

European media publish anti-Muslim cartoons: An ugly and calculated provocation

the Editorial Board
4 February 2006

The *World Socialist Web Site* unequivocally condemns the publication by a series of European newspapers of defamatory cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist and killer. These crude caricatures, intended to insult and incite Muslim sensibilities, are a political provocation. Their publication, initially by a right-wing Danish newspaper with historical ties to German and Italian fascism, was calculated to fuel anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment.

The decision of the right-wing Danish government to defend the newspaper that initially published the cartoons, and of newspapers in Norway, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Iceland and Hungary, both conservative and liberal, to reprint them has nothing to do with freedom of the press or the defense of secularism. Such claims make a mockery of these democratic principles.

The promulgation of such bigoted filth is, rather, bound up with a shift by the European ruling elites to line up more squarely behind the neo-colonial interventions of US imperialism in the Middle East and Central Asia. It is no accident that it occurs in the midst of the ongoing slaughter in Iraq, new threats against the Palestinian masses, and the preparations to launch sanctions, and eventual military aggression, against Iran.

It is, moreover, a continuation and escalation of a deliberate policy in Europe, spearheaded by the political right and aided and abetted by the nominal “left” parties, to demonize the growing Muslim population, isolate it, and use it as a scapegoat for the growing social misery affecting broad layers of the working class.

In the name of the fight against terrorism, governments throughout Europe are implementing repressive measures that target, in the first instance, Muslim and other immigrant populations, while preparing the ground for the destruction of the democratic rights of the working class as a whole. These police state preparations go hand in hand with an offensive against the jobs, wages and living standards of working people and an ever-greater concentration of wealth in the coffers of a wealthy and privileged minority at the top.

One does not have to uphold Islam, or any other religion, to sympathize with the indignation of Muslims around the world who have expressed their outrage at the racist drawings flung in their face by media outlets that claim to be defending Western secularist values against the dark hordes from the East.

On Friday, protests against the publication of the cartoons spread across the Middle East, northern Africa and Asia, with thousands

demonstrating in Iraq, tens of thousands in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and some 50,000 filling a square in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. Muslims also protested in Britain and Turkey.

The events that have led up to the present confrontation make it clear that the publication of the cartoons was a political provocation. The Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*, which first published twelve caricatures of Mohammad on September 30, supports the right-wing government headed by Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen—a government that includes in its coalition a rabidly anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim party.

In the 1920s and 1930s, *Jyllands-Posten* was infamous for its affinity for Italian fascism and the German Nazi dictatorship. In 1933, it argued for the introduction of a dictatorship in Denmark.

Last September, the newspaper asked forty cartoonists to draw images of the Prophet Muhammad, something that is proscribed by Islamic law as blasphemous. Spelling out the provocative and inflammatory aim of this exercise, the chief editor said its purpose was “to examine whether people would succumb to self-censorship, as we have seen in other cases when it comes to Muslim issues.”

The newspaper proceeded to publish twelve drawings. These included a cartoon showing the Prophet Muhammad wearing a turban in the shape of a smoking bomb, another with Muhammad on a cloud in heaven telling an approaching line of suicide bombers that he had run out of virgins with which to reward them, and a third depicting the prophet grinning wildly, with a knife in his hand and flanked by heavily-veiled women.

In October, Prime Minister Rasmussen refused to meet with the ambassadors of eleven predominantly Muslim countries who had requested a meeting to discuss their objections to the cartoons. Setting the tone for the ensuing developments, Rasmussen declared that the cartoons were a legitimate exercise in press freedom, and implied that there was nothing to discuss.

The affront was stepped up when a Norwegian magazine published the drawings in January. Denmark continued to ignore protests by Danish Muslim groups and other Muslim organizations until the end of January, when Saudi Arabia and Syria recalled their ambassadors from Denmark and the Saudi regime initiated a consumer boycott of Danish goods.

Only when the boycott spread and the Danish company Arla Foods, the second largest dairy producer in Europe, announced that its Middle Eastern sales had completely dried up, did the Danish government and *Jyllands-Posten* issue statements of regret,

while defending the decision to publish the cartoons.

This week the simmering controversy exploded when the French newspaper *France Soir* republished the cartoons. Defending its printing of the drawings in an editorial on Thursday, the newspaper's editor wrote: "Enough lessons from these reactionary bigots."

