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Civilian Massacres and Koran Burnings: A Tale of Two Misdeeds in Afghanistan

By Aryn Baker

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When Mullah Abdul Rahim Shah Ghaa thinks back to the day in February when a couple of Afghan employees at a U.S.-run detention center outside of Kabul yanked five partially burned Korans out of a trash incinerator, he shudders with anger and revulsion. “It is like a knife to my heart,” says the head of the provincial religious council. The March 11 slaying of 16 Afghan civilians by a lone U.S Army staff sergeant named Robert Bales in Kandahar, however, has left less of a scar. “Of course we condemn that act,” he says. “But it was only 16 people. Even if it were 1000 people it wouldn’t compare to harming one word of the Koran. If someone insults our holy book, it means that they insult our faith, our religion and everything that we have.”

As details emerged from Bales’ systematic slaughter of the slumbering civilians of Panjwayi, many Americans were repelled by the horrific act. The Panjwayi massacre was dubbed an Afghan My Lai, and American officials in Afghanistan braced for a reprisal of the nationwide riots that killed over three dozen, including four Americans, in the wake of the Koran burnings. Even as Afghan President Hamid Karzai lashed out at what he called “Satanic acts that will never be forgiven by apologies,” the anticipated uprising never materialized. The disparity in reaction has mystified many. Why would a nation rise up over the inadvertent burning of a Koran by U.S. forces, when a calculated massacre by that same entity has been largely treated with indifference?

Distrust of the foreign military presence in Afghanistan is on the rise, but some consolation can be taken from the fact that Afghans as a whole still differentiate between the heinous acts of a few and the overall military presence. Were loathing of the foreign forces universal, we most likely would have seen such an uprising. Instead, Afghans understand that there is a timetable for withdrawal, and see no reason to expedite that exit.

In part, the answer can be located in the ubiquity of violence. To Afghans, Sgt. Bales' murderous rampage is little different than the allied airstrikes that have accidentally hit wedding parties, schools or children herding sheep, mistaking them for insurgents on the move or militant installations. The Taliban, for their part, have made personalized acts of violence commonplace: beheadings, hangings and village square executions are part of their inventory of intimidation. "After thirty years of war, we are used to it," says Shah Ghaa. "If we protested for each killing then we would have protests two times every day." It's not an exaggeration. According to the UN, 3,021 Afghan civilians were killed in war related incidents last year – some eight a day. Four out of five of those deaths were blamed on insurgents.

By contrast, attacks on the Koran, whether by accident as happened in February, or on purpose as when a Florida pastor burned a Koran a year ago—protesters in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif stormed a UN office, killing seven foreigners in addition to four protesters—are relatively rare. And Afghans want to keep it that way. "It's our red line," says university student Basir Abdul. "If we don't protest the burning of the Koran today, tomorrow the foreigners will enter our houses and rape our women." Besides, he says, he doesn't know anyone in Panjwayi, "so the killings don't affect me. But the Koran belongs to everyone." In a country riven by tribal loyalties, Islam transcends ethnic identity. It's the one thing that all Afghans can agree upon.

The history of Islam is one of defending the faith, says Shah Ghaa. The Koran is not merely a book, or just the word of God, but a symbol of sacrifice akin to the Christian crucifix. Afghans see themselves as an integral part of Islam's historic struggle against tyranny. "Since the time of the Prophet, there has been war to keep our religion alive," says Shah Ghaa. An estimated two million Afghans died during the anti-Soviet jihad, he says. "Why? Because we had to defend our religion. Insulting the Koran is like insulting everyone who died in that struggle."

Comparing reactions to the two atrocities is not just a question of the sacred vs. the profane, says parliamentarian Fawzia Koofi. As with everything else in Afghanistan, politics plays a role. While she has no doubt that anti-government elements and even opposition politicians sought to capitalize on both incidents, she believes that Afghans have become savvy to the political opportunities presented by yet another case of civilian deaths and have learned not to react. Sgt. Bale may have murdered nine children in his rampage, she notes, but just a few days later an insurgent bomb planted in the road of an neighboring province killed nine more. "Why don't we stand strongly against the Taliban when they massacre people?" she asks. "People are clever enough to understand that this is a political issue, and the Koran is not."

At least not for the moment. The outsize response to the burned Korans has served as a strong lesson to U.S. and foreign forces in Afghanistan. In a country where death stalks freely, defending the afterlife is sadly paramount.