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The Huffington Post

America's Image Problem in Afghanistan

By John Feffer

02/29/2012

The United States definitely sends mixed messages to the Muslim world. Early in his presidency, Barack Obama went to Cairo to “seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition.” The president proclaimed that America and Islam “share common principles -- principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.”

That all sounds good. Unfortunately, the image has proven stronger than the word. When Muslims around the world turn on the television, open the newspaper, or check out their favorite websites, they are more likely to see injustice, intolerance, and indignity coming from America the (Not Always So) Beautiful. It’s not just the iconic Abu Ghraib pictures from the Bush era. Muslims -- and, of course, everyone else -- can get outraged over the picture of Syed Wali Shah, a seven-year-old victim of a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan. Or the video of laughing Marines urinating on the corpses of Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

And now with the picture of a partially burned Qur’an -- part of a rescued remnant of copies that troops at the Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan threw into a garbage pit for incineration -- the world’s Muslims can be excused for believing that the Cairo speech was only words. You’d think the U.S. army would be a little more careful. Last April, when members of the Dove World Outreach Center burned a Qur’an after putting it on trial, riots broke out in Afghanistan and left scores of people dead, including seven UN staff.

This time around, the Pentagon insists that the act was inadvertent. That may well be so, but you can't see "inadvertent" in a picture. In a country where the literacy rate is 28 percent, the third-lowest in the world, a picture can indeed be worth a gazillion words. The United States obviously has a serious image problem.

Here's the paradox. The U.S. army, which is actively working with Afghans, sponsors what seems like an endless series of cultural awareness workshops to facilitate cooperation. The Marines have mandatory cultural training; you can do pre-deployment training online with the Army; there's cultural role-playing in a replica of an Afghan village at Fort Polk in Louisiana. Since it works in Muslim-majority countries around the world -- Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait - - the Pentagon takes great pains to avoid charges of Islamophobia.

Yet the Pentagon still manages to fall into the same category as that other famous Qur'an burner, Terry Jones, the Florida preacher who could endure several lifetimes of cultural sensitivity training and remain a knucklehead. Believe it or not, Jones is running for president on a platform of reducing military spending and bringing all U.S. troops home from overseas. No, Jones has not suddenly become a peace activist. He still issues threats to burn more Qur'ans, most recently as a response to the possible execution of an Iranian pastor. But he is the more honest Islamophobe. He genuinely wants to stay away from all Muslims, just as an arachnophobe wants to stay away from all spiders, however irrational the fear might be.

So, how is it that the Pentagon and the Islamophobe, with their opposite views on Islam and intervention, end up generating a similar response in the Muslim world? The answer lies in the image that the Pentagon has of the Muslim world. This is America's other image problem.

U.S. military operations involve an implicit distinction between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims." The "bad Muslims" are, of course, the Taliban, who demonstrated during their brief and bloody reign that they interpret the Qur'an much as Terry Jones interprets the New Testament and Bibi Netanyahu interprets the Old Testament. It's not a question of fundamentalism. There's really no such thing as Islamic fundamentalism, for nearly all Muslims take the Qur'an to be the literal word of God (and "fundamentalism" is really a Protestant invention anyway). Rather, it's a question of interpretation, and the Taliban have ignored all the teachings of the Qur'an that contradict their own medieval beliefs about women, religious tolerance, and warfare.

The "good Muslims," meanwhile, are Hamid Karzai and all the Afghans who are willing to fight alongside coalition forces. Coalition forces, however, deep down don't trust their Afghan partners. More than once, Karzai has threatened to quit and join the Taliban himself. And Afghan government soldiers have not just threatened to quit; they've done so and brought their sophisticated American-made weapons with them to the Taliban. Last June, Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis visited a coalition base in the Zharay district of Kandahar province and watched as Afghan policemen ignored orders to stop suspected Taliban. "To a man, the U.S. officers in that unit told me they had nothing but contempt for the Afghan troops in their area," reports Davis in an Armed Forces Journal article, "and that was before the above incident occurred." It was also before an Afghan intelligence officer, in the wake of the inadvertent Qur'an burning, killed two American servicemen working in the Afghan Interior Ministry, prompting Washington to pull

out all its advisors from the Afghan ministries. Since the start of last year, Afghans wearing police or army uniforms have killed at least 36 U.S. and NATO troops.

It's not that Afghans are inherently untrustworthy. Rather, the United States has put them in an untenable position. They must choose between supporting unpalatable insiders and unpalatable outsiders.

