



Innocence of Muslims

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Innocence of Muslims^{[1][2]} is the title attributed to a controversial anti-Islamic movie "trailer" that was written and produced by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula.^{[3][4]} Two versions of the 14-minute video were initially uploaded to YouTube in July 2012, under the titles *The Real Life of Muhammad* and *Muhammad Movie Trailer*.^[5] Videos dubbed in the Arabic language were uploaded during early September 2012.^[6] Anti-Islamic content had been added in post-production by dubbing, without the actors' knowledge.^[7]

What was perceived as denigrating of the Islamic prophet Muhammad caused demonstrations and violent protests against the video to break out on September 11 in Egypt and spread to other Arab and Muslim nations and to some western countries. The protests have led to hundreds of injuries and over 50 deaths.^{[8][9][10][11]} Fatwas calling for the harm the video's participants have been issued and a Pakistani minister has offered a bounty for the killing of Nakoula, the producer.^{[12][13][14][15]} The film has sparked debates about freedom of speech and Internet censorship.^[16]

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Plot and description

The video titled "The Real Life of Muhammad", uploaded on July 1, 2012, has a running time of 13:03 in 480p format. The video "Muhammad Movie Trailer" was uploaded on July 2, 2012, with a running time of 13:51 in 1080p format. Both are similar in content.

The trailer starts with a scene portraying the reportedly increasing persecution of Copts and poor human rights in recent-day Egypt, with rise in church-burnings, growing religious intolerance and sectarian violence that has been seen against the 10% population of Egypt that are Copts, and complaints that authorities have failed to protect this population.^{[17][18]} *The New York Times* stated: "The trailer opens with scenes of Egyptian security forces standing idle as Muslims pillage and burn the homes of Egyptian Christians. Then it cuts to cartoonish scenes depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a child of uncertain parentage, a buffoon, a womanizer, a homosexual, a child molester and a greedy, bloodthirsty thug."^[19]

Most references to Islam have been overdubbed, added after the filming over the original spoken lines.^[20] The film's 80 cast and crew members have disavowed the film: "The entire cast and crew are extremely upset and feel taken advantage of by the producer. ... We are deeply saddened by the tragedies that have occurred."^[21]

The script was originally written about life in Egypt 2,000 years ago and was titled *Desert Warrior*.^[22] It was a story about a character called "Master George". Several actors were brought in to overdub lines. They were directed to say specific words, such as "Muhammad".^[23] The video opens in a present-day setting, in which Egyptian security forces are depicted doing nothing as a mob of Muslim characters destroy Egyptian Christians' homes and property.^[19] Hiding from the attack, a doctor and his family take shelter in their home where the doctor takes up a pen and begins writing on a whiteboard: "Man + X = BT". "BT" is overdubbed as "Islamic terrorists". The young woman asks what "X" is. He tells her that she needs to discover that for herself.

The video continues with scenes set in the past. Some scenes depict the main character referred to in overdubbing as "Muhammad". In one scene, the "Muhammad" character's wife, "Khadija", suggests mixing parts of the Torah and the New Testament.^[24] In another scene, the "Muhammad" character is seen speaking to the donkey known as Ya'fur in Islamic tradition.^[25]

A *Vanity Fair* article described the video as "Exceptionally amateurish, with disjointed dialogue, jumpy editing, and performances that would have looked melodramatic even in a silent movie, the clip is clearly designed to offend Muslims, portraying Mohammed as a bloodthirsty murderer and Lothario and pedophile with omnidirectional sexual appetites."^[26]

Filmmaker and promoters

The movie is reported to have been written and produced by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, using the pseudonym of "Sam Bacile".^{[3][4][27]} Nakoula claimed that he was creating an epic, two-hour film; however, no such film has been located.^[28]

The project was promoted by Morris Sadek by email and on the blog of the National American Coptic Assembly.^[29]

According to a consultant on the project, the videos are "trailers" from a full-length film that was shown only once, to an audience of fewer than ten people, at a rented theater in Hollywood, California. Posters advertising the film used the title *Innocence of Bin Laden*.^[30] The film's original working title was *Desert Warrior*, and it told the story of "tribal battles prompted by the arrival of a comet on Earth".^[31] On September 27, 2012, U.S. federal authorities stated Nakoula was arrested in Los Angeles for allegedly violating terms of his probation. Prosecutors stated that some of the violations included making false statements regarding his role in the film and his use of the alias "Sam Bacile".^[32] On November 7, 2012, Nakoula pled guilty to four of the charges against him and was sentenced to one year in prison and four years of supervised release.^{[33][34]}

