



Why Are We Still in Afghanistan?

The violent response to accidental Koran burning once again drives home the perils of nation-building.

By **DOUG BANDOW** on 3.6.12 @ 6:08AM

American soldiers mistakenly burned a half dozen Korans in Afghanistan. Predictably, the response was riots by many and murder by a few Muslims. Violence has become the tactic of choice of Islamic extremists around the world against secular critics and religious minorities alike.

Indeed, this isn't the first time that Afghan mobs have killed to avenge a perceived insult to their faith. Last year a crowd in the generally peaceful city of Mazar-e-Sharif slaughtered a dozen United Nations staffers after Rev. Terry Jones burned a Koran in Florida.

The latest round of violence was sparked by the burning of six Korans removed from a prison because they contained extremist messages -- added by Afghan Muslims apparently unconcerned about the alleged sacredness of the text. Sent to a landfill, they were set on fire before Afghan personnel identified them as Korans.

In the ensuing violence some 30 Afghans died and a half dozen Americans were killed. A taxi driver told the *Wall Street Journal*: "If they are insulting our Koran, we don't want peaceful rallies." A policeman informed the *Washington Post*: "Afghans and the world's Muslims should rise against the foreigners. We have no patience left." Another cop, trained by NATO, declared: "We should burn those foreigners."

Members of parliament and political allies of Afghan President Hamid Karzai openly encouraged attacks on allied personnel. Parliamentarian Abdul Sattar Khawasi asserted that "Americans are invaders, and jihad against Americans is an obligation" and called for "war against Americans."

Apparently no one expressed remorse over the deaths of innocent people. President Karzai demanded U.S. cooperation in his investigation of the incident. Local religious leaders called for trying the American personnel who burned the Korans in Islamic court. After meeting

with President Karzai, one group of senior Islamic clerics issued a statement: "This evil action cannot be forgiven by apologizing."

The initial U.S. intervention in Afghanistan was necessary to break al Qaeda and punish the Taliban for hosting terrorists. But those objectives were achieved a decade ago.

Since then Washington has been attempting to establish competent and honest governance in Kabul. Along the way Americans have sacrificed more than 1,900 lives (U.S. allies have lost another 1,000) and \$507 billion. However, the latest example of deadly intolerance in Afghanistan suggests that America's attempt at nation-building is a chimera, unattainable at least at reasonable cost in reasonable time.

The difficulty starts with Afghan President Hamid Karzai. His supporters committed widespread electoral fraud during his 2009 reelection campaign. The State Department declared the vote "marked by serious allegations of widespread fraud." The 2010 parliamentary elections were little better, "marred by widespread fraud and corruption" according to State. Last year the group Freedom House declared that the "parliamentary elections, which were characterized by widespread fraud, did little to repair the credibility of Afghan political institutions following the flawed 2009 presidential poll." In an assessment released earlier this year, Freedom House reported a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. Corruption is pervasive, yet President Karzai forced the release of a top official arrested as a result of an investigation by the anticorruption task force. Karzai's late brother, Ahmed Walid Karzai, was widely believed to be involved in the narcotics trade. Wealth generated by that business, as well as siphoned off from the massive inflow of Western money that dominates Afghanistan's war economy, has funded construction of gaudy "poppy palaces" that line Kabul streets. In grand understatement, Freedom House warned of "a lack of political will to address the problem."

Afghans are cynical about "their" government. However, they fear "their" security forces, particularly the Afghan National Police. When I visited Afghanistan people described being robbed by the latter, which is supposed to protect them. The latest State Department assessment on human rights reported that the "security forces committed arbitrary or unlawful killings." State cited "reports of serious abuses by government officials, security forces, detention center authorities, and police," including arbitrary arrests, unlawful trials, and illegal imprisonments filled with beatings, torture, and rape. Children are mistreated as well.

Such is the government presided over by President Karzai. Yet he plans to spend his time investigating the accidental burning of a few copies of the Koran.

EVEN MORE FANTASTIC is the U.S. government's desire to build a liberal nation state in Afghanistan. The latter is a desperately poor land ravished by decades of conflict. More important, Afghanistan is locked in the past.

There are educated and tolerant Afghans who want to build a free and humane society, some of whom I met on my first trip to Afghanistan in 2010. When I visited the country last October as part of a NATO-sponsored delegation, a group of female parliamentarians expressed their fear of the consequences of an allied withdrawal. Even most rural, tribal peoples are not the "savages" denounced by Sarah Palin, but simply traditionalists who want to be left alone.

However, there obviously are many -- too many -- Afghans who view the lives of infidels, even "people of the book," as Jews and Christians are known, as valueless. The burning of the Korans was called "antihuman" by one Islamic cleric and "inhumane" by the clerical delegation which met with Karzai. Yet the murder of non-Muslims is accepted as reasonable and just by some Afghans.

