One of the most detrimental examples of Muslim stereotyping in modern day film is *American Sniper,* a 2014 drama biopic about the life of and experiences of Navy Seal Chris Kyle. The film was directed by Clint Eastwood, written by Jason Hall, and based upon the book of the same name by Chris Kyle himself. The film made $89 million in its opening weekend and too date it has made $350,126,372 making it the third highest grossing R rated movie of all time according to the MPAA.

The film mostly focuses on Kyle’s four tours of duty in Iraq and the intermittent breaks during which he returns home to his wife. While in Iraq, Kyle shows a range of emotions towards his job as a navy seal sniper; at his best, he is a cold blooded killer who eliminates his targets with precision and little thought, but at some points in the film he finds himself pausing and contemplating what he’s about to do. Despite his occasional run-ins with his PTSD, the main antagonists of the film are the Muslim insurgents in Iraq and in particular a sniper named Mustafa. The film is extremely degrading towards Muslims since it primarily portrays them as evil creatures whose sole purpose in life is too kill as many United States marines as possible.

The only named antagonist of the film, Mustafa, is a mirror image of Kyle: both are celebrated snipers in their respective causes, and they are both shown to have children. However, a main distinction between the two men -- aside from their military affiliations -- is their strong sense of religious faith. Kyle is a bible-carrying Christian who does what he does because he wants to protect his country in the name of his god. Similarly, the film defines Mustafa simply as a Muslim combatant (as if his faith explains his actions), and any possible complex motivations he could have for joining the fight against the United States is conveniently left out. Mustafa is the only Muslim in the film that the audience sees on screen for more than a few seconds, so by omitting any real motivation for his actions, the film eliminates any chance for the audience to sympathize with the cause of the film’s Muslim characters. Without being able to sympathize with or understand their motivations, the viewer only can see the Muslims through eyes of Kyle, who frequently refers to the Muslims as “them” and “savages”. Kyle strips away the humanity from his enemy combatants in order to make his job of killing them easier to emotionally deal with, but for the audience, who does not need that emotional buffer, all his euphemisms do is reduce the Muslim characters of the film into nothing more than simple-minded homicidal savages.

One of the most emotionally powerful scenes -- but also one of the most detrimental towards the image of Muslims -- is the opening of the film when Kyle finds himself providing sniper support for a marine convoy clearing out a series of houses. The scene is broken into two parts. The first part shows Kyle spotting a male in his mid-thirties, talking on a cell phone, and contemplates shooting him because he could be contacting insurgents. However, before Kyle makes up his mind, the man steps out of his line of sight and instead a burka-clad woman and young boy emerge from one of the houses and start to approach the Marine convey. In this moment, Kyle is confronted with probably his most intense decision point in the whole film as these civilians reveal themselves to be insurgents, the woman brandishing a Russian hand grenade that she gives to her son. As the boy starts running towards the convoy, the audience hears Kyle begging under his breath for the child to stop, but the outcome seems inevitable: he is going to have to shoot the child.

This dramatic scene takes an unexpected turn when the camera pans to Kyle’s finger moving for the trigger, the screen cuts out, a gunshot is heard, and the audience finds themselves witnessing a flashback of Kyle’s first time killing a deer with his father. The sudden change is problematic because as the child would have been Kyle’s first kill in Iraq, it draws a parallel between shooting a deer and a child. By comparing the two actions, the film reduces the Muslim mother and child to nothing more than game animals that are being hunted for sport. This process of dehumanization and stereotype is only furthered as the flashback extends to give the audience a general idea of Kyle’s life before that dramatic opening scene: one powerful segment shows a superior officer telling Kyle that any non-American male of military age in Fallujah is there to kill him, setting up the audience’s opinion of any future male Muslim characters in the film to immediately be negative. The film is preparing the audience, the way that Kyle was prepared, to justify shooting the small running boy.

When the second part of the convey scene resumes after the extended interruption, the audience is forced to witness the child being shot, his mother rushing to pick up the grenade, and then Kyle shooting her too. The mother’s reaction to her child’s death represents the pinnacle of the film’s refusal to explore the complicated motivations of its Muslim characters, since the message conveyed to the audience is that rather than tending to her wounded, dying child, this woman would rather try and kill United States soldiers. Kyle himself seems conflicted initially the action, as the audience undoubtedly is; when Kyle’s spotter starts congratulating him on saving the day, Kyle tells the man to shut up. It appears that the film is paying respect to the horrible situation that just transpired and is trying to make sure that the audience does not lose sight of the humanity of Kyle’s victims or the atrocity of his actions. But within five minutes, the film begins its primary montage of Kyle indiscriminately shooting Iraq insurgents. If the audience is supposed to identify with Kyle as the main protagonist, the montage undermines any sense of the Muslim characters’ humanity, as they just become enemies to be stopped or bodies to be shot. As Kyle cuts down the insurgents like cattle, the camera operator ensures that a Bible is always in the frame. Kyle is even dubbed the “Legend,” a title that is repeated for the rest of the film. Kyle and his fellow soldiers’ disregard for the lives and motivations of the Muslim insurgents and civilians creates an “othering” effect – reducing Muslims to a two-dimensional, unsympathetic “other” -- that the audience is then expected to adopt to serve as their own as emotion justification for the protagonist’s actions.

Kyle’s dehumanization of his enemies is a coping mechanism to help him deal with the emotional trauma of war, and while there are arguments to be made for if that is right or wrong, the issue with it in *American Sniper* is that the audience is never presented with an alternate way of seeing these characters. While the story of the film is a reflection of the way people in combat rationalize their actions, the way that message is conveyed to the viewers is a reflection of how media in general deals with Muslims. Instead of Muslims being seen as a larger group with certain bad subsets, the media has instead tends to group Muslims under the banner of Islamic extremism because that way they can just point a finger at them and call foul rather than actually delving into the complex issues that surround Islamic extremism. This oversimplified approach may work for soldiers such as Chris Kyle, but when it is amplified and normalized into the primary way to view Muslims, it creates a society that views Muslims, the same way Kyle did, as inhuman savages.