Hot story rides 'piggyback' on mosque debate

By JANE MUSGRAVE

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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While Gainesville pastor Terry Jones may have his faults, no one can criticize his timing.

If he had not planned his Quran burning as debate rages over a proposed Islamic community center and mosque near New York City's ground zero, it might not have gained the traction that prompted world leaders, including President Obama, to urge him to find less incendiary ways to commemorate Sept. 11, political observers said Thursday.

"This story has piggybacked on (the debate over the mosque) and raged nationally on the increasing sense of Islamophobia," said Randall Marshall, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union in Miami.

Leonardo Villalon, a political science professor at the University of Florida, said many Muslims viewed the proposed Quran burning as yet another assault on their religion.

Having fought wars in two Muslim countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States "is largely perceived as being hostile to the Muslim world," Villalon said.

The rancorous and often ugly stereotypes that have been used to decry the proposed mosque have confirmed that view, he said.

Instead of being seen as one wacko who heads a small congregation in Florida, Jones personifies what some Muslims believe Americans really think of them, Villalon said.

"It would be wrong to pretend that this is happening in the abstract," he said. "It's happening in the context of all these other things. People are saying, 'There they go again. Those Americans are slapping us in the face again.' "

That Jones set his sights on the Quran made his plan even more invidious. Muslims believe the Quran is the word of God, theologians say. They believe the angel Gabriel gave Muhammad the words directly from Allah.

Still, civil libertarians say, burning the Quran is protected. If Jones follows through with his plans for Saturday's ceremony, there's nothing government officials can do to stop him. Gainesville officials
suggested it might violate open burning laws, but ACLU attorney Jim Green said they would be on shaky legal ground.

It's doubtful the threat to the public would trump Jones' First Amendment rights, Green said. The defense, he said, should be more speech.

"Counter-protests are certainly a way to express to the Islamic community that what is being planned is antithetical to many Americans' beliefs about religious tolerance," he said.

Robert Rabil, an assistant professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University, said more speech is needed to persuade the world that the U.S. is not anti-Muslim. "We need to work on engaging in public diplomacy to send a message where we stand," he said.

Newspapers in some Arab countries have said that Jones is not representative of the American people, Rabil said. But that message may not reach everyone, he said.

A similar message about Muslims has failed to reach some Americans, Villalon said. He said the 9/11 hijackers weren't mainstream Muslims, but minority extremists. But nine years later, many Americans don't believe it, Villalon said.