

The following is a timeline of major events and significant statements from the accidental, improper destruction of copies of the Koran at Bagram Airfield on February 20th until February 28th.

■ ISAF ■ AFGHAN ■ TALIBAN ■ EXTERNAL

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2012

ISAF Commander General John Allen apologized to the Afghan government and people for an incident in which ISAF personnel at Bagram Airbase improperly disposed of Islamic texts, including several copies of the Koran. The religious material had reportedly been collected from the Parwan Detention Facility and “inadvertently taken to an incineration facility.”¹

Violent protests outside Bagram airbase. The crowd consisted of up to 2,000 Afghans, many of whom threw rocks and chanted anti-American slogans. U.S. troops reportedly wounded one protestor when they fired rubber bullets to suppress the crowds. Religious officials from Parwan province displayed a stack of blackened Korans and called for the punishment of the ISAF personnel involved.²

President Hamid Karzai appointed a fact-finding delegation to investigate the incident. The delegation was composed of religious leaders from the Ulema Council and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The delegation was tasked to report their findings back to President Karzai.³

General Allen issued a directive for all coalition forces in Afghanistan. It required ISAF personnel to complete training in the proper identification of religious materials, their significance, correct handling, and storage.⁴

The Taliban condemned the incident. The group called the United States “barbaric” and demanded that “guilty parties” to be brought to justice. It further criticized the Afghan government for being a puppet regime of the United States for acting against the protestors.⁵

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2012

Protests continued for the second day in multiple locations. The most violent demonstrations occurred in Parwan and Kabul provinces, where up to 2,000 protestors threw stones and Molotov cocktails while chanting anti-American slogans. Security forces fired on protestors in Kabul and Parwan, killing 5-11 Afghans and wounding dozens of others.⁶

The Wolesi Jirga, or the Lower House of Afghan Parliament, demanded “harsh punishment” for those involved in the incident. The resolution was unanimously passed and some MPs demanded justice from the parliament floor and spoke out against the United States.⁷

President Karzai called for restraint at the protests. He was reportedly saddened by the reports of civilian casualties in the provinces over the issue of burning of Koran in Bagram airbase and requested the population to avoid violence and asked security forces to refrain from using lethal force.

U.S. officials briefed President Karzai on the Koran burning incident. General John Allen and U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Dr. Ashton B. Carter updated President Karzai on the ongoing protests. Deputy Secretary Carter also apologized on behalf of Secretary Panetta to President Karzai and the people of Afghanistan.⁸

U.S. and Afghan officials meanwhile continued negotiating a strategic partnership agreement. However, they agreed to defer the contentious debate over night raids and prison authority to separate negotiations in order to make progress on the bilateral agreement.⁹

Condemnation from Iran. Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast condemned the burning of the Koran by US soldiers, stating that “disrespecting Muslim beliefs and violating the Afghani [sic] people’s rights is an indication of these occupiers’ irresponsibility for their illegal actions and misunderstanding of the religious culture of the people of this region.”¹⁰

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2012

The protests continued for a third day. At least 6 Afghan civilians were killed in protests across Afghanistan: 2 in Khogyani district, Nangarhar province; 2 in Uruzgan province; 1 in Baghlan province; and 1 in Laghman province. The protest in Asadabad, Kunar province drew 1,500 demonstrators while the demonstration in Mehtar Lam, Laghman province drew up to 3,000 people.¹¹

Two ISAF soldiers were killed by a man wearing an ANA uniform. The attack took place at a joint base in Khogyani district, Nangarhar province as a protest was underway outside. Two other security personnel were wounded. After the incident, the attacker fled and blended in with the protestors outside the base.¹²

President Barack Obama and U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker expressed apologies to President Karzai. Ambassador Crocker met with President Karzai and delivered a letter of apology from U.S. President Barack Obama. He assured Karzai the incident had not been intentional and that a full investigation would be carried out. Crocker also reiterated the United States’ commitment to Afghanistan.¹³

Karzai’s investigative delegation released a statement. The group, composed of religious leaders, called for restraint among the population, a thorough investigation by ISAF, and the handover of control of prisons to Afghan security forces. They also requested formal praise for the ANSF for quelling violence throughout the country.¹⁴

President Karzai held a meeting with more Members of Parliament and religious officials. The group reportedly demanded harsh retribution and some called on mullahs and religious leaders “to urge the people from the pulpit to wage jihad against Americans.”¹⁵

The Taliban issued a statement to the Afghan people. The statement condemned the “desecration” of the Koran. It praised the protestors and encouraged all Afghans to “avenge” the act by taking up arms against international forces.¹⁶