But it's actually worse than this. "A particularly frustrating feature of the U.S. narrative, for Muslims, is that it divides Muslim society into a progressive liberal and secular sector on one hand and on the other a regressive Islamist sector that seeks to impose backward Islamic traditions. America then seeks to promote the liberal forces and to undermine the Islamist forces," explains pollster Steven Kull. "It is particularly infuriating to Muslims when America intervenes in a way that is destabilizing, trying to root for one imagined side against another, in what Americans conceive of as an inevitable evolution toward the victory of one side."

We think we're helping them. They think we're out to destroy their way of life.

Even with all the sensitivity trainings in the world, which amount to little more than lipsticking the pig, the U.S. army remains an occupation force in Afghanistan. This occupation force has stirred the nationalist impulses of Afghans, prompted the use of desperate measures such as suicide bombings, and created the semblance of a crusade by the West against Islam. The wars conducted in Afghanistan and Iraq have had little to do with Islam per se. They have been about geopolitics, natural resources, and the reassertion of U.S. military power. But many in the Islamic world view these conflicts as an assault on their religion. The Qur'an burning is not the only indignity. Afghans, points out FPIF contributor Julia Heath, "don't approve of how U.S. troops bring dogs into their homes or touch their women because these are culturally offensive actions. Shopkeeper Wali Aziz says, 'They [U.S. troops] are careless with our holy things, and they are careless with our country.'" Whenever such desecrations take place, they reinforce the notion that religion is at the heart of the conflict rather than at the periphery.

It doesn't help that so many U.S. politicians talk about Islam as though it were the greatest enemy of humanity. President Obama was quick to apologize for the latest Qur'an burning outrage. But Republicans were equally quick to seize on the apology as proof of Obama's "weakness," as Rick Santorum put it. Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich piled on with their own criticisms of the president's diplomatic gesture. Indeed, rarely does a day go by in the Republican primaries that one of the candidates doesn't defame Islam. Santorum and Gingrich have both laid it on thick with their wild accusations about the threat of sharia law and their misrepresentations of the Park51 Islamic cultural center.

"So far, Mitt Romney has largely remained above the fray," I write in an Other Words op-ed Running Against Islam. "He often resorts to carefully couched phrases like 'Islam is not an inherently violent faith.' But the man who has changed his position on so many issues may well be laying the groundwork for another flip-flop. Walid Phares, a right-wing pundit and prominent Islamophobe, is one of Romney's advisors. And the pro-Romney Super PAC Restore Our Future is masterminded by Larry McCarthy, the attack ad specialist. McCarthy not only designed the Willie Horton spot that swung the 1988 presidential race in George H.W. Bush's favor; he also

put together an error-laced ad about Park51 that nearly deep-sixed Iowa Democrat Rep. Bruce Baley in his 2010 reelection bid.”

Sure, we could try to send all the Republican candidates and some Democrats as well down to Fort Polk to train alongside U.S. soldiers and learn how to behave respectfully toward Muslims. But even if they become as diplomatic as Mr. Sensitivity himself, Barack Obama, the United States continues to wage war in predominantly Muslim countries, and fire-starters like Pamela Geller or Robert Spencer continue to badmouth not Islam or “bad Muslims” or “Islamic radicalism,” but mainstream Islam itself. Park51, which expanded the Geller-Spencer soapbox to monstrous proportions, was hardly the threat they made it out to be. If they’d only bothered to read the writings of the cultural center’s founder, they might have discovered a philosophical co-religionist.

As I write in my new book *Crusade 2.0: The West’s Resurgent War on Islam*, “Ironically, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf was just the kind of ‘good Muslim’ that conservatives loved to cozy up to in order to prove that they were not Islamophobic. In his writings, the imam quotes approvingly from Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and conservative literary critic Allan Bloom, lauds corporate power unfettered by state control, believes that ‘anti-religionism crept in as a new state religion’ in the twentieth century, and condemns Hamas as a terrorist organization.” But for all his conservative tendencies, the imam remains an imam. In the eyes of Geller and Spencer, the only good Muslim is a secular Muslim.

Somehow we must combine a principled engagement with the Muslim world with a principled withdrawal from areas of combat. If the troops don’t come home and the drones don’t stop killing civilians, fine speeches and sensitivity trainings will just seem like hypocrisy, our words and our images will remain far apart, and the chasm between the West and Islam will endure, nowhere more so than in the imaginations of those twin extremists, the Taliban and the