

9/11 anniversary overshadowed by uproar over Koran-burning

Bill Van Auken
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For nearly a decade, Washington has exploited the shock and grief surrounding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks to justify wars of aggression abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home. Now, the ninth anniversary of 9/11 is overshadowed by the confused and repulsive media circus surrounding a Florida religious crackpot's proposed burning of the Koran.

Terry Jones, the head of the tiny right-wing Christian fundamentalist sect, the Dove World Outreach Center, in Gainesville, Florida, continued on Friday to feed the media frenzy over his threat to burn copies of the Koran to mark the 9/11 anniversary.

He has been the focus of an extraordinary effort by top US political and military officials over the past week aimed at dissuading him from carrying out his proposed provocation. On Thursday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates personally telephoned the "pastor," urging him to drop his plans.

Earlier on the same day, President Barack Obama gave an interview to ABC News in which he appealed to Jones to listen to the "better angels" of his nature and call off his "International Burn a Koran Day."

"I just want him to understand that this stunt that he is talking about pulling could greatly endanger our young men and women in uniform who are in Iraq, who are in Afghanistan," Obama said.

Invoking his status as "commander-in-chief," Obama was echoing the warning made by Gen. David Petraeus, who earlier in the week warned that Jones's provocation "could endanger troops and it could endanger the overall effort in Afghanistan."

This is the message that has predominated from official Washington in response to the threatened Koran-burning. It is opposed first and foremost not because it is a vicious and reactionary attack on Muslims, but because it could interfere with a colonial-style war that has claimed the lives of countless thousands of Muslims.

On Friday, at least one Afghan was killed and several others wounded when troops opened fire on people protesting Jones's plans. A crowd estimated by local

authorities at 10,000 took to the streets in protest in the northeastern province of Badakhshan. The shooting erupted when demonstrators tried to storm a NATO base, pelting it with stones.

The provocation has taken on an even more sinister turn as Jones has linked his supposed decision to cancel the book-burning with a demand that organizers of a proposed Islamic cultural center in lower Manhattan bow to right-wing pressure and abandon the site, which is two blocks from Ground Zero, the site of the 2001 attacks.

After both Feisal Abdul Rauf, the imam in charge of the center, and a local Florida imam who had tried to dissuade Jones from the Koran-burning denied that such a deal had been struck, Jones claimed Friday that he had been "lied to." He added that the Koran-burning now had merely been "suspended" but not "cancelled." When pressed by reporters as to whether or not he was going to burn the books, he replied, "We're actually not prepared to answer that right now."

Other groups in several states have vowed that even if Jones calls off his Koran-burning, they will undertake similar acts of provocative desecration on Saturday. Among them is the right-wing Christian cult led by Fred Phelps, which has gained notoriety by picketing the funerals of US soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At a White House press conference on Friday, Obama returned to the controversy, appealing to Jones. "My hope is that this individual prays on it and refrains from doing it," he said.

Once again, Obama invoked his status as commander-in-chief, warning that Jones's threatened action would "put our young men and women in harm's way" and provide "the best imaginable recruiting tool for Al Qaeda."

Such claims from the White House and the Pentagon are both hypocritical and absurd. What has placed US troops in "harm's way" are the decisions to launch and continue two wars of aggression aimed at securing US hegemony over the oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. As for "recruiting tools" for Al Qaeda, these wars and the millions

of civilians they have killed, wounded or turned into homeless refugees have provided far more powerful incentives to attack the US than anything a religious huckster in central Florida could ever do.

If the threatened Koran-burning elicits such strong emotions among Muslims, it is because of the actions carried out under both the Bush and Obama administrations. These have included the two wars, abductions and torture of detainees at Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, Bagram and CIA “black sites,” and the roundup of thousands of Muslims in the wake of 9/11 for no other reason than their religion and national origin. These and other actions have convinced millions of people that the US “war on terror” is in reality a war on the Islamic world.

Such conceptions have been further encouraged by the fomenting of anti-Muslim sentiments within the US, of which Jones’s provocation is merely one of the more extreme examples. The leadership of the Republican Party has attempted over the past several weeks to turn a right-wing anti-Muslim campaign against the proposed Islamic cultural center in lower Manhattan into a “hot button” issue in November’s midterm elections.

In his response during the press conference to a question on the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the US, Obama said that because the country is “going through a tough time, then fears can surface, suspicions, divisions can surface in a society.” This is a cowardly evasion.

The US president does not dare to indict those responsible for deliberately whipping up these fears, suspicions and divisions. In the end, the government depends upon such sentiments to facilitate its wars and attacks on democratic rights in the name of combating terrorism.

Obama continued by praising his predecessor George W. Bush and extolling the supposed national unity forged in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

“We are all Americans,” he said. “We stand together against those who would try to do us harm. And that’s what we’ve done over the last nine years.”

He urged the American people “to hang onto that thing that is best in us, a belief in religious tolerance, clarity about who our enemies are ...”

Clarity about who our enemies are? Is Obama kidding?

The American people were first told that their enemy was Osama bin Laden, who was assigned responsibility for the September 11 attacks, events that remain shrouded in mystery and have yet to be subjected to any credible investigation. That bin Laden began his career as a CIA “asset” in Afghanistan, when massive amounts of US military and financial aid were being poured into financing an Islamist insurgency against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, is something neither the government nor the media

wished to dwell upon.

Then the Bush administration launched an unprovoked war against Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban government, which had come to power with US support, and install its own puppet regime, backed by US troops. The hunt for bin Laden was largely abandoned.

Within a year and a half of 9/11, the enemy became the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, which had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks. The war was launched based upon lies about “weapons of mass destruction” and fabricated links between Baghdad and Al Qaeda.

Now the Obama administration is engaged in the continued occupation of Iraq and a major escalation of the war in Afghanistan, as the number of US troops killed in both wars has climbed to nearly 5,700. The president is claiming that 100,000 US troops are in Afghanistan to battle Al Qaeda, even as US commanders acknowledge that there are less than 100 members of the terrorist group in the entire country.

That the anniversary of 9/11, used by two administrations to legitimize war crimes and violations of constitutional rights, is now overshadowed by the Koran-burning circus is symptomatic of a deep-going crisis within the US ruling establishment.

The wars that were supposed to secure US domination of key global energy resources have produced only mayhem and instability, while opposition to them among the American people is at record levels. The concern that the demented actions of a Florida religious sect could endanger the military’s effort in Afghanistan is indicative of the fragility of the US occupation of that country.

Meanwhile, Obama’s attempt to use the September 11 anniversary to affirm that “we are all Americans” and must “stand together” rings ever more hollow under conditions of an economic crisis characterized by an unprecedented social chasm between a financial aristocracy, made even wealthier by Wall Street’s bailout, and the country’s working class majority, confronted with mass unemployment and a relentless assault on wages and social conditions.



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