Other newspapers in France, including the liberal *Libération*, followed suit, printing some or all of the ugly cartoons. *Le Monde*, for its part, ran a sketch of a man, presumably Mohammad, made up of sentences reading, "I must not draw Muhammad."

The German newspapers *Die Welt*, *Die Tageszeitung*, *Tagesspiegel* and *Berliner Zeitung*, the Dutch papers *Volkscrant*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *Elsevier*, Italy's *La Stampa* and *Corriere della Sera*, Spain's *El Periodico* and two Dutch-language newspapers in Belgium were among those that published some or all of the cartoons over the past several days.

In Britain, the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 all showed some of the cartoons on television news broadcasts.

An indication of the political forces and motives behind the deluge of racist caricatures was the decision of Geert Wilders, a member of the Dutch parliament who has proposed a law that would ban women from wearing burqas, to post the cartoons on his web site "as a token of support to the Danish cartoonists and to stand up for free speech."

Among those European politicians and government officials who have sprung to the defense of the Danish government and the media outlets that published the images is French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. With quintessential cynicism, the man who helped incite last year's anti-police riots in the largely Muslim immigrant suburbs of France by referring to their inhabitants as "scum" and "gangrene" has now adopted the mantle of press freedom to support yet another attack on Muslims.

The absurd attempt to give this anti-democratic assault a democratic veneer is exemplified by Sarkozy, who authored the current state of emergency that has gutted civil liberties in France. The French government of Sarkozy and President Jacques Chirac set the precedent for such anti-Muslim attacks by imposing—with the support of the Socialist and Communist parties and the "far left" *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Struggle)—a ban on Muslim girls wearing head scarves in the public schools. This overt attack on religious freedom in general and the rights of Muslims in particular was likewise passed off as a defense of secularism and the "enlightened" values of the French Republic.

The real content of the supposed crusade for secularism and press freedom was shown in the first wave of mass deportations of French Muslims under a law championed by Sarkozy in the aftermath of last year's riots. The law provides for the summary deportation of all foreigners who are indicted—not convicted—of crimes. Hundreds of youth were arrested by Sarkozy's riot police during the disturbances, and these are now threatened with being shipped out of the country.

The new Grand Coalition government headed by Angela Merkel has likewise called for stronger measures to evict foreigners from German soil.

The foreign policy interests behind the anti-Muslim attack were indicated by the Netherlands' announcement of plans to send

additional troops to help police Afghanistan for US imperialism.

On Friday, the US State Department issued a statement opposing the publication of the cartoons. "These cartoons are indeed offensive to the belief of Muslims," said a department spokesman, adding, "We fully recognize and respect freedom of the press and expression, but it must be coupled with press responsibility. Inciting religious or ethnic hatreds in this manner is not acceptable."

This intervention is entirely hypocritical, coming from a government that has sought repeatedly to muzzle the American press and has waged a brutal attack on Muslims within the US. The Bush administration has, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, spearheaded the assault on Muslims around the world, using the so-called "war on terrorism" as the pretext.

Washington's "respect" for the beliefs of Muslims was exposed before the eyes of the world in the pictures of sadistic abuse of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, where military and intelligence officials employed tactics designed to exploit Muslim beliefs and sensibilities.

The official US response to the publication of the cartoons is largely motivated by immediate concerns over the impact the provocation could have on Washington's imperialist operations in Iraq, Iran and elsewhere.

Some who defend the publication of the cartoons claim they are examples of satire—as though crude appeals to the basest and most bigoted impulses can be equated with genuine social or cultural criticism. In fact, the images plastered on the pages of European newspapers and broadcast on television news programs have far more in common with the type of anti-Semitic caricatures made infamous by the Nazis than they do with satire.

That such outpourings can have anything to do with a struggle for secularism in opposition to religious belief is absurd. A genuine critique of religion can be conducted only on the highest intellectual level, appealing to science and reason—not ignorance and fear.

The current episode reveals the enormous dangers facing the working class from the visible decomposition of democracy in all of the capitalist countries. The promotion of anti-Muslim chauvinism, and all forms of communalist and nationalist poison, is the expression of a social system that is mired in insoluble crisis and incapable of meeting the most basic needs of the broad masses of the people.

The only antidote to such backward and reactionary politics is the development of a united movement of workers of all countries, religions and nationalities in opposition to war and in defense of democratic rights against the capitalist ruling elites and the system they uphold. The program upon which such a struggle must be based is socialist internationalism.

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