

**Human Rights First today noted that as violent protests ostensibly against a film that defamed Islam and the Prophet Mohamed continue across many countries in the Middle East and beyond, it is important to bear several points in mind.**

1. The outrage over the film is real, but is being manipulated for political gain. The smoking gun is Al-Nas TV, a Saudi financed satellite TV channel that broadcast extracts from the film trailer with a shrill commentary from the notoriously anti-Christian and anti-Semitic presenter Khaled Abdallah blaming America and Coptic Christians for making the film and calling for protests on September 11. The pro-Salafi channel is popular in Egypt.
2. The film trailer that has been cited as the cause of the disturbances had been available on You-Tube for several weeks before any protests broke out, suggesting that extremist religious groups saw this as an opportunity to stage coordinated protests that would pressure fragile transitional governments in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen to make concessions to their agenda.
3. Islamists governments in power in Cairo and Tunis have been placed in awkward situations where they risk being outflanked by more extreme political rivals as defenders of Islam.
4. Being the elected leader of a democratic government aligned with the West and the United States presents new challenges for Islamist politicians that will largely define the impact of these movements on human rights conditions in their countries. As a leader of a persecuted opposition group protesting against a perceived insult against Islam from the West is an opportunity to rally support and to embarrass a government that is a western ally. Now Islamist leaders are in power in Egypt and Tunisia they must distance themselves from anti-Western sentiments expressed in street protests, if they are to maintain good relations with their Western allies. It remains to be seen whether President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the leadership of the An-Nahda party in Tunisia will rise to meet this challenge. If they do, they will redefine political Islam in ways that will be more conducive to international standards of freedom of expression and religious tolerance.
5. It is noticeable that in Sudan and Syria authoritarian governments facilitated anti-Western protests over the film and that Salafi groups backed by Saudi Arabia and other authoritarian Gulf monarchies have been at the forefront of protests over the film. These extreme anti-Western forces have been gaining ground in the region for many decades. They have an interest in fomenting protest and unrest and in destabilizing democratic transitions. These protests and the extreme anti-Western ideas they propagate were not created by the Arab Spring, in fact they are dedicated to derailing the democratic, human dignity agenda that inspired the dictator-toppling protests of January- March 2011.
6. It is encouraging that there has been bi-partisan support from Washington for the continuation of American support for efforts to promote democracy and human rights in the Arab world. This is the right response by American policy makers. To do otherwise

would be to allow extremists to set the agenda for the region's future, using manufactured outrage over an obscure film as a pretext to advance an agenda profoundly hostile to human rights and democracy.

7. American leaders are right to repudiate the nefarious content of the anti-Muslim film while stressing that "violence in response to speech is wrong and unacceptable." It is to be hoped that leaders in majority Muslim countries that are friends of the United States and the West will adopt the same message. If they do so the world will have learned something from these tragic, destructive and profoundly unnecessary events and the cause of tolerance and mutual understanding will have been advanced.