepresent their views to escape censure.

This is a common problem in public opinion research across the world. In the US, for example, it is believed that hostility towards African Americans is still widespread among white southerners, even though many of the latter group are unwilling to express such views openly. In response, the political scientists James Kuklinski, Michael Cobb and Martin Gilens developed the ‘list experiment’[^5]. In this scenario, individuals were randomly divided into
two groups (which I will call ‘treatment’ and ‘control’ for simplicity, though strictly speaking there is no ‘treatment’ involved). Both groups were given a list (hence the name) of three items and asked to state ‘how many’ of these items made them angry. The list was as follows:

1. the Federal Government increasing the tax on gasoline
2. professional athletes getting multimillion dollar contracts
3. large corporations polluting the environment

The ‘treatment’ group, however, was given a fourth item — the ‘sensitive’ question — which its members might not have been prepared to answer openly. In Kuklinski, Cobb and Gilens’ study, this item was:

4. a black family moving in next door

The key insight of the list experiment is that, because individuals are only asked ‘how many’ items make them angry, and not which ones, those who would be angered by a black family moving in next door can say so without fear of being discovered or punished. Such a person might answer ‘two’ if assigned to the treatment group (because items 1 and 4 anger them), but if pressed could always claim that they were angered by items 1 and 2. In the aggregate, however, researchers can tell what proportion of the population at hand agreed with the ‘sensitive’ question by simply looking at the difference between the number of items agreed with in the treatment and control group. This is because (assuming the two groups were selected at random) there is no reason to expect that individuals in the treatment group will be more angered by items 1 to 3 than individuals in the control group. Consequently, if there is a significant difference in the number of items which people say anger them in the treatment group, it can only be because of the inclusion of the sensitive item.

To adapt this for the context of this research, an item had to be found which would tap into anti-Muslim sentiment. Such an item could not constitute straw man views so extreme that they would generate scarcely any responses (for instance, it would presumably be hard to find someone to agree that ‘all Muslims are terrorists’ or ‘I hate all Muslims’) but at the same time it could not tap into elements of anti-Muslim sentiment which are overly abstract or divorced from the operational reality of the ADF (for example ‘Islam is a misogynistic religion’ or ‘Islam is a threat to Western
civilisation’). Similarly, views on Muslim immigration to Australia are irrelevant to the ADF’s operational needs because a soldier could very well be happy to work with Muslims in Afghanistan or Iraq without necessarily being happy to have them come to Australia (this ruled out using ‘a Muslim family moving in next door’ as an item in the list). Instead, I settled on ‘the Muslim religion promotes violence and terrorism’. This is a commonly held view of the anti-Islam right in Australia. It is also more closely related to the ADF’s operational requirements than views on Islam’s relationship to women or gays or whether it poses an abstract threat to Western values or democracy. If one believes that the Muslim religion promotes violence and terrorism, then all Muslims, including nominally friendly forces and civilians, could potentially be viewed as enemies.

The other three items had to be adapted somewhat to the Australian context. Moreover, care had to be taken to avoid the ‘ceiling/floor’ problem which arises in the context of list experiments. The ceiling problem occurs if all three of the non-sensitive items are suggestions which most respondents would agree with or be angered by, meaning that respondents in the treatment group who were prejudiced would give the answer ‘4’, thereby revealing themselves to be prejudiced. The floor problem is the opposite, whereby all three non-sensitive items would be issues few people would agree with, so that individuals giving the answer ‘1’ would similarly be ‘blowing their cover’. The solution to these problems is to choose the three non-sensitive items such that it would be very hard to agree with all three of them, or with none of them. Two of the questions should therefore express what are very nearly opposite opinions on the same subject, while the third should be something to which almost everyone can agree.

I therefore chose the three non-sensitive items as:

1. environmental regulations and taxes like the carbon tax destroy Australian jobs
2. I’m sick of hidden fees and costs when I buy things, especially on the internet
3. mining and logging companies are destroying the Australian environment
Items 1 and 3 are very close to the original American list experiment, and express opposing views on the question of environmental regulation, so that it would be difficult to agree with both simultaneously. Item 2 was designed to avoid the ‘floor’ problem by finding a statement with which the largest number of Australians could be expected to agree. An online poll of 200,000 respondents cited in Fox News named hidden fees and costs as the issue which most annoys Australians. This was therefore taken to be the ‘uncontroversial’ option.7

In addition to the list, the survey contained a number of questions on each soldier’s demographic background and personality characteristics, particularly political opinions. This was designed to allow me to compare background characteristics between treatment and control and those who had received cultural sensitivity training and those who had not (more of this below).