In fact, there are reasons why Afghans might hate Americans. Even then U.S. commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal admitted that at checkpoints "We've shot an amazing number of people and killed a number and, to my knowledge, none has proven to have been a real threat to the force." Tens of thousands of Afghans have fled to Pakistan and more than 300,000 have been displaced within their own nation. While the Taliban is primarily responsible for the human carnage, Americans and Europeans are outsiders, who rarely have been welcomed fondly by people determined to govern themselves.

However, the latest round of violence was just another instance of hateful intolerance. Six years ago Kabul sentenced to death a Christian convert. Under Western pressure the Karzai government released the man on a technicality and allowed him to emigrate. Christians and other religious minorities receive none of the respect that Afghan Muslims demand for themselves. Indeed, there is no freedom of religious conscience even for Afghans in Afghanistan.

The situation was worse under the Taliban, but that is scant comfort today. In its latest assessment Freedom House reported: "Religious freedom has improved since the fall of the Taliban government in late 2001, but it is still hampered by violence and harassment aimed at religious minorities and reformist Muslims."

The group Open Doors ranked Afghanistan number 2 on its latest "World Watch List," up a spot from last year. Afghanistan outranked even Saudi Arabia and Iran in persecution. Explained Open Doors: "the situation remains desolate, especially for minority groups, including the small Christian community. Despite having signed all international agreements designed to protect the freedom of religion, the government in the current setting is not even able to guarantee the most basic tenants of this right. On the contrary, being recognized as a Christian immediately places any believer in a very difficult position."

In its most recent report the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom concluded simply: "Conditions for religious freedom remain exceedingly poor for

minority religious communities and dissenting members of the majority faith, despite the presence of U.S. armed forces in Afghanistan for almost 10 years and the substantial investment of lives, resources, and expertise by the United States and the international community." Recently "the small and vulnerable Christian community experienced a spike in government arrests, with Christians being detained and some jailed for the 'crime' of apostasy."

Last year's State Department assessment of international religious liberty offered a similarly negative assessment. Noted State: "The constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom and, in practice, the government enforced these restrictions." Respect for religious liberty is on the decline, "particularly for Christian groups and individuals." Moreover, "Negative societal opinion and suspicion of Christian activities led to targeting of Christian groups and individuals, including Muslim converts to Christianity. The lack of government responsiveness and protection for these groups and individuals contributed to the deterioration of religious freedom."

Members of this society are lecturing Americans about the latter's lack of "respect" for the former's religious beliefs.

THE LATEST ROUND of violence should cause Americans to reflect on what Afghanistan is and is likely to become. U.S. foreign policy cannot be based solely on the perceived worthiness of those being defended, but presidential contender Newt Gingrich made an important point when he declared that Washington shouldn't risk "the life of a single American... in a country whose religious fanatics are trying to kill us and whose government seems to be on the side of the fanatics."

The U.S. and its allies entered Afghanistan to fight terrorism. That job has been completed. Al Qaeda is a wreck and its remnant operates elsewhere, including next door in Pakistan. Afghanistan has become irrelevant to protecting Americans from terrorist attack.

It still would be best if possible to leave an Afghan government capable of protecting its people from the worst depredations of the Taliban. To that end the U.S. and NATO have constructed at great cost Afghan security forces that are more capable than in the past, but which continue to suffer from debilitating deficiencies -- many privately admitted by allied personnel on the ground.

The biggest problem remains the Afghan government, however. Even allied officials who have increasing confidence in the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police express frustration with the Karzai government. However impressive the official façade, the reality behind looks very different -- rather like in South Vietnam decades ago. Will even well-trained Afghan security personnel be willing to die for the regime in Kabul when the allies depart?

Remaking Afghan society is a hopeless task. Social engineering is hard enough at home. Doing so abroad is far more difficult, especially when many Afghans are ready to kill when

offended by those who believe differently than them. The problem runs far deeper than the loss of mutual trust between Afghans and allies, as some observers suggest. Afghan society may -- and hopefully will -- eventually evolve in a more humane direction, but it will do so on Afghanistan's, not America's, schedule.

Indeed, violent intolerance pervades the Muslim world. Not all Islamic states persecute -- Turkey and some of the small Gulf kingdoms are more tolerant places -- but Islam joins Communism as the two most accurate predictors that a government will suppress religious liberty. And Muslim nations like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan top any list of religious persecutors.

American foreign policy cannot be focused on promoting religious liberty abroad. However, to the extent that promoting human rights remains a basic U.S. goal, Washington should advance respect for freedom of religion. Moreover, the lack of a shared commitment to the value of the life, dignity, and conscience of the human person makes some partnerships difficult if not impossible. As perhaps in Afghanistan.

Americans should wish the Afghan people well. But Washington cannot turn Afghans into Americans. The latest round of Islamic violence in Afghanistan alone is not enough to pronounce the U.S. counter-insurgency mission to be a failure. However, the killings highlight the perils of nation-building. And they entitle the American people to ask: Why are we still in Afghanistan?