Production

In July 2011, Nakoula started casting actors for *Desert Warrior*, the working title at that time.^[22] The independent film was directed by a person first identified in casting calls^[35] as Alan Roberts, whose original cut and filmed dialog and script did not include references to Muhammad or Islam.^{[36][37]} According to the casting.backstage.com announcement, it was to be "an HD 24P historical Arabian Desert adventure film" with "Sam Bassiel" as producer with shooting to start in August 2011. The lead was to be "George: male, 20–40, a

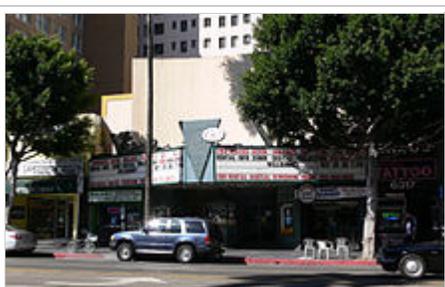
strong leader, romantic, tyrant, a killer with no remorse, accent".

American non-profit Media for Christ obtained film permits to shoot the movie in August 2011, and Nakoula provided his home as a set and paid the actors, according to government officials and those involved in the production.^[38] Company president, Joseph Nassralla Abdelmasih claimed that Media for Christ's name was used without his knowledge. He also stated that film was edited afterwards without Media's involvement.^[39] Steve Klein, an anti-Muslim activist, claimed to be the spokesman for the film.^[40] Klein told journalist Jeffrey Goldberg that despite previous claims, "Bacile" is not a real person and is neither Israeli nor Jewish and that the name is a pseudonym.^[41] Israeli authorities found no sign of him being an Israeli citizen,^[42] and there was no indication of a 'Sam Bacile' living in California or participating in Hollywood filmmaking.^[43]

By September 13, 2012, "Sam Bacile" was identified as Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, a 55-year-old Coptic Christian from Egypt living near Los Angeles, California,^[44] with known aliases.^[45] In the 1990s, he served time in prison for manufacturing methamphetamine.^{[44][46]} He pleaded *no contest* in 2010 to bank fraud charges and received 21 months in prison;^{[44][46]} being released on probation in June 2011.^[47] Nakoula claims to have written the script while in prison and raised between \$50,000 and \$60,000 from his wife's family in Egypt to finance the film.^{[3][48]} The FBI contacted him due to the potential for threats, but said he was not under investigation.^[49] On September 27, 2012, U.S. federal authorities arrested Nakoula in Los Angeles for suspicion of violating terms of his probation. Violations included making false statements regarding his role in the film and his use of the alias "Sam Bacile". On November 7, 2012, Nakoula pled guilty to four of the charges against him and was sentenced to one year in prison and four years of supervised release.^{[33][34]}

Law professor Stephen L. Carter^[50] and constitutional law expert Floyd Abrams^[51] have each pointed out that the government cannot prosecute the film's producer for its *content* because of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which protects freedom of speech in the United States. The U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted the First Amendment as invalidating government restrictions on blasphemy since 1952^[52] and hate speech^[53] since the mid-1970s. In March 2011, the Court reiterated its position on hate speech by an 8–1 majority: "As a Nation we have chosen a different course—to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate."^[54]

Screening and Internet upload



Vine Theater, Hollywood, California, where the single screening took place

The video production "Innocence of Bin Laden" was advertised in the Anaheim-based newspaper *Arab World* during May and June 2012. The advertisement cost \$300 to run three times in the paper and was paid by an individual identified only as "Joseph". The advertisements were noted by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), whose Islamic affairs director stated, "When we saw the advertisement in the paper, we were interested in knowing if it was some kind of pro-jihadist movie." Brian Donnelly, a guide for a Los Angeles based tour of famous crime scenes who noticed the poster advertising at the Vine Theater, said, "I didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing. We didn't know what it was about because we can't read Arabic."^[55] The earlier version of the film was screened once

at the Vine Theater of June 23, 2012 to an audience of only ten people. The film had no subtitles and was presented in English. An employee of the theater stated, "The film we screened was titled *The Innocence of Bin Laden*," and added that it was a "small viewing".^[56]

A second screening was planned for June 30, 2012. A local Hollywood blogger, John Walsh, attended a June 29 Los Angeles City Council meeting, where he raised his concerns about the title of a film to be screened that appeared to support the leader of al-Qaeda. He said "There is an alarming event occurring in Hollywood on Saturday. A group has rented the Vine Street theater to show a video entitled *Innocence of Bin Laden*. We have no idea what this group is." The blog site reported that the June 30 screening had been canceled.^{[57][58]} A Current TV producer photographed the poster while it was being displayed at the theater as advertising to later discuss on the talk show *The Young Turks*.^[59] The poster did not denigrate Muslims, but rather referred to "my Muslim brother". In a translation provided by the ADL, the poster stated it would reveal "the real terrorist who caused the killing of our children In Palestine, and our brothers in Iraq and Afghanistan",^[60] a phrase that has been used by Palestinians to protest U.S. support of Israel.^[61]

