

Qur'an abuse story roils Islamic World: Anti-American riots

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If a Qur'an is accidentally dropped on the floor, the person who dropped it makes a contribution to charity in atonement. Copies are never placed at the bottom of a pile of books. And because the toilet is considered an impure place, the Qur'an is never taken into the bathroom.

This reverence for the Islamic holy text helps explain the explosive international reaction to a *Newsweek* report—since retracted because it was erroneous—that a copy of the Qur'an had been flushed down the toilet in the course of interrogations of detainees at a U.S. prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

"This is the ultimate spiritual torture," said Muqtedar Khan, a nonresident fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution who studies Islam and world politics. "If this was done, it is the ultimate blow."

It now appears that it was not, in fact, done. But damage has certainly occurred, reinforcing negative Islamic perceptions about Americans in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, in which women were photographed sexually degrading Muslim men.

On May 9 *Newsweek* reported that an internal military investigation of the prison at Guantánamo Bay, which houses many Muslims suspected of terrorism, revealed that copies of the Qur'an had been placed in bathrooms and that one had been flushed down the toilet.

Anti-American riots ensued in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia, resulting in at least 15 deaths and many more injuries.

Under pressure from the U.S. military, the State Department and the White House, *Newsweek* editor Mark Whitaker issued a retraction May 16. The report was largely based on a single, anonymous source—a government official—and that individual was no longer certain of the story's validity. The magazine later issued guidelines to

tighten restrictions on using “unnamed sources” in stories.

(Some commentators have questioned the credulity of the magazine’s editors, as did RNS contributor James Lileks: “Did no one at *Newsweek* consider the difficulty of flushing a book down the toilet?” In a related incident, a Southern Baptist pastor recently apologized for a sign in front of his church declaring “The Koran Needs to Be Flushed.” See *Century Marks*, p. 7.)

To the world’s 1 billion Muslims, the Qur’an is the literal word of God. Even translations from the Arabic do not have the same status for reliability.

“It’s like Jesus, considered by Christians to be God in person. It’s divine,” said Imam Muzammil Siddiqui, who leads the Islamic Society of Orange County, California, and is chairman of the Council of Islamic Centers in Southern California. “Muslims don’t worship the Qur’an,” Siddiqui said, “but it is very sacred.”

In his briefing May 16, White House spokesman Scott McClellan said that Guantánamo detainees are provided with copies of the Qur’an and are “able to worship freely.”

Nevertheless, some major newspapers have reported that allegations arose early when the U.S. started imprisoning terrorist suspects. Then in 2003 the Pentagon issued detailed rules for handling the Qur’an at Guantánamo. The rules said the holy book must not be placed “in offensive areas such as the floor, near the toilet or sink, near the feet, or dirty/wet areas.”

The sacredness of the Qur’an is such that Muslims do not handle the book anywhere without first undergoing a ritual hand-washing, called “ghusl,” which places them in a state of ritual purity.

Khan explained that the Jewish view of the Torah, which is regarded as so sacred that if it falls to the ground the entire congregation fasts for a day and gives to charity, is similar to how Muslims view the Qur’an.

The riots that erupted in Afghanistan and Pakistan following the original *Newsweek* report were the result of the horror that Muslims felt hearing of such insult to their sacred book, said Khan.

Political forces were at work, he added. “This thing is so dear and important for Muslims, it is easy to mobilize Muslims on this issue,” Khan said. “Muslims have the

fear that people in the West have no respect for Muslim religiosity.”

Some U.S. Muslims see the controversy as a moment to educate the American public. The Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) launched its “Exploring the Qur’an” program May 17.

The nonprofit group is distributing free copies of the Qur’an, in English and Arabic, featuring commentary by the late Indian scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a translator of the Qur’an who died in 1953. (To obtain a copy of the Qur’an, go to www.cair-net.org .)

“We are initiating this campaign as an attempt to turn a negative incident into something more positive,” said Nihad Awad, CAIR’s executive director. But Awad added that there is no undoing the damage of the *Newsweek* story, because what was reported is perceived as just the latest in a string of anti-Muslim actions and policies by Americans and their government. *–Religion News Service*