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Revealing the roots of Islamic reaction against the movie of 'INNOCENCE OF MUSLIMS'

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"Innocence of Muslims", a very low budget movie without any artistic value, achieved what it meant to. The movie was condemned by all Muslims who felt offended and, led to demonstrations of Muslim population around the world. Further it was exploited as a pretext by Islamist extremists to stage terrorist attacks like the one that resulted in killing of 4 Americans including Christopher Stevens, US Ambassador to Libya.

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Remembering the reaction showed by Muslims against the publication of Prophet Mohammad's caricatures by Jyllands-Posten, a Danish paper, on September 2005, the Western world should have expected strong reactions from Muslims against the latest anti-Islam movie.

It, however, should be noted that methods of showing disapproval and anger were not same in every Muslim country and community. So to speak, violent actions committed some fundamentalist groups' and exposed by Western media as sample of Islamic fierceness do not reflect the common, unified feelings of the Muslims. While it is clear that even the liberal and pro-Western Muslims disapprove the movie, Muslims differentiated in how to respond against the movie.

Pakistan, not surprisingly, witnessed the most massive demonstrations against the movie. Recently, Pakistan, not Iran or Saudi Arabia, has been flashpoint of any kind of anti-Western demonstration. The country was close ally of the USA during Cold- War and most important partner of the West during Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, was abandoned by its Western Allies shortly after Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan. Having shouldered the heavy social, economic burden of Soviet occupation in Afghanistan in 1980s, Pakistan, mostly had to rely on China for economic and military aids, and on Taliban in order to secure its western borders. When American –led invasion of Afghanistan started in fall of 2001, Pakistan's strategic importance was re-discovered by West as its support was seen crucial in winning the war and securing the stability in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, mistrust between the USA and Pakistan has always been there. On the one side, Americans always suspected, and sometimes openly stated that Pakistan's notorious ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) supported some Taliban factions like Haqqanis in order to de-stabilize the Karzai government.¹ On the other side, majority of Pakistanis, including decision makers, think that America betrayed to Pakistan in case of war in Afghanistan like they did many times in past.²

Hence, Pakistani society, currently one of the most anti-American societies in the world, did not miss the chance of protesting against America and West by pretexting the anti-Islam movie.

Probably, some will be tended to remember Libya as where most violent demonstrations took place because of killing of US's ambassador to Libya, Chris Stevens, along with four other Americans in city of Benghazi. It is obvious that some Islamist groups, particularly Salafis and some other small local terrorist organizations affiliated with Al – Qaeda take advantage of the current situation in Libya as the full state control cannot be exercised on some parts of the country. However, there is no clue that will indicate the massive radicalization of the local population. In this sense, it would be useful to remember that it was Libyans themselves, who got angry the killings and violent actions perpetuated by extremists, stormed the compound of Ansar Al-Sharia Brigade, a militia of extremists, and forced them to leave Benghazi.

Also in Egypt some demonstrations against the movie took place. Nonetheless, comparing to hundreds of thousands of Egyptian who revolted against Mubarak and, made him leave the presidency, the crowd that marched to protest the movie was negligible and, demonstrations were peaceful. It is also noteworthy to mention that president Morsi and other Islamist politicians like Tarik El-Zomor, spokesman for Gamaa Islamiya, even condemned the removal of American flag in the American Embassy and urged calm.

Turkey, known with its high rate of anti –American sentiments, did not witness any large scale demonstrations. On the contrary Turkey's conservative Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan, warned against excessive demonstrations the movie after condemning the movie.

Mehmet Gormez, head of state-controlled Directorate of Religious Affairs and Fethullah Gulen, leader of Turkish biggest and most influential religious community, voiced similar views. Also the fact that Turkey has been focused on developments in Syria and escalated violence in southeastern part of the country would explain the lack of interest towards massive demonstrations against the movie.

On the continuation of the story, revealing the reactions of the Muslims living in Western countries is also necessary in order to understand the story behind.

