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Insults, Incitement and Islam

GRAHAM PEEBLES

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Across the Muslim World there is rightly outrage and hurt at the latest calculated attack on Islam, in the form of the film trailer Innocence of Muslims. All who hold human rights and moral decency close to their heart share their indignation.

Freedom of speech is a basic human right, protected under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states 1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference. And 2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression. Rights enshrined in law that are nevertheless denied to many, rights supposedly honoured in democratic countries.

Expressions of free speech that are little more than propaganda, that consciously incite hatred and spark acts of violence are rightly restricted under the very law that protects our freedom of expression. Article 20, paragraph 2. Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.

Innocence of Muslims

The deliberately amateurish film with no real narrative portrays the Prophet Mohammed as a violent and lascivious fool. It is cheaply made, poorly acted and directed, and as a piece of filmmaking it is to be dismissed out of hand, but as The Guardian 17/09/2012 put it “the really sinister thing is that all this ham-fistedness and crassness is an important sense deliberate. It has to look like propaganda for the provocation to be effective.” The actors claim they did not know

what the film was about, or it's purpose and some speak of suing the producers. The BBC reports, "One actress featured in the film said she had no idea it would be used for anti-Islamic propaganda and condemned it." Offensive dialogue that insults Islam and the Prophet Mohammed has been crudely added after filming.

The trailer was written and produced in the USA by Nakoula Basseley, a Coptic (Egyptian) Christian living in California, who drafted much of the script whilst serving a prison sentence for fraud. And directed, according to Gawker "by a 65-year-old schlock director named Alan Roberts He's the creative vision behind soft-core porn classics like *The Happy Hooker Goes Hollywood*." Whether a full film version exists is speculation, the trailer however has done its toxic, destructive work.

Basseley says his wife's family paid for the film, but it is still unclear how it was funded or what the cost was. Whatever the amount, it is hard to justify any expense at all on a film rooted in such prejudice and hatred, which serves no purpose other than to hurt and insult Muslims throughout the World, reinforce negative stereotypes, incite violence and fuel division. The film is as The Guardian 17/09/2012 state "a bigoted piece of poison calculated to inflame the Muslim world... it might be risible were it not for the ugly Islamophobia which it promotes and whose effects are now being seen around the world."

Intended fury

The film has unsurprisingly prompted widespread protests throughout the World. On the 11th September In Cairo protesters scaled the walls of the embassy, pulled down the US flag and called for the expulsion of the US ambassador to Cairo. In Libya the U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American staff members were killed in the American embassy in what appears to have been an unrelated pre-planned military style attack, as The Observer 16/09/2012 comments "The murder of US diplomats was not carried out spontaneously, but by a jihadist militia that wanted to kill Americans on the 9/11 anniversary."

Protests directly triggered by the offensive, degrading film, have since taken place in countries with large Muslim populations, sadly causing as the BBC 14/09/2012 reports more loss of life. "Three people were killed when the US embassy in Khartoum was attacked, Sudanese state radio said. In Tunisia, two people were killed after crowds breached the US embassy compound in Tunis. There was one death in Egypt and one in Lebanon." In Yemen hundreds of students demonstrated in the capital Sanaa and demanded the US ambassador be expelled, thousands waved flags on the streets of Beirut and chanted "America hear us – don't insult our Prophet." The Guardian 17/09/2012 reports that Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah has "called for new demonstrations to express outrage at a film that denigrates Islam and the prophet Muhammad. "Prophet of God, we offer ourselves, our blood and our kin for the sake of your dignity and honour," Nasrallah told supporters who chanted "death to Israel" and "death to America" at a rally in the southern Shia suburbs of Beirut."

The Philippines Indonesia, usually calm Qatar, Afghanistan, London, Kashmir, all have witnessed demonstrations and in Pakistan access to You tube has been blocked by the government, the Prime Minister, rightly describing the film as ""blasphemous." Such is the deep-

seated feeling amongst the people of the Muslim community. An open wound has been deliberately inflamed and the people cry out in anger and frustration.

Free speech or incitement

The film and the reaction to it, has prompted much to be written and spoken about unrestricted free speech and the dangers of censorship. Writing in The Observer Nick Cohen argues that, “Nothing, however vile, justifies censorship. Even in the hardest of cases such as this anti-Islamic film, the old arguments against censorship remain the best.” The observation of basic human rights is the foundation for any democratic society and free speech is a fundamental requirement. Where it is absent totalitarian control of one kind or another becomes possible, perhaps inevitable.

There are though many methods of control and restriction of freedoms, both crude and subtle. Is for example the manufacturing of consent, a form of sociological coercion commonplace in America (and elsewhere) compatible with freedom and/or democratic principles of independent thinking and participation. Noam Chomsky, “the anti-democratic thrust of opinion in what are called democratic societies is really ferocious, and for good reason. Because the freer the society gets, the more dangerous the great beast becomes and the more you have to be careful to cage it somehow.” The ‘Great Beast’ is of course us – the 99%.

The making and distribution of this film is not an expression of freedom of any kind, it contributes nothing of value to the political environment or social discourse and has no artistic merit. The Anna Lindh Foundation reinforces this view in their statement made on 16/09/12, asserting “Innocence of Muslims is an inflammatory pamphlet, the distribution of which – on the anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11th – cannot be abridged to a manifestation of freedom of expression.”

