

A Mutual Suspicion Grows in Denmark

By Jeffrey Fleishman
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COPENHAGEN — Right-wing politicians consider Omar Marzouk a menace. Muslims accuse him of blasphemy for pasting Osama bin Laden's image onto women's underwear. The "only ethnic comedian" in Denmark, as he likes to call himself, Marzouk provokes all sides but senses that audiences are increasingly touchy these days.

"Society is more radical," he says, sitting in a cafe in an autumn dusk. "You have the Al Qaeda movement preaching that Muslims can't exist in Western culture. And in this country you have the Danish People's Party telling Muslims, 'You're different and we can only accept you if you're a Dane.' These voices are actually pulling the same way: toward radicalism."

Hate screeds are rattling against this Scandinavian nation's aura of serenity. A Muslim publisher with suspected ties to the Al Qaeda terrorist network was recently jailed for allegedly inciting jihad and distributing videotapes of beheadings. A right-wing radio host reacted by saying that Muslims should be expelled from Western Europe, "or you exterminate the fanatical Muslims, which would mean killing a substantial population of Muslim immigrants."

Such incendiary cases, although exceptional in Denmark, raise fears that if Muslim integration can't succeed in the most liberal of Western nations, it might not be able to flourish in more conservative ones.

With cars burning across France and Islamic radicals going underground in Britain, Europe is reeling from the anger of Muslim communities that for decades have existed as parallel universes. Terrorist bombings and riots have sparked fears on the continent and raised questions about its hallowed ideal of cultural tolerance. Muslims complain that tensions over terrorism have turned them into convenient symbols for conservative politicians pushing anti-immigration policies.

From the Danish Parliament to the immigrant neighborhoods in Norrebro, this city of nut bread and sea winds echoes with suspicion. Liberal freedom-of-speech laws are being challenged by Hizb ut-Tahrir, an extremist Islamic organization recruiting Muslims to battle coalition forces in Iraq that include 530 Danish troops. In a society that prides itself on racial parity, voters have elevated the xenophobic Danish People's Party from the fringes to the country's third most powerful political bloc.

"I believe integrating a large number of Muslims can't be done. It's an illusion," said

Martin Henriksen, a 25-year-old legislator for the People's Party. "They don't have the desire to blend in with other people. We've been a Christian country for 1,000 years and we are the oldest monarchy in the world. I want to get married and have a lot of kids who can walk around in a society not influenced by Muslims."

This attitude mirrors growing cultural strains, anxiety over possible terrorist attacks and the Danish People's Party's frequent criticisms of the 200,000 Muslims among the nation's 5.4 million people. The tilt to the right is starkly seen in the number of asylum applications the government has approved: 53% in 2001 and 10% last year.

Across town in a neighborhood of fast-food *shawarma* stands and veiled women, Fadi Abdul Latif, the spokesman for Hizb ut-Tahrir in Denmark, accused conservatives of changing the meaning of integration. Whereas it once meant attending Danish schools and speaking the national language, he charged, now it forces Muslims into accepting European values on issues including sexuality and religion.

"This is the Europe of the Middle Ages," said Abdul Latif, a Palestinian born in a Lebanese refugee camp who moved here years ago. "When others want to force their values on Muslims, we must reject this. We neither want to assimilate nor isolate. We want to keep our identity and carry our message of Islam to others. But Europe is using the climate of war and terrorism to force assimilation."

Hizb ut-Tahrir seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate and expel Western influences from Muslim nations. Outlawed in Sweden and Germany, the group faces a possible ban in Britain after the London transit bombings in July. In 2002, Abdul Latif was charged with distributing hate literature that revered suicide bombers as martyrs and quoted a verse from the Koran: "And kill them from wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out." He received a 60-day suspended sentence.

