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## The Koran Desecration and the Role of Religion in Conflict

### Summary

- The recent desecration of the Koran and Islamic writings caused violent unrest in Afghanistan and raises concerns about essential training in culture and religion for U.S. personnel.
- Basic knowledge of religious actors and their roles in peacebuilding and conflict management is still barely factored in by policymakers and advisers to U.S. government.
- There needs more effort by local, regional, and international religious leaders to promote nonviolent and tolerant reactions even in midst of incendiary events.
- An assessment is needed to evaluate whether efforts at promoting inter-cultural sensitivity are working or not, and identifying processes for mitigating tensions.

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In February 2012, Afghan employees at the Bagram Air Base were enraged to find burnt copies of the Koran and other Islamic writings in the trash. This set off deadly protests throughout the country claiming as many as 41 Afghan lives and the shooting of four American soldiers. There were violent and nonviolent protests in Afghanistan and in several Muslim countries. There were condemnations by heads of states. Immediate apologies were offered by the NATO commander in Afghanistan, General John R. Allen, President Barak Obama, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. As of mid-March, three distinct boards of inquiry are examining the missteps that led to the Koran burning: a joint U.S./Afghan undertaking, a U.S. military investigation with the authority to recommend disciplinary action and an Afghan investigation supervised by a council of religious figures. The desecration of the Koran, and recent killings of 16 Afghan civilians in Kandahar by a U.S. sergeant, brought relations between the U.S. and Afghanistan to a new low as the crisis revealed a layer of unspoken cultural and religious insensitivities and lack of understanding.

Unfortunately, there is a track record of similar incidents. In the recent past, the U.S. military had been accused of defaming the Koran in Iraq where it was used for target practice, at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba, where the holy book was allegedly flushed down the toilet, and also mishandling it in detention sites such as Abu Gharib.

Ten years after 9/11, two wars in Muslim societies, and the unfolding of the Arab civil unrest in the Middle East and North Africa, there are fundamental questions as to why there remains basic knowledge gaps in culture, religion, and customs within the U.S. military and government. The latest event furthermore raises larger questions about our analysis on the role of religion in peacebuilding, and whether conflict resolution operations can be successful without factoring in relevant attitudes and behaviors relating to religion. This USIP Peace Brief is partly a result of a

conversation between experts, scholars and U.S. government officials who discussed the complex issues regarding the intersection of religion, peacebuilding, and conflict prevention in conflict zones during a closed-door session at USIP shortly after the Koran incident.

## Where is Religion in the Equation?

Religion's role in conflict and peacebuilding is complex, varied and occasionally the subject of controversy. Is religion part of the problem or part of the solution in conflict resolution? Are religious actors sufficiently taken into account in assessing a conflict? Are U.S. government officials and policymakers adequately factoring in cultural and religious values in assessing the scope of conflict and violence prevention? The answer is often no. Casting religious actors as villains or insignificant civil society actors relegates them to the margins, yet mainstream international peacebuilding efforts are constantly facing obstacles by ignoring the role of religious actors. Religion is integral to conflict management, peacebuilding, development and conflict management, especially in conservative religious-based societies.

Religion remains a strong ideological source for identity and values, including those relating to nationalism, conflict and peacemaking. In many world regions, religion has a new resonance in contemporary times. Religious actors and tensions linked to religious identities are playing active roles in both conflicts and approaches to resolving those same conflicts. Religion is often associated, correctly or incorrectly, as a central factor in inter-communal violence in places as diverse as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, India, Northern Ireland and Uganda. Negative perceptions of religious factors in conflict, a motivating factor for violence and driving communities apart, have tended to predominate. At least as important, however, is the power of religious ideas and voices to persuade. Their resonance within communities, the influence of religious leaders to speak as political or social voices and powerful religious symbols all can be used constructively to counteract extremist behavior, bringing about resolution and reconciliation.

The recent crisis of the defamation of the Koran exemplifies the need to better understand the vital role of religious leaders and communities and their multidimensional function in maintaining peace and stability in their respective communities. There is a need to improve communications between policymakers, enable coordinating governing bodies to utilize religious bodies effectively, and ensure that local religious actors rapidly respond as mediators.

