

Manufacturing Discontent: The case of the Danish cartoons

By Muhammad Idrees Ahmad

The publication of offensive cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in *Jyllands-Posten*, a major Danish newspaper, last year precipitated a bitter confrontation between Europe and the Islamic world that reached its climax early this year. Events may have overtaken the cartoon war but the fallout from the controversy is going to shape European politics vis-à-vis its immigrant population for years to come. The deluge of articles and opinions in the media for the most part failed to provide context or insight into the issues involved. The common narrative placed 'Western secularism' against 'Muslim intolerance'; warnings of a 'clash of civilisations' were legion. Many took refuge in absolutes and defence of the cherished Western value of 'freedom of expression' was deemed paramount. However, if we are to learn anything from this experience and understand the reactions on both sides it is important that myths are dispensed with, and agency and intent are identified.

The story that made the rounds in the European media was that of an intrepid cultural editor of a mainstream Danish newspaper concerned with the stifling political-correctness in Europe, who decided to 'test the limits of freedom of expression' and challenge the rising self-censorship by publishing caricatures of the most revered figure in Islam. Unaccustomed to such high-minded ideals, the Muslim world reacted in characteristic way – with violence – but only after their sentiments had been sufficiently enflamed by itinerant Imams and rogue regimes months after the publication of the offending cartoons. Newspapers in several European countries published the cartoons simultaneously as a gesture of solidarity and the Islamic world responded with a commercial boycott of all Danish products.

As we shall presently see, there are many problems with this narrative, beginning with the publication itself.

Jyllands-Posten is Denmark's largest selling newspaper with a notoriously anti-immigrant editorial line. In 2001 it assisted Anders Rasmussen's Prime Ministerial bid on an anti-immigration platform by publishing fake stories of asylum fraud by Palestinian refugees days before the election. A 2004 report by European Network Against Racism singled out *JP* for its excessive and skewed coverage of immigrant issues. Flemming Rose, the cultural editor who commissioned the cartoons, is himself a close associate of notorious Islamophobe and arch-Zionist Daniel Pipes, founder of the McCarthyite *Campus-Watch* and advocate of WWII style internment of American Muslims and complete ethnic-cleansing of Palestinians. Rose was already testing the waters in 2004, when he published a laudatory article on Pipes with a sample of his extremist views in the format of an interview. In one section Pipes claimed he was 'amazed that Europe is not more alarmed about the challenge that Islam poses' and questioned the wisdom of leaning back and waiting 'for things to happen'. He need not have waited long; things did happen and it was his interlocutor who furnished the trigger. But is this sufficient explanation for the ferocity of the response?

An editorial in the *Washington Post* touched on the aspect of the story which had been duly ignored in the myriad commentaries on the subject. The paper called the publication of the cartoons a 'calculated insult' by a 'right-wing newspaper in a country where bigotry toward the minority Muslim population is a major, if frequently unacknowledged, problem'. In *The Guardian* Jonathan Steele quotes Jytte Klausen, a Danish political scientist as saying: 'Religious tolerance and respect for human rights have been sorely lacking in Denmark.' Klausen and others cite frequent statements by Brian Mikkelsen, the minister of cultural affairs, regarding cultural 'restoration' and the evils of 'multiculturalism', as symptomatic of this intolerance. In an article in *Index on Censorship*, George Blecher quotes the independent Danish daily *Information* as saying that the publication of the cartoons was inspired by Mikkelsen's speech at a Conservative Party meeting where he called for 'a new offensive in the Culture Wars' and deplored Muslim immigrants for their 'medieval standards and undemocratic ways of thinking'. The paper went on to say:

'Among [Mikkelsen's] points and examples was that "freedom of expression" was threatened, because a comedian "doesn't dare piss on the Koran", and illustrators don't dare put their names on illustrations that show Mohammed's face.'

