

Pro-democracy "Arab Spring" crowds were much larger than those involved in the current protests in the Middle East and North Africa; lack of media objectivity about geographic scope of so-called "Muslim Rage" has dangerous implications

Megan Reif

Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Colorado Denver

September 16, 2012

While media reports on the Arab uprisings discussed the difficulty of estimating crowd size and pondered what percentage of the population they represented, much of the current media coverage of the recent riots that erupted throughout the Muslim world on September 11, 2012 in response to the anti-Islam film, "Innocence of Muslim," has described the events as "days of rage" and violence "sweeping" the entirety of almost a quarter of the world's population.

A simple comparison of the smallest estimates of the crowds that turned out in the early days of the so-called "Arab Spring" in late 2010 and 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa shows that those crowds were much larger than the ones that have formed in the past few days, except in Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, and Qatar.

Using a variety of sources published during the early phase of the Arab revolutions, I created a spreadsheet (image below and larger photo here) with the lowest figure for Arab Spring crowd estimates mentioned in the earliest, independent, Western news source I could find for the period from December 10, 2010 through May 31, 2012. I stopped on the latter date to ensure that figures for earlier protests do not contaminate figures for the protests that began on September 11, 2012.

My crowd estimates for the current anti-American riots draw largely on a map by The Atlantic Wire, "A Map of Muslim Protests around the World", updated on an ongoing basis, in addition to a few additional sources. To avoid bias in favor of my hypothesis that the pro-democracy demonstrations were larger, I rounded up all of the crowd estimates for the anti-

film protests, counting any media statement saying that "hundreds" protested as 500 people, and "thousands" as 5,000 people for countries in which specific numbers were not provided by the source.

While the size of crowds in both Arab Spring and the anti-film riots are both small as a percentage of the total population of each country, even with the generous rounding for the anti-American riots, the percentages involved in the anti-American incidents are much smaller. It should also be noted that the deaths involved in the "Arab Spring" were also much higher.

It is interesting to observe how media images of the crowds at Tahrir square in early 2011 were presented in wide-angle format, while the current spate of protest images are closely cropped around smaller, violent groups of people, giving the impression that the crowds are large and menacing. Just do a Google image search, for example, on "protest 'Arab Spring'" and compare the results with the Google image search, "protest 'Muslim,'" and limit it to the September 10-September 16, 2012 period. The diverse, multi-generational, multi-faith, crowds of both genders that brought about the downfall of authoritarian regimes throughout the region are massive compared to the smaller crowds of young, frustrated men rioting near U.S embassies and businesses in recent days. The recent crowds are pathetic, by comparison, but we would never know that without the same wide-angle perspective. The emphasis of the narrative presented by newcasters and pundits on cable news and by reporters and experts in the mainstream print media would have us believe that the current protests are larger and more serious than those of the Arab uprisings. Given that the U.S. is the target of this anger, this disproportionate emphasis is not surprising, but it discounts the fact that the vast majority of Muslims are not protesting the film, U.S. values, or even U.S. policy. Furthermore, the incredulity with which the media and commentators respond to the expression of anti-American sentiment in light of ongoing drone strikes alone, not to mention the history of American policy in the region, further undermines our image. Muslims will increasingly view Americans as naive, if not hypocritical, if we think that selective support of the Libyan opposition and a few other pro-democracy movements makes us the new champion of freedom in the Muslim world while we avoid decisive action in Syria and ignore demands for freedom in places like Bahrain, the West Bank, and the

Gaza Strip, as well as the results of free and fair elections when we do not like the winners.

Mirroring the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, America had the sympathy of many Muslims around the world after the death of Ambassador Stevens and his colleagues on September 11, 2012, but the sensationalist, naive, and overblown public response to protests against the anti-Islam film is already doing much to alienate the very pro-democracy reformers of the Arab revolutions that we purported to support.