

Death toll mounts in worldwide protests against anti-Muslim cartoons

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The death toll has reached at least ten in the repression of protests by Muslims angered by the publication in Europe of cartoons defaming the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist. Demonstrations have taken place in nearly every country where there is a sizeable number of Muslims, from New Zealand to the United States—where a protest took place Monday after the *Philadelphia Inquirer* became the first major US daily to reprint the cartoons.

It is noteworthy that those who have rallied to the defense of the right-wing anti-immigrant newspaper in Denmark that first published the racist cartoons have had little to say about the violence of repressive governments across the Middle East against their own people registering outrage over the widely disseminated insult to their religion.

These ostensible defenders of press freedom instinctively sympathize with the regime of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, which “defended freedom” by shooting down seven demonstrators. Other deaths were reported in Lebanon, Turkey and Somalia. All but one of those killed were Muslim protesters.

In Afghanistan, two people were killed Sunday in separate protests in Kabul and the central town of Mihtarlam. The demonstrators in the capital linked the anti-Muslim cartoons to the US military occupation of their country and clashed with NATO troops. The protesters chanted: “Death to Denmark! Death to Norway! Death to America! Death to Bush!”

On Monday two more demonstrators were shot to death in front of the main US base at Bagram, just outside Kabul, and three more were killed Tuesday by Afghan and Norwegian troops at a NATO base in Maymana, on the country’s northern border.

Thousands took part in demonstrations from the Indian subcontinent to North Africa: in New Delhi,

India; Peshawar, Pakistan; Tehran, Iran; Amman, Jordan; Cairo, Egypt. In the Iranian capital, hundreds of police were mobilized at the Danish embassy and opened fire with tear gas, but a group of 400 youth broke through the cordon and set fire to the building.

While most of the protests were spontaneous expressions of popular anger, in some countries right-wing Islamic fundamentalists or discredited regimes have sought to manipulate the widespread indignation to serve their own ends.

This seems to be particularly the case in Damascus and Beirut, where the Syrian regime both supported and restrained the demonstrations. In the Syrian capital, where the secret police closely monitor all popular political activity, demonstrators were permitted to attack the Danish and Norwegian embassies, but blocked from taking any action against the US and French embassies—i.e., against those powers capable of serious retaliation against Damascus.

In the Lebanese capital, thousands of demonstrators seem to have been bused in from Syria with pre-printed religious signs and instructions to attack first the Danish embassy and then a Maronite Christian church, an action calculated to inflame sectarian tensions and split the unstable anti-Syrian coalition government.

The publication of the anti-Muslim cartoons has been largely portrayed in the US and European press as an effort by a serious newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten* of southern Denmark, to explore whether pressure from Islamic fundamentalists was causing self-censorship by cartoonists, who were unwilling to risk retaliation for portraying the Prophet Muhammad in a negative light. Most coverage in the United States has suggested that the newspaper was shocked that the publication of the cartoons created such a furious reaction.

There is reason to believe, however, that *Jyllands-*

Posten deliberately sought to provoke Muslim anger to fuel a nativist backlash in Denmark. The newspaper is linked politically to the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party, which is opposed to a multi-cultural approach to the growing immigrant population in Denmark and has declared that it is impossible to assimilate Muslims into Danish society. The newspaper played a major role in the election victory of the current prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

Attempts to present the issue as one of secularism vs. religious fundamentalism are no more persuasive, because they obscure the fact that the popular reaction in Muslim countries is rooted not in a centuries-old conflict of rival cultures or systems of religious belief, but in much more recent—indeed contemporary—conditions of imperialist oppression.

As a column in the Long Island-based newspaper *Newsday* admitted, “The deep offense many Muslims have taken to the cartoons is about present-day politics as much as theology.”

Let us pose a question to the crusaders for press freedom. Suppose, on Martin Luther King Day last month, a daily newspaper in Birmingham, Alabama had published a derogatory and racist cartoon of the murdered civil rights leader—something that could only serve to legitimize the revival of racial stereotyping and repression.

Suppose further, that this provocative cartoon resulted in angry and even violent protest demonstrations, and that, in “solidarity,” major daily newspapers in the United States proclaimed it their duty to defend “press freedom” by reprinting the overtly racist cartoon on their front pages? What would be the reaction of those who are today lining up behind the right-wing provocateurs in the name of “press freedom”?

In the heyday of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, American newspapers outside the South would, on occasion, take note of such stereotypes in the Southern press as proof of the ingrained racism of the entire Southern ruling elite. Today, by contrast, press barons are lined up in defense of a right-wing racist provocation against the Muslim population of Western Europe, whose conditions of life, including poverty, job discrimination, housing segregation, police harassment and denial of democratic rights, greatly resemble those of black Americans in the old South.

There is no more “democratic” value in the anti-Muslim cartoons than in the Holocaust-denying screeds of anti-Semitic British author David Irving. But today, as Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul observed aptly, hostility against Muslims has replaced anti-Semitism as a staple of the European and American press.

As was made clear at the Munich conference of Western military and security officials (See: “Munich Security Conference: Imperialists close ranks”), the campaign in defense of the anti-Muslim cartoons is a form of political incitement in the service of definite government policies—not only within countries like Denmark, France and Germany, with large Muslim minorities, but internationally.

The systematic mobilization of liberal sections of the press and political establishment behind the anti-Muslim campaign, on the bogus grounds of freedom of speech, freedom of the press and secularism, is an effort to broaden the social base of support for military intervention against the peoples of the Middle East, particularly Iran and Syria.

To justify such aggression, whether it takes the form of air strikes, full-scale invasion, or even the use of nuclear weapons—which cannot be ruled out—it is necessary to demonize not only a particular political leader or regime, but the entire population of the region. This, not the defense of freedom and democracy, is the essential function of the government and media campaign around the anti-Muslim cartoons.



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