

The Power of Division and Unity

Dr. Sherifa Zuhur
Strategic Studies Institute

Twelve cartoons published by the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, on September 30, 2005, and reprinted in January in other European newspapers unleashed a strong reaction in the Muslim world. Wildly different conclusions were drawn from these events, as from several other important and divisive incidents that followed, including the thwarted takeover of port management by the Dubai Ports World and sectarian fighting in Iraq. Oddly, the cartoon incident might be the most significant illustration of extreme polarization, which has not yet been bridged nor fully addressed. While the Dubai Ports incident demonstrated a lack of knowledge on the part of many Americans and an unfortunate xenophobia heightened by security concerns, the sectarian fighting in Iraq was not due to lack of information. Restraint and building conduits for unity are key to the latter, essentially inter-Muslim/inter-Iraqi tensions. Why, then, is it so difficult to perceive a need for restraint and respect on a broader scale, especially given the impact of the Global War on Terror on Muslims themselves?

A careful review of censorship and blasphemy charges concerning portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad might have alerted a global audience, even certain Danish journalists and editors, to the dangers of cultural provocation. During my travels, I have heard the questions, "Why can't Muslims just give up on it?" and "Where are the moderate Muslims?" President Musharraf declared he is a moderate and is nonetheless insulted and angered by the cartoons, and he, like many others, called for Muslims to restrain themselves, to no avail. Unfortunately, to some Americans, the Muslim's expression that he has been insulted means that he is not a moderate. Ayatollah Sistani issued a statement against the cartoons, but which also pointed out that the actions of Muslim extremists have some culpability as they had "projected a distorted and dark image of the faith of justice, love, and brotherhood." Religious leaders in Friday sermons around the world reminded Muslims that the Prophet himself withstood many insults from the Meccans who refused to accept his new faith. "You," they cried, "have fallen into the trap of provocation." Saudi business women, who are also moderates, helped organize a boycott against Danish products.

Anjali Kamat in *al-Ahram Weekly* argues that portraying the Prophet as a terrorist "rationalizes further violence against Muslims." Jihadist websites call Muslims to further violence and to abhor non-Muslims. On the other hand, Jeff Jacoby of *The Boston Globe*, proclaims that "we are all Danes now," and conservative news sites urged a "buy Danish" campaign to counter the Muslim boycott.

Is the West oblivious to catalysts for Muslim anger? Years ago, I read a play, *Muhammad*, by the Egyptian dramatic master, Tawfiq Al-Hakim. It required a huge cast, but more importantly, could never be staged because of popular feeling against the physical portrayal of the Prophet. Now, those familiar with the Shi'i Muslim tradition

may know that dramas about Muslim martyrs, particularly Hussayn, the Prophet's grandson, are annually performed. Do Muslims see a contradiction? No, not really. Shi'i imagery of the Prophet and the Imams which appears in paintings or medallions runs counter to the visual taboo of Prophets as expressed by other Muslims. But even Shi'i imagery is never blasphemous or derogatory.

In 1976, I attended the English language version of Syrian director Mustafa al-Akkad's film *al-Risala*, entitled *Muhammad, Messenger of God*, starring Anthony Quinn as Hamza, the Prophet's uncle, and Irene Papas as Hind, one of his early Meccan polytheistic enemies. Suddenly, we heard on the news that a group of American Hanafi Muslims stormed a Jewish charitable agency, Bnai Brith, taking hostages and demanding the film be withdrawn. The film reopened, but threats to burn the theaters scared away other movie-goers. Akkad, sadly, was killed by Islamist terrorists just this year in the hotel bombings in Amman, Jordan.

Salman Rushdie's novel, *Satanic Verses*, was published in the fall of 1988. The book takes its name from the *gharaniq*, verses that alluded to the "daughters of Allah," which were not included in the recensed version of the Qur'an organized under the Caliph `Umar. The heroes of Rushdie's novel reject religious visions, Muhammad's own, and others in a surreal tale mixing past and present charlatanry. An Indian Muslim, Sayed Shahabuddin, first petitioned Rajiv Ghandi's government to ban the book. His words were instructive, though he had not himself read the book, "You must look at this in the context of how the Moslem regards the Prophet. As far as the Moslems are concerned, there is no divinity about the man. He is a man. But he is the messenger of God, and the entire Islamic faith is based on this notion: that he is the Prophet and that what you find in the Koran is the word of God. We also regard the Prophet's own life as the model for the rest of humanity, and for all times. To a believing Moslem, you can jest about a lot—but you cannot jest about the person of the Prophet."

