

Rage Over Cartoons Perplexes Denmark

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By Jeffrey Fleishman

COPENHAGEN — This diminutive nation with an offbeat sense of humor and a strong self-image of cultural tolerance is not accustomed to having its flag burned, embassies stormed and coat of arms pelted with eggs.

But Denmark has become a target for the Muslim world's outrage at cartoons lampooning the prophet Muhammad.

The scope and intensity of the violence ignited by the caricatures, first printed in September by the country's right-leaning Jyllands-Posten newspaper and reprinted more recently in other Western publications, have left this country bewildered.

"A lot of Danes have problems understanding what is going on and why people in those countries reacted this way," said Morton Rixen, a philosophy student, looking out his window at a city a whirl in angst and snow. "We're used to seeing American flags and pictures of George Bush being burned, but we've always seen ourselves as a more tolerant nation. We're in shock to now be in the center of this."

On Wednesday, four people were killed and at least 20 wounded in a fresh round of protests in southern Afghanistan, and demonstrators in the West Bank city of Hebron attacked the offices of international observers, forcing their evacuation. President Bush spoke out about the protest for the first time, saying, "We reject violence as a way to express discontent with what may be printed in a free press."

Danes suspect that the furor over the cartoons has been co-opted by the wider anti-Western agenda of Middle East extremism. Yet they believe the media images of fury over the drawings have cracked the veneer of their nation and exacerbated a debate about immigration, freedom of expression, religious tolerance and a vaunted perception of racial harmony often disputed by immigrants.

Denmark is a small portrait of Europe's struggle to integrate a Muslim population that has doubled since the late-1980s and dotted the continent with head scarves and back-alley mosques. The cartoons were sketched in an atmosphere of rising Muslim discontent, a surge in strength for the anti-immigration Danish People's Party, a commitment to keeping Danish troops in Iraq and the arrests here of suspected militants with reported ties to Al Qaeda.

Some worry that anti-immigrant political parties are exploiting the burning of Danish

embassies in Lebanon, Syria and Iran to promote a xenophobic agenda. "Racism is suddenly popping up in this country," said Merete Ronnow, a nurse who worked in Danish relief efforts in Lebanon and Afghanistan. "I'm stunned by this. It's like now Danes can express exactly what they feel. My colleagues are saying, 'Look, this is how a Muslim acts. This is what a Muslim does.' "

Recent polls reveal a country of torn emotions and doubt. The Danish People's Party has gained 3 percentage points, but so has its nemesis, the Radical Left Party. A newspaper headline this week blamed President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair for not supporting Denmark through the ordeal. And nearly 80% of Danes believe a terrorist attack looms.

"I don't know what to do. It's amazing to see the Danish flag being burned," said Michael Hansen, an engineer. "It's not fear, it's more anxiety. There have been terror attacks in the U.S., Spain and in Britain. We are the logical fourth. If they forgot about us, they've remembered now."

Hansen's roommate, Martin Yhlen, said: "The whole cartoon thing was a ridiculous provocation. The newspaper knew before they published it that people would be extremely upset. You do have freedom of speech, but with that comes a moral obligation. It doesn't benefit integration in Europe. It widens the divide."

Even Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen seems baffled. "We're seeing ourselves characterized as intolerant people or as enemies of Islam as a religion. That picture is false," he said Tuesday during a news conference.

"We're facing a growing global crisis that has the potential to escalate beyond the control of governments and other authorities," he said. "Extremists and radicals who seek a clash of cultures are spreading it.... These are trying times for the Danish people."

Flemming Rose is not sleeping well these days. His cellphone glows with incoming calls. Cultural editor of Jyllands-Posten, Rose commissioned the caricatures. In an interview one recent night, Rose said he was trying to correct what he viewed as a troubling self-censorship in the media and arts over depictions of Islam. His decision to print the caricatures came after a Danish children's book author could not find an illustrator to draw Muhammad because Muslims believe any depiction of God or the prophets is sacrilege.

