

Danish Cartoon Crisis/Controversy

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The Danish Cartoon Crisis Controversy refers to the contention associated with the publication of twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad on 30 September 2005 by the Danish newspaper *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten*. Also known as “The Muhammad Cartoon Crisis,” it encompasses localized reactions to stories about the publication of the cartoons, the Danish government’s response to negative reactions from various Muslim groups, and various global protests—some of them violent—that broke out in early 2006. Danish Muslims have labeled the controversy “Jyllands-Posten’s Crisis” while Danish journalists, politicians, and the general public predominantly choose to refer to these events as the “Muhammad Crisis,” a term specific to the Danish context.

The development of the crisis in Denmark has several roots that extend back to the late 1990s. Some observers have suggested that over the course of a decade *Jyllands-Posten* had been cultivating a clash of civilizations discourse that depicted Islam as an imminent threat to the fundamental values of the secular and Christian West. The actual publication by *Jyllands-Posten* of the twelve cartoons was not associated with a particular news story but was rather the result of an editorial decision. The cartoons appeared in the culture section of *Jyllands-Posten*’s Sunday edition and were accompanied by a brief editorial titled “The Threat from the Dark” that depicted a threat to the Western world by voices from the dark Middle Ages.

Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen exacerbated the controversy on 30 October 2005 when he refused to meet with eleven ambassadors from Muslim-majority countries who had expressed concern about growing anti-Islamic rhetoric in the Danish public sphere. At the same

time the Organization of Islamic Conference (now the Organization of Islamic Cooperation) sent a letter of concern to the Danish prime minister. The government's refusal to engage in dialogue generated strong criticism from the Danish political opposition as well as more than twenty Danish former diplomats. In response, Rasmussen used an interview in *Jyllands-Posten* on 30 October to frame the debate in Denmark as an issue of freedom of speech, thus effectively endorsing *Jyllands-Posten's* position. While the spin deflected attention from Rasmussen's refusal to meet with the concerned ambassadors, it prompted Danish Muslims to turn to the Middle East in search of advocacy and support in opposing the cartoons.

While the initial global media coverage of Danish Muslim reactions to the cartoons had come in the shape of several Al Jazeera news reports and a *Le Monde* report—all during the month of Ramadan in October 2005—global news reporting didn't influence Danish media coverage until early 2006. In December 2005 two delegations of Danish Muslims traveled to Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, leading to further criticism of the Danish government by a number of Muslim-majority countries. This spurred renewed debate in the Danish media that questioned the role of the delegations in mobilizing the support of Muslim institutions and governments against Denmark as well as the loyalty of Danish Muslims more generally. Meanwhile, global reactions to the cartoons began to turn violent more than four months after their initial publication. With the death of at least 150 people in Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and elsewhere, the gravity of the controversy transcended Danish and European borders.

For most Scandinavians the cartoon crisis is associated with violent global responses in February 2006 to the anti-Islamic discourse of *Jyllands-Posten*. The initial tendency of the Swedish government and media was to blame the Danes, the Danish government, and *Jyllands-Posten* for provoking the negative reactions. However, when the Swedish embassy in Syria was attacked on 4 February 2006, the Swedish focus turned to aggressive, fundamentalist Muslims. In the summer of

2007 a secondary crisis loomed when Swedish artist Lars Vilks's provocative drawing of a dog with the head of the prophet Muhammad reached Swedish newspapers and generated strong global reactions. However, the Swedish government moved quickly to engage in dialogue with Muslim leaders and effectively distanced itself from the drawing.

On 12 February 2008 three men were arrested by the Danish police and charged with conspiring to murder cartoonist Kurt Westergaard. Two of them were deported and the third was acquitted of the charges. The arrests prompted Danish newspapers to reprint Westergaard's cartoon, which again provoked reactions in Pakistan and Gaza. On 2 June 2008 a car bomb killed six people and wounded more than twenty others at the Danish embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack, citing the Danish cartoons as the reason. In a third incident on 1 January 2010, Westergaard was attacked in his home by a Somali man with an axe, but escaped into a newly installed panic room. On 29 December 2010 Danish and Swedish intelligence services arrested four men for planning an attack on *Jyllands-Posten's* Copenhagen headquarters.

For many non-Western Muslims, the cartoon controversy exemplified Western arrogance and hatred toward Islam. Their anger came from a deep sense that they were not respected or valued. Newspapers in Muslim-majority countries were quick to point to apparent double standards in Western attitudes to free speech in dealing with religious belief as well as the simplistic oppositional rhetoric of Western news media.