He also circulated a flier in 2004 urging Muslims to "go help your brothers in Fallouja and exterminate your rulers if they block your way." Abdul Latif said in an interview that Hizb ut-Tahrir was rallying fighters in the Middle East, not Europe. The Danish government, whose support of the Bush administration in Iraq has drawn threats from Al Qaeda affiliates, has reopened an investigation into Tahrir.

Abdul Latif is not the only voice testing Denmark's free speech boundaries. Said Mansour, a Moroccan-born Danish publisher who has been under intelligence surveillance for years, was charged in September with instigating terrorism after police raided his home and confiscated allegedly "inflammatory jihadist" videos and speeches. On the other side of the political spectrum, radio host Kaj Wilhelmsen had his broadcasting license revoked for three months for advocating violence against Muslims.

Cultural relations were further strained later in September when Jyllands-Posten, the nation's leading newspaper, printed 12 caricatures of the prophet Muhammad, including one suggesting he had a bomb in his turban. The newspaper said the illustrations were an exercise in free speech, but Muslims viewed them as a provocation. Two newspaper

cartoonists were reportedly driven into hiding.

Terrorism and immigration have propelled right and center-right political parties not only in Denmark but also across the continent. A breakdown of the four largest parties in the European Parliament shows that rightist parties hold 355 seats, compared with 243 held by liberal ones.

Thirty-five percent of Copenhagen residents listed integration as the most important issue in the upcoming elections Tuesday, according to a poll published by Jyllands-Posten. In a similar survey last year, only 13% considered integration a significant problem.

"Twenty-five percent of all children in Copenhagen and more than 10% of all children in Denmark are being born to non-Danish mothers. What is happening is a gradual scooping out of the Danish population," Mogens Camre, a member of the Danish People's Party and the European Parliament, said last year. "Islam is threatening our future.... That faith belongs to a dark past, and its political aims are as destructive as Nazism was."

Ahmed abu Laban, an Islamic leader in Copenhagen, said Christian and Muslim extremists are "manipulating the sense of insecurity. If we remove the element, Denmark is an excellent country. We need reconciliation and contrition. There's no time to wait.... I tell many Muslims, 'Europe is sensitive today.' It won't tolerate any act of terror. It is fed up."

Marzouk believes that the delicate space between humor and angst is narrowing. The son of Egyptians, Marzouk was born in Denmark and has lived with its contradictions, its racial stings and its often profound sense of human rights. He sat on a recent day in a cafe, riffing one-liners and political insights, across the river from neighborhoods of Somali flower vendors and Lebanese butchers.

He enjoys pricking hypocrisy.

"The Danish government's idea of better integration is, 'Let's have Turkish night and watch a belly dancer,' " he said. His tongue is just as sharp toward Muslims. In the early 1990s, the blind Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, who would later be convicted in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, sought refuge in Denmark as an Egyptian political dissident.

"He was attacking the West and I asked him, 'How can you kill the same infidels who are now protecting you?' " Marzouk said.

Since Sept. 11 and the Iraq war, Marzouk said, animosity between Muslims and non-Muslims has deepened. Muslims fear their traditions are threatened by Europe, and native Europeans believe radical Islam has taken root in the continent's permissive societies, he said.

"It's a fragile time," he said.

Henriksen, a fresh-faced carpenter who was elected as a lawmaker in February, supports tougher anti-immigration measures and attributes his party's popularity to being a "place Danes came come with all their frustration and anger."

He says his political philosophy hardened in part over his experiences in poor immigrant neighborhoods. He said he once dated a black African Catholic and was spat at by young Muslim men who, he surmised, believed the woman to be a Muslim who should not have been in a relationship with a white Dane.

"I attended a mosque to listen to what Muslims had to say," he said. "They talked about women wearing head scarves and that Muslims should only be treated by Muslim doctors. I found it an affront to Danish society. I also went to a Muslim wedding. It was grotesque. They were talking about jihad and following holy war. It made me think about what's out there."

Times special correspondent Helen Hajjaj contributed to this report.

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