Once the survey wording was agreed, the next step in the research was to identify a military base and group of units to survey. Thanks to the work of Dr Albert Palazzo, Director of Research in Strategic Plans–Army and manager of the Army Research Scheme and of the units involved, I was able to survey four special operations units based at Holsworthy, New South Wales: the 2nd Commando Regiment, the Special Operations Engineer Regiment, the Special Operations Logistics Squadron and the Special Forces Training Centre. These units are by no means a random sample of the army as a whole or of the ADF. Indeed, even within the special forces, there may exist differences in attitudes between this sample and the Special Air Service Regiment, for instance, given the greater emphasis the latter places on reconnaissance and intelligence gathering as opposed to kinetic action.8 However, from the perspective of the study, the Holsworthy special forces units are among the most useful to study given that they have borne a heavy share of the fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The respondents were recruited through flyers distributed by regimental points of contact. The flyers deliberately omitted any reference to Muslims or to cultural sensitivity training, in order to avoid attracting respondents with particularly strong views on the issue either way. The flyers simply referred to ‘research into how well your training so far has prepared you to operate in diverse linguistic-cultural environments’. The survey attracted 182 respondents and was conducted at the Holsworthy Other Ranks’ Mess
on Tuesday 18 August at 11.00 am. Because it was not known in advance which soldiers would participate in the survey, it was not possible to assign them to treatment and control in advance. Moreover, soldiers choose where to sit in the mess and, plausibly, are more likely to choose to sit with soldiers who are similar to them in terms of many variables which might affect how they would answer the question at hand. Consequently, I randomised assignment to treatment and control by assigning a number in order to the seats in the room, starting with seat number 1 in the top left-hand corner of the mess, going down clockwise to seat 260 in the bottom right-hand corner. I then assigned each seat to receive either the treatment or control form using a single draw from a Bernoulli distribution (equivalent to tossing a coin) in the statistical program R. The respondents arrived at 11.00 am and had all finished the survey by 11.30 am. The completed forms were then digitised using the open source software Formscanner and analysed statistically using R.

**Results and interpretation**

The headline findings are that anti-Muslim sentiment is most likely widespread in the units surveyed. Moreover, in so far as it is possible to ascertain, given the non-random assignment of soldiers to cultural sensitivity training, this training appears to be making little or no difference to this fact.

Recall that the level of agreement in the population under study with the controversial item (in this case ‘the Muslim religion promotes violence and terrorism’) is simply the difference between the mean number of items agreed with in the treatment and control groups respectively. In the whole sample of 182 respondents, the mean number of items agreed with in the treatment group was 2.26, compared to 1.46 in the control group, a difference which is statistically significant at the .1% level. As Kuklinski et al. pointed out, the estimate for the percentage of respondents who agreed with the sensitive item is the difference between treatment and control multiplied by 100 — which in this case would be 80%. The mean number of items agreed with in each group is displayed below.

Does cultural sensitivity training make a difference to this? To begin assessing this, I looked at the difference between treatment and control among the soldiers who had and had not received cultural sensitivity
training. Reflecting the fact that the Holsworthy units have seen extensive service overseas, just over 80% of respondents (136 individuals) had received some cultural sensitivity training. This means, for one thing, that more precise estimates can be gained of the differences for this group than for the individuals who have not received cultural sensitivity training.

The result? The level of anti-Muslim sentiment among individuals who have received cultural sensitivity training is, if anything, higher than among those who have not. The mean number of items agreed with in the treatment group — among soldiers who have received cultural sensitivity training — is 2.33, while the mean in the corresponding control group is 1.42. The best estimate, therefore, for the proportion of soldiers who have received cultural sensitivity training and who believe that the Muslim religion promotes violence and terrorism is 91%. The corresponding figure for those who have not had cultural sensitivity training is a mere 17%. The graph below reproduces barplots of the mean number of items agreed to for the groups which did and did not receive cultural sensitivity training.