The film was supported and promoted by pastor Terry Jones, known for a Quran-burning controversy, which also led to riots around the world.^[62] Jones said that he planned to show a 13-minute trailer at his church, the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida, on September 11, 2012.^[63] It was reported on September 14, 2012, that a planned screening by a Hindu organization in Toronto will be coupled with "snippets from other movies that are offensive to Christians and Hindus". Because of security concerns no public venue has been willing to show the film; the group still plans on showing the film in the future to a private audience of about 200 people.^{[64][65]} Siobhán Dowling of *The Guardian* reported that "a far-right Islamophobic group in Germany", the Pro Germany Citizens' Movement, has uploaded the trailer on their own website and wants to show the entire film, but authorities are attempting to prevent it.^[66]



Movie poster for *Innocence of Bn [sic] Laden* at the Vine Theater, June 2012.

Blocking of the YouTube video

The video clips were posted to YouTube on July 1 by user "sam bacile",^[5] however, by September, the film had been dubbed into Arabic and drew the attention of the Arabic-speaking world by blogger Morris Sadek. Sadek's own Egyptian citizenship had been revoked.^{[67][68]} A two-minute excerpt dubbed in Arabic was broadcast on September 9 by Sheikh Khalad Abdalla^{[69][70]} on Al-Nas, an Egyptian television station.^[71]

YouTube voluntarily blocked the video in Egypt and Libya and blocked the video in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, India, and Singapore due to local laws while Turkey, Brazil, and Russia have initiated steps to get the video blocked.^{[72][73][74]} Google, Inc., the owner of YouTube, also blocked the video in Libya and Egypt citing "the very difficult situation" in those countries.^[75] In September 2012 the Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sudan and Pakistani governments blocked YouTube for not removing the video, the website will remain suspended until the film is removed.^{[76][77][78]} Government authorities in Chechnya and Dagestan have issued orders to internet providers to block YouTube and Iran has announced that it is blocking Google and Gmail.^{[79][80][81]} Google has also agreed to block the anti Islam movie in Jordan.^[78]

The White House asked YouTube to review whether to continue hosting the video at all under the company's policies. YouTube said the video fell within its guidelines as the video is against Islam, but not against Muslim people, and thus not considered "hate speech".^[73] Ben Wizner of the American Civil Liberties Union said of this, "It does make us nervous when the government throws its weight behind any requests for censorship."^[82]

Ninth Circuit court rulings on removal

On February 26, 2014, the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ordered YouTube to remove the video from its website by a 2-1 majority. The ruling was in response to a complaint by actress Cindy Lee Garcia, who had objected to the use of her performance, which had been partially dubbed for its inclusion in *Innocence of Muslims*. Garcia had believed during production that she was appearing in a film called *Desert Warrior*, which was described as a "historical Arabian Desert adventure film", and was unaware that anti-Islamic material would be added at the post-production stage. Garcia had argued that she held a copyright interest in her performance.^{[83][84]}

In May 2015, in an en banc opinion, the Ninth Circuit reversed the panel's decision, vacating the order for the preliminary injunction.^{[85][86][87]} Ibrahim Hooper, the National Communications Director and spokesperson for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), advised that people should not watch the film.^[88]

Reactions and consequences

In addition to the attacks on diplomatic missions, there were protests in many nations, through Islamic countries in the Middle East,^{[89][90]} Asia,^{[91][92]} and Africa^[91] as well as the United Kingdom,^{[91][93]} France,^[94] the Netherlands^[95] and Australia.^{[96][97]}

See also

- 2005 Quran desecration controversy
- 2012 Afghanistan Quran burning protests
- Blasphemy law in the United States
- *Fitna* (2008) and subsequent protests and trial
- *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*
- *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy
- *The Message* (1976 film)
- Muhammad in film
- Persecution of Copts
- *The Satanic Verses* controversy
- *South Park* controversies § Censorship of the depiction of Muhammad
- *Submission* (2004)



Protesters in Kuala Lumpur take to the streets to demonstrate against the film.

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External links

-  Media related to Innocence of Muslims (video) at Wikimedia Commons
- YouTube channel of Sam Bacile (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4DjVszAn4GAyzgsjtkJONg/videos>) with two videos apparently comprising extracts from the film, uploaded in July 2012.
- "US police quiz anti-Islam video suspect" (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/09/201291514945705109.html>) (video) from *al Jazeera's* protests live blog (<http://blogs.aljazeera.com/liveblog/topic/anti-islam-film-protests-10701>)
- Beware of Even Numbers - The film 'Innocence of Muslims' and the dangerous failing of the media (<http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/112248/beware-of-even-numbers>) on Tablet Magazine

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