



## Explaining the inexplicable: murder at Mazar

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*By C. Christine Fair, April 4, 2011*

In [September of 2010](#), Pastor Terry Jones, an obscurantist preacher from the boondocks of Florida, caught the attention of U.S. political, diplomatic and military leadership when he threatened to burn a copy of the Quran. Ultimately, Mr. Jones desisted from this inflammatory folly after achieving several days of sustained fame and after receiving various entreaties by President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and even the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, General



STR/AFP/Getty Image

David Petraeus, who warned that such action would put U.S. troops in harm's way. The crisis was dispelled when the [gun-toting](#) Mr. Jones -- who is no religious scholar but [rather](#) a homophobic, Islamophobic used furniture salesman -- at last relented and promised to not revisit the subject in the future.

In early January of 2011, the mustachioed Mr. Jones announced, while sporting a leather jacket, that he would hold an "International Judge the Koran [sic] Day," during which the Quran would be tried for murder. Unlike his September escapade -- conveniently timed to coincide with the ninth anniversary of 9/11 -- this round of theatrics drew no press attention. On March 20, 2011 Mr. Jones served as the judge in this "trial of the Koran," which also featured a mock prosecutor, defense attorney, and witnesses. Some of the participants were even sporting robes and headwear presumably intended to be some variety of "Arab" costuming. Amidst about 30 observers and a film crew from an Orlando film school, the Quran was found guilty after which it was doused with kerosene and burnt upon an ornamental outdoor [firepit](#). Despite the modest turnout, Jones declared the event a success as well as a "[once-in-a-lifetime experience](#)."

The bizarre mock trial and execution of Islam's most revered book went unnoticed in the American and international media until April 1, when angry mobs in the usually peaceful northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif stormed a U.N. compound and [slaughtered at least eight](#) people. The violence quickly spread beyond the city of Mazar-i-Sharif into Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Kabul. The crowd was mobilized

following [Friday prayers at the shrine of Hazrat Ali](#), in which the event was recounted, enraging the attendees.

While Mr. Jones was deliberately provocative, this butchery of innocent Afghans and international U.N. workers is mind-boggling. How is it possible that the actions of a largely reviled, fringe lunatic in central Florida could result in protests in [Afghanistan](#) and [Pakistan](#) and spawn the deaths of so many people -- including Afghan Muslims?

### **Clash of juridical cultures**

The Quran crisis underscores a clash of juridical cultures. In the United States, though Mr. Jones' actions are repugnant, they are not illegal. The pastor enjoys the same freedom of speech and freedom of religion that all Americans enjoy, be they Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, atheist, or other. Ironically, his right to be religiously offensive is the other side of the very coin that protects our religious freedoms including the freedom to espouse no religion at all. Tolerating hatemongering shenanigans is the price that Americans of all stripes pay for our freedoms.

While some Muslims -- especially those who are not American or who do not live in the United States -- may find this tolerance of ghastly behavior inexplicably abhorrent, many Americans recoil at laws in countries such as [Pakistan and Afghanistan \(among other Muslim countries\)](#), which criminalize expressions of *intolerance*, such as [blasphemy](#). Blasphemy laws in both Pakistan and Afghanistan carry a maximum sentence of death, can be alleged and prosecuted with little or no evidence, are often employed for economic or other retaliatory motives that are anything but religious, and are usually used against non-Muslims for an array of reasons. In January, an Islamist zealot [assassinated](#) Pakistan's governor of the province of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, because he had the temerity to suggest reforming Pakistan's flawed law after a Christian mother was condemned to death under it. While Pastor Jones is an obscure and reviled figure in the United States, Taseer's killer, Mumtaz Qadri, became nationally acclaimed as a hero and even [festooned with flowers, Valentine's Day cards and gifts](#).

Similarly, some Americans were shocked when they heard that [Said Musa](#), a 46 year-old Afghan Red Cross worker, had been arrested and faced the possibility of a death sentence for "apostasy." Mr. Musa was declared an apostate because he had converted to Christianity. Mr. Musa, who lost a leg serving in the Afghan army, was among a group of some 26 Christians arrested in May of 2010 after an Afghan television program played footage of Christian converts being baptized. The public was outraged and some parliamentarians called for the execution of the "apostates." Mr. Musa was removed safely from Afghanistan but others remain in Afghan prisons.

