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Al Jazeera

Quran burning: Mistake, crime, and metaphor

The failure of the US to appreciate the seriousness of Quran burnings undermines claims of benevolence in Afghanistan.

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3/9/2012

On February 20, 2012 several US soldiers - five of whom have so far been identified - took some Islamic writings, including several copies of the Quran, to a landfill on Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan where they were burned.

As soon as Afghan workers on the scene realised that Qurans were being burned, it was recognised as an act of desecration, and they immediately launched a protest. The protest spread rapidly throughout the country, and turned violent, resulting in at least 30 Afghan deaths, five dead US soldiers, and many non-lethal casualties. The incident is under formal investigation by three distinct boards of inquiry: a US military investigation with authority to recommend disciplinary action against the soldiers; a joint US/Afghan undertaking; and an Afghan investigation leading to recommendations by a council of religious figures.

The US governmental response has been apologetic in tone, but weakly so. President Obama sent a formal apology to the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, expressing regret and explaining that the incident occurred due to carelessness rather than as a deliberate expression of Islamophobia.

In contrast, a reactionary backlash in the US complained that it was the Afghan government that should be apologising, given the loss of US lives and an outburst of violence that was much

exaggerated given the accidental nature of the provocation. The reactionary Republican presidential candidate, Rick Santorum, expressed his view in the following language of rebuke: "I think the response need to be apologised for, by Mr Karzai and the Afghan people, for attacking our men and women in uniform and reacting to this inadvertent mistake." He added: "This is the real crime, not what our soldier did."

'Non-apology'

Obama - as usual in such situations - seemed caught in the headlights, publicly justifying the apology as necessary "to save lives ... and to make sure that our troops who are there right now are not placed in further danger". Such a rationale leads to an ironic query: when is an "apology" not an apology? The answer seems to be: when Obama wants to appease foreign anger while at the same time not seeming to weaken his patriotic credentials. In my view he loses ground with both constituencies. Maybe Hillary Clinton had a point during the 2008 campaign for the presidential nomination when she famously taunted Obama: "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

What is baffling is the unlearning evident here. There were earlier well-publicised desecrations of the Quran that showed how intense a reaction could result from such behaviour. An outcry followed the disclosure that a Quran had been flushed down a toilet in Guantanamo a few years ago. Somewhat later, a US soldier in Iraq was found to have used a Quran for target practice, which provoked a storm of angry denunciations of the US presence in the country.

And then there was the shocking spectacle of Reverend Terry Jones of the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida, announcing to his tiny congregation that he would burn 200 Qurans on the anniversary of 9/11 in 2010, an outrage despite its non-governmental character. The planned burning was successfully discouraged, at least temporarily. But on March 20, 2011 the determined Rev Jones held a "trial of the Quran", found it guilty of crimes against humanity, and burned a Quran in the church sanctuary.

The result in the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif was an attack on the UN Assistance Mission, killing at least 30, including seven UN workers, and injuring 150. Our man in Kabul, Hamid Karzai, called for the arrest of Jones, but such a request was ignored, and his conduct discounted as an expression of the freedom of religion in the US that did not reflect official views.

One would have supposed that a vigilant imperialism would have understood that any disrespect towards the Quran, whether public or private, delivers a severe blow against the US mission in Afghanistan. At least with US troops, such an experience would have led to introducing the most rigorous means to train and discipline occupation forces accordingly. It is not an exaggeration to say that such displays of disrespect for the Quran are more serious setbacks than dramatic defeats on the battlefield. Why? Because it so clearly discredits the US claim to be a humanitarian benefactor by its presence in Afghanistan.

Symbol of unity

There is something deeply disturbing about this compulsive inability to show respect for the most sacred artifacts of a foreign civilisation. The Quran is the holiest of scripture in Afghanistan - not only because Islam is the dominant religion of the country, but also because it underpins the unity embedded in the wider cultural identity of the Afghan people. It is a more potent symbol of Afghan unity than the national flag or constitution in this otherwise most fragmented of countries.

