



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (11/2006)

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## FREE SPEECH AND THE MUSLIM WORLD

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AMIDST the worldwide Muslim anger over the Danish media's offensive caricature of the Prophet Muhammad, an unusual twist happened in Gaza where Hamas had just defeated Fatah in the recent Palestinian elections. Armed Fatah followers had threatened to attack a Christian church in the Palestinian territory to retaliate against the Danish insult. But, interestingly, Hamas offered to protect the church, saying to its priest: "We are brothers."

In almost similar vein, a former Israeli diplomat who had served in Southeast Asia wrote an article on February 7 in Singapore's TODAY where he said the election victory of Hamas has reshuffled the Middle East deck of cards. Unlike many hardliners in Israel and the United States, the diplomat, Emanuel Shahaf, thinks that Hamas' victory will provide an opportunity for Israel. The rise of an Islamist party like Hamas, he says, will spur Middle East peace, not war. Muslims and Jews have a long history of living together. The common origins of their religion, Shahaf says, gives rise to hope that religious leaders on both sides will advance a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There is a message here that seems to be drowned by the rage over the highly provocative cartoons of the Prophet. Those who are sometimes, or often, portrayed as militant may turn out to be moderate. Hamas, for all its radicalism in its struggle against Israel, may well one day become an effective partner for peace in the Middle East. History is full of examples of leaders who, despite being radical in origin, ended up as preachers of peace and understanding when in power. Some even paid the price of transformation with their lives.

### **Muslim Street-Muslim Elite Reaction**

The Hamas position reflects the complex nuances that should be appreciated in the ongoing global outrage over the Danish cartoons triggered by Jyllands Posten. Still, the divergent response from the Muslim world to the cartoons is a familiar one; it is between the 'Muslim street' and what can be broadly called – for the sake of contrast -- the 'Muslim elite'. The Muslim street are reacting with strong emotion to what they see as insensitive insults by some of the European media. The result is what we see – the burning of Danish flags and property, physical threats to Danish lives and even the deaths of Muslim protestors at the hands of security forces trying to contain the fallout. The Muslim elite, however, are responding more cautiously. They prefer peaceful protests and choose the path of economic boycotts, legal actions and diplomatic counter-initiatives. The media tend to characterize them as "moderates". While they may well be so, it should not be taken to imply that the anger of the Muslim street is therefore militant, or radical, even extreme.

It would be wrong to view these contrasting reactions in terms of a ‘militant-moderate’ divide. Indeed, it would be a tragic fallacy to reduce the storm that has been unleashed by the Danish cartoons of the Prophet into an issue pitting freedom of speech, or expression, against Islam.

Those who defend the crude caricatures in the name of free expression will have to be consistent. If the European media are ‘free to publish and be damned’, the logic then follows that, in the name of free expression, the Muslim protestors are free to vent out their anger, whatever the consequences. Yet, it is no secret that the Western media can and do exercise restraint where necessary. Notice how during the invasion of Iraq, even CNN chose not to report news that were damaging to the US military campaign.

The bigger danger of using the freedom argument is that it will increasingly turn the Muslim world off each time they hear freedom and democracy being preached to them by the West. For if freedom of expression means one can wantonly spite and denigrate the faith of others, what is the meaning of liberalism, then? The damage from the latest European stance is to plant the seeds of deep distaste in the Muslim world for the very values of liberal democracy that the West says it wants to promote in the Middle East now. This will be tragic because there is inherently no contradiction between freedom and Islam.

### **Contrasting US-Europe response**

In this respect, the noticeable change in the United States’ response to the issue is significant. If this reflects new policy, the conciliatory US position will play a major part, ironically, in containing the Muslim rage and bridging the West and an agitated Muslim world.

Some European government leaders and media have chosen to defy Muslim demands for apology, arguing that the principle of free speech has to be defended. In contrast, the US has criticised the publication of the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad as an incitement to religious hatred. The US has said there is no such thing as unbridled freedom of the press and of expression. “We all fully recognize and respect freedom of the press and expression but it must be coupled with press responsibility. Inciting religious and ethnic hatreds in this manner is not acceptable,” the State Department says.

In choosing to stand with the Muslim world, the US has shown more sophistication. It seems to have learned a lot from its own experiences post-September 11. It is drawing a clear line between its war on terrorism and its respectful attitude towards Islam as a religion. The stance taken over the cartoons will help win over some Muslim ground if the same signal is heard from the lips of President Bush. As the self-declared champion of free speech, the US statement is powerful because it neutralises the European argument that freedom of speech is sacred and cannot be limited.

### **Fundamentalists of Free Speech**

Unfortunately, while the US is showing more maturity in its understanding and treatment of the Muslim world, Europe is backsliding. It was not too long ago that the Europeans were the ones who showed more empathy and sophistication. While the new US approach will help reduce animosity towards America, the shifting European attitude could stoke a new round of radicalism. There is a need to prevent this episode from spreading radicalism and in its

extreme form – terrorism. In this, the West and the Muslim world have their roles cut out for them.

The radical liberals in Europe who argue for unbridled freedom of expression need to review their ‘fundamentalist’ interpretations of liberalism. Free speech or free expression is a noble value, certainly. But freedom must come with responsibility, which sadly has been missing in this tragic episode over the cartoons.

The Muslim world, on its part, must show displeasure in no uncertain terms towards any violent response to the Western media provocation. The moderates must prevail over the Muslim street, no matter how difficult the exercise. The Muslim elite can play a part by showing the Muslim street that there can be a better way of showing displeasure. Hit back where it will be most painful, if they must, but choose the course of non-violence. Economic boycotts, are one example. Legal action, whatever the odds, is another.

The Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC) and the Arab League have asked the UN to ban contempt of religious beliefs and to punish with sanctions those who contravene. This seems to be a new development; although it may be tough to win support at the UN, there can always be a beginning.

Contempt towards religious beliefs is an issue of global security because more than just free speech, world peace is at stake. For if the Muslim world concludes that there will be no end to Islamophobia, the extreme fringe will win more ground and the mainstream moderates will, once again, lose their voice in a world of free speech dominated by extremists on both sides of the fence.

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