

Experts say Quran burning 'tailor-made' for Taliban

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The Taliban is attempting to capitalize on the outbreak of violence that followed the inadvertent burning of a Quran by NATO troops by characterizing the war as a conflict between infidels and Islam, analysts said.

"It's tailor-made to their argument that the United States is trying to desecrate and destroy Islam," said Seth Jones, an analyst at Rand Corp. and author of "In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan."

"It's patently untrue."

On Monday (Feb. 27), a suicide car bomber launched an attack against the gates of a coalition base in Jalalabad, killing nine Afghans. The Taliban said the attack was revenge for the Quran burning, The Associated Press reported.

Over the weekend, two military advisers were found dead in their office at the Interior Ministry, a highly secure facility in Kabul. In response, NATO withdrew all its advisers from government ministries as Afghan police searched for a suspect in the killings.

The Quran burning threatens to undermine cooperation between Afghan and coalition forces, which is at the heart of the U.S. strategy to withdraw its troops and turn over security to Afghan forces, analysts said.

"The danger is a potential breakdown in trust between Afghan security forces and (U.S. and coalition) advisers," said David Barno, a retired lieutenant general who commanded coalition forces in Afghanistan and is at the Center for a New American Security.

Historically, Jones said, such crises eventually fade away.

The United States has moved quickly to quell the fallout from the incident. President Obama issued an apology to Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Marine Gen. John Allen, commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, said the burning was not intentional and will be investigated. Karzai has urged his countrymen to remain calm.

The White House said it was committed to continuing its plan to reduce U.S. forces in Afghanistan, turning over security responsibility to Afghan forces by the end of 2014.

It's not clear whether the Taliban is directly behind any of the recent violence, but the outbreak works to their advantage, Barno said. "They're moving quickly to exploit that," he said.

Some analysts said it will be hard for the Taliban to capitalize on the anger. The militant group remains deeply unpopular in Afghanistan, Jones said. "What we're seeing now is more of a reaction to that specific incident than it is support for Taliban," he said.

Jones said U.S. and Afghan officers have forged deep bonds after more than a decade of fighting together against the Taliban, and it is not easy to damage that relationship.

The outbreak in violence comes as the U.S. mission in Afghanistan is moving increasingly toward advising and assisting local forces as the United States draws down its combat forces.

The success of that mission will ride largely on the quality of the relationship between NATO and Afghanistan.

Commanders are working to ensure those bonds remain strong. After two U.S. soldiers were killed by a man wearing an Afghan army uniform last week, Allen traveled to the base where the shooting took place.

"There will be moments like this when your emotions are governed by anger and the desire to strike back," Allen told a group of soldiers. "Now is not the time for revenge."