Rasmussen's government relies for support in Parliament on the far-right Dansk Folkeparti with an anti-immigrant agenda and immigrants from Islamic countries are its primary targets. Even Kofi Annan has criticised the government for being 'unsure of how to treat its significant Muslim population'. Racially motivated crimes doubled in the country between 2004 and 2005 according to the Danish Institute for Human Rights. Steele writes:

'If there is a tolerance spectrum, with resistance to diversity at one end, acceptance of it in the middle and celebration of it at the other end ... Denmark is still at the spectrum's prejudiced end, a traditionally mono-ethnic country that has not yet accepted the new cultures in its midst. Public discourse is stuck where it was in Britain a generation ago, with angry talk about "guests" who ought to conform to the "host country" or go home.'

It is a matter of no small significance that Rasmussen remains one of Bush's very few allies in Europe and has sent troops both to Iraq and Afghanistan. The Danish queen's exhortation to the citizens to show their 'opposition to Islam' did not do much to ease the tension.

The publication of the cartoons within such an environment takes on an altogether different meaning, but does that justify the violent response? More importantly, why did it take four months to materialise?

As a matter of fact, the response to the publication of the cartoons was immediate and peaceful. Appeals from Danish



**DOGMA 2006: TO CELEBRATE THE
HEROIC ACTIONS OF JYLLANDS-
POSTEN, AND IN THE SPIRIT OF
KENTUCKY FRIED FREEDOM, THE
DROUTH MAKES ITS OWN GRAPHIC
TRIBUTE TO JYLLANDS-POSTEN**



**MOSES TAKES DOWN THE TABLETS
(IBUPROFEN)**



Luther in the first few seconds of the Protestant Movement



Muslim groups to the Culture Minister Mikkelsen were rebuffed and a request of ambassadors from 11 Muslim countries to take their concerns to the Prime Minister directly was rejected. At this point Danish Muslim organizations lodged a complaint against *Jyllands-Posten* to the police on the grounds that it had committed an offence under sections 140 and 266b of the Danish Criminal Code. Having exhausted all the legal avenues, leaders of the Danish Muslim community finally turned to the Muslim world for support. The Arab League duly issued a condemnation and criticised the Danish government for its inaction. In Denmark the Regional Public Prosecutor of Viborg decided to discontinue investigation into whether the paper had violated the Danish Criminal Code. Several Muslim countries withdrew their ambassadors from Denmark in protest and consumers in the Middle East started a boycott of Danish products. The Organization of the Islamic Conference issued a resolution condemning the publication and lodged a complaint with the UN. Danes were ordered out by militants in the Occupied Palestinian territories, and protests erupted in various Muslim countries. At this point, several newspapers in Europe decided to publish the cartoons simultaneously as 'a gesture of solidarity' and the response, which had been hitherto measured, finally turned violent.

The sensational images of flags being torched, mobs burning down embassies, and offices of the EU being occupied by gunmen clearly make for more exciting television. But the more significant story of the four months of silent protest was lost in the Drama. A few dozen extremists with offensive placards in London made headlines but the nearly 15 million Muslims of Europe who weathered the storm with dignity were deemed unworthy of coverage. Behaviour of the former was used to characterise the sentiments of the latter. The fact that 97% of the youth surveyed by the UN in Muslim countries deplored the violence wasn't considered newsworthy. Condoleezza Rice placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of Washington's official enemies: Syria and Iran (even though the campaign started in Saudi Arabia, an official ally). In *The Nation*, Gary Younge writes: 'Muslims were in effect being vilified twice – once through the original cartoons and then again for having the gall to protest over them.' Many in the Muslim world with their own political axes to grind made most of the opportunity and enflamed sentiments further, but that is irrelevant. It is a truism that we are all responsible for the predictable consequences of our actions. Given the racist and inflammatory nature of the cartoons it was reasonable to expect a response. It was also reasonable to expect that not all responses were going to be restrained. It is impossible that the *JP* editors did not take this into consideration. If someone has hijacked the legitimate grievances of more than a billion Muslims and is trying to make political capital out of it, the responsibility still lies with those who have provided this opportunity. Had the paper not published the cartoons, there would be no sentiments for the extremists to whip up.

