

# Weapons of Mass Education

by Lt. Col. Stan Zezotarski

The Middle Eastern origin to which they identify has been the subject of public discussion, and also perhaps of misunderstanding. But one fact rarely discussed is the courage of these Middle Eastern Americans who, in many cases, risk their lives to give their fellow California National Guardsmen an edge in Iraq's hostile regions, and communicating with locals on projects that could accelerate the country's rebuilding.

They are the California National Guard's Cultural Awareness Team, commanded by Team Leader Capt. Hatem Abdine. They are building a unit of "09L soldiers" that train deploying units how to communicate with Iraq and Afghanistan locals. The team not only educates deploying units about the Middle Eastern cultures, but they reach out to Muslim communities in 13 Western States under a special program initiated by the National Guard Bureau.

PHOTO BY STAFF SGT ROCIO MANRIQUE, ARMY DIVISION, JFHQ  
RIGHT: COURTESY OF MUSLIM CULTURAL AWARENESS TEAM



An American citizen who was born and raised in Kuwait before immigrating to the United States and becoming a U.S. citizen in the early 90s, Abdine is also the Commander of the 2632<sup>nd</sup> Transportation Company, San Bruno. With the exception of Abdine, the identity and the number on the Cultural Awareness Team cannot be revealed. Many members of this team came to the U.S. seeking political asylum because of the work they did in Iraq in support of U.S. Forces during the Persian Gulf War of 1990; helping enforce the “No Fly Zones” over Northern Iraq, or helping U.S. Forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Because of their patriotism and Faith, they are the targets of the criminal element of the Iraqi insurgency.

“(Society) needs to distinguish between good citizens and criminals,” said one enlisted member of the team. “That’s what terrorists are—criminals.”

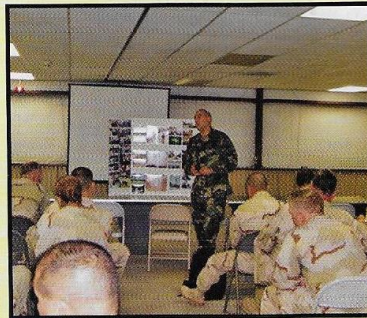
The team teaches American soldiers that the Middle East has different ethnic and religious groups. There is a big difference between the people and religious fanatics. Soldiers also get a lesson on customs and courtesies along with a crash course in Arabic. The program provides a two-way bridge where American soldiers are equipped with knowledge and understanding that keep them alive and achieve their mission, as well as a viaduct for Middle Eastern Americans to cross into the armed forces and enjoy the fruits of the American system of opportunity. The team is gifted with knowledge and experience about the Middle Eastern way of life and the various religions especially the Muslim Faith. They are also fluent in the various Arabic dialects and other languages including: Kurdish, Farsi and Dari. Most recently, the team prepared the National Guard’s 49<sup>th</sup> Military Police Brigade for its deployment to Iraq.

“What the terrorists try to do is use the umbrella of the Muslim religion to justify what they do,” said one of the team’s non-commissioned officers. “With that justification, they want to establish a Muslim, or Islamic, state based on their interpretation of the Quran, the Muslim Holy book. It’s simply a distortion of the Faith by a small faction of followers who proclaim Islam as their faith.”

The state of Islam, according to Gilles Kepel in his book, “Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam,” is a political movement of largely several Central Asia, Middle East, and East African countries whose populations primarily profess the Muslim

religion. These countries subscribe to the Sharia—or law distilled from the holy texts of Islam—and advocate an Islamic structure similar to the relationship between states and the federal government in the United States. One of the key principles, according to Kepel, is that Islam replaced the ignorance or barbarism “in which Arabs were supposed to have lived before the revelation of Islam to the Prophet Mohammed, at the beginning of the seventh century A.D.” Part of that revelation does not condone the desecration of the human body, or human remains.

The Islamic movement seeks to unite the Muslim Faiths of many factions ranging from impoverished students, to intellectuals—across the region. One of those factions, according to Kepel are the “disenfranchised,” whose most extreme elements’ have distorted views that veer from the Islamic belief, with a vision of a



The Muslim Cultural Awareness team briefs the 49<sup>th</sup> MP Brigade.

worldwide Islamic government instead of one confined to the Middle East, Central Asia, and East Africa.

All factions proclaim to subscribe to the charitable principles of the Muslim Faith—except for the radical elements of the disenfranchised. Radical clerics in these extreme groups occasionally issue proclamations—or fatwas—that erroneously condone the exclusion of charitable acts toward non-Muslim Faiths or even violating basic Muslim principles by condoning violence against fellow Muslims, in some cases, according to Kepel. For example, the Muslim community’s concept of charity—or al-zakat—which means charity in Arabic—bans Muslim businessmen and bankers from charging interest rates on loans regardless of faith or belief.

“Charity is the fifth pillar of the Muslim Faith,” explained Abdine. “It isn’t a club, it does not only apply just to Muslims, but to everybody, even when they loan money to people from different religions. It’s a practice the Muslims are supposed follow, to encourage partnership, that way you distribute the burdens and successes amongst several people instead of just one person.”

Understanding this concept has soldier relevance, especially when units could find themselves dealing with local Iraqi officials on various rebuilding and construction projects.

“Many of the cultural awareness principles that we teach deploying units give them tools that are in some cases even better than what our diplomats have,” Abdine said. He also explained that when meeting someone in the Middle East, how you look them in the eye, the firmness of your handgrip, and your body posture can impact your credibility. Developing an understanding of the Muslim Faith can also impact your sincerity. Those are just a couple reasons that the Cultural Awareness team is reaching out to Middle Eastern communities. The team offers Middle Eastern Americans the opportunity to support their country—the United States. In addition, it offers opportunity for advancement and reaching a higher standard of living by earning diplomas, degrees, advanced degrees, and equal footing for jobs. In some cases, it’s the door through which some Middle Eastern immigrants enter to gain their citizenship.

“This mission gives us the opportunity to participate in the defense against terrorism,” Abdine said. “It’s a win-win situation. We help out the Middle Eastern community and we defend our country. It’s a good opportunity to mingle with the community, build trust, and establish channels of communication. It’s important to show the Middle Eastern community that they are represented in the California National Guard. Even prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>, the team was out connecting with the community on a daily basis making the opportunity to join the Army and become a “09 Lima—Translator Interpreter” possible.

The Faith to which they identify has sometimes been misinterpreted; but one word which either eludes or is used too infrequently when describing the California National Guard’s Cultural Awareness team is heroes. 🐻