Cultural Clash Fuels Muslims Angry at Online Video

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK, New York Times

CAIRO — Stepping from the cloud of tear gas in front of the American Embassy here, Khaled Ali repeated the urgent question that he said justified last week’s violent protests at United States outposts around the Muslim world.

“We never insult any prophet — not Moses, not Jesus — so why can’t we demand that Muhammad be respected?” Mr. Ali, a 39-year-old textile worker said, holding up a handwritten sign in English that read “Shut Up America.” “Obama is the president, so he should have to apologize!”

When the protests against an American-made online video mocking the Prophet Muhammad exploded in about 20 countries, the source of the rage was more than just religious sensitivity, political demagogy or resentment of Washington, protesters and their sympathizers here said. It was also a demand that many of them described with the word “freedom,” although in a context very different from the term’s use in the individualistic West: the right of a community, whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish, to be free from grave insult to its identity and values.

That demand, in turn, was swept up in the colliding crosscurrents of regional politics. From one side came the gale of anger at America’s decade-old war against terrorism, which in the eyes of many Muslims in the region often looks like a war against them. And from the other, the new winds blowing through the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, which to many here means most of all a right to demand respect for the popular will.

“We want these countries to understand that they need to take into consideration the people, and not just the governments,” said Ismail Mohamed, 42, a religious scholar who once was an imam in Germany. “We don’t think that depictions of the prophets are freedom of expression. We think it is an offense against our rights,” he said, adding, “The West has to understand the ideology of the people.”

Even during the protests, some stone throwers stressed that the clash was not Muslim against Christian. Instead, they suggested that the traditionalism of people of both faiths in the region conflicted with Western individualism and secularism.

Youssef Sidhom, the editor of the Coptic Christian newspaper Watani, said he objected only to the violence of the protests.

Mr. Sidhom approvingly recalled the uproar among Egyptian Christians that greeted the 2006 film “The Da Vinci Code,” which was seen as an affront to aspects of traditional Christianity and the persona of Jesus. Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and other Arab countries banned both the film and the book on which it was based. And in Egypt, where insulting any of the three Abrahamic religions is a crime, the police even arrested the head of a local film company for importing 2,000 copies of the DVD, according to news reports.
“This reaction is expected,” Mr. Sidhom said of last week’s protests, “and if it had stayed peaceful I would have said I supported it and understood.”

In a context where insults to religion are crimes and the state has tightly controlled almost all media, many in Egypt, like other Arab countries, sometimes find it hard to understand that the American government feels limited by its free speech rules from silencing even the most noxious religious bigot.

In his statement after protesters breached the walls of the United States Embassy last Tuesday, the spiritual leader of the Egypt’s mainstream Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood, declared that “the West” had imposed laws against “those who deny or express dissident views on the Holocaust or question the number of Jews killed by Hitler, a topic which is purely historical, not a sacred doctrine.”

In fact, denying the Holocaust is also protected as free speech in the United States, although it is prohibited in Germany and a few other European countries. But the belief that it is illegal in the United States is widespread in Egypt, and the Brotherhood’s spiritual leader, Mohamed Badie, called for the “criminalizing of assaults on the sanctities of all heavenly religions.”

“Otherwise, such acts will continue to cause devout Muslims across the world to suspect and even loathe the West, especially the U.S.A., for allowing their citizens to violate the sanctity of what they hold dear and holy,” he said.

“Certainly, such attacks against sanctities do not fall under the freedom of opinion or thought.”

Several protesters said during the heat of last week’s battles here that they were astonished that the United States had not punished the filmmakers. “Everyone across all these countries has the same anger, they are rising up for the same reason and with the same demands, and still no action is taken against the people who made that film,” said Zakaria Magdy, 23, a printer.

In the West, many may express astonishment that the murder of Muslims in hate crimes does not provoke the same level of global outrage as the video did. But even a day after the clashes in Cairo had subsided, many Egyptians argued that a slur against their faith was a greater offense than any attack on a living person.

“When you hurt someone, you are just hurting one person,” said Ahmed Shobaky, 42, a jeweler. “But when you insult a faith like that, you are insulting a whole nation that feels the pain.”

Mr. Mohamed, the religious scholar, justified it this way: “Our prophet is more dear to us than our family and our nation.”

Others said that the outpouring of outrage against the video had built up over a long period of perceived denigrations of Muslims and their faith by the United States or its military, which are detailed extensively in the Arab news media: the invasion of Iraq on a discredited pretext; the images of abuse from the Abu Ghraib prison; the burning or
desecrations of the Koran by troops in Afghanistan and a pastor in Florida; detentions without trial at Guantánamo Bay; the denials of visas to prominent Muslim intellectuals; the deaths of Muslim civilians as collateral damage in drone strikes; even political campaigns against the specter of Islamic law inside the United States.

“This is not the first time that Muslim beliefs are being insulted or Muslims humiliated,” said Emad Shahin, a political scientist at the American University in Cairo.

While he stressed that no one should ever condone violence against diplomats or embassies because of even the most offensive film, Mr. Shahin said it was easy to see why the protesters focused on the United States government’s outposts. “There is a war going on here,” he said. “This was a straw, if you will, that broke the camel’s back.

“The message here is we don’t care about your beliefs — that because of our freedom of expression we can demean them and degrade them any time, and we do not care about your feelings.”

There are also purely local dynamics that can fan the flames. In Tunis, an American school was set on fire by protesters angry over the video — but then looted of computers and musical instruments by people in the neighborhood.

Here in Cairo, ultraconservative Islamists known as Salafis initially helped drum up outrage against the video and rally their supporters to protest outside the embassy. But by the time darkness fell and a handful of young men climbed the embassy wall, the Salafis were nowhere to be found, and they stayed away the rest of the week.

Egyptian officials said that some non-Salafis involved in the embassy attacks confessed to receiving payments, although no payer had been identified. But after the first afternoon, the next three days of protests were dominated by a relatively small number of teenagers and young men — including die-hard soccer fans known as ultras. They appeared to have been motivated mainly by the opportunity to attack the police, whom they revile.

Some commentators said they regretted that the violence here and around the region had overshadowed the underlying argument against the offensive video. “Our performance came out like that of a failed lawyer in a no-lose case,” Wael Kandil, an editor of the newspaper Sharouq, wrote in a column on Sunday. “We served our opponents something that made them drop the main issue and take us to the margins — this is what we accomplished with our bad performance.”

Mohamed Sabry, 29, a sculptor and art teacher at a downtown cafe, said he saw a darker picture. “To see the Islamic world in this condition of underdevelopment,” he said, “this is a bigger insult to the prophet.”

*Mai Ayyad contributed reporting.*
"It was this clash of cultures that fuelled [December's] Cronulla riots and which is at the heart of Mr Howard's warning," the newspaper said. Studies by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission show most of the nation's 280,000 Muslims have suffered racially inspired discrimination, abuse or violence. Public opinion has also been outraged by firebrand imams preaching jihad in Australia, and by the uncovering of alleged bombing plots. In extracts from the book published yesterday in The Australian, Howard also criticised Muslim attitudes toward women as a "problem". "The conservatism toward women of the Mediterranean cultures is nothing compared with some of the more extreme [Muslim] attitudes."