

Cartoons ignite cultural combat in Denmark
By Dan Bilefsky International Herald Tribune
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COPENHAGEN When the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published 12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad - including one in which he is shown wearing a turban shaped as a bomb with a burning fuse - it expected a strong reaction in this country of 5.4 million people.

But the paper was unprepared for the global furor inspired by the cartoons, which provoked demonstrations in the Indian-controlled part of Kashmir, death threats against the artists, condemnation from 11 Muslim countries and a rebuke from the United Nations.

"The cartoons did nothing that transcends the cultural norms of secular Denmark, and this was not a provocation to insult Muslims," said Flemming Rose, cultural editor of Jyllands-Posten, Denmark's largest newspaper, which has refused to apologize for publishing the drawings.

"But if we talk of freedom of speech, even if it was a provocation, that does not make our right to do it any less legitimate before the law," he added in an interview from Miami, where he has fled to escape the publicity after living under police protection in Denmark.

As countries across Europe grapple with how to assimilate their growing Muslim communities in the post-Sept. 11, 2001, world, Denmark has become an unlikely flash point in the growing culture wars between Islam and the West.

The publication of the cartoons in late September has spawned a fierce national debate over whether Denmark's famously liberal freedom of speech laws have gone too far. It also has tested the patience of Denmark's 200,000-strong Muslim community. Its members say the cartoons reflect an intensifying anti-immigrant climate that is stigmatizing minorities and radicalizing young Muslims.

In Norrebro, an ethnically mixed neighborhood of Copenhagen where the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard is buried and where kebab stands dot the tree-lined streets, Imam Ahmed Abu-Laban, a leader of Denmark's Muslim community, bristles at what he calls the "Islam-phobia" gripping the country.

Abu-Laban asserted that the cartoons had been calculated to incite Muslims since it was well-known that in Islam, depictions of the prophet are considered blasphemy.

"We are being mentally tortured," he said from his mosque, in an anonymous building that looks more like an apartment complex than a house of worship. "The cartoons are an insult against Islam, an attempt by right-wing forces in this country to get a rise out of the Muslim community and so portray us as against Danish values."

Rose, of Jyllands-Posten, who has worked as a journalist in Iran, said he decided to commission the cartoons when he heard that Danish cartoonists were too scared of

Muslim fundamentalists to illustrate a new children's biography of Muhammad.

Annoyed at the self-censorship he said had overtaken Europe since the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered last year by a Muslim radical for criticizing Islam's treatment of women, he said he had decided to test Denmark's free speech norms.

The cartoons were published amid an intensifying anti-immigrant backlash in Denmark, reflected in the rise of the far-right Danish People's Party.

The party, which holds 13 percent of the seats in the Danish Parliament, has helped to push through the toughest anti-immigration rules on the Continent, including a prohibition on Danish citizens age 24 or under bringing in spouses from outside Denmark.

Soren Krarup, a retired priest and leading voice in the party, said the Muslim reaction to the cartoons showed that Islam was not compatible with Danish customs. He said that Christ had been satirized in Danish literature and popular culture for centuries - including a recent much-publicized Danish painting of Jesus with an erection - so why not Muhammad? He also argued that Danish Muslims must integrate.

"Muslims who come here reject our culture," Krarup said. "Muslim immigration is a way for Muslims to conquer us, just as they have done for the past 1,400 years."

Muslim leaders warn that such rhetoric is alienating the people the Danish People's Party says it wants to assimilate.

"Are young Muslims growing up here going to assimilate better when they hear themselves described in this way?" Abu-Laban said.

In the latest sign that some Muslims in Denmark are becoming radicalized, the police in October arrested seven Muslim men aged 20 or under in connection with an alleged terrorism plot in Bosnia.

One of the men, Abdulkadir Cesur, 18, a Turk with Danish residency, was arrested in a raid near a Bosnian airport in which the police found evidence indicating an imminent suicide bombing, including suicide vests and 30 kilograms, or 65 pounds, of high explosives.

Of the seven men, whom the police describe as fervent Muslims, six attended the same Libyan-backed mosque in the Norrebro neighborhood, Danish investigators say. The men studied under a radical, self-proclaimed imam, Abu Ahmed, 33, a Libyan of Palestinian origin who is known for giving fiery sermons calling for jihad against the West.

Danish counterterrorism officials say a growing number of young Danish Muslims are being drawn to Hizb ut-Tahrir, or the Party of Liberation, a radical Muslim group that calls for creation of an Islamic caliphate and whose goal is the unification of all Muslim countries under one leader who would implement Sharia, the Islamic legal code. The

group, which distributes its literature at mosques and on the Internet, is banned in most of the Muslim world, as well as in Russia and Germany, but it is allowed to operate in Denmark and Britain.

