

U.S. military struggles to teach troops to respect Koran

After the Koran burning in Afghanistan last month, soldiers have received new guidelines, but experts say the troops need broader cultural training.

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Reporting from Washington — Troops serving in Afghanistan were advised never to touch the Koran, never to place anything on top of one, and to keep it off the floor and out of bathrooms. They were even told never to "talk badly" about it.

But the do's and don'ts said nothing about burning the Muslim holy book, which is what happened last month as a cache of Korans was incinerated at Bagram air base, setting off riots across the country that killed more than 30 people and provoked attacks on U.S. forces.

An investigation by NATO officials into the burnings found five U.S. troops responsible, but it concluded that the actions were not deliberate and were the result of a miscommunication. The troops could face disciplinary action, but commanders in Afghanistan have not yet announced the form it will take.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops last week started mandatory refresher training on how to handle the Koran. Troops are now told flatly not to dispose of Korans and will be urged to err on the side of caution when dealing with Arabic texts, assuming "material is sacred if there is any doubt over its religious significance."

But some experts think the more explicit approach might not stop future incidents. Montgomery McFate, an anthropologist who has worked closely with the U.S. Defense Department, said the issuance of cultural do's and don'ts was only useful to a point.

"It makes culture into a set of arbitrary rules. You don't understand why," she said. "The Bible is not considered itself a holy object, and unless you'd grown up in a religious tradition where that was true, you wouldn't understand the way that Muslims feel about the Koran."

Lt. Col. George Robinson is a senior officer in the Marine Corps' language and culture training programs and has seen the new training documents issued last month. "It's

probably a little too simplistic to suggest that it's a simple matter of do's and don'ts," he said. "It's more a matter of why is the Koran important."

The Koran, which means "the recitation" in Arabic, is considered by Muslims to be the verbatim word of God as revealed to the prophet Muhammad.

The military has struggled for years with troops mishandling Korans. In 2005, Newsweek reported that a Koran was flushed down a toilet in the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in 2003. An internal investigation found no evidence to back up the allegation, but it did find that a camp guard had deliberately kicked a Koran. In 2008, the Army announced that a soldier in Iraq had used a Koran for target practice.

In the early years of the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, cultural awareness training was practically nonexistent. Now, all Army forces are required to undertake six to eight hours of online training before they deploy, and Marines get two days of classroom courses.

According to Rochelle Davis, a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars who is writing a book on cultural training in the military, troops she has interviewed found such training useful and commanders recognize its value too.

"Over the past decade we have created a military that is the strongest, most powerful military in the world, but we haven't been able to achieve what we wanted to achieve in Iraq and Afghan," she said. "Culture and interacting with the populations has been one of the ways that they think it can happen."

Mahir Ibrahimov, a top Army advisor on culture and language, is working to update and standardize the service's approach. He said the Koran burnings could affect the Army's training. "If that's the result of a lack of cultural training, of course we need to keep that in mind for the future," he said.

Ibrahimov was a soldier in the Soviet army in the 1970s. He received training on the culture of Afghanistan as the Soviet Union geared up for its disastrous 1979 invasion, and later worked as a civilian in Moscow developing cultural training programs.

Despite the painful Soviet experience in Afghanistan, Ibrahimov said he was not surprised it had taken the U.S. time to refine its training. Translating a Russian proverb, he put it this way: "You cannot learn from others' mistakes; you only really learn from your mistakes."