



This commentary provides one view on the controversy over the publication of cartoons deemed offensive by many Muslims. As is the case with all PacNets, the views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Pacific Forum CSