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## Protests sweep Islamic world, fueled by domestic politics, anti-US anger

**Protesters who attacked embassies and clashed with police in at least 17 Muslim countries outraged by more than an anti-Islam video.**

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STANBUL, TURKEY

Anti-American protests continued their sweep across swathes of the Islamic world today, sparked by a low-budget video deliberately denigrating the prophet Muhammad that was made in the US. From Mauritania to Indonesia, protesters took to the streets in anger over the video, which portrays Islam's most sacred figure as a sexually loose and ruthless buffoon.

Yet the protests were about much more than the video. They were a reflection of a deeper, wide-ranging discontent, rooted not only in anger at the US for such things as its pro-Israel policies, drone strikes, and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, but also in frustration at domestic leaders who have not been able to effect rapid change in the wake of the Arab Spring. Analysts also point to a wider power struggle under way between mainstream Islamic groups and ultra-conservative Salafist elements, believed to be behind the Sept. 11 attack in Libya that killed the US ambassador.

"There is a battle going on for the soul of these states," says Salman Shaikh, director of the Brookings Doha Center, contacted in Qatar. "People are offended [by the movie], but with regard to the Arab world, a lot of it has to do with internal domestic politics between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism," says Mr. Shaikh.

"It's domestic politics mixed with an attempt to make new nation states and political systems and institutions that are so vital, he says, arguing that it's not a coincidence that new governments are being challenged most. "And that is a pretty heady mix."

US officials were quick to denounce the video as "reprehensible" this week, but that was not enough to tamp down the fury felt across the globe.

On Thursday, the high walls of US embassies in Sudan and Tunisia were scaled and breached by crowds; Salafists in Tunis replaced the embassy's US flag with their own black one, and the American school there was set alight.

American flags were torched from Tehran to Amman to Kuala Lumpur. Egyptian protesters fought street battles with security forces. In Afghanistan, which was otherwise surprisingly quiet, an effigy of Barack Obama was burnt in an eastern province. In India-administered Kashmir, the top Islamic cleric told all Americans to "immediately leave" because Muslim sentiments "have been hurt by these pictures."

Iran's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, condemned a historic string of Western insults, saying that an "evil chain – namely Salman Rushdie, the Danish cartoonist and Quran-burning American priests," showed that the US and "evil Zionist groups are furious at the increasing brilliance of Islam... in the world today."

In Khartoum, where antigovernment protests earlier this year were easily crushed, security forces did not prevent crowds from attacking the downtown British and German embassies before driving farther out to the US embassy.

### **In Yemen, a president's apology**

In Yemen, security forces were significantly reinforced today to prevent a repeat of yesterday's breach of the US Embassy compound. President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi issued an apology to President Obama and the American people, and vowed to investigate.

Hundreds of Yemenis nevertheless converged today toward the embassy compound after Friday prayers. Security forces held them back with tear gas and warning bullets at a barrier a mile from the embassy.

While the protests were sparked by the anti-Islam film, Yemenis have long resented what they consider American "meddling" in Yemeni affairs. Many Yemenis bristle at continuing American drone strikes in the country, one of which left 10 civilians dead last week.

US Ambassador Gerald Feierstein was singled out yesterday as protesters chanted, "Today is your day, oh ambassador!" as they stormed the embassy walls. Today they carried placards with the same words, and another which read: "America is the devil."

## **Gaza leaders rally the crowds**

In the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, Islamic Jihad and Hamas leaders encouraged a strong display of anti-Americanism.

In Gaza City, thousands chanted "Death to America" and "Death to Jews," and heard speeches from party leaders blaming the US for allowing the release of the film. Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniya told protesters that "The criminals behind the release of the film must be brought to justice. This film is meant to ignite a sectarian war in the Middle East."

The US is widely demonized in Palestinian territories for its staunch pro-Israel policies. Many marched today to express anger at those policies, burning US and Israeli flags along the way.

"We are here to show America and Israel that we will not stay our hand," said Mohammed Dahman, who carried a green Hamas flag. "Mocking our prophet is a red line. We may be silent at some issues ... but we will get so violent when it comes to our prophet and our creed."

He said he admired the Libyans who sacked the consulate in Benghazi and killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens. "It's a great loss that there is no American embassy here so we could pour out our fierce anger on them," said Mr. Dahman. "I would have killed them all if I had the chance."

But Majed Aadas, an English teacher, said killing is against the teachings of Islam.

"Our religion does not urge us to kill innocent people," says Mr. Aadas. "Today's demonstration is a message to the Western regimes in general and it is not directed against the people. We know that many Americans sympathize with the Palestinians and I have met many of them personally in Gaza."

## **Fundamentalism emerges on the political scene**

Anti-US grievances vary from country to country, and are compounded in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria by a strong fundamentalist element that has emerged on the political scene. The assault on the US Consulate in Benghazi occurred just hours after Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on pro-Al Qaeda groups to "kill the crusaders" to avenge the death in a drone strike of a Libyan leader of the Al Qaeda.

Many Libyans have responded with shock, sadness, and embarrassment to Tuesday's attack. In Benghazi, people took to the streets, with one sign reading in English: "Sorry People of America this is not the behavior of our ISLAM and Profit [sic]."

"It may have been last minute, but people felt they should do something that very day," says Lamia Abusedra, a culture ministry official from Benghazi. In the days since the attack, Libyans have come forth to voice their regret and insist that Islam is a peaceful religion.

Partially as a result of the US-led NATO effort that ensured the fall of dictator Muammar Qaddafi last year, Libya remains one Arab nation with widespread pro-American sentiment. But Salafist groups and armed militias, the Islamists often harboring anti-US feelings, continue to roam Libya, though authorities today announced the arrest of four suspects in the Benghazi attack.

"In today's sermon, the sheikh spoke against what happened on [Sept. 11], and about the rights of both citizens and foreigners," says Talal Giuma, co-founder of a children's health charity and teacher on Muslim-Christian relations at Tripoli's Algeria Square mosque.

"There's a religious principle that not to thank those who bring you into being is like ingratitude toward God," says Mr. Giuma. "America supported the rebels in the war against Qaddafi, and we should be grateful."

Other Libyans have taken to the Internet to send messages of condolence – and to address those who supported the attack.

"The victory of the prophet is not through breaking, burning, looting, and theft," says one Arabic message that circulated on Facebook. "Those who truly want his victory will make known his mores, life and message."