Pakistani editorial writers tended to doubt the sincerity of the Danish cartoon publishers. In Pakistan references to the Christian West and Jewish Israel may have derogatory connotations but revered Christian and Jewish figures are not attacked or insulted, since their prophets are also sacred to true Muslim believers. Article 295C of Pakistan's Criminal Code condemns those who in words or writings, gestures or visible representations, insult the holy name of the Prophet. Thus, initially, a certain Pakistani national consensus formed around criticism of the cartoons as

blasphemous, provocative, and sacrilegious. Deaths in Lahore and Peshawar as a result of demonstrations against the cartoons refocused attention on domestic Pakistani politics. Here, expressions of discontent were exacerbated by the political turbulence resulting from the enormous human toll of the Azad Kashmir earthquake, the March 2006 visit of President George Bush, and the continued American military presence and air strikes in the northern Bajaur region. In effect, President Musharaf's close cooperation with the global war on terror as well as political oppression and economic deprivation meant that the United States became the primary target of the protests. This potential for the cartoons to add fuel to fires already burning was also reflected in the response to their publication in Nigeria. While European newspapers depicted the riots that broke out in the provinces of Borno and Katsina in February 2006 as an outcome of the Muhammad Cartoons, it's more likely that the cartoons fuelled preexisting sectarian tensions between religious and ethnic groups.

In Indonesia, the most populous Muslim-majority country, the cartoons were published on two occasions but were quickly withdrawn with apologies. During a visit in early February 2006 Danish minister of Development and Cooperation Ulla Tørnæs, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono insisted that freedom of expression should not be used to insult a religion. For the Muslim newspaper *Republika*, the cartoon incident was emblematic of a clash of civilizations mindset that demonstrated Western arrogance and the prevalence of anti-Islamic sentiment. The largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, and others condemned the cartoons as well as the violence that resulted from their publication. While 86 percent of Indonesians identify as Muslim, a multi-faith consensus emerged with Buddhists, Confucians, Hindus, Protestants, and Catholics all condemning the publication of the cartoons. Although liberals, jihadists, and moderates all condemned the cartoons as disrespectful, there was considerable disagreement on how to react to their publication.

In effect the cartoons became emblematic of the distinct way in which each political strand in Indonesia enacts its aspirations and ideology.

Having taken office in August 2005, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad banned the publication of the cartoons and suspended trade with Denmark. Ahmadinejad had to stake out his position vis-à-vis the cartoons while balancing domestic unrest at home, where students were pushing for liberalization, women were calling for more rights, and urban poor felt left behind by the revolution with, on the other hand, continued development of Iran's nuclear power capability and its ongoing push to become a regional powerhouse. Inspired by Ahmadinejad previous statements about the Holocaust, the Iranian newspaper *Hamshahri* sponsored an international Holocaust cartoon competition. Moreover, at Ahmadinejad's behest, a conference was organized in Tehran in December 2006 to examine whether the Holocaust had ever taken place. This provocative suggestion infuriated foreign politicians but gained support in Iran. The stated aim of the conference was to create an arena where free-thinking about the Holocaust could be articulated away from Western taboos and the restriction imposed on them in Europe. Ahmadinejad successfully evoked the Shi'ite myth of Hussein ibn Ali as a metaphorical parallel. Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, along with a small group of followers, was surrounded, isolated, outnumbered, and ultimately massacred in the valley of Kerbala in Iraq by opponents inspired by Satan. In this rhetoric, Iran was similarly alone and surrounded by enemies, with Israel and the United States, in the role of the Great Satan. As an easily accessible metaphor for the battle of values in the Middle East, Ahmadinejad appropriated the cartoons in an effort to buttress his support among Iranian voters.

Various religious and political leaders in the Middle East adopted a narrative of Western transgression in condemning the publication of the cartoons. As reflected in Al Jazeera's coverage, this discourse represented Muslim outrage as unified, justifiable, and legitimate. This unifying

narrative was espoused by those who saw the cartoons as yet another instance in a long history of Western humiliations and assaults against Islam.

To a great extent, the way in which international reactions to the Danish cartoons manifested themselves can be seen to have been shaped by local political environments and social circumstances rather than by the cartoons in their own right, or by general principles such as freedom of expression, or any implied Islamic prohibitions on depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

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