

Denmark and Jyllands-Posten: The background to a provocation

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The basic lie in the controversy over the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad published by Danish and European newspapers is the claim that the conflict is between free speech and religious censorship, or between Western enlightenment and Islamic bigotry.

The *taz* newspaper, which has close links to the German Greens, declared the conflict was about reducing the influence of all religions, including Christianity, “to a tolerable measure.” In *Spiegel.online*, Henryk M. Broder condemned the halfhearted apology made by the publishers of the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*, which unleashed the caricature controversy, as an “example of how democratic public opinion capitulates to a totalitarian standpoint.”

An examination of the prevailing political conditions in Denmark reveals how bogus such arguments are. One would be hard pressed to find another European country where political changes over the past few years have found such a clear—and repellent—expression.

In a country renowned for its tolerance and openness, the social crisis and the betrayals carried out by the old working class organizations have opened the way for the emergence of political forces which systematically encourage xenophobia and racism. The newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* has played a prominent role in this process.

Last autumn *Jyllands-Posten* assigned 40 prominent Danish caricaturists to draw the Prophet Muhammad. Twelve responded and the results were published on September 30. The project was deliberately designed to provoke.

According to the cultural editor of the newspaper, Flemming Rose, it was aimed at “testing the limits of self-censorship in Danish public opinion” when it comes to Islam and Muslims. He added: “In a secular society, Muslims have to live with the fact of being ridiculed, scoffed at and made to look ridiculous.”

When the anticipated reaction by the Muslim community failed to arise, the newspaper continued its campaign, determined to create a full-scale scandal. After a week had gone by without protest, journalists turned on Danish Islamic

religious leaders who were well known for their fundamentalist views and demanded: “Why don’t you protest?” Eventually, the latter reacted and alerted their co-thinkers in the Middle East.

At this point the head of the Danish government, Andres Fogh Rasmussen, and the xenophobic Danish People’s Party, which is part of the ruling coalition, swung into action. Fogh Rasmussen demonstratively turned down appeals by concerned Arab ambassadors for talks to clarify the issue. Even after 22 former Danish ambassadors appealed to the prime minister to hold discussions with the representatives of Islamic states, Rasmussen maintained his stance, arguing that “freedom of the press” could not be a topic for diplomatic discussion.

The chairperson of the Danish People’s Party, Pia Kjaersgaard, insulted Danish Muslims who complained about the caricatures, publicly denouncing them as national traitors because they supposedly placed their religious beliefs above free speech.

From the start, the campaign had nothing to do with “free speech” and everything to do with the political agenda of the Fogh Rasmussen government, comprising of a coalition of right-wing neo-liberals and conservatives, together with the Danish People’s Party.

The latter rose to prominence in the 1990s when all of the country’s bourgeois parties—including the then-governing Social Democrats—responded to a mounting social crisis with xenophobic campaigns. The People’s Party declared at the time that Islam was a “cancerous ulcer” and “terrorist movement.” Kjaersgaard, notorious for her racist outbursts, declared that the Islamic world could not be regarded as civilized. “There is only one civilization, and that is ours,” she said.

Fogh Rasmussen, at that time the chairman of the right-wing Venstre party, adopted much of the racist demagoguery of the People’s Party. In the election campaign of 2001 he demanded, among other things, that “criminal foreigners” be thrown out of the country within 48 hours.

His campaign utilized an election poster featuring pictures

of Muslim criminals to suggest that all Muslims were violent. Venstre won the election and, together with the traditional conservative party, formed a minority government, which was supported by the extremist People's Party.

Danish politics lurched far to the right. The country's immigration laws were drastically tightened, while spending for development aid was cut back. In the Iraq war, which was opposed by the majority of the Danish population, Fogh Rasmussen lined up behind the Bush administration and sent a contingent of Danish troops to help occupy the country.

The campaign unleashed by *Jyllands-Posten* is a continuation and intensification of this reactionary trajectory, aimed at bolstering the xenophobic policies of the government and strengthening its support for US imperialism.

The caricatures themselves are patently racist. They suggest that every Muslim is a potential terrorist. Reports and pictures of outraged Muslims protesting the defamation of their prophet are used to reinforce this slander.

Official politics and the media throughout Europe are increasingly preoccupied with such agitation. Muslims are collectively held responsible for acts carried out by terrorist groups, although they bear no responsibility for them. In the German state of Baden-Württemberg, Muslims seeking to stay in the country must answer a catalog of questions probing their religious beliefs.

Television news presenters regularly malign Muslims for being prepared to protest against the defamation of Muhammad, but not against acts carried out by terrorist groups in the name of Islam, suggesting that they secretly support such acts.

A campaign is emerging to depict Islam as an inferior culture that is incompatible with "Western values." There are clear parallels here to the anti-Semitic caricatures that were spread in the 1930s by fascist newspapers such as the Nazi *Stürmer*. The depiction of Jews as sub-humans served as the ideological preparation for the Holocaust.

Today the systematic defamation of Muslims is being used to prepare public opinion for new wars against countries such as Iran and Syria—wars which will be even more brutal than the Iraq war, and could well involve the use of nuclear weapons.

It is no coincidence that it was the *Jyllands-Posten* that took up this initiative. The newspaper is notorious for its declarations of support for the Nazis in the 1930s, and has played a key role in Denmark's recent shift to the right.

With editorial offices in the rural area of Aarhus, *Jyllands-Posten* remained a relatively insignificant provincial newspaper until the beginning of the 1980s. At that time it began an aggressive policy of expansion. It bought up

smaller regional and local newspapers and launched a price war with the two established newspapers in the Danish capital—*Berlingske Tidende* and *Politiken*—and rapidly built up its circulation to 170,000, becoming the biggest circulation newspaper in the country.

In the 1990s the decidedly conservative paper increasingly developed into a mouthpiece for openly xenophobic, right-wing forces. Nearly a quarter of the editorial board was dismissed, and the quality of the paper sank as its aggressiveness rose.

Shortly before the publication of the Muhammad cartoons, *Jyllands-Posten* ran a headline reading, "Islam is the Most Belligerent." The newspaper ran an exposé about an alleged Muslim death-list of Jewish names—until it emerged that the whole thing was a fabrication.

One year ago the editor-in-chief resigned because the newspaper carried a report, in the midst of an election campaign, alleging the systematic abuse of welfare rights by asylum-seekers. The sensational charges were published against his will.

The notorious right-wing sympathies of *Jyllands-Posten* are no secret. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* describes it as "a newspaper with an almost missionary zeal, boasting that it has been successful in breaking the ideological and political grip of left-wing liberals over Danish society." According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, it would be "an inadmissible simplification" to equate *Jyllands-Posten* with the People's Party, but they are certainly "fellow combatants in the broader sense."

The *Frankfurt Rundschau* writes: "Connoisseurs of Danish media will note with no little irony that it is precisely *Jyllands-Posten* which is now considered to be a beacon for free speech, i.e., the most right-wing of the Danish newspapers, which normally thrashes anyone who dares to advance a different point of view."



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