The caricature Muslims apparently found most offensive in the Jyllands-Posten showed Muhammad wearing a turban shaped like a bomb. Another depicted the prophet complaining that paradise had run out of the virgins who suicide bombers believe await them after death. His publication, said Rose, was a rallying cry for freedom of expression and the Western values of political and religious criticism.

In a like-minded show of solidarity, many European publications have run the drawings since January, when Saudi Arabia and other Muslim nations began boycotting Danish goods, including dairy products that are costing Arla Foods about \$2 million a day. Tehran announced Tuesday that it had cut trade with Denmark, which exports more than \$250 million worth of products annually to Iran.

Rose said that Islam should be treated no differently than Christianity or other religions regarding parody and political satire.

"I think it's problematic when a religion tries to impose its taboos and rules on the larger society," he said. "When they ask me not to run those cartoons, they are not asking for my respect. They're asking for my submission... To me, those cartoons are saying that some individuals have hijacked, kidnapped and taken hostage the religion of Islam to commit terrorism."

The chief editor of Jyllands-Posten, Carsten Juste, said he hadn't realized the explosive nature of the caricatures and apologized for offending Muslims. Rose, however, has no regrets. When asked if the cartoons may have been too provocative in a time of strained relations between Muslims and Europeans, he said, "This has caused a great debate in Western Europe because it hits in the middle of the controversy. Freedom of speech. Religious respect. It's been very instructive."

Protests by European Muslims have been more muted than rallies and demonstrations held in the Middle East, where calls for bloodshed and *fatwas* are common. For Denmark's more than 200,000 Muslims, out of a total population of 5.4 million, democratic values and reverence for the prophet can conflict. Their struggle with a tricky cultural divide often goes unappreciated by native Danes, according to Muslim leaders.

Rightist politicians and commentators, meanwhile, often blame Muslim immigrants for burdening the welfare state while making only cursory efforts to integrate. These sentiments have grown stronger as the Danish People's Party has become the nation's third most powerful party.

"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 in 2004.

"Islam is threatening our future.... That faith belongs to a dark past, and its political aims are as destructive as Nazism was."

Ahmed Akkari is a scourge to populist politicians. A small man with an armful of disheveled papers, Akkari was part of a delegation of Danish Muslims who in December delivered the cartoons and other anti-Islamic sketches to religious leaders in Cairo and

Beirut. The Danish People's Party says the trip was an opportunistic attempt to harm Denmark by triggering resentment across the Muslim world. The party recently called for deporting radical Muslims.

Akkari said he traveled to the Middle East because Denmark's institutions and right-of-center government had ignored the concerns of the Islamic community. "Nobody listened to us," said Akkari, a spokesman for 27 Muslim organizations. "We are not saying censorship of the press.... But there must be limits on the freedom of speech when dealing with some things."

The son of a political refugee who fled Lebanon in the 1970s, Akkari was raised and educated in Denmark. He said the Danes think of themselves as tolerant but that minorities here encounter subtle discrimination and a "national pride" that often feels threatened by immigrants.

When asked about the Jyllands-Posten's right to publish the cartoons, Akkari said the paper should practice equality and publish derogatory caricatures of the Pope and a rabbi. "Then we will be satisfied," he said.

But these days Akkari is more worried that Middle East violence will create a backlash in Europe over integration. "It's hurting our case," he said. "It's turning the picture completely."

The cultural backlash may already be underway. Martin Yhlen has tried to hide the fact that he is a Dane. Studying international development, Yhlen was working on his thesis in Yemen when the cartoon uproar swept the Middle East. Passions grew and the Danish flag went aflame. The Danish Foreign Ministry told him to leave.

"It's strange for us. Danes were always welcome in the Middle East, but now we're not. We've never seen this before. We've seen it with the U.S. and Israel, but not quiet little Denmark."

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Special correspondent Helen Hajjaj contributed to this report.