## Varied Responses to Defaming Scripture

The desecration of the Koran, or any other scripture, is an offense to that particular faith community because scripture represents core identity markers and it encapsulates guiding ethical principles for the believer. For Muslims, the Koran is a holy book which is understood as a divine revelation sent to humankind for guidance; it is memorized, recited regularly in the daily prayers, recited publically, aesthetically printed in classical Arabic, and a text which is very much integrated in the life of the believer. Scripture is often the most potent symbol of unity, transcending ethnicity, tribe, nationalism and culture. When it is defamed it evokes intense shock and emotions. However, within Islam there are concise boundaries about refraining from violence and controlling emotions to prevent the escalation of the conflict. When apologies are offered, it is a religious obligation to accept the apology with the intention of moving toward mediation and reconciliation.

Some experts asserted that the violent response to the defamation of the Koran was primarily due to the perception that NATO coalition forces act in a pattern of continued disrespect to local culture: from night raids of homes to unaccountable detention of prisoners, from bombings of weddings and funerals to urinating on enemy corpses, and the constant stressful conditions living

with a foreign military presence. For some, the desecration of the holy book was the pinnacle of enduring cultural and religious abuses which could not be contained.

Others claim that violent protests against NATO were more about the presence of foreign forces and the accumulated frustration of seeing the disparity of wealth, the dismal economic opportunities for the youth, severe corruption at every level, poor governance and unaccountability of governing institutions, stymied reforms for empowerment, and persistent obstacles to providing health services, promoting human rights, and effective power sharing. This is to say that the defaming of the Koran ignited a series of frustrations already in play.

An analyst with the Defense Department said that military personnel receive mandatory training in culture prior to overseas deployment; however, the department needs to improve in the area of evaluating the effectiveness of these trainings and explore areas to develop and enhance cultural understanding.

Also, there is ongoing debate within the military whether cultural training needs to be reinforced based on the period of duty, and how to improve on retaining the knowledge under stressful conditions of conflict.

## Tentative Lessons Learned

This event is an opportunity to appreciate the potential impact of religious leaders and their efforts in peacebuilding. Analysts need to recognize that their ambivalence toward religion is only contributing to misunderstanding and continued miscalculations in conflict analysis. Some might argue that there is no pattern of disrespect or and that this single event will not erode Afghan support for NATO engagement. Yet, such an argument does not fundamentally address the fact that global efforts against terrorism, questionable attacks by NATO on Pakistani forces, and increasing visibility of Islamophobia all contribute to a view that religion is dismissed, or worse, being targeted to be marginalized.

Below are a few lessons learned on how to better understand the role of religion in conflict resolution:

- Since 9/11, the study of religion and international affairs is entrenched within the field of security studies, terrorism and defeating extremism. Focusing exclusively on acts of terrorism limits the analysis and understanding of the broader range of issues at work in any given situation. Using a conflict resolution and conflict transformation framework can present a broader set of suitable issues, actors and behaviors.
- Religious leaders have firsthand knowledge of local issues, and most often they and their organizations can gain local cooperation easily, and have direct access to disputants. A focused strategy aimed at religious leaders should consist of a clear vision and methodology to build relationships, implement conflict prevention practices and support post-conflict development and social well-being.
- The chaplains within the Department of Defense have insight, experiences and a network of religious leadership; they have an invaluable role to broaden the knowledge and skills of the military and should serve as advisers to Department of State to improve the understanding of religious actors.
- Mitigating violence needs to be integrated within the larger enterprises of cultivating a culture of peacemaking, in which the principles and values of peacemaking are affirmed publicly and privately. A culture of peace consists of instilling the skills and attitudes

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief is based in part upon a closed-door roundtable convened by the United States Institute of Peace which drew on the expertise of scholars, practitioners, U.S. government officials, and the policy community to discuss the implications of the burning of the Koran. The findings capture the key perspectives of the attendees but do not reflect any consensus position. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not take policy positions.

needed to recognize and defuse potential conflicts on personal, interpersonal, communal, regional, national and international levels. This is a natural fit for religious actors.

- Just as with other civil society actors, religious actors contribute to the wider field of peacebuilding. There needs to be a long-term commitment to a comprehensive approach that focuses on local community while engaging the middle and top levels of religious leadership.

As policymakers and U.S. government grapple with the repercussions of this unfortunate event, there needs to be symbolic acts of reaching out to communities who have been offended to restore trust, rebuild relationships, acknowledge lapses of proper judgment, and the need to use collaborative conflict resolution. If the aim is to work toward a culture of peacemaking, then a revised training in culture should consist of key religious values and customs, with an emphasis on understanding honor, guilt, empathy, ethics and justice. This onerous task should not only be delegated to the chaplains, who are uniquely situated to interface with locals, but rather there needs to be a wider ownership within the government.



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