Can it be inferred from this then that cultural sensitivity training increases anti-Muslim sentiment? In fact it cannot, for the following reasons. Cultural sensitivity training in the ADF is given to service personnel prior to their deployment overseas. ADF personnel who are not due to deploy overseas are not provided with cultural sensitivity training.\textsuperscript{14} Cultural sensitivity training

![Graph showing mean number of items agreed with - Whole Sample](image-url)
ADF views on Islam: does cultural sensitivity training matter?

Mean Number of Items Agreed with - No CS Training

Could reduce anti-Muslim sentiment, all other things being equal, but it could simply be that this effect is being comprehensively drowned out either by the effects of overseas deployment or by whichever factors caused individuals to join units which would be deployed overseas in the first place. For instance, 2 Commando has been the spearhead of Australia’s military efforts in the Greater Middle East for some time. It could be that individuals
with particularly strong anti-Muslim views might be more likely to try to join 2 Commando as opposed to other units precisely to take the opportunity to fight there. Alternatively, it could be that, even if individuals start without any anti-Muslim sentiments, the experience of fighting a counter-insurgency war in Iraq or Afghanistan causes them to acquire some. On the other hand, the experience of fighting in these countries could have the opposite effect — fighting alongside trusted local interpreters, Iraqi or Afghan National Army units or building good relations with local communities might serve to reduce anti-Muslim feeling. Without a random experiment in assignment to cultural sensitivity training as described above, it is impossible to rule out these possibilities completely. However, analysis of some of the background data which I gathered on the respondents would seem to weigh against these considerations. I compared the political leanings of individuals who had received cultural sensitivity training to those who had not, based on the Australian Election Study’s 0-10 point scale of political ideology (where 10 is the most right wing and 0 the most left wing). As can be seen from the plot below, ADF personnel who have received cultural sensitivity training (i.e. who have deployed overseas) are ideologically indistinguishable from those who have not. Consistent with research on the political positions of military personnel in other countries, both groups are slightly more conservative than the Australian population as a whole — the mean political position of civilian respondents to the Australian Election Study in 2013 was $5.15$, whereas the mean position of respondents to my survey who had received cultural sensitivity training was 6.31 and the mean position of those who had not received cultural sensitivity training was actually somewhat higher at 6.46. There is no evidence then, that more politically conservative soldiers opt for units which are more likely to deploy overseas or that the experience of combat makes soldiers more right wing in general.

Still, the above approach represents a rather crude means to measure the extent to which service overseas affects soldiers’ views on Muslims. A soldier’s position on the ideological spectrum is a combination of views on a number of different issues, many of which have nothing to do with Muslims or Islam. The evidence presented above should therefore be taken as suggestive rather than conclusive that there are no other relevant differences between soldiers who received cultural sensitivity training and those who did not.
ADF views on Islam: does cultural sensitivity training matter?

The best way to determine whether this training has an effect on the level of anti-Muslim sentiment would be to select a large sample of ADF personnel at random, then to divide them again at random into two groups, one of which would receive the training and one of which would not. Assuming the two groups to be sufficiently large and to have been split at random, the difference in agreement with the sensitive item between them would provide an accurate estimate of the causal effect of cultural sensitivity training. For operational reasons, however, the army was not prepared to run such a trial. Should the army wish to explore the question in more detail in future, this is the approach I would recommend.

Conclusion

This study has found strong evidence that many members of the ADF’s elite units simply do not buy the official line presented by Western leaders from George W. Bush on that ‘Islam is a religion of peace’. Anti-Muslim sentiment is strong at least among some of the elements of the ADF at the forefront of deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, it has found no compelling evidence that cultural sensitivity training has even made a dent in
ADF views on Islam: does cultural sensitivity training matter?

these views. What are the conclusions and recommendations which follow from this?

