

Unanswered questions about attack on Danish cartoonist

Stefan Steinberg
8 January 2010

The attack carried out by a Somali man against the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard at the start of January, just a few days after the failed Christmas day airline bombing of Northwest Flight 253 in Detroit, has been deliberately exploited by sections of the European media and political circles to both revive and intensify anti-Muslim sentiments, as well as stoke up support for the US-led “war on terror”.

In fact there are genuine grounds for comparing the recent events in Detroit and the attack on Westergaard. The official US explanation of how a young Nigerian, with known links to terrorist groups, could fly undetected halfway around the globe and then attempt to blow up a plane over Detroit is barely credible. And, in the case of the attack on the Danish cartoonist, similar glaring anomalies have emerged, throwing into doubt the version of events given by the Danish authorities and intelligence services.

On January 1 a Somali-born citizen with a Danish residence permit broke into the house of the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard in Aarhus, Denmark’s second largest city, 125 miles northwest of Copenhagen. The Somali, later identified as Mohammed Muhideen Gelle, allegedly brandished an axe and proclaimed his intention to kill Westergaard, who fled to a specially constructed safe room and alerted the police. The police shot Gelle in the hand and knee before arresting him.

Westergaard came to prominence in 2006 as one of 12 Danish artists who depicted cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in a manner highly offensive to Muslims. Westergaard’s own cartoon was one of the most provocative, portraying Muhammad with a stick of dynamite in his turban, i.e. blatantly depicting the central figure of Muslim faith as a terrorist. The cartoons were published in the Danish

daily *Jyllands-Posten* and then, in the name of “free speech”, reprinted in newspapers across Europe. In fact, from the start the campaign surrounding the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons had nothing to do with “free speech” and much more to do with the ultra right political agenda of the Danish government—a coalition of right-wing neo-liberals and conservatives, including the avowedly anti-Muslim Danish People’s Party.

This anti-Islamic provocation was undertaken by right wing forces across Europe to encourage xenophobic sentiments. The aim and background to the campaign have been dealt with extensively on the WSWs (See “Denmark and Jyllands-Posten: The background to a provocation”). Following the publication of the cartoons and a number of death threats against him, Westergaard was given extensive police protection.

In the wake of the attack on Westergaard it now emerges that Mohammed Muhideen Gelle was well known to the Danish security services. Despite the fact that he lived in a rundown apartment in Denmark and was married with three children, Gelle evidently had sufficient finances to undertake a series of trips abroad. Just last summer he was detained by the authorities in Nairobi after the Kenyan police observed Gelle associating with other suspects on a Kenyan terror watch list. He was arrested on July 30 and released on August 12.

According to the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, the Somali and four other suspects were said by the Kenyan police to have been involved in a plan to conduct terrorist attacks against a bus station and two hotels in Nairobi, including the Hotel Intercontinental, where the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was taking part in a meeting on African development.

After Gelle was set free, the head of Kenya’s

antiterrorism police, Nicholas Kamwende, declared that the Kenyan authorities had passed on “intelligence information” about Gelle to the Danish Embassy. “We told them, ‘He is a dangerous man,’ but their reaction was negative,” Mr. Kamwende said in an interview. It is inconceivable that the American intelligence authorities were not informed by their Kenyan or Danish counterparts of the identity of Gelle and his involvement in a plot to threaten the life of the US Secretary of State.

In an initial statement after the January attack on Westergaard, the head of the Danish intelligence service (PET) Jakob Scharf acknowledged that Gelle had in fact been under surveillance by his intelligence agency.

The PET statement said that the “attempted assassination” of Mr. Westergaard was “terror related” and that PET had information that the Somali assailant “has close relations to the Somali terror organization Al Shabab and leaders of Al Qaeda in East Africa”... and was “also suspected of having been involved in terror-related activities during his stay in East Africa.”

In the latest development, Gelle’s ex-wife has now told the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper that PET had sought to recruit her husband as an informant in 2006. PET officials have refrained from denying the newspaper report, declaring simply that it was normal for the intelligence agency to conduct “interviews with individuals that may be of interest to the service.”

While media apologists for the Danish security services seek to explain away the attack on Westergaard on the basis of lapses in intelligence gathering and a “failure to connect the dots” the official account of what took place defies credibility. In recent years the Danish government has implemented changes to its immigration law, which now rank among the most restrictive in all of Europe. Nevertheless, we are asked to believe that a man with allegedly extensive terrorist contacts and under surveillance by Danish intelligence authorities was able to move freely between Africa and Europe and then carry out an attack on one of the best-protected men in Denmark.

While a host of questions arise as to the real state of relations between Gelle and the Danish security services, what is clear is that the attack on Westergaard is being utilised by right-wing political forces to once again stir up anti-Muslim sentiments and create a

climate of hysteria to justify the opening up of new fronts in the “anti-terror war”.

Predictably, conservative papers such as the British *Times* and *Daily Mail* used the assault on Westergaard to call for a renewed political offensive against Muslims. In Germany the rabidly pro-Israel author Henryk M. Broder wrote a commentary for *Der Spiegel* on the Westergaard attack titled, “The West is choked by fear”. In his editorial Broder vehemently condemns all those who expressed their solidarity with Muslims after the initial publication of the Muhammad cartoons.

A number of newspaper commentaries have also linked the assault on Westergaard with the failed bombing of the Northwest Flight 253 in order to make the case for an expansion of the “war against terror”.

In an article in the influential German weekly magazine *Die Zeit*, entitled “A typical German debate”, author Frank Jensen argues that it is inadequate to restrict the discussion over the consequences of the failed Detroit bombing and the attack on Westergaard to the pros and cons of installing body scanners at airports. Instead Jensen concludes that, in addition to measures to combat Islamic extremism at home, Germany must play a much more aggressive role in combating terrorism abroad. “The federal republic will be unable to avoid the necessity of considerably expanding its efforts in the struggle against terror abroad”, Jensen writes, “in particular in its attitude to failed states where Al Qaeda and its affiliates are located.”

With US pressure growing for increased European military involvement in Afghanistan the attack on Westergaard, together with the failed Detroit plane bombing, are being deliberately exploited to break down widespread public opposition to militarism and create conditions where European nations can massively step up their own commitment to the “war against terror”.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact