

Anti-Muslim caricatures, anti-Islamic sentiments and press freedom

The controversy over a cartoon in the German *Tagesspiegel*

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Following Denmark, Germany now has its own controversy over anti-Muslim caricatures. On February 10, the Berlin daily paper *Tagesspiegel* published a drawing that provoked disgust among Iranian football fans, drew an official protest from the Iranian government, and led to violent demonstrations in front of the German embassy in Tehran.

The drawing, entitled “Why the German army has to be called up for the [football] World Cup,” shows four Iranian football players, unshaven and with moustaches, displayed as suicide bombers wearing explosive belts. The other side of the cartoon shows four dazed German soldiers.

Critics have attacked the cartoon as a slander against the Iranian people, depicting them indiscriminately as terrorists. The Iranian embassy in Germany wrote that the “tasteless drawing” caused “revulsion and disgust” among the Iranian population and demanded an apology from the journalists responsible.

The author of the cartoon, Klaus Stuttmann, refused to accede to this demand and said that he had not insulted anyone, saying that he only wanted to protest against the planned deployment of the German army at the football World Cup. He said that it had never occurred to him that his cartoon would cause such a reaction of disgust. He went on to say that he had also thought the cartoon competition held by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, which had called for caricature submissions of the prophet Mohammed and published 12 of them, was a “needless provocation.”

Stuttmann has received a flood of emails, some containing death threats, and is presently in hiding.

In a joint letter to the *Tagesspiegel*, 50 cartoonists defended Stuttmann and argued along similar lines. They argued that the cartoon contained “political content that concerned only Germany, and that operated with the irony of depicting a scenario that did not represent reality. This irony was either not understood or was consciously overlooked and falsely interpreted.”

The editorial office of the *Tagesspiegel* offered a half-hearted apology. “We regret the Iranian reaction to the cartoon, we regret its impact, here and elsewhere,” it declared on February

15 under the heading “On our own behalf.” The statement went on: “We can only explain it on the basis of a limited knowledge of the internal political debate in Germany. Of course, neither Klaus Stuttmann nor the *Tagesspiegel* wanted to place the integrity of Iranian footballers in question.”

At the same time, however, the editors defended publishing the cartoon. This was done “within the limits of what is covered by the freedom of expression and the press in this country.” The editors thanked those readers who had offered their solidarity to the *Tagesspiegel* and to Stuttmann. One of these readers, in a letter to the editor published in the *Tagesspiegel*, had an obvious racist tone.

Although the editors of the *Tagesspiegel* maintained a certain distance, other sections of the media went on the offensive using “freedom of opinion and of the press” as their weapon, and sought to portray the protests against the caricatures as a reaction of the Islamic world against freedom of opinion, irony and humour. They continued the campaign that started with the publishing of the caricatures of Mohammed in *Jyllands-Posten* and other European newspapers.

The editor-in-chief of the *Berliner Zeitung*, Uwe Vorkötter, wrote a strongly worded commentary under the heading, “With humour, without respect.” He complained that it was offensive “that a serious newspaper like the *Tagesspiegel* saw itself compelled (and was in fact compelled) to publish an explanation and justification where no explanation or justification was necessary.”

Vorkötter wrote that the protest of the Iranian embassy, which viewed the caricature as insensitive, irresponsible and immoral, was “absurd, dangerously absurd.” “We will not subject ourselves to the prejudices of a humour-resistant Islamic moral police that sees everything Western as decadent and everything heathen as debauched,” he fulminated.

In similar fashion, the German Green Party representative in the European Parliament, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, commented: “We as politicians are not allowed to dictate to the press where its boundaries are. Freedom is neither tasteful nor tasteless.”

If anything is absurd, then it is the attempt to represent the dispute over the cartoon as a controversy over the pros and cons

of free speech. The issue is not to ban the publication of a cartoon but rather to evaluate it. The right to protest and be infuriated about such a publication is also an integral part of the right to free speech. If the *Tagesspiegel* assumes the right to publish such a caricature then others also have the right to condemn it publicly. This has nothing to do with censorship.