It is not secret that Muslims of West, especially the ones of continental Europe, have generally felt they were discriminated and treated as second class citizens. Vast majority of first generation Euro-Muslims immigrants came from rural areas of their native countries and had limited educational background. Since their initial aim was saving money and making their investments in their origin country rather than settling down in Europe, majority of them lived in social buildings with their co-countrymen and did not try to learn the values, customs, traditions of the societies in which they lived for decades. Hosting European countries, other part of the story, did not prepare comprehensive integration policies since they did not think that immigrants would turn to permanent residents and citizens.

This, nonetheless, became a problem neither for them nor for the hosting countries as they were mostly employed as laborers in service and manufacturing sectors.

After both side realized that Muslim immigrants are to stay they started to act accordingly. On the one hand, Muslims of Europe begun to involve in local politics, mostly in immigrant friendly leftist parties, learning of culture and language, sending their children to state schools, etc. On the other hand, European governments opened the way for Muslim to be represented in local town and city councils and, even in national assemblies, adjusted state school's curriculums according in a way that will teach about Islam, etc.

Unfortunately, these positive developments were interrupted by the developments in first years of twenty-first century. As first 9/11 terrorist attacks shocked the whole Western world, not only America. While still experiencing the shocking effects of this attack, Europe was hit by bombings in Madrid and London, respectively in 2004 and 2005. To add insult to injury, these two attacks were executed by Europe's home-grown extremists, on the contrary to 9/11 attack which was perpetuated by 'foreigners', in Europe's two of the most immigrant-friendly countries.

There is no doubt that war in Afghanistan, occupation of Iraq, unsolved dispute between Palestine and Israel negatively contributed to the amount of anger among the Muslims, including European Muslims, toward the West. This facilitated for Al – Qaeda and other extremist Islamist organizations to enlist operators, fighters to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq, to collect donations in the West, and bomb the Western cities when ordered to do so.

Unquestionably, this new reality raised the bells in Europe, both in level of states and level of masses. In state level, while some countries, like Spain and Germany searched better means to integrate the Muslims into society, majority of them, started pursuing policies such as restrictions on building of mosques, conducting close security surveillance on Muslim communities, which alienated their Muslim citizens further.

Worse, this coincided with rising of European extreme rightist parties with their strong anti-Islam discourse. European extreme right, which was on rise since 90's, gained even more popularity among those who were frustrated with center parties thanks to their incompetency of re-producing their paradigms in order to challenge the realities brought by globalization. Financial meltdown and recession that started in 2007 even allowed some extremist parties like Wilder's Party for Freedom take part in minority governments. Unfortunately this rhetoric of European extreme right appears to have made some to believe that Islam is evil and backward belief and immediate threat to Western civilization^{7,3}

Otherwise, it would not be easy to understand the motivation behind the Breivik's attack that claimed a total of 77 lives or regular violent attacks by racist thugs against Muslims in Europe.

In this regard, it is important to see the European Muslims' smart and peaceful reactions to the movie. Most of the Islamic associations and foundations voiced their anger by organizing press meetings, appearing on TV, contradicting the arguments of the movie by publishing leaflets like IMGGM, the biggest Turkish religious organization in Europe, did. Some of them like Liberal Islamic League and Central Council for Muslims in Germany showed even more liberal attitude by declaring that they are oppose to ban of the movie as it may generate more hostility towards Muslims.⁴

All in all, this paper concluded with following findings after analyze of the reaction of Muslims against anti-Islam movie: As first, Muslim world is not a homogenous one and thus its reactions against the anti-Islam movie differed. As second, level of reactions and citizens' participation was not same in all Muslim countries. While marches were attended by tens of thousands of people in Pakistan, only a couple of thousands of people gathered in most of the other Muslim countries. As third, reactions not only reflected the Muslims sensitivity about their religion and prophet but also frustration with Western because of War in Afghanistan, occupation of Iraq, and some other various reasons. As fourth, Europe should know that most of the Euro-Muslims are law-obedient citizens, but more inclusive integration policies for its Muslim citizens are still needed. As fifth and last, Muslim immigrants should not forget it was Europe where they were provided jobs, social security and even more religious and political freedom than their own native countries did.

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