

# CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

## The Quran Desecration and its Implications – Perspectives of Partners

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*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

1. **Subject: The Quran Desecration and its Implications – Perspectives of Partners**
2. **Purpose:** This paper aims to present the CSAG’s analysis regarding the current incidents of Quran burning, why it matters, possible reasons, its implications, and the perspective of partners.
3. **Background/Introduction**
  - a. Recent incidents of Quran burning, including an Iraqi asylum-seeker in Sweden and a group of anti-Islam activists in Denmark, have sparked outrage in many Muslim countries and widespread condemnation.
  - b. Such incidents have occurred in the past; however, their frequency has increased in recent years.<sup>1</sup>
  - c. Besides burning the Quran, there were occasional incidents of other religious books being burned, but they did not occur as often and did not receive significant media attention.<sup>2</sup>
4. **Timing and the Possible Reasons**
  - a. The recent incident of Quran burning coincided with the Eid-Al-Adha<sup>3</sup> and the anniversary of Saddam Hussein’s death.

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<sup>1</sup> TRT World, “Danish Far-Right Party Leader Burns Copy of Holy Quran in Sweden”, July, 2023, <https://www.trtworld.com/europe/danish-far-right-party-leader-burns-copy-of-holy-quran-in-sweden-56378> ; Hafez, Farid, Haaretz, “Why Is the Far Right Obsessed With Burning the Koran?”, July, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/error?404&path=%20middle-east-news/2023-01-24/ty-article-opinion/.premium/why-is-the-far-right-obsessed-with-burning-the-koran> (accessed July 26, 2023)

<sup>2</sup> The Guardian, “Catholic Church in Israel Badly Damaged by Suspected Arson Attack”, Jun, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/18/catholic-church-multiplication-israel-damaged-possible-arson-attack>; Shatto, Rachel, Advocate, “A Gay Man Burned a Bible in Protest at a Tennessee Book Burning”, Feb, 2023, <https://www.advocate.com/religion/2022/2/07/gay-man-burned-bible-protest-tennessee-book-burning#toggle-gdpr> (accessed July 26, 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Berry, Alex, DW, “Sweden: Man burns Quran outside mosque during Eid al-Adha”, Jun 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/sweden-man-burns-quran-outside-mosque-during-eid-al-adha/a-66053104> , (accessed July 26, 2023)

- b. It may be connected with Türkiye's approval of Sweden joining NATO, aimed at derailing the process.<sup>4</sup> To impede strengthening of NATO by keeping Sweden out, there is a possibility of Russian involvement to provoke Türkiye.
- c. Immigration is a complex and multifaceted challenge in Europe; certainly resentment toward immigrants, stoked by right wing organizations has likely been a catalyst for such actions.
- d. Extremist individuals or organizations view Quran burning as a way to express their opposition to Islam, to incite violence, or to spark a reaction from Muslims.

## 5. Responses

- a. The incident of Quran burning has resulted to strong condemnation by countries in the CENTCOM AOR who have expressed their concern amid a rise of extremist tendencies in Europe.
- b. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a coalition of 57 Muslim countries, has suspended the status of the Swedish Special Envoy due to the string of Quran burnings.
- c. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) approved a resolution on religious hatred and bigotry in the wake of the Quran burnings in Sweden.<sup>5</sup>
- d. The European Union (EU) issued a statement condemning the Quran burning as "offensive, disrespectful, and a clear act of provocation."<sup>6</sup>
- e. US State Department has condemned the Quran burning in Sweden. However, the US stopped short of condemning the burning of the Quran at the UN Human Rights Council for fear of undermining its support for freedom of expression.<sup>7</sup>
- f. The Saudi Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning the Quran burning as "a new provocation of the feelings of millions of Muslims worldwide".
- g. Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, said that people who desecrate the Quran should face the "most severe punishment", and Sweden has "gone into battle-array for war on the Muslim world" by supporting those responsible.<sup>8</sup>

## 6. Perspectives from Regional Countries

- a. Since the Quran is considered in Islam as the sacred word of God, deliberate damage to or disregard of the Quran incites resentment, anger and provocation across Muslim communities.

