

## The Culture War And The Cartoon Ruckus

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*Forerunner*, "WorldWatch," February 2006

As discussed in "Fiddling While Europe Burns" (*Forerunner*, November 2005), the current social unrest in Europe is caused by the slow collision between a culture roughly based on the Koran and one roughly based on the Bible—between Islam and Christendom. Whether or not the cultural clash is violent, friction and tension are ever-present, waiting for something to spark a conflagration. Sometimes, though, a spark that would normally die on its own is intentionally inflamed. This seems to be the case with the recent firestorm over the satirical cartoons of the Islamic prophet Mohammed.

In September 2005, a minor Danish paper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published twelve cartoon drawings of Mohammed. These ranged from benign—Mohammed leading a donkey—to more pointed—Mohammed with a lit bomb in his turban. The newspaper was illustrating that European artists fear reprisal for negatively depicting Islam in general and Mohammed in particular, especially with the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh—killed for a short artistic film on the mistreatment of women in Islam—occurring just over a year ago.

But, notes Stratfor's George Friedman, this is where the oddity begins:

The cartoons actually were published in September, and—though they drew some complaints, even at the diplomatic level—didn't come close to sparking riots. Events unfolded slowly: The objections of a Muslim cleric in Denmark upon the initial publication by *Jyllands-Posten* eventually prompted leaders of the Islamic Faith Community to travel to Egypt, Syria and Lebanon in December, purposely "*to stir up attitudes against Denmark and the Danes*" in response to the cartoons. As is now obvious, attitudes have certainly been stirred. ("The Cartoon Backlash: Redefining Alignments," *Stratfor Geopolitical Intelligence Report*, February 7, 2006; emphasis added.)

The initial reaction to the cartoons was mild and certainly non-violent. That it took five months for anything substantial to happen points to a deliberate encouragement of rage and offense within the Muslim world. For example, the near-simultaneous embassy burnings in Damascus, Syria, and Beirut, Lebanon, were ostensibly spontaneous, yet more likely, Syria's al Assad regime gave its implicit approval, if not outright encouragement. Syria is a police state. Demonstrations do not occur without government sanction.

Security forces strategically prevented protestors from storming the U.S. and French embassies, while letting them burn the Danish and Norwegian embassies. The regime, while willing to push some nations' buttons, knows what would be going too far. Further, the "spontaneous" demonstration in Beirut consisted of 20,000 protestors arriving by bus, all waving identical, pre-printed signs. These events, along with similar ones in Iran, prompted U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to accuse Iran and Syria of deliberately seizing on the dispute to incite violence. She said Iran and Syria have "gone out of their way to inflame sentiment and to use this to their own purposes."

Also telling is that, while there have been demonstrations and even death threats within Europe, the violence and destruction—EU office burnings in the Gaza Strip; European embassy burnings in Syria

and Lebanon; shootings of protestors by police in Afghanistan; and burnings in Pakistan of the four-star Ambassador Hotel, two banks, a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise and the regional office of a Norwegian cell phone company, as well as the damaging of a McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and Holiday Inn—has taken place exclusively within Islamic nations. What began as a diplomatic and religious squabble over some cartoons *within* Europe has been fanned into mobs *outside* Europe targeting almost any symbol of the West. That protestors are chanting not only "Death to Denmark!" but also "Death to America!" and "Death to Israel!" shows that the offense over the cartoons is a pretense, and the underlying rage and hostility are against far more than just tiny Denmark. Denmark, Friedman observes, has made a national religion of not being offensive to anyone. The larger target of outrage is the West, and it seems to suit various Islamic groups—and even governments—to keep this stirred up.

The differences between the November Paris riots and the cartoon uproar are substantial. While both began over seemingly minor events, the similarities end there. In Paris, the riots were spontaneous, and involved burning and mayhem in immigrant enclaves. Within Europe, and especially France, the whole issue was essentially dismissed as the fault of the French government for failing to integrate the immigrant—Islamic—populations. More and better governmental efforts were the prescription of choice.

Reactions to the cartoons, however, have built slowly, requiring a measure of encouragement from various parties. The violence has occurred outside Europe, and hostility has been displayed toward numerous Western nations. The most significant difference may be that, rather than capitulating to the Islamists' desires, a number of European politicians have stood their ground, maintaining that the Western value of freedom of speech will not be subjugated to religious sensitivity. Significantly, too, the cartoon crisis has narrowed the divide between the U.S. and Europe as nothing else has recently. Suddenly, Europe is faced with the failure of multiculturalism, nudging it ever so slightly toward President Bush's stance.

George Friedman summarizes the situation:

The controversy over the cartoons involves issues so fundamental to the two sides that neither can give in. The Muslims cannot accept visual satire involving the Prophet. Nor can the Europeans accept that Muslims can, using the threat of force, dictate what can be published. Core values are at stake, and that translates into geopolitics.

As these two civilizations continue to provoke each other, the stakes will continue to rise.