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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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No. 179/2012 dated 25 September 2012

## **Impact of Anti-US Protests: Healthy Change in the Muslim World**

By James M. Dorsey

### **Synopsis**

*Demonstrations against an American-made anti-Islam video clip have sparked fierce debates in the Muslim world. They also provoked demonstrations against militant Islamists and spurred initiatives by governments and religious authorities to turn anger into constructive engagement with the rest of the world.*

### **Commentary**

THIS MONTH's violent protests in Muslim countries against the bigoted anti-Islam video on the Internet have taken place against the backdrop of popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa over the past two years. They have catalysed a change in the attitude and approach of Muslims, which had over the past two decades reacted to perceived insults to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad with a series of protests that produced death and destruction, which in retrospect are little more than blips on the radar of history.

To be sure, this month's protests were as lethal as the past protests including those following Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against British writer Salman Rushdie, the 2004 killing of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh for producing a film critical of Islam's treatment of women, and the 2005 Danish anti-Muslim cartoons. Scores have been killed in the recent protests, most prominent of whom was US ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens.

### **Historic change**

However unlike past protests, this month's outrage has produced historic change with protests against Islamist militants; debate about the role of religion in politics; how Muslims should respond to blasphemy; the limits of freedom of expression; and initiatives to engage in dialogue with the non-Muslim world. In effect the anti-Islam video clip, which got more than 30 million hits since the protests erupted, may have been the spark but the protests were really about the kind of society the Arab world is striving for and struggles for power among Islamists. Also as in the case of militant soccer fans in Egypt, they were a settling of scores with the police and security forces, the foremost remnants of the ousted regime of former president Hosni Mubarak.

In the most dramatic expression of change, angry Libyan protesters last weekend attacked Ansar al Sharia, the militant Islamist group believed to be responsible for Stevens' death, forcing the group to abandon its base in the city of Benghazi and the government to announce a crackdown on the country's myriad of armed groups.

Similarly, Egyptian activists have taken legal action against Ahmed Abdullah aka Abu Islam, who burnt a bible during last week's protest in front of the US embassy in Cairo, and television host Khaled Abdullah who first aired the controversial video clip, *The Innocence of Islam*, on Salafist Al Nast tv. On Facebook, the "We are all Khaled Said" page that played an important role in mobilising last year's protests that toppled Hosni Mubarak, listed reasons why Muslims should have ignored the video rather than ensure its popularity.

### **Turning anger into positive engagement**

In Lebanon, a presenter on Future TV that is owned by Sunni Lebanese leader Saad Hariri, denounced the Shiite militia head Hassan Nasrallah as a hypocrite in a 15-minute political diatribe, for calling for protests against the video clip while remaining silent about the Assad regime's destruction of mosques and killing of Muslims in Syria. Similarly, Sheikh Assir, a hardline cleric at an anti-video protest in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon, denounced Hezbollah for displaying portraits of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at a rally, describing him as a butcher.

The cleric charged that Hezbollah was exploiting the protests to polish its image tarnished by the group's support of Assad. "Why didn't Sheikh Nasrallah do anything when the prophets of freedom were martyred in Syria?" he asked, adding that Assad committed blasphemy by forcing prisoners to say "There is no God but Bashar al Assad," rather than the Muslim oath of faith, "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet."

The protests have also persuaded some governments and religious authorities to turn anger into positive engagement. Qatar has announced that it is investing US\$450 million in a three-part epic that depicts the life of Prophet Muhammad. Ali Goma, the grand mufti of Egypt urged Muslims to "follow the Prophet's example of enduring insults without retaliating" and reportedly is looking at launching an international campaign under the motto, 'Know Muhammad,' to explain Islam to the non-Muslim world.

### **Important step forward**

On the other hand, the protests have also strengthened the hand of Muslim conservatives who insist on strict laws against blasphemy and limiting freedom of expression to ensure that Islam is shielded against criticism and mockery. Salafis in Egypt could succeed in pressuring the Muslim Brotherhood to include a ban on blasphemy in the drafting of the country's new constitution. A similar provision has already been included in the draft Tunisian constitution. Saudi grand mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Asheikh and the grand imam of Cairo's Al Azhar University, Sheikh Ahmed el Tayyeb, called separately for the criminalisation of all insults of religious prophets and messengers.

Without doubt, a majority in nations across the Middle East and North Africa rejects expressions of blasphemy and supports laws against insults of Islam across the region. Nevertheless, the debate sparked by the recent anti-video protests is largely reflective of the tensions in societies transiting from autocracy to a more open form of government. For Islamists the struggle against blasphemy is in part a response to autocratic repression that, for example in Tunisia, targeted men with long beards who attended dawn prayers. Liberals across the region walk a tightrope between advocating freedom of speech that would allow criticism and mockery of religion and losing whatever public support they may have.

Change produced by the most recent protests is unlikely to amount to Western-style liberalism. It does however constitute a watershed in which people for the first time draw lines that they could not draw before and in which anger pent-up in societies with no release valves or manipulated by autocratic rulers, not only spills into the streets but is also being channeled into engagement. It may be just one step forward, but nonetheless, it is an important step.

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