

The 'maverick' Egyptian-American Copt behind the anti-Muslim film

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(RNS) When inflamed mobs stormed the U.S. embassies in Libya and Egypt on Tuesday (Sept. 11), the media quickly looked to a likely spark.

Florida Pastor Terry Jones ignited deadly riots by threatening to burn Qurans in 2010, and by torching the Islamic holy text last year. Recently, Jones said he would promote a crude film that portrays Islam's Prophet Muhammad as a foolish sexual pervert.

But in the days before the protests, Jones made no public mention of the film, called "Innocence of Muslims," even as he prepared to stage an "International Judge Muhammad Day" on Sept. 11.

Instead, the man who translated the film into Arabic, sent it to Egyptian journalists, promoted it on his website and posted it on social media was an obscure Egyptian-born Coptic Christian who lives near Washington and proudly touts his ties to Jones.

Morris Sadek describes himself as a human rights attorney and president of a small group called the National American Coptic Assembly, based in Chantilly, Va. Sadek says on his website that he is a member of the Egyptian and Washington, D.C. bar associations who has "defended major human rights cases" including the late Coptic Pope Shenouda III, who died in March.

But fellow Copts depict Sadek as a fringe figure and publicity hound whose Islamophobic invectives disrupt Copts' quest for equal religious rights in Egypt.

"Mr. Sadek is a maverick who belongs to a very narrow extreme current of Coptic activists," the Washington-based group Coptic Solidarity said in a statement. "He likes to use inflammatory and abrasive language to insult Muslims and Islam. As his actions agitate more the Islamic extremists, some people wonder if he is not in fact working to fulfill their agenda."

Cynthia Farahat, Coptic Solidarity's director of advocacy, said Sadek "has done a lot of harmful things for Copts in Egypt."

"Every single thing he says is used by Islamists to justify terrorism against Copts," Farahat said.

According to the Egyptian Independent newspaper, Sadek was banned from entering Egypt and had his citizenship revoked in May 2011 because he called for war against the country.

As protests against the anti-Muslim film spread throughout the Middle East and Africa, Palestinian protesters shredded posters of Sadek and Egyptians chanted his name, according to international reports.

While the Egyptian protests appear to have been incited by the anti-Muslim film, the Obama administration is investigating the possibility that al-Qaida plotted the Libyan attack to mark the anniversary of 9/11.

Sadek's Facebook account and Twitter feed are rife with anti-Islamic sentiments, as is his website, where he is described in one media report as "ignorant" and "crazy." A YouTube video dated to 2010 shows the 69-year-old wearing a cowboy hat and

waving an American flag and gold crucifix while shouting "Islam is evil!" outside the National Press Building in Washington.

A photo on his website shows Sadek with Jones, whom he calls a "Bible hero," at a small protest outside the White House.

On Sept. 6, Sadek emailed journalists around the world, promoting Jones' anti-Islamic event and including footage of "Innocence of Muslims," according to The Wall Street Journal. A conservative TV host in Egypt broadcast the video on Sept. 8, sparking protests at the U.S. embassy in Cairo.

"I really think Morris just wanted to get famous in the Egyptian media," said Michael Meunier, president of the Washington-based U.S. Copts Association. Sadek "wanted to steal the work of someone else to gain fame in the media and the result is now clear," Meunier said.

Sadek has said that he hyped the film to highlight the plight of Christians in Egypt.

"I am only (leading) a Coptic organization that promoted the film. I am only interested in the first part about persecution of Copts," he told Reuters. The trailer's first minutes show Egyptian police standing idle as Copts' homes are ransacked by bearded marauders.

Details about the film's makers remain sketchy, but the AP reports that Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, a 55-year-old Coptic Christian who lives in Southern California, said he managed logistics for the company that produced it. Nakoula also told the AP that he is concerned about Muslims' treatment of Coptic Christians.

According to the Pew Research Center, Egypt's 7 million Copts -- about 10 percent of the population -- have been barred from building churches and applying for

government jobs, among other restrictions. Since the onset of the Arab Spring, Coptic churches have been pillaged and torched. Fears have intensified since the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood won power in June.

Sadek's promotion of the anti-Islam film may backfire against Copts, Meunier said.

"These activities are being used now for political gains by the Islamists because they are trying to rally their supporters to vote for the constitution they are drafting," he said. "They also stated that they will have to put safeguards in the new constitution against similar insults in Egypt. What they mean is that we are going to put even more articles to curb freedom in the new constitution."

Sadek told Reuters that he felt sorry about the deaths in Libya, where four Americans, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, were killed. He did not respond to requests for comment from Religion News Service.

Brent McBurney, president of Advocates International, a human rights firm in Washington, said Sadek volunteered on cases involving persecuted Copts in Egypt from 1999-2000.

"But as his views became more and more askew we disaffiliated ourselves from him," McBurney said.