

Denmark's media mount a provocation by reprinting Mohammed cartoons

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Virtually the entire media in Denmark reprinted the notorious caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed on February 13.

The decision to re-print came just one day after three men, two Tunisians and a Danish national, were arrested for an alleged plot to kill one of the cartoonists, Kurt Westergaard. At least 15 papers across Denmark reprinted images of the cartoons, in what can only be described as a calculated provocation. Despite having no evidence regarding the guilt of the three detained, since the security service claimed it moved on suspicion and did not have enough grounds to charge the men, the Danish media raced to be first to print the cartoons, supposedly to underline their defence of “free speech.”

Jyllands-Posten, the newspaper that commissioned and first printed the cartoons in 2005, chose to use the image in place of every letter “O” in the paper’s name “*Posten*” throughout that day’s publication. *Extra Bladet*, a prominent tabloid, took the opportunity to print the entire selection of 12 cartoons in its February 13 edition. Even the nominally left publication *Politiken*, which had criticised *Jyllands-Posten* for its original publishing of the cartoon, reprinted the image. “In a free society, we can discuss how public discussions should be conducted, but not if they should be conducted,” Tøger Seidenfaden, editor-in-chief, said.

Jyllands-Posten had justified its original publication of the cartoon as an attempt to test the limits of self-censorship. However, the history of *Jyllands-Posten*, including its support for German and Italian fascism during the 1920s and 1930s, makes abundantly clear that this was nothing more than an attempt to stir up racial and religious antagonisms. When the original printing of the cartoons failed to generate the desired outraged response from Islamic groups, the newspaper continued to stoke the controversy.

As protests spread, the images were republished in newspapers across Europe under the specious claim that what was involved was the defence of “freedom of expression” in opposition to a “totalitarian” Islam.

The Danish government refused to meet with delegations of majority Muslim countries opposed to the defamatory images, leading to weeks of protests across the world during January and February 2006. Danish embassies were targeted and a boycott of Danish goods by Middle Eastern countries was

instituted. In the end this was one of the major factors that impelled the government to seek reconciliation.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time: “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 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.” (See “Denmark and *Jyllands-Posten*: The background to a provocation”)

The latest events demonstrate the extent to which the so-called liberal and “left of centre” sections of the establishment have lurched rightwards. Justifying its decision to publish the cartoon, *Politiken* said that the Danish media should stand behind *Jyllands-Posten* “when it is threatened with terrorism.” The alleged murder plot “shows that there are fanatic Islamists who are ready to make good on their threats and there are people in this country who neither respect freedom of expression nor the law.”

Recent events confirm the fraudulent character of the Danish establishment’s claim to be defending democratic rights. The fact that those arrested for the supposed plot were not charged and that the two Tunisian nationals will be expelled from Denmark without any legal proceedings whatsoever did not raise any concerns.

Little has been said in the media about the three accused of the murder plot and their right to the presumption of innocence until proven guilty and to a fair trial. The two Tunisians, although they have been living in Denmark for more than seven years, are to be deported under reactionary legislation which provides for anyone deemed to be a “national security threat” to be expelled from Denmark.

Lawyers representing the Danish Institute for Human Rights and one of the Tunisians accused explained that the decision to expel without trial has deep implications for fundamental principals of democracy. “It is incomprehensible that we can release one of the three suspects in this affair, a Danish citizen, for lack of evidence, yet expel two foreigners without knowing

the reason why or giving them the chance to defend themselves before a judge,” Franz Wenzel told Danish TV.

“It is profoundly troubling that the reasons for these expulsions will not be judged by an independent court,” said Christoffer Badse, a lawyer at a state-funded institute.

As an op-ed piece in the *Middle East Times* by Frank Kaufmann put it, “One presumes that Denmark upholds due process, and that in Denmark arrests are not equated with guilt, but remarkably 15 Danish newspapers reprinted this very same cartoon on Wednesday in protest against the alleged plot.

“Even if these papers had waited for a guilty verdict following due process, it would remain the case that an infantile provocation of this magnitude is beyond reproach. Considering the vast difficulties worldwide that derived from the initial printing of these cartoons, there are simply no words to describe the decision of not one or two deranged editors, but a coordinated effort among 15 newspapers in what is generally regarded as a modern nation.”

The government remains committed to using the anti-democratic law, which is part of Denmark’s anti-terrorist legislation adopted in 2002 after the September 11 attacks. Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated on February 19 that the expulsions were necessary to protect Denmark from terrorists, even though no one has been charged with such a crime.

Underscoring the degree of calculation, the cartoon was republished in the midst of rioting in predominantly immigrant neighbourhoods over a period of eight days, beginning February 10. The disturbances were in response to increased police surveillance and stop-and-search powers. Over 50 people were arrested during the troubles, as young people took to the streets of many Danish cities, burning cars and setting fire to other properties including schools.

There is no doubt that the Danish media seized the opportunity to fuel tensions and justify the police crackdown.

It is the third time in just under a year that rioting has broken out in Danish cities. In March 2007 many took to the streets to protest the eviction of a group of squatters from a youth centre. The protests became violent and were only quelled after a number of days, with 650 people being arrested. On the six-month anniversary of the demolition of the youth centre, riots broke out in Norrebro, the local district, in early September.

It was after these events that police instituted a random stop-and-search policy. Originally confined to a limited number of areas, they were greatly expanded. The final straw that triggered the recent disturbances appears to have been the alleged violence by police towards an elderly Palestinian man in early February.

The prospects for young people, especially immigrants, are bleak. Many complain of alienation and marginalisation. This position has been actively encouraged by the government’s right-wing allies, the Danish People’s party (DPP), which has taken part in government coalitions with the Conservative and

Liberal parties since 2001 and has been the driving force behind some of the most reactionary measures adopted, including the severe tightening of immigration legislation.

More fundamentally, it is the consequence of the putrefaction of the old organisations, particularly the Social Democrats and the trade unions, and their inability to defend the basic social interests of the working class. This has led many young people to turn to violent protest as a means of expressing their sense of injustice and outrage.

Writing in the British *Guardian*, Jacob Illeborg noted that “Denmark, once acknowledged for her liberal stance and social egalitarianism, has over the last years become an increasingly polarised society where the differences between the Danish majority and migrants and especially Muslim migrants have been the dominant political agenda.” He added, “In certain neighbourhoods the atmosphere is now so tense that I avoid going there when in Copenhagen.”

It is still not clear what the implications of the re-printing of the cartoons will be in terms of protests in other countries. A relatively small protest took place in Khartoum, capital of Sudan, Rafah in the Gaza Strip, in the Indonesian capital Jakarta, in Bahrain and in three cities in Pakistan—Multan, Karachi and the capital Islamabad. Earlier in the week, Pakistan summoned the Danish ambassador to demand an apology and to express “strong protest” to the republication. Iran and Egypt have also lodged complaints and a conference organised in Denmark to discuss the situation in Iraq issued a statement condemning the decision.

It is quite possible these protests could escalate. In this environment, it is to be expected that any protests will be used by the defenders of “free speech” to bolster their opinion that Muslims are fundamentally “intolerant” and “totalitarian” and that they threaten western democratic society. Thus the “freedom of the press” campaign will be used to promote the most reactionary of political ends.



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