



## **Post-Revolutionary turmoil and the rising threat to stability in the Arab World**

*By Nora Renger, EGF Middle East Researcher*

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*Key points:*

- The “wrath of Islam” is hardly novel
- Nor is the wrath of Christendom
- Questioning the critique of morality
- Yet Muslims have always rejected violence
- Although they will not tolerate injustice
- “Islamic politics” rising across the Muslim world
- Turmoil following revolutions a threat to stability

## **The “wrath of Islam” is hardly novel**

A new wave of violence spread across the Arab World on occasion of the 11th anniversary of 9/11, after a 14-minute trailer, “The Innocence of Muslims” was uploaded to YouTube and went viral on Facebook and Twitter. Not surprisingly, the reaction to the derogatory short video about the Prophet Muhammad was strong, especially in the Arab World. Within a few days of the movie’s release, violent protests against the anti-Islam film reached the Middle East and North Africa. The American Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three other officials were allegedly killed by al-Qaeda operatives during an attack against the American consulate in Benghazi. At the same time, demonstrators at the American embassy in Egypt tore down the American flag which was flying at half-mast in memory of the victims of 9/11, burned it and replaced it with a flag depicting the *shahada*, the Muslim confession of faith. Along with American consulates, the German embassy in Khartoum, Sudan was also set ablaze.

One wonders where the connection lies between Western ambassadors and a poorly made amateur film by an Egyptian-American Copt, who manifestly had a chip on his shoulder against Muslims. What justifies the destruction of cars coincidentally parked in the vicinity of the American consulate in Tunis or such violence in general? Recent events are not, however, the first provocation of this kind. We remember “The Satanic Verses”, published in 1988 by

Salman Rushdie, which caused major controversy in the Muslim World and led to Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini imposing a fatwa on Rushdie. In 2004, the Dutch film director, Theo van Gogh, was killed by an Islamic fanatic, because of his movie “Submission” which criticized the treatment of women in Islam. Furthermore, the publication of Muhammad caricatures by the Danish magazine Jyllands-Posten in 2006 provoked yet more attacks on Danish embassies. Most recently, the French satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo, published Muhammad caricatures a few weeks after the uproar caused by “The Innocence of Muslims.”

## **Nor is the wrath of Christiandom**

Why are Muslims so sensitive to satire towards Islam? Why would a believer who is comfortable with his religion feel threatened by criticism? When the American film “The Last Temptation of Christ” by Martin Scorsese came out in 1988, it caused huge controversy among conservative Christians. There were violent protests in France that led to an incendiary attack on a movie theatre. As the film was considered blasphemous, it was censored in many countries in South America, Southeast Asia as well as in Europe and Turkey. Clearly, the Western world is familiar with the sensitive nature of religious beliefs. Indeed, one cannot reproach a believer who is offended when his religion is being ridiculed.

## **Questioning the critique of morality**

On the contrary, the latest protests in the Arab World go beyond that. What is the issue here? We are actually witnessing a conflict between modern and conservative ideals. The moral concept in the West and the one in the Muslim world differ strongly from each other. Whilst the moral concept in the West is based on democratic values, the moral concept in the Arab world is based on Islam. Therefore, the Western world considers any caricatures, films, books etc. to be part of what they call “freedom of opinion” and “freedom of the arts”, whereas Muslims consider that freedom of opinion ends where religion begins. The reason is that the Koran strongly condemns blasphemy. “And if you ask them, they will surely say, ‘We were only conversing and playing.’ Say, ‘Is it Allah and His verses and His Messenger that you were mocking?’ Make no excuse; you have disbelieved after your belief. ...” (Sura 9, 65-66). There is no excuse in Islam for anybody making fun of God, his Prophet or symbols that represent him. This is the reason why the spokesman of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, Muhammad Ghozlan, asked the United States to apologize for the film and to prosecute those who are responsible for it.

## **Yet Muslims have always rejected violence**

But wasn't the Arab Spring supposed to sound the bell of democracy and all its values? Since the end of the revolution, the Arab world has been facing an

essential question: to which legal system must it give priority? For a conservative Muslim it is impossible to give preference to a law that is in contradiction to divine law, while a secular society, cannot tolerate special religious rights contradicting secular law. Whatever impression the media conveyed, rioters were a minority of the population. In Cairo, about 3000 people demonstrated in front of the American embassy. A large number of enlightened and liberal Muslims actually condemned the violence and explained that this kind of reaction would only worsen the image of Islam in the world. Among these was Imam Mohamed Majid, who presides over one of the biggest mosques in the United States. He spoke to the Egyptians by satellite TV and assured them that the majority of Americans rejected the film. Also, Egypt's President, Mohamed Morsi, said “... I condemn and oppose all who... insult our prophet. ... [But] it is our duty to protect our guests and visitors from abroad... I call on everyone to take that into consideration, to not violate Egyptian law... to not assault embassies.”