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<sup>4</sup> Ritter, Karl, PBS News, "Türkiye Agrees to Send Sweden's NATO Accession Protocol to Parliament Swiftly", July, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/nato-chief-says-turkey-agrees-to-send-swedens-nato-accession-protocol-to-parliament-swiftly> (accessed July 26, 2023)

<sup>5</sup> Aljazeera, "UN motion after Sweden Quran burning: How did your country vote?", July, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/12/un-bodys-motion-on-quran-burning-how-did-your-country-vote>, (accessed July 27, 2023)

<sup>6</sup> European Union External Action, "Iraq/Sweden: Statement by the Spokesperson on the latest events following the burning of the Quran", July, 2023, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/iraqsweden-statement-spokesperson-latest-events-following-burning-quran\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/iraqsweden-statement-spokesperson-latest-events-following-burning-quran_en), (accessed July 27, 2023)

<sup>7</sup> Beksac, Eren, Anadolu Agency, "UK, US reject condemning burning of Quran at urgent session of UN Human Rights Council", July, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/uk-us-reject-condemning-burning-of-quran-at-urgent-session-of-un-human-rights-council/2943309>, (accessed July 27, 2023)

<sup>8</sup> Reuters, "Iran's Khamenei says Sweden in 'battle-array' over Koran desecrations", July, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/koran-burners-should-be-handed-over-prosecution-irans-khamenei-says-2023-07-22/> (accessed July 27, 2023)

- b. Remaining silent about such incidents could be counterproductive; potentially perceived as tacit support or at the very least disinterest in the affairs of Muslims. Silence could be detrimental to US interests, as it may inhibit 'partnership efforts' and erode the trust and goodwill that the US troops have built with local communities and may 'harm US smart power initiatives'.
- c. Incidents such as these may cause dilemmas for Western countries in balancing their commitment to freedom of speech and respect for religious minorities. Supporting the principle of free speech while also condemning the Quran burning aren't necessarily mutually exclusive messages. However, this approach does require a proactive and sophisticated narrative, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding.

## **7. Implications**

- a. Quran burnings may lead to internal backlash and protests from the Muslim community in host countries, as well as other communities that believe in the interfaith harmony and mutual respect.
- b. It can be seen as an act that undermines the values of tolerance and respect. It can also damage relations between different communities and exacerbate diplomatic tensions, particularly in countries with large Muslim populations.
- c. Disrespect for Islam by burning the Quran is a ready ammunition for extremist ideologies of VEOs, who could take advantage of such incidents to reinforce their anti-Western narratives and provide a rallying point to retaliate with violence in the name of defending Islam.
- d. The presence of the US/Coalition troops in AOR countries would be threatened/delegitimized by the exploitation of such incidents by VEOs.

## **8. Analysis/Conclusions**

- a. Actions such as Quran burning may seem minor from a non-Muslim perspective but can have a significant impact with many consequences.
- b. In some Western countries, such incidents are not seen as unlawful, but as an aspect of freedom of speech and democratic norms.
- c. However, from the perspective of many Muslims, Quran burning may undermine US/Coalition counterterrorism efforts by damaging relationships with the local population and limiting cooperation.
- d. Unless tangible actions are taken to highlight the gravity of such incidents, negative elements (such as VEOs) would continue to seek ways as this can benefit their hidden agendas.
- e. The US may condemn such incidents in order to improve its image amongst the partner states while maintaining its support for freedom of speech and the wider rule of law.
- f. CENTCOM can use the presence of troops in AOR countries, having local commanders directly engage with their counterparts to manage perceptions and address concerns face-to-face.
- g. To avoid endangering US troops and US interests in general, CENTCOM, as coalition lead, could play an active role in clearly articulating concerns of Muslim partners while remaining an advocate of freedom of expression. The use of STRATCOM could be an optimal approach to promote solidarity by marginalizing the actors that are burning Quran and disrupting their ability to publicize these incidents to large audiences.