Could it be that this was precisely the response the publication of the cartoons was meant to generate?

With the news of the first violent protests, Flemming Rose was quick to declare it the long predicted 'clash of civilisations' and questioned the compatibility of the 'religion of Islam with a modern secular society'. Similar sentiments were voiced by his confederate Daniel Pipes, invited on CNN to comment on the controversy. Neither one's neocon connections, nor their links to each other were mentioned. The continuous coverage of the protests was clearly having an impact – a March 9 *Washington Post* poll revealed that nearly 46% of Americans had a negative view of Islam, a number 10 points higher than in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Given the timing and the provenance of the controversy, James Petras and Robin Eastman-Abaya have speculated that this may very well have been an effort to prepare public opinion for the upcoming attack on Iran. This would not be the first time that cartoons are used to provoke a violent response from a minority in order to discredit and demonise a whole racial, ethnic or religious group. The Southern white racists did it, the Nazis did it and so did the FBI.¹

So, was this about freedom of speech? As the British press revealed, the same publication had already turned down caricatures of Jesus on the grounds that readers will not 'enjoy' them and they will 'provoke an outcry'. In many European countries holocaust denial is a crime and the British historian David Irving is serving time for a speech made in the '80s. *Mein Kampf* cannot be bought or sold in Germany. So freedom of speech is clearly not absolute. But assuming it was absolute: it would merely reflect the existing imbalance in society so long as it was not tempered by associated responsibilities. Otherwise, it gives the dominant sector in any society a license to offend. Younge writes:

'The right to offend must come with at least one consequent right and one subsequent responsibility. People must have the right to be offended, and those bold enough to knowingly cause offence should be bold enough to weather the consequences, so long as the aggrieved respond within the law.'

It is hard to see anything positive coming out of this episode except the principled and dignified stance of the British and American Left. In clear contrast to the French Left during the headscarf debate, the Left in the US/UK took a commendable position by refusing to let abstract principles distract from reality. They recognised the gratuitously offensive nature of the cartoons and the political motivation behind their publication. They also acknowledged that the 'right to freedom of speech equates to neither an obligation to offend nor a duty to be insensitive'. The commitment to freedom of speech, and the commitment to fight racism need not be mutually exclusive. Freedom of speech could certainly find better uses than in attacks on the most vulnerable parts of our society. The decision to print the cartoons was political; it had nothing to do with any ideals. At the end of the day, the incident failed to put a wedge between Muslims and the US/UK Left as everyone had expected it would. The whole debate is best summed up by the political cartoonist Martin Rowson, who regularly receives hundreds of angry and obscene e-mails when he draws President Bush with blood on his hands, but for him it is an acceptable price since 'the purpose of satire is to attack people more powerful than you are'. Flemming Rose, and the Southern white supremacists would clearly disagree.





**DENMARK.
SAVING WESTERN
BACON SINCE 2006**



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Endnote

1. 'The Nation's Ward', a cartoon by Grant Hamilton, portrayed an American Indian as a savage snake constricting a pioneer family while being fed by Uncle Sam even as the pioneers' home burns. The Nazis used caricatures of Jews as dirty, unattractive and shabbily dressed men busy undermining the Reich to whip up anti-Semitic sentiments in the population. Philip Rupperecht, the most popular of these, ran in Der Stürmer. The FBI's COINTELPRO Program used a fake colouring book to discredit the Black Panther Party and advocated 'the use of cartoons, photographs, and anonymous letters' to ridicule the New Left: 'Ridicule is one of the most potent weapons which we can use against it.' For a history of the relation between caricatures of African Americans and racism see: <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/caricature>

ZIPPY



" LESSON ONE "



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