First, it is possible that cultural sensitivity training does have some effect in reducing anti-Muslim sentiment. For one thing, the training itself is very short — usually lasting less than one day. Perhaps a higher ‘dose’ of the training would produce different results. If this is something which the ADF wishes to investigate, then my next recommendation would be to run a full randomised controlled trial with a random sample of service members and an enhanced program of cultural sensitivity training. However, there is no guarantee that this will produce any effect. Changing soldiers’ world views in the army of a democratic country is no easy task. Historical evidence suggests that attempts by military authorities to change political views are often treated at best with wry contempt on the part of the soldiers. In the British Army of World War II, for instance, the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA) attempted to motivate soldiers to fight by ‘indoctrinating’ them with ‘democratic values’. However, as the historian Jeremy Crang writes:

A good number of soldiers continued to regard [ABCA political discussion sections] with a marked degree of apathy and cynicism and as little more than an opportunity to have a leisurely cigarette, a crafty nap and — if they were lucky — a bit of fun at the officer’s expense.

As one former soldier claimed:

ABCA and BWP [British Way and Purpose, an ABCA lecture series] were a break in the training routine where soldiers could smoke and dream whilst somebody else stood up and aired extremist political views. If these appeared to embarrass the officer then everybody agreed with them for the hell of it.15

Polling within the civilian Australian population by the Scanlon Foundation suggests that anti-Muslim feeling is confined to a minority, although this may be an underestimate because of social desirability effects (the poll did not employ a list experiment).16 However, anti-Muslim sentiment is strongest amongst political conservatives who, as indicated, are more likely to make their way into the ADF. Thus many recruits may be coming into the service with strong prior views on Muslims which may be difficult to change.
A better approach might be to build on the good news emerging from this study. The ADF might be best advised to reinforce troops’ professional ethics of respect for foreign civilians and collaborative teamwork with foreign allies even in situations where they have little affinity for these foreign cultures in the abstract. It is not mandatory to like outsiders in order to work with them. As long as soldiers’ private views do not conflict with professional behaviour in theatre or at home, then the ADF should not expend serious time changing them. There is a good deal of evidence, again from military history, that soldiers can hold prejudices against outsiders in the abstract but, with the proper professional ethos, work well with them in practice. It is quite likely, for instance, that there was widespread dislike of African Americans among white servicemen in the US Army prior to President Truman’s decision to desegregate combat units, yet black and white troops worked well together not long afterwards. Evidence suggests that the same is true of gays in the US military today.

In terms of other types of future research the ADF might consider, the list experiment, as demonstrated here, is another useful tool which could be employed if the ADF seeks to estimate the extent, not just of sensitive opinions, but also of various types of illicit behaviour such as drug use, bullying or sexual harassment. List experiments have, for instance, been used to detect the extent of employee theft from organisations and various other types of undesirable behaviour.

Finally, if the ADF wishes to determine whether it is spending its dollars on training programs wisely, properly constructed, randomised controlled trials are an indispensable tool. Randomly selecting individuals for participation in a study and randomly assigning them to different types of training is indeed costly in terms of transport, paperwork and soldiers’ time, but there is no better way to determine whether current practices are working and delivering value for money. If the program is large enough, the savings realised would far outweigh the costs of the trial. The British government’s Behavioural Insights Team, for instance, which runs randomised controlled trials of civilian government policies, is estimated to have saved the taxpayer £20 for every £1 spent on its trials. In the absence of a randomised controlled trial, it is impossible to distinguish the effects of any training program from the effects of whatever caused an individual to be selected for the program in the first place. For the ADF’s largest and most expensive training programs (provided their effectiveness can be measured outside a
ADF views on Islam: does cultural sensitivity training matter? 

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**Endnotes**

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2 See http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2012-02-29/racism2c-sexism-rife-on-ADF-facebook-group/3860736


6 I also rephrased the original survey to ask about ‘agreement’ with items rather than being ‘angered’ by them.


9 Soldiers were instructed not to move or swap the forms once they were laid down in front of the seat.

10 The code and final assignment of seats to treatment and control is available on request.

11 See http://www.formscanner.org/

12 Meaning that the probability that this result came about by chance alone is less than 1/10th of 1%.

13 The confidence interval for the estimate ranges from 48% to 100%. This is a large interval because the sample is relatively small.

14 Conversation with Dr Palazzo.
ADF views on Islam: does cultural sensitivity training matter?


18 See http://www.palmcenter.org/publications/dadt/what_does_empirical_research_say_about_impact_openly_gay_service_military