International law, acting as a guide and aid to clarity of thinking, states there are limits to free speech. Where such expression is clearly based on racial or religious hatred and incites violence, then it is illegal and the perpetrators subject to prosecution. For where the law is infringed consequences follow – something Israel should be made aware of. What is crucial is the motive. If something is spoken, written, painted, drawn, filmed etc. with the premeditated intention of causing offense, because it is rooted in hatred of one kind or another it is outside the law.

Freedom of expression is indeed a fundamental human right, but it does not stand alone, or above other related rights, such as human dignity and mutual respect. All need to coexist and indeed all are indivisible.

Unless the filmmakers of Innocence of Muslims are completely naïve or plain stupid, they would have known that producing a film in which the Prophet Mohammed is portrayed, as a violent, promiscuous simpleton would inevitably cause offense and would probably result in violent demonstrations. Therefore the film breaches international guidelines on free speech, and should be banned, its makers charged and prosecuted. Al Jazeera 14/09/2012 quote the filmmaker Danny Schechter, whose view on the film is clear: “It is very political from beginning to end. It’s

not about free expression; it's about propaganda. The film is incitement – it's not information, it's not filmmaking and it's really intended as a technique of war-making.”

What good can possibly come from continuing to allow such a distasteful film to be circulated? It serves no purpose other than to provoke further potential violence. Enabling Muslims to be marginalized and demonized once more, constructing some perverse justification for continued American and Israeli intimidation, aggression and the spreading of paranoia. Allowing this film to be shown or not has little to do with censorship and/or free speech, and to reduce this issue to such notions is a convenient, distraction, fabricated in order to avoid discussing the filmmakers intention and the underlying causes of Islamists hurt and anger, which arise largely out of American foreign policy.

Simmering resentment “the safeguard of justice”

Opinion amongst large numbers of Islamists throughout the Muslim World towards America is overwhelmingly negative. The Pew Research Center found in a recent survey that “There remains a widespread perception that the U.S. acts unilaterally and does not consider the interests of other countries. In predominantly Muslim nations, American anti-terrorism efforts are still widely unpopular.” In fact according to the Pew report only 15% of Muslims have confidence in President Obama, approve of his foreign policies and hold favorable views of America in general. Pew state, “In a number of strategically important Muslim nations, America’s image has not improved during the Obama presidency.” In fact it has deteriorated, as US policies throughout the region continue to cause consternation amongst large numbers of Muslims, (and of course more widely).

American support for Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine, which violates a host of international and indeed national laws and contravenes numerous UN resolutions, is perhaps top of the list. Followed by the Iraq war US involvement in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen, long running proxy wars in Somalia, and US support for what the BBC call ‘friendly dictators’. Add confinement without trial, abuse and torture in Guantanamo and Bagram prisons, the burning of the Qur’an by US soldiers in Afghanistan and Florida Pastor Terry Jones and disrespecting the dead bodies of Afghans. The list is indeed long and damning, and so it goes on.

The recent demonstrations were simply *sparked* by the film Innocence of Muslims; it was of course not the root cause of the protests. As the BBC 15/09/2012 state “we are witnessing profound anti-Americanism, dormant for much of last year, fused with religious extremism – with the controversial Innocence of Muslims film merely a trigger.” Of course extremists were involved they never miss an opportunity, their violent actions distorting the events feeding prejudice and creating a convenient diversion from the issues.

US ideals of peace justifying conflict

All violence is to be condemned and the attacks that caused deaths and injuries resulting from these protests are no exception, they should not be allowed to take centre stage though, and it must be stated that the vast majority of actions undertaken have been peaceful and without incident. The Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) says in relation to the protests that “the vast

majority of Muslim public opinion has expressed its anger to the release of the film peacefully and individually, and the Arab governments of the region have reiterated their commitment with cultural inclusiveness while condemning the attacks to diplomatic delegations.”

To speak with solemnity and shock, calling for justice against the perpetrators of violence as US officials have, is expected and indeed right, albeit hypocritical and reactionary. In order to create peace however it is necessary to remove the causes of conflict, in this case those causes are complex and not confined to one poorly made deeply offensive film. Offensive let us add, not just to Muslims, who are understandably enraged, but to all right minded men and women respectful and tolerant of others beliefs and cultures.

American foreign policy is seen by many to be that which seeks to extend the influence and maximize the power of America, safeguard their interests at the expense of others and the natural environment and support criminality – Israel comes to mind. Such distasteful American foreign policies go back decades, as Noam Chomsky states in The Guardian “Even in the 1950s, President Eisenhower was concerned about what he called a campaign of hatred of the US in the Arab world, because of the perception on the Arab street that it supported harsh and oppressive regimes to take their oil.” A perception proved to be correct.

Ideologically driven, rooted in a desire to export worldwide an American version, or vision, of democracy, which they claim to be the highest ideal for all. The attitude is that when all follow America’s lead on matters relating to economics, politics, religion and social affairs, peace will inevitably follow, and not until. With this doctrine in mind America has sought to dominate the world, repeatedly making war in the name of peace.

Peace though is beyond ideology. For peace to envelop our world as men and women everywhere hope, there must be tolerance, cooperation and understanding of others, not ideological imposition – of *any kind*. The equitable sharing of natural resources, of knowledge, ideas and experience will create justice. Dissipating mistrust and resentment leading to peace and a natural movement towards unity that encourages the greatest possible diversity enriching the lives of us all.