### **Getting to killing**

Clashing legal and civil values alone cannot explain the bloody violence that has erupted across Afghanistan this weekend. Sensible people understand differences in legal regimes across states and do not easily mobilize into murderous mobs. Sensible people understand that killing innocent people in reaction to an offender far away is not condoned in any religion.

Nor does the act of desecrating a Quran itself offer a satisfying exculpatory narrative for the savage murders at Mazar-i-Sharif on Friday. After all, Sunni militants have attacked and razed dozens of Shia mosques and Sufi shrines in Pakistan in recent years alone, including one just yesterday in Dera Ghazi Khan that left [more](#) than 40 dead. These attacks have doubtless resulted in the incineration of countless Qurans, but have sparked no apparent mass outrage among Muslims in South Asia.

Moreover, if the senseless Quran burning were so universally viewed as a legitimate precipitant of massacres of innocents, why has the violence not erupted elsewhere? If frustration with international occupation and episodic but [gruesome human rights violations](#) of U.S. and international troops had explanatory power, we should see this outrage in Iraq as well. Just as Afghanistan has witnessed U.S. army "[kill teams](#)" which deliberately killed Afghan citizens for sport, Iraq too witnessed many horrific human rights violations by U.S. soldiers and private security firms.

When Pastor Jones first raised his ugly plot, a phalanx of senior American officials and community leaders condemned him and his scheme. Anyone with a television could clearly see that the tides were firmly against Mr. Jones. More recently, General Petraeus has declared the March 20 Quran burning to be hateful and intolerant. President Obama himself [called](#) it "an act of extreme intolerance and bigotry." NATO ambassador to Afghanistan [Mark Sedwill](#) too condemned the desecration of the Quran.

How then do we get to the senseless and savage butchery of people who were utterly innocent and dedicated to helping Afghans? Here the finger must turn to politics within Afghanistan itself: Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai.

Rather than explaining to his population that Jones is a fringe crank whose actions are reviled by most Americans, Karzai has made this his most recent anti-American cause célèbre, denouncing the Americans who have paid deeply in lives and treasure to support his inexplicably corrupt and unaccountable government.

In fact, the conflagration of April 1 likely would not have happened had it not been for President Karzai himself, who drew attention to the little known event on March 24 when he [issued a press release](#) in which he called the immolation of the Quran "a crime against a religion and entire Muslim *umma* [community]." He further called for the U.S. and U.N. to "bring to justice the perpetrators of this crime."

Despite the condemnation of U.S. civilian and military leadership, Karzai continues to stoke the sentiments of Afghanistan's uninformed masses and goad entrepreneurs of death of violence into further murderous action.

### **With friends like this...**

Karzai's various demands for Pastor Jones be brought to justice are simply bizarre. Karzai knows full well that Mr. Jones committed no crime in the United States and Afghanistan has no jurisdiction over the dubious pastor and his firepit. Some countries such as the United Kingdom have [denied Jones entry into their country](#), which is an entirely appropriate, sovereign response. Other countries could certainly follow suit justifiably.

It is very difficult not to conclude that Karzai *chose* to pursue a path of deadly controversy to demonstrate his strategic independence from the very country that continues to pay the vast majority of all of his bills while his coterie of supporters loot his country's coffers. According to the recently downsized U.S. defense budget, American taxpayers will still pay about \$[300 million per day for the military effort](#) in Afghanistan alone. For all operations in the country, the United States is expected to spend about [\\$17 billion in Fiscal Year 2011](#) alone. This is in addition to the [1,461 US soldiers](#) killed and countless more injured in Afghanistan since 2001. Needless to say, many more [Afghan civilians](#) and security forces have died in the same period, as have U.S. civilians as well as coalition military and civilian personnel. In 2010, more than [2,777](#) civilians were killed.

At some point, we need to ask how it is possible to justify squandering such life and treasure on Karzai when he time and time again undermines his own and our interests. How can we continue to support a man who is willing to stoke the flames of violence in his own country for his own, deeply personal political gains? This is as inexplicable as the senseless violence in Mazar-i-Sharif and the bigotry of Mr. Jones.

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