Terrorism experts say the group has played a major role in the radicalization of disaffected Muslim youth. But because its main weapon is ideology rather than explosives, Danish officials say, it is allowed to operate under the same permissive rules that allowed the publication of the cartoons.

Under Danish law, inciting someone to commit an act of terror is illegal, but spouting vitriol against the West or satirizing Muhammad is not. The State Prosecutor's Office investigated the group in the spring of 2004 and decided not to ban it since it was not breaking the law.

Still, legal experts say that groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir are pushing the limits of Denmark's free-speech rules. Claus Bergsoe, a Danish lawyer who has defended Islamic militants, said that balancing civil liberties and fighting terrorism had become harder since Sept. 11 and that the government was beginning to clamp down.

In the first prosecution under new counterterrorism laws introduced in 2002, a Moroccan-born Danish publisher, Said Mansour, was charged in September with inciting fellow Muslims to holy war by producing and distributing CDs and DVDs showing beheadings in Chechnya and glorifying suicide bombers. His defense counsel described the material as "controversial art." Mansour remains in custody.

Yet Hizb ut-Tahrir continues to flourish. Abu-Laban, the Muslim community leader, who also does outreach work with Muslim youth, said he had personally observed the influence of the group. He said Hizb ut-Tahrir recruited his son Taim, a 17-year-old student, by focusing on the grievances of the Muslim world in Iraq, Palestine and Chechnya, and playing on his sense of alienation by offering him instant heroism and a strong sense of identity.

In December, Taim, formerly a straight-A pupil, was expelled from Vester Borgerdyd, a Danish public school with a large Muslim minority, after teachers overheard him giving sermons calling for the destruction of Israel and assailing Danish democracy during Friday prayers at the school.

Abu-Laban blames Hizb ut-Tahrir for encouraging Taim, who has since been ordered out of the house by his father.

"Hizb ut-Tahrir knew that the son of an imam would be a nice fish to catch and they misused him," Abu-Laban said. "They sell a simple package by giving young Muslims martyrdom in 15 minutes. If they were good Muslims, they would have told my son to listen to his father," he added, his eyes moistening.

"Now he is being made out to be some kind of Khomeini," he said, referring to the Iranian revolutionary, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

At the Vester Borgerdyd school, whose walls are lined with photographs of smiling

students in Muslim dress, the headmistress, Anne Birgitte Rasmussen, said that Taim had been attracting a large following and that she feared his sermons would raise tensions among the school's more moderate Muslims.

After his expulsion, a committee of Danish rectors banned Friday prayers at all public schools across Denmark. Danish officials say that the maintenance of civil order trumps freedom of speech in the public school system.

"The tone of the political debate in this country, the talk about Muslims and immigrants, is making it very difficult for us," Rasmussen said.

In a secluded community center a few blocks from the school, Fadi Abdul Latif, the spokesman of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Denmark, said in an interview that the ban on school prayer was just the latest outrage from a political establishment that was trying to criminalize Islam in order to discredit the religion.

"The government says it's O.K. to make jokes about urinating on the Koran," Abdul Latif said. "They are inciting violence and provocation so that they can make new laws that discriminate even more against Muslims."

He added that the anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Danish People's Party had contributed to a swelling of Hizb ut-Tahrir's ranks in recent months.

"When Muslims see the discrimination here, they begin to listen," Abdul Latif said.

In 2002, Abdul Latif was charged with distributing hate literature that attacked Jews and praised suicide bombers as martyrs. A leaflet quoted a verse from the Koran: "And kill them from wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out." He received a 60-day suspended sentence.

In 2004, Abdul Latif distributed a flyer exhorting Muslims to "go help your brothers in Falluja and exterminate your rulers if they block your way."

Abdul Latif, a Palestinian who grew up in a refugee camp in Lebanon before moving to Copenhagen in 1986, said the call to arms was aimed at fighters in the Muslim world - not in Denmark. He said he had been called in for questioning by the police over the summer, but had continued to distribute his pamphlets unhindered.

Even Hizb ut-Tahrir's fiercest critics, such as Rose, the editor behind the Muhammad cartoons, say the group should be allowed to operate as long as it does not break the law.

But Rose acknowledges that even his liberalism has its limits. He said he would not publish a cartoon of Israel's Ariel Sharon strangling a Palestinian baby, since that could be construed as "racist." He would, however, publish a cartoon poking fun at Moses or one of Jesus drinking a pint of beer.

"Muslims should be allowed to burn the Danish flag in a public square if that's within the boundaries of the law," he said. "Though I think this would be a strange signal to the Danish people who have hosted them."