Full-fledged furor broke out against Rushdie when the book was sent to Ayatollah Khomeini, who said in February 1989 that the author should die for insulting Islam. At my university, it seemed that no one but myself and the head of our college's Muslim Student Association had read the book, so we chaired a public discussion. Many felt, as Muslims do about the cartoons, that deliberate provocation had taken place.

Also in 1988, Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz had won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first time anyone writing in Arabic had attained that honor. In 1959, when the author had first published his novel, *Children of Gebelawi*, (*Awlad Haritna*), written in 114 chapters like the *Qur'an*, the work was banned as blasphemous, and Mahfouz lost his chair as head of the Cinema Institute. The Rushdie Affair inspired the radical Egyptian Islamist organization, Jihad, to issue a fatwa against both Rushdie and Mahfouz. A few years later, Islamists stabbed the elderly Mahfouz, who survived the attack. About the same time, in 1994, Yusuf Chahine, a Christian Egyptian filmmaker had to appear in court for the banning of his feature film, *al-Muhager*, (*The Emigrant*) because it depicts the story of Joseph.

Maxime Rodinson's 1961 book, *Muhammad*, was the target of Islamist protest set off by a journalist in 1998 who suggested that the book denigrated Islam, and that it did not

belong in my university's curriculum. It had been assigned as a supplementary text by a young faculty member. The faculty met, vowed to defend "academic freedom," but then the university removed the book from the course and the library, and the young faculty member had to return to Europe. This was only one in a chain of such "book incidents." In May 2000, the Muslim Brotherhood's newspaper and protesters targeted another "blasphemous" book by Syrian author, Haydar Haydar, entitled *Walima La'shab Al-Bahr* (*A Banquet for Seaweed*). Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni received numerous death threats and complaints about his handling of this matter. Another incident concerned an Egyptian author of many books about the oppression of women, Nawal Saadawi. Following a magazine interview in which she described the pilgrimage to Mecca and the ritual kissing of the black stone there as "vestiges of pagan practices," a religious authority declared her "beyond the bounds of Islam." That phrase means she can be treated as an apostate, and an Islamist lawyer filed a case to divorce her forcibly from her Muslim husband as a third party in two separate courts. He could do so under the Islamic principle of the *hisba*, upholding the good and forbidding the evil, which had funded other Islamist efforts to divorce those with objectionable views forcibly, like Egyptian Professor Nasr Abu Zayd (in exile in Europe) and Jordanian politician-personality, Toujan al-Faisal (the King intervened) from their spouses.

In response to the original publication of the 12 cartoons, Danish Muslims requested apologies, protested, and for months, got nowhere. The reprinting of the cartoons in other European newspapers ignited broader Muslim feelings and calls against not only Denmark but other Western nations and symbols. But even this simple fact was disputed, first by a Danish tabloid, then a German newspaper, and then very similar stories in the American press that suggested a "plot" and a mysterious tour by the Danish Muslims to the region, who supplemented the original 12 cartoons with several even more insulting images. Actually, it seems that the Danish Muslims did travel to Cairo, and that subsequently the cartoons were discussed, outside of the formal program of the Organization of the Islamic Conference meeting in Mecca, as an example of the heightening Islamophobia now raging in Europe, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Once the element of conspiracy had been injected into the drama, the idea of charging Syria and Iran with inspiring the affair, or "letting demonstrators go wild," was a reasonable explanation to Westerners. But not to Muslims. Why couldn't their Western colleagues acknowledge that people, especially those in the street, really do feel that the West hates Islam, and that this incident illustrates extreme cultural blindness?

And we saw a kind of unity. In Gaza, where Hamas' recent victory has caused grave disputes with the previously Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority, Hamas and Fatah supporters marched united against the cartoons. Shi'i and Sunni Muslims demonstrated against the cartoons in Iraq. Emiratis and American and British Muslims, Afghans, Nigerians, Indonesians, Pakistanis – Muslims everywhere were insulted.

In the end, even if we cannot agree on the meaning of the Cartoon Incident, it ought to provide a few warnings for the future. First, many Muslims believe there is a war on Islam, not a war on terror. Secondly, the mobs, in some cases, did not distinguish

between the Danish and other European or Western flags, and so long as the West claims its right to freely disparage Muslims, even those detached from al-Qa'ida or its ilk, that lack of differentiation will continue and feed the jihadi aim for a heightened state of conflict between the West and Islam. Let us not let them divide us.