Kindred Hatemongers:

Why American Islamophobes and Muslim Protestors Need Each Other

*Mark Juergensmeyer*

 The main activists related to the insulting and amateurish video, “The Innocence of Muslims,” can be considered to be kindred hatemongers. The violent protesters around the Muslim world have some things in common with the US-based Islamophobes who created the video to which they have been objecting.

Both are extremists with a political agenda. And both want to use this incident to discredit the legitimacy of the moderate governments in power in their respective countries. Like evil twins, there is a symbiotic relationship between the strident protestors and the bigoted filmmakers. Each needs the other.

 The crudely-made video, “The Innocence of Muslims,” was designed to be offensive. The Southern California maker of the film, Nakoula Basseley Nakoula (originally identified by one of his pseudonyms, “Sam Bacile”), was hoping that his target audience would be outraged. Nakoula was a Copic Christian from Egypt who had a string of criminal charges, including fraud and methamphetamine convictions, on his dossier. Sam Klein, a right-wing Christian activist from Hemet, California, who founded Courageous Christians United, which has organized protests outside mosques and abortion clinics, served as consultant for the ugly project.

Both Nakoula and Klein despised President Barack Obama, and hoped that their video would anger Muslims in the US and discredit the Obama administration that protected them. The film was produced in 2011 and originally screened in Hollywood, but only about a dozen people appeared at its premier. There was virtually no audience, and even more disappointing to the filmmakers, no negative outcry.

In Egypt they were more successful. Another Coptic Christian in the US, Morris Sadek, helped to promote the film on his website, and apparently he was the one who arranged for a translation into Arabic and the promotion of the video in Cairo. There, it quickly went ballistic.

So in Egypt and throughout the Muslim world, finally, the filmmakers received the hoped-for negative publicity and public protests that they sought. But although most Muslims were offended by the tawdry mocking of their Prophet in the film, the most violent responses came from very specific groups who had a more targeted political agenda and had been longing for a pretext to attack symbols of American influence in their countries.

In Libya, the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi that killed four American staff members, including the remarkable ambassador, Chris Stevens, was not a random mob. Truckloads of militia attacked the Consulate and it was a mortar attack that eventually demolished the building and killed the Ambassador, who had returned to the offices to make certain that his staff were all safe.

No angry mobs assaulted the Consulate, only a highly organized militia attack. The militants were likely jihadis, either al Qaeda-related or Saudi-funded from a neighboring town that had been a center of anti-American activism in the early years of the Iraq war. In attacking the US Consulate they were also trying to delegitimize the moderate Libyan government that had rejected the extremists even as it was accepting US government support.

In Egypt, the assault on the US Embassy in Cairo was also largely supported by right-wing Muslim political groups. These were associated with the extremist Salafi party that had received almost 20% of the vote in Egypt’s recent elections, but kept out of power by the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood.

The right-wing Egyptian Muslims were looking for an excuse to attack America’s continuing presence in Egypt as a way of discrediting the Muslim Brotherhood government of Egypt’s President Mohamed Morsi. The insulting video was a problem for Morsi, since he wanted to support the protestors who railed against it, while at the same time he was committed to protecting American diplomatic offices in Cairo. He was also involved in delicate negotiations for continued US aid which he certainly did not want to jeopardize.

So the hideous video came at an opportune time for Morsi’s right-wing political foes. They were able to transfer their hatred for the film to a hatred of America, and from there to a hatred of America’s ally, the moderate Morsi. Tellingly, in the midst of the crisis, President Barack Obama declined to label Egypt as an ally of the US, which may have been a way of protecting Morsi as well as a way of giving notice that he expected the Egyptian president to more firmly reject the protestors.

In the meantime, while the Muslim world burned over the horrible video, its producer, Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, was safely in hiding somewhere in Southern California. While many leaders on the political right were quick to blame Libya and Egypt for not protecting American interests, few bothered to criticize the hatemonger, Nakoula, who had created the mess in the first place.

But without him the anti-American and anti-moderate government hatred in the Middle East would not have been as stridently provoked. Just as hate responds to hate, those whose political fortunes depend on the manufacture of hatred seem to need each other.

juergens@global.ucsb.edu

Mark Juergensmeyer is a professor of global studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*