Stuttman's football cartoon is not so harmless as the author and his editorial board like to maintain. The representation of Iranian football players as bearded suicide bombers corresponds to a racist stereotype which numerous Iranians must regard as offensive.

Such a stereotype is no better than the representation of Jews with hooked noses, a hanging lower lip and garbed in a kaftan. Such representations have disappeared from the German press because they represent an anti-Semitic cliché, which remains anti-Semitic even if the cartoon is aimed at intervening in the "internal political debate" and is not expressly directed against Jews. If, nevertheless, such a caricature were to be published in a major German newspaper, then the inevitable result would be protests from offended parties and an apology by the editorial board and the German government.

The demand for an apology by the Iranian ambassador is not as misplaced as it is represented by much of the media. One recalls the comparison made between US president George W. Bush and Adolf Hitler, by the former German Justice Minister, Herta Däubler Gmelin, at the beginning of the Iraq war. Although the comparison was thoroughly justified and Däubler Gmelin expressed it only in a verbal comment at a closed trade union meeting, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder wrote a personal letter apologizing to Bush and Däubler Gmelin was sacked. At that time, no one saw fit to protest about this violation of the principle of free speech.

The death threats against the caricaturist are reactionary and must be condemned. But neither the anonymous threats by email, nor the fact that Islamic forces can manipulate genuine indignation for their own reactionary purposes, can divert from the fact that many people feel insulted by the cartoon.

The initial protests came not from Islamists but from a football web site, *persianfootball.com*, maintained by exiled Iranians who regard themselves as remote from the mullah regime in Teheran. According to *Die Zeit* newspaper, supporters of the Iranian national soccer team felt offended by the cartoon because it equated "the last remaining Iranians—the national team—which is respected in the West, with Arab Islamists and the hated regime....The enslaved people are now forced to show some solidarity with the mullahs. And all because of the mockery of football players who also play for German clubs."

If Stuttman states he could not have anticipated the reactions to his cartoon, then, to put it politely, this does not reflect well on him as a cartoonist. A high and critical level of political consciousness is the basis for good caricatures. Otherwise they sink to the level of cheap jokes that create humour at the

expense of others and encourage backward prejudices.

The publication of the Mohammed caricatures by the *Jyllands Posten* infuriated millions of Muslims who regard the ridiculing of the founder of their religion as a continuation of the colonial suppression carried out by the Great Powers, intent on the confiscation of oil and other resources of the Middle East and Central Asia. They saw a direct connection between the cartoons and the Iraq war, which found a symbolic expression in the torture photos from Abu Ghaib, and the threats and preparations for war with Iran. Under these circumstances it could come as no surprise to any thinking person that the football cartoon in the *Tagesspiegel* would be looked upon as a further provocation.

On the other hand, the erroneous campaign over "freedom of the press" only serves to represent Islam as a backward culture which is incompatible with "Western values." Over a century ago, wars were ideologically prepared by the major imperialist powers with crude propaganda over the "yellow peril." Now new conflicts are being planned with the aid of similar propaganda—wars and conflicts which will far exceed the brutality and loss of life inflicted so far in the Iraq war.

The fact that ultra-right-wing forces have suddenly discovered a passion for the defence of free speech demonstrates the utterly cynical nature of the current campaign. This not only applies to the *Jyllands Posten*, which moves in the vaporous atmosphere surrounding Denmark's ultra-right and xenophobic Danish People's Party.

The latest such protagonist for "free speech" to emerge is the Italian Reform Minister Roberto Calderoni. A member of the racist Northern League who is already notorious for organizing demonstrations against the building of mosques, Calderoni appeared on Italian television wearing a T-shirt sporting the Mohammed caricatures. He declared his action represented a "fight for liberty" and demanded a halt to any dialogue with the protesting Islamic world. He also called for the "hypocritical distinction" between a terrorist and peace-loving Islamism to be dropped.



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