



MUHAMMAD CARTOON SPARKS VIOLENT PROTESTS

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Months of violence by Muslims around the world protesting editorial cartoons published in European papers have highlighted the cultural divisions between Western Democracies and Islam.

The problems began in September 2005 when a Danish newspaper published a 12-cartoon series on Muslim issues. One of the cartoons depicted the Prophet Muhammad wearing a turban shaped like a bomb.

In Islam, even positive depictions of Muhammad are forbidden, but Danish Muslims were also offended by the newspaper's reasons for publishing the series.

Unlike most political cartoons, the series was not the result of a news event, but of what the newspaper described as a test of self-censorship among cartoonists addressing Muslim issues.

An outcry arose among Danish Muslims.

Ambassadors from 10 predominantly Muslim nations sent a letter to Danish Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen demanding a meeting and urging him "to take all those responsible to task," but Rasmussen refused.

Conflict spreads from Denmark to Europe and Middle East

Since their concerns went unheard in Denmark, several Danish Muslims traveled to the Middle East to seek support.

The Danish group met with representatives of 57 Muslim nations who had gathered in Mecca, Saudi Arabia for a December summit.

The meeting's closing statement condemned the "desecration of the image of the Holy Prophet Muhammad" and expressed "concern at rising hatred against Islam and Muslims" and the use of "the freedom of expression as a pretext to defame religions."

Then in February, European newspapers, intent on showing their support for freedom of speech and solidarity with the Danish newspaper, decided to re-publish the cartoons.

The move sparked violent protests throughout the Islamic world and in Islamic communities in England and Germany.

The death toll from the outrage has reached at least 13 and many more have been injured.

More than just cartoons

The Danish prime minister called the protests “a growing global crisis” that is about more than just the drawings.

Many European countries have had difficulty integrating Muslim immigrants into their societies and in some countries anti-immigrant tensions are high.

France has experienced riots and Spain and Britain are still reeling from attacks on their railway systems.

“The cartoons in themselves can’t really explain the extent of the protest and the anger that we’re seeing. ... Increasingly people across the Arab and Muslim world perceive themselves to be under a generalized assault by the United States and its allies,” Ali Abunimah, founder of the Electronic Intifada and journalist on Middle Eastern issues, said on the NewsHour.

He said anti-Western sentiment in the region is fed by “the war in Iraq, U.S. support for Israel, Guantanamo, Abu Grahib ... and increasing xenophobia against Muslim communities within Europe.”

Middle Eastern countries are also feeling the pressure. Islamic groups opposed to Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, have led the outcry and directed anger over the cartoons into denunciations of Musharraf's alliance with the West and President Bush.

Many Western leaders, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice accuse Islamic radicals of manipulating the crowds to inflame anti-Western sentiment and create disorder in the region.

A call for dialogue

Imam Ahmed Abu Laban, one of the Danish Muslim leaders instrumental in raising concerns about the cartoons, said Muslims have a religious obligation to defend the Prophet Muhammad in a democracy -- but said that violence is not the right way to do so.

“We both believe there is something called 'holy.' Danes say freedom of speech is holy. Muslims say Muhammad is holy. Let us sit together and think how to reshape the necessary values and commitment to address this dilemma,” he said.

The prime ministers of traditionally Christian Spain and Muslim Turkey, issued a joint statement calling for “respect and calm” in an opinion piece published in the International Herald Tribune.

“In a globalized world, in which the relationships and exchanges among different civilizations continue to multiply, and in which a local incident may have worldwide repercussions, it is vital that we cultivate the values of respect, tolerance and peaceful coexistence,” wrote Tayyip Erdogan, prime minister of Turkey, and Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, prime minister of Spain.

--Compiled by Anne Bell for NewsHour Extra
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