

# City Weekly

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## SENSE OF COMMUNITY SHAKEN

### Market vendors take stock

#### Some Middle Eastern shopkeepers sense the hostility

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**W**hen the pushcarts come to Haymarket, it is not quite business as usual for the owners of a string of small Middle Eastern markets and halal meat shops around the corner from Faneuil Hall.

On Fridays and Saturdays, Blackstone Street, which hosts the highest concentration of Middle Eastern shops within a Boston city block, nearly overflows with produce stands. The halal shops, open all week, offer beans, nuts, spices, and meats slaughtered in accordance with Islamic doctrine to shoppers of diverse nationalities.

Yet in this bustling market, where the vendors' varying ethnicity paints as colorful a spectrum as the fruits and vegetables they sell, the recent terrorist attacks have made their place within the Haymarket community uncertain.

During his five years working in the market, Belkacem Aouaidjia, who grew up in Algeria, has felt welcomed by the other vendors.

"They are good friends to me. We're like family. . . . a big family," he says. Most of the vendors have remained warm toward him since the attacks of Sept. 11, but a few, he says, seem changed.

"We used to get big smiles from people," he said. "Now they are not all so big." Another vendor said some of his colleagues now make unusual comments — such as questioning suspiciously to whom he is talking on a cellphone.

He says he can't tell if they are joking. Yet another shopkeeper, Salim Marhamo, 41, who emigrated from Lebanon

13 years ago and opened the Blackstone Halal Market three years later, confided, "Of course you can feel that people are scared, people are tense, people are concerned, which is a normal feeling."

The Haymarket is no ordinary community, however, and its Muslim and non-Muslim members alike say it will not be undone by fear.

Joseph Matara, president of the Haymarket Pushcart Association, declared confidently of the vendors, "They will

HAYMARKET, Page 7



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/PAT GREENHOUSE

"Of course you can feel that people are scared, people are tense, people are concerned, which is a normal feeling," said Salim Marhamo, who owns Blackstone Halal Market.

## Consensus is Haymarket will not be undone by fear

► **HAYMARKET**  
*Continued from Page 1*

[stick together] and they'll help one another."

Matara spoke with each vendor and shopkeeper individually after the terrorist attacks. Recognizing the new fear factor, he wanted to demonstrate support for the Muslim vendors by personally reminding each Haymarket worker of the need for continued tolerance.

In interviews recently, however, a few non-Muslim vendors readily admitted a new discomfort.

The Muslim shopkeepers "seem fine, but who knows? They could be the next terrorist," said Anthony Molina, a Sicilian-born vendor who has worked at the Haymarket for 22 years. "Who's to say your next-door neighbor ain't one of them?"

Doug Hayes, a vendor for 37 years, admitted that although he has remained cordial toward the shopkeepers, it's difficult when "you don't know who to lash out

at."

In contrast, pushcart owner Ry Figueroa, 28, says he believes the friendly atmosphere between Muslims and non-Muslims has not changed.

To an outsider observing the Haymarket workers vie for customers, they might seem like a discordant lot to begin with. Amid the glorious pinks, greens, and reds on the produce stands and the pungent aromas of goat and lamb wafting out of the halal markets, the vendors' aggressive voices bombard one's senses.

"One dolla' box!" a vendor shouts at passing shoppers.

"Hey, we got mangoes here!" another bellows.

Yet beneath this appearance of fierce competition lives a cohesive community. After working a full 40 hours over the course of two or three days, many of the vendors unwind together at Pete's Pub on Saturday nights.

Through decades of working sleepless hours side by side, vendors and shopkeepers of Italian,

Chinese, Lebanese, Egyptian, and Irish descent become friends.

Matara, the pushcart association president, said he promised the Middle Eastern vendors and shopkeepers any assistance they might need.

So far, he says, no one has reported any harassment.

"I haven't seen any overt discriminatory actions against anybody down there," said Matara, who has been a Haymarket vendor since he was 13.

Reflecting on the simultaneous diversity and good will at the Haymarket, Lebanon-born Marhamo marveled, "It's really, really beautiful. It's maybe unique in the whole world. Maybe this is one of the reasons I stay this long."

Another shopkeeper of Egyptian descent, who chose to remain anonymous, observed, "When you've been neighbors with someone . . . I don't think anything can change it."