

Light the touch paper and stand back

Paul McGeough, Sydney Morning Herald, 16 September 2012



Libyan protesters burn a US flag. *Photo: AP*

What the hell was that? In a perfect global storm: massive over-reach by crackpot Christian fundamentalists in California collided with what may have been a lucky break for the remnants of al-Qaeda's leadership hiding in the wilds of Pakistan - throwing the whole Arab Spring into question, upending the US presidential campaign and, leaving the rest of us gasping at the volatility of a region with too many naked flames.

Take out the tragic death of four American diplomats in Benghazi, Libya, and there's an element of "we've seen this before ..."

Flashback to February, when 29 Afghans and six Americans were killed amid wild protests in Afghanistan after US troops burnt copies of the Koran. And to Mazar-e-Sharif in the north of Afghanistan, when seven United Nations staff died early last year as angry crowds demonstrated against a Florida pastor [Wayne Sapp], who thought it would be fun to stage a Koran burning.



The bodies of the four Americans killed in Benghazi arrive home. *Photo: AP*

As was the case then, the events of this week might have come and gone under the news radar, except they began in crucible countries of the Arab Spring - Egypt and Libya. And because the day on which the four diplomats died was the 11th anniversary of September 11, 2001. We're still groping for facts. But the grossly offensive mockery of the prophet Muhammad - rightly

described by Hillary Clinton as "disgusting and reprehensible" - is being revealed as the deliberately provocative work of exiled Egyptian Christian Copts in the US and their deranged fellow travellers from the American Christian right.

Still unclear is the affiliation and agenda of those who murdered the four Americans.

Liberated Libya is a lawless jungle, where many people take their rocket launchers to the local shop or their favourite cafe.

Conceivably, the killers were random protesters who happened to have rockets in their pockets.

But coinciding with this rising head of steam across the region about the uploading on YouTube by the Christian crazies in California of an Arabic-language version of the calculated blasphemy of Islam, titled *Innocence of Muslims*, was a 9/11 anniversary internet video message from al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, urging revenge for the death in a US drone-strike of his Libyan deputy - Abu Yahya al-Libi.

"Blood is calling, urging and inciting you to fight and kill the crusaders," he intones.

Do you see where this is going? Nothing excuses the killings in Libya; just as nothing excuses the too-simplistic riff by some American commentators saying how ungrateful these Egyptians and Libyan are, "after we liberated them".

But when for decades whole populations have been treated as an inconsequential mob, some of them can hardly be blamed for behaving as such when provoked.

Their social landscapes have been cruel, intellectually barren spaces, in which broken-down education and state censorship fostered ignorance and narrowness.

Mrs Clinton appeared be aware of some of the realities of the region. She told reporters: "It is hard for some people to understand why the US cannot or does not just prevent [such videos] from ever seeing the light of day."

But the Secretary of State failed to join the dots, to sheet home some of the blame for that incomprehension to Washington and the other Western powers, which actively sponsored the dictatorial regimes, or were indifferent to their behaviour.

Those years of rigid censorship are why many in the Muslims world cannot conceive of a society in which the offending film could be produced without the blessing of an arm of government.

To throw off the yoke of state-sponsored ignorance and control without consequence is a big ask.

The naivety of some as they grappled for understanding was touching. There was genuine puzzlement on the part of one imam who spoke to *The New York Times* in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

"I ask the government of America," he said, "why did they allow a person to insult a man, Muhammad, when by insulting him they sadden the whole Muslim world, and create hatred towards Americans?"