## **Although they will not tolerate injustice**

The latest events prove that the Arab Spring has left great dissatisfaction among the population. First, there seems to be widespread disappointment to the still lacking economic and political change. Further, crimes committed during the Arab Spring have not yet been punished, while security forces still proceed as violently against demonstrators as during the Mubarak regime. However, anything could have induced new violent protests in the region. But the

impulse for the protests was given by Islamists in Egypt and Libya who tried to use this film for their own benefit. There was in fact a high number of Salafi TV Channels calling for protests in front of American embassies. The Salafist leader, Wesam Abdel Wareth, leading the Salafi Channel "El-Hekma", personally called for viewers to protest in front of the US Embassy in Cairo. So did the Egyptian television presenter Sheikh Khaled Abdallah on the Egypt Salafi Channel "An-Nas".

### **"Islamic politics" rising across the Muslim world**

The question is: which interests are Salafists pursuing by calling for protests? Let us take a closer look. Islamists in Libya could not prevail after the fall of Gaddafi. The Muslim Brotherhood filled only 17 of 80 seats during the legislative elections in July 2012, while the Islamic party of Abdel-Hakim Belhadj could not win a single seat. In addition, Libya's new Prime Minister, Mustafa Abu-Shaghour, is in essence a secular politician. However, the attack on the American embassy was allegedly perpetrated by al-Qaida in response to the death of an al-Qaida leader in Yemen, who was killed by an American drone in June.

Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt, by contrast, could recruit swathes of supporters following the eruption of the Arab Spring. Whereas they were targets under Mubarak's regime, they now benefit from having more rights. The militant Islamic group, Al-Gamaa al-

Islamiya, fighting in the 1990s against Mubarak with the objective of creating an Islamic state, has recently founded a political party. During the legislative elections, the party won 1/3 of the seats. Its members do not appreciate Egypt's close contact with the United States, they consider Morsi to be 'not Islamic enough', and would like to introduce more Islamic practices in daily life.

In this context, the anti-Islam video represents a perfect way to gain attention. In Egypt, in particular, we can observe a kind of contest between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists about "who defends Islam the best". This is a good example of how religious and cultural conflicts, which could not burst out during the Mubarak hard line years, can arise in the aftermath. In Yemen the situation is similar to Egypt. Islamists do not appreciate close ties with America and consider their president too weak to rule "in the name of Islam". The attack against the US Embassy can be seen, therefore, as a protest against a government perceived as too frail.

In Lebanon, protests served as a perfect diversion. After the spread of the anti-Islam video, tens of thousands supporters of the militant Shi'a Islamic group, Hezbollah, gathered to hear the Secretary General of the movement, Hassan Nasrallah, speak in mid-September last year. Hezbollah is struggling at present, given that its most important allies, Iran and the Assad regime are both navigating troubled waters. If the Assad regime were to fall, Hezbollah's supply line would collapse. In addition, Hezbollah's image is

tainted as four of its members are suspected of having murdered the ex-Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rafik Hariri.

In Sudan, where the attacks were not only concentrated on the US Embassy but also targeted the German counterpart, we can observe a long-festering anti-German attitude present in the country. The publisher of the Sudanese journal Al-Intibaha, Mustafa al-Tayyib, has fuelled anti-German sentiments for some time. Germany's aid in the field of Civil Society in South Sudan, the support of the region in general and the alleged oppression of Muslims in Germany were reason enough to call for recent demonstrations in front of the German and American Embassy in Khartoum. Mustafa al-Tayyib is the uncle of the Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, it should be added. Al-Bashir could in fact welcome the turmoil, since it serves to take people's mind off social protests against poverty and price increases which have been taking place in recent months.

In Tunisia by contrast, Salafism has become a serious threat to stability. In some towns, Islamic fundamentalists have gained the upper hand and imposed their rule. They assault cultural centers, movie theatres, galleries, hotels and universities if these are not considered to be compatible with Islam. On the other hand, the government led by the Islamist party Nahda is not able to tackle the country's most important problems, among which unemployment and economic troubles dominate.

## **Turmoil following revolutions a threat to stability**

It seems clear that the controversy about the anti-Islam film is a signal for new democratic governments in the Arab world to act. They can no longer avoid the political confrontation with fundamentalists in their respective countries. Islamic groups do not feel represented enough. It might be necessary to work closer together in order to avoid new attacks in future. If not, the governments will continue to have difficulty explaining attacks on Western institutions. Besides overcoming economic slump, this step might be the hardest challenge for the young Arab democracies to take. A big difference between the protests against the caricatures in 2006 and the current situation is that the former occurred during an environment of relative political stability in the Middle East. Today's turmoil, on the other hand, has come immediately after highly revolutionary trends within Arab countries and is thus particularly dangerous in relation to both security and national stability.

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Director and Founder: Dr Marat Terterov

Email: [Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com](mailto:Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com)

Avenue Du Manoir D'Anjou 8

Brussels 1150 Belgium

Tel: +32496 45 40 49

[info@gpf-europe.com](mailto:info@gpf-europe.com)

[www.gpf-europe.com](http://www.gpf-europe.com)

[www.gpf-europe.ru](http://www.gpf-europe.ru)