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Middle Eastern Responses to Anti-U.S. Protests: Signs of Healthy Change?

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For the first time after more than two decades of periodic protests against perceived insults to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, the lethal September demonstrations across the Muslim world against an American-made anti-Muslim video clip have sparked a variety of Muslim responses. These include introspection, demonstrations against militant Islamists, and initiatives by governments and religious authorities to turn popular anger into constructive engagement with the rest of the world.

To be sure, the recent protests were as lethal as past ones, including those that followed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against British writer Salman Rushdie, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's campaign in 2000 against Syrian novelist Hayder Hayder, the 2004 murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh for producing a film critical of Islam's treatment of women, and the 2005 Danish cartoon crisis.

And no doubt, the instigators of the latest protests, like those in the past, capitalized on widespread discontent, including the fact that countries like Egypt and Libya have yet to see the hoped-for economic benefits of their recent popular revolts or any sense that their yearning for social justice is being achieved. Youth unemployment remains high, with job creation, at the best of times a gradual process, being hampered by a lack of domestic and foreign investment. Add to this food price inflation with soaring grain prices on the world market – Egypt is the world's largest wheat importer – and it becomes clear that the manipulation of emotions remains an attractive strategy for various political actors and movements.

Nonetheless, the uprisings that have rolled across the Middle East and North Africa during the last two years have resulted in a significant widening of the political space in which various social and political groups can compete. The recent protests occurred within this new context and hence, did not merely constitute another example of public venting of pent-up anger and frustration, government efforts to distract attention from domestic issues, or Islamist attempts to project themselves as the true defenders of the faith.

The anti-American demonstrations also provoked a counter-reaction, which included unprecedented protests against Islamist militants; open debates about the role of religion in politics, how Muslims should respond to blasphemy, and the appropriate limits of freedom of expression; and initiatives to engage in dialogue with the non-Muslim world. In effect, the video clip may have been the spark but the protests were really multi-faceted, partly being about the kind of society Middle Easterners and North Africans strive for, partly underpinned by struggles for power among competing Islamist groups, and in the case of militant soccer fans in Egypt, consisting of a settling of scores with the police and security forces, the foremost remnant of the toppled regime of former president Hosni Mubarak.

In the most dramatic expression of the new context, angry Libyan protesters attacked *Ansar al-Sharia*, the militant Islamist group believed to be responsible for US Ambassador Stevens' death, forcing the group to abandon its base within in the city of Benghazi and the government to announce a crackdown on the country's myriad armed groups. Similarly, liberal Egyptian activists have taken legal action against Ahmed Abdullah, aka Abu Islam, who burned a Bible during the a protest held in front of the US embassy in Cairo, and against television host Khaled Abdullah, who first aired the controversial video clip, "The Innocence of Islam," on the Salafist Al Nast television. The Facebook page "We are all Khaled Said," which played an important role in mobilizing last year's protests that toppled Hosni Mubarak, listed reasons why Muslims should have ignored the video rather than raising a furor and thus ensuring its popularity.

In a sharp break with traditional Lebanese reluctance to publicly take on Hezbollah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, a presenter on Future TV, which is owned by Sunni Lebanese leader Sa`ad Hariri, denounced the Shi`ite militia head as a hypocrite for delivering a 15-minute diatribe calling for protests against the video clip while remaining silent about the Assad regime's destruction of mosques in Syria and killings of Muslims. Similarly, hard-line Sheikh Assir, a cleric at the Bilal Bin Rabah Mosque in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon, denounced Hezbollah's displaying of portraits of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during an anti-video protest. The cleric charged that Hezbollah was exploiting the protests to polish its image, which was 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 also persuaded some governments and religious authorities to turn the displays of anger into positive engagement. Qatar has announced that it is investing $450 million in a three-part epic that would depict the life of Muhammad. Ali Goma, the grand mufti of Egypt, urged Muslims to "follow the Prophet's example of enduring insults without retaliating," and reportedly is considering launching an international campaign under the motto, 'Know Muhammad,' to explain Islam to the non-Muslim world.

To be sure, the protests have not fundamentally changed relations between Muslims and Copts in Egypt or reduced the Copts' sense of discrimination. Nor have they altered the toxic dynamic of sectarian relations in Lebanon. In fact, they have

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.

As a result, Salafis in Egypt might well succeed in pressuring the Muslim Brotherhood to include a banning of 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 Sheikh and Ahmed el-Tayyeb, the grand imam of Cairo's Al Azhar University, one of the Muslim world's foremost institutions of Islamic learning, have each called for the criminalization of all insults of religious prophets and messengers.

Without doubt, a large majority of the public across the Middle East and North Africa rejects expressions of blasphemy and supports existing laws against insulting Islam. Still, the debate sparked by the recent anti-video protests reflects the tensions in societies transitioning from autocracy to a more open form of government. For Islamists the struggle against blasphemy is in part a response to longstanding repression under *ancien regimes* that in Tunisia, for example, 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.

If change is to come to the Middle East and North Africa, it is unlikely to amount to Western-style liberalism. If anything, the fallout from the recent demonstrations underlines the fact that popular protests in the region are not driven by the desire to copy Western democracy, but by a desire for dignity, greater social justice and enhanced freedom, albeit freedom that complies with long-standing cultural and religious norms widely held across the Middle East and North Africa.

Still, the protests and the responses to them provide further indication that the broader publics in the region have now been empowered to shape their future in ways not previously available to them. In some cases, their pent-up anger may also be channeled positively into engagement. It may be just one step forward, but it nonetheless an important one.

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