Americans would react furiously, and likely violently, were the Bible to be burned by foreign military personnel somehow present on national territory, but the truth is that the imperial mindset is utterly incapable of comprehending the logic of reciprocity. The contradictory logic of imperium has a different ethic: the wrongs that we do to others we occasionally will excuse as accidental, while being incapable of even imagining that others might dare to do them to us - and if they were stupid enough to do such, a righteous fury would be unleashed.

Tom Friedman, whose arrogance is as boundless as the globalisation he blandly celebrates, tells his readers that Afghan political and religious leaders have made themselves primarily at fault for their failure to protest strongly against "the killing of innocent Americans", especially given the accidental nature of the Quran desecration and Obama's apology. The liberal interpretation of the incident is only softer in tone than Santorum's reactionary rant.

In an important sense, these soldiers, including those who participated in this unfortunate incident, were truly "innocent". They are themselves both participants and victims of an occupation of a foreign country that should never have been attempted, and is proving as futile as those many prior Western attempts to domesticate Afghanistan well-chronicled in Deepak Tripathi's **illuminating book**, *Breeding Ground: Afghanistan and the Origins of Islamist Terrorism*.

Those who are most responsible, in my judgment, are those who have mandated such a war, and this includes the president and those who favoured the war policies that have led to a misguided, ten-year military presence in Afghanistan with few results except this upsurge of vitriolic anti-American sentiment and a torn country. The best that the United States can hope for after inflicting such an ordeal is some deal negotiated with the Taliban, the original mortal enemy, which portends a political future for Afghanistan not at all to Washington's liking (nor is the prospect of an empowered Taliban consoling to the majority of Afghans). After all those billions spent; lives lost, sacrificed, and misshaped; and devastation wrought, there is nothing left but the slim hope of learning from defeat after the fact. With the Iran war drums beating, it seems like an idle fancy that the US political elite will seek the intensive rehab it needs to have any chance of recovering from its addictive militarism.

Touching nerves

Of course, unleashing violence in response to desecration does make for a sorry spectacle, and reflects badly on the quality of religious leadership in Afghanistan. At the same time, Afghan clerical leadership's call for an end to nighttime raids on Afghan homes and their insistence on the US military turning over the administration of prisons to the Afghan government seem like reasonable demands. They touch the raw nerve of the US occupation, and for this reason will not

be accommodated. These US-run activities have been consistently perceived by the Afghan people as principal sources of "occupation terror".

The response of US officials to these demands sounds as though it were lifted from a colonial handbook: that raids in the middle of the night are effective operations, and that the Afghan judicial system is not capable of the handling the legal issues associated with dangerous Afghan detainees. Such a response unintentionally poses an awkward question: Who governs Afghanistan at this time? It has long been the case that the limits of Karzai's mandate are not set in Kabul, but by distant Pentagon and White House officials - a reality that makes a mockery of US claims of respect for Afghan rights of self-determination.

What is at stake touches on the essence of military intervention and foreign occupation, much more than the secondary question of whether to treat Quran burning as a mistake or a crime. It is, of course, from differing perspectives both a mistake and a crime, but aside from this, the Quran burning is a telling metaphor for all the many instances of flawed Western diplomacy, consisting of military intervention and foreign occupation.

Such types of diplomacy fly in the face of colonialism's collapse and the rise of non-Western religion and culture, and produce one costly geopolitical failure after another. To burn the most holy scripture of a culture, whether by inadvertence or calculation, is the most delegitimising acknowledgement of bad motives and intentions that one can imagine.

In this regard, Quran burning is as provocative an assault on Afghan political culture as was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, with respect to the authoritarian cruelty in Tunisia under Ben Ali, who was driven from power as a direct result. The failure of the United States government even now to appreciate the seriousness of what has happened, despite several earlier intimations of the great popular significance attached to any show of disrespect towards Islam throughout the Muslim world, is monumentally discrediting to its claims of benevolence - and undermines its goal of quelling the global threat of anti-Western terrorism.