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2012

Protests continue for the fourth day. The demonstrations were again held in multiple locations and left 12 civilians dead. Herat province, which had previously seen little unrest, experienced several violent demonstrations that yielded 8 fatalities. Other provinces also experienced fatalities: 1 in Baghlan province, 1 in Kabul, and 2 in Khost province. Dozens more were wounded.¹⁷

Germans closed a base in the northern city of Taloqan. Protests in Taloqan, Takhar province caused the fifty German troops stationed there to close their base and relocate 80 kilometers away to Kunduz City.¹⁸

General Allen visited Nangarhar site of U.S. casualties. Allen’s visit was an attempt to ease tensions between U.S. forces and their Afghan counterparts. His statement called for calm and restraint from coalition forces, stating, “Now is not the time for vengeance. We’re here for the Afghan people. Now is how we show the Afghan people that as bad as that act was at Bagram, it was unintentional and Americans and ISAF soldiers do not stand for this.”¹⁹

Organization of Islamic Cooperation condemns the incident. The Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which is a 57-member organization based in Saudi Arabia, deplored the burning of the Koran and called for swift action to punish those responsible. He described the incident as a “deplorable act of incitement” that is “contrary to the common efforts of the OIC and that of the international community to combat intolerance, and incitement to hatred based on religion and belief.”²⁰

Pakistani groups also protested the Koran burning. Three parties associated with the *Diffa-e-Pakistan* Council held a protest in Quetta to condemn the burning of a Koran at Bagram. Approximately 500 activists attended the rally. A speaker urged Muslims to continue jihad against the United States. Activists from *Jamaat-e-Islami* and *Jamaat-ud-Dawa* also participated in the rally.²¹

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2012

Protests continued despite Karzai again asking population to refrain from violence. Protests occurred in Wardak, Logar, and Laghman provinces, with the latter numbering up to 2,000 protestors. While stressing that peaceful demonstration remains the legal right of the people, Karzai called on demonstrators to express their sentiments through peaceful means and strictly avoid violence and destruction of public property. Karzai also stressed that his administration was working closely with ISAF in conducting the investigation into the initial incident.²²

Religious clerics asked for the U.S. to guarantee no more desecrations to religious materials. The National Council of Ulema and religious scholars from Nangarhar met with President Karzai and also stressed that peaceful protest was the constitutional right of every Afghan citizen. They also stressed that coalition forces operating in transitioned areas (such as Surkhroad, Behsood, Khewa and Jalalabad city) were still conducting night raids and should cease immediately.²³

ISAF Commander commends Afghan soldiers and police. In a statement, General Allen thanked the ANSF for quelling violence during the protests across the country. He praised them for standing “shoulder to shoulder” with ISAF personnel and thanked their dedication and commitment.²⁴

Confrontational comments from Iranian military commander. A Brigadier General with Iran’s paramilitary Basij militia publicly stated that nothing short of burning the White House and hanging American military commanders could compensate for the burning of Korans. “The U.S. has committed such an ugly act and burnt Korans because of the heavy slap it has been given by Islam,” he said.

Iranian belief that U.S.-Taliban talks affected by Koran burning. Iran’s Ambassador to Afghanistan, Fada Hossein Maleki, condemned the burning of the Koran and said it would affect Washington’s so-called peace talks with the Taliban, as he believed U.S. actions in Afghanistan would come under increased criticism. “While the US disrespecting Muslim sanctities is nothing new but what happened in Bagram has resulted in new forms of popular rage and drawn reactions from both parliaments—reactions that stem from the national and religious will of Afghans,” he said.²⁵

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2012

Protests continued in the North. Large protests occurred in the northern provinces of Samangan and Kunduz province, with 4,000 protestors and 2,000 protestors, respectively.

ISAF personnel killed at Ministry of Interior. An Afghan driver for police intelligence officers remains the key suspect for fatally shooting two ISAF advisors inside the Ministry of Interior headquarters. The motive behind the killing is unclear, even though the Taliban have claimed the act. Following the incident, General Allen ordered all NATO civilian advisors to withdraw from Afghan ministries. France, Germany, Britain, and the US have withdrawn all civilian staff from Afghan government institutions. A search is still underway for the shooter.²⁶

Six coalition troops wounded in Kunduz. A grenade thrown during a large demonstration in Imam Sahib district, Kunduz injured six ISAF troops. Two protestors were killed during the protest.²⁷

Iran condemned Koran burning incident. The Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning the “desecration of the Koran” by U.S. troops in Afghanistan and calling for the immediate withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan.²⁸

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2012

Food tainted at ISAF base. The Taliban claimed to have poisoned food at a dining facility at FOB Torkham in the east of the country. ISAF confirmed that the food had been contaminated with bleach, but no one was injured.²⁹

Suicide attack at Jalalabad. An explosives-laden vehicle exploded outside the gates of Jalalabad Airbase, killing 1 ANSF member, 2 private security guards, and 6 civilians. There were no NATO casualties and the Taliban claimed the attack in retaliation for the Koran burning and said it hoped attacks against ISAF would continue.³⁰

Unfounded rumors of a new desecration sparked protest in South. Over a thousand residents protested in Tarin Kot, Uruzgan province, but the peaceful demonstration ended by the afternoon. Protesters claimed hearing that the Koran had been disrespected during an ISAF operation in the Dijuz area, but both ISAF and ANSF officials denied any such report.³¹

Taliban release another statement. The Taliban issued another statement denouncing international presence and implying that the Koran burning was an intentional act. The text encouraged protests, praised martyrdom, and projected optimism about their intended triumph over ISAF forces.

Afghanistan announces arrest of three for spying for Iran and Pakistan. The spokesman for the National Directorate of Security announced that a senior foreign ministry diplomat and three other government officials had been arrested for spying for Iran and Pakistan. The men had reportedly been detained and arrested “with concrete evidence.” One of the men was at the foreign ministry while the other two worked in Nangarhar and Herat.³²

Iran seeks UN condemnation. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali-Akbar Salehi remarked that the UN Human Rights Council should condemn the burning of the Koran. “Undoubtedly, this deplorable act of incitement is a gross violation of human rights, hurting sentiments of Muslims worldwide,” he said.³³

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2012

Western officials defended Afghan mission. In separate statements, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen reaffirmed the international commitment to Afghanistan. Clinton stated the U.S. plan was not affected by the recent string of violence and Rasmussen stressed that the withdrawal of civilian advisers after the MoI shooting was only temporary and would not affect the Transition timeline for 2014.³⁴

Egyptian MP calls for cutting relations with U.S. Senior Egyptian legislator Ahmad Abdul-Al called on Arab countries to voice their protest at the Koran burning by cutting relations with Washington. “The US militaries’ burning of Koran is an insult to Islam and Muslims and a new position should be adopted against the US administration which has done nothing but apologizing,” he said. He called on all parliaments of the Arab states to cut relations with Washington until the “culprits of this action were tried and Muslims’ rights restored.”³⁵

Anti-U.S. Rally Held in Yemen. Yemeni people staged a rally in the capital city of Sana’a and chanted anti-US slogans and burned the US flag to protest against the Koran burning. The protesters carried banners condemning the act and stated that the desecration of the Koran was part of a broader U.S. plot to humiliate the Muslim world and oppress the Arab nations. They condemned the silence of other Islamic states’ and called for unity among Muslims.³⁶

Bahraini condemns Koran burning. Bahraini opposition leader Fazel Abbas, Secretary-General of the National Democratic Action Society of Bahrain, accused the U.S. and the West of deliberately insulting Muslims by burning the Koran. He called on the Muslim community to mobilize in opposition to the U.S.³⁷

NOTES

- ¹ Commander ISAF Statement
- ² NYT, Telegraph, BBC, Washington Post, Reuters
- ³ Office of the President of Afghanistan
- ⁴ Commander ISAF Statement
- ⁵ Statement of Islamic Emirate
- ⁶ Reuters, BBC, AP, Washington Post, NY Times, Telegraph, Tolo
- ⁷ Pajhwok, Tolo, Pajhwok
- ⁸ Office of the President of Afghanistan
- ⁹ AP
- ¹⁰ Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran, 22 Feb 2012
- ¹¹ BBC, Pajhwok, NY Times
- ¹² Guardian, Tolo, Reuters, Pajhwok
- ¹³ Office of the President of Afghanistan, AP
- ¹⁴ Office of the President of Afghanistan
- ¹⁵ Washington Post, NY Times
- ¹⁶ Voice of Jihad
- ¹⁷ BBC, Reuters, Guardian, Pajhwok, Khaama
- ¹⁸ Der Spiegel
- ¹⁹ Al Jazeera
- ²⁰ FARS News Agency
- ²¹ Dawn
- ²² Office of the President of Afghanistan, Pajhwok
- ²³ Office of the President of Afghanistan
- ²⁴ ISAF Press Release
- ²⁵ 'Qur'an burning will affect US negotiations with Taliban in Qatar,' Press TV
- ²⁶ Wall Street Journal, BBC, Al Jazeera, Pajhwok, NY Times
- ²⁷ Tolo
- ²⁸ Tehran Times
- ²⁹ CNN
- ³⁰ NY Times, Washington Post
- ³¹ Pajhwok
- ³² Express Tribune
- ³³ Otti, Albert, 'Iran seeks UN condemnation of Koran-burning in Afghanistan,' DPA.
- ³⁴ Washington Post
- ³⁵ FARS News Agency
- ³⁶ FARS News Agency
- ³⁷ FARS News Agency