

Koran-burning provocation sparks US fears over Afghanistan

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A small Florida-based Christian cult's announcement that it will mark September 11 by burning copies of the Koran has triggered an extraordinary wave of official condemnations.

Washington's response is based not on any principled revulsion over this filthy provocation, but rather on fear that it will unleash an explosion of hostility to US imperialism across the Muslim world. In particular, the Obama administration and the Pentagon are concerned that the incident will fuel support for the armed groups resisting the US occupation of Afghanistan.

The planned Koran-burning has been organized by Terry Jones, the head of the Dove Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida, a non-denominational church that, by its own admission, has a congregation consisting of no more than 50. Located in the same city as the University of Florida, the church has been widely condemned by area residents. Jones has long attempted to gain notoriety by mounting a virulent campaign against Islam, writing a book entitled "Islam is the Devil," and encouraging his parishioners to send their children to school wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the title.

The most rapid official response to the planned provocation came from General David Petraeus, the senior commander of US troops occupying Afghanistan. "Images of the burning of a Koran would undoubtedly be used by extremists in Afghanistan—and around the world—to inflame public opinion and incite violence," the general declared. He said that these images would prove "indelible," much like those depicting the torture and depravity at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

Reports of the planned anti-Muslim outrage in Florida have already touched off demonstrations in the Afghan capital of Kabul where hundreds took to the streets, chanting "Death to America" and pelting a passing US military convoy with stones. Thousands rallied outside the US Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen echoed

Petraeus's concerns Tuesday, stating that the church's action "would be in a strong contradiction with all the values we stand for and fight for."

The White House also weighed in Tuesday. "Any type of activity like that would be—that puts our troops in harm's way—would be a concern to this administration," Robert Gibbs, the White House press secretary, said at a news briefing.

Religious leaders convened an "emergency summit" in Washington to condemn "the derision and outright bigotry" directed against Muslim-Americans and to declare themselves "appalled by such disrespect for a sacred text that for centuries has shaped many of the great cultures of our world."

A State Department spokesman called the church's plan "un-American." And Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used an appearance before the Council on Foreign Relations to call the proposed Koran burning "disgraceful."

"We're a country of what, 310 million plus right now? And, I mean, it's regrettable that a pastor in Gainesville, Florida, with a church of no more than 50 people can make this outrageous and distressful, disgraceful plan and get, you know, the world's attention," Clinton said. She suggested that the fault lay with the media for giving too much attention to the story.

If the stunt being organized by Jones and his church is getting such attention and arousing such anger in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Muslim world, it is because the planned action, while repellant, is hardly an aberration.

It is being organized in a political context in which much of the Republican Party has turned plans by an Islamic organization to build an interfaith community center in lower Manhattan into a key issue in the midterm elections. Ultra-rightists, extreme Zionists and Muslim-hating bigots have been given a nationwide platform to spout their filth, posturing as defenders of the "sacred ground" of the World Trade Center, site of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. These elements have planned their own

demonstration at Ground Zero on Saturday, the ninth anniversary of the attacks.

Coming together with a sustained campaign against immigrants that has been encouraged by both major parties, this agitation has led inevitably to a series of attacks on mosques and other acts of violence.

Moreover, millions of Muslims around the world have drawn their own conclusions about the US attitude towards them that are based on the bitter experience of two wars and occupations that have claimed over a million lives, turned millions more into refugees and ravaged the societies of Iraq and Afghanistan.

These wars have been accompanied by the deliberate whipping up of anti-Muslim sentiments, both to build a base of support for military aggression and to demoralize those who have resisted.

Desecration of the Koran—with US personnel throwing the Islamic holy book into toilets, urinating and spitting on it, kicking it and tearing it to pieces—became part of the standard operating procedure of torture, sexual depravity and systematic abuse employed to “break” detainees at the Guantánamo prison in Cuba, Abu Ghraib in Iraq and at the Bagram facility in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration and the Pentagon today boast of their “sensitivity” to the religious beliefs of their detainees. The US military recently touted as an example its order that the force-feeding of Guantánamo hunger strikers be carried out between dusk and dawn out of respect for Muslim fasting during the month of Ramadan. This procedure, in which prisoners strapped into restraining chairs have tubes forced through their nostrils and into their stomachs, is regarded by most international organizations as a form of torture.

That anti-Muslim outrages like the one planned by the Christian cult in Florida have the potential for igniting massive upheavals has been proven repeatedly over the past several years. In November 2005, published reports of the desecration of the Koran by guards and torturers at Guantánamo unleashed a series of violent riots that claimed 17 lives in Afghanistan and spread to other Muslim countries. Similarly, in 2006, when a right-wing Danish newspaper, in a calculated bid to whip up anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments, published satirical cartoons portraying the Prophet Mohammed as a terrorist, demonstrations erupted around the world.

While the gospel according to Terry Jones is as reactionary as it is repugnant, it is hardly without precedent. A large number of leading figures on the Christian right have demonized Islam, providing a pseudo-religious justification for wars aimed at imposing semi-colonial control over the energy-rich and predominantly Muslim regions of the

Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

Thus, Franklin Graham, the son of the prominent evangelist Billy Graham, denounced Islam as “a very evil and very wicked religion.” Pat Robertson, the televangelist who ran for the Republican presidential nomination, has compared the Koran to Hitler’s “Mein Kampf.” And the late Jerry Falwell, the founder of the “Moral Majority” and a prominent figure in Christian right Republican circles, stated, “I think Mohammed was a terrorist.”

The planned Koran-burning in Florida is entirely in sync with this bigoted theology. Reflecting the right-wing forces that have been cultivated by the American ruling elite as a base of support for militarism abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home, it is no accident that the Dove sect resurrects the method of book-burning, made infamous by the Nazis in 1933 Germany.

It was the 19th century German poet Heinrich Heine who wrote prophetically, “Where books are burned in the end people will burn.”

What is most remarkable about this entire controversy, however, is the level of official hysteria that it has generated. Clearly, the US government and the military fear that the situation in Afghanistan is slipping out of control and that even the actions of an isolated sect in Florida can turn the Afghan people even more violently against the US occupation. The 30,000-troop surge ordered by Obama has only deepened popular hostility towards the US military as casualties among both the civilian population and American troops steadily rise.

At the same time, Washington is concerned that the spectacle of Koran-burning in Florida will eclipse its attempt to posture as the broker for “peace” in the Middle East at the Israeli-Palestinian talks, which have been organized in large measure to provide a cover for right-wing Arab governments to align themselves with US aggression against Iran.

This is what has given rise to the extraordinary situation in which virtually every major US official and government institution are issuing fervent appeals to a religious crackpot and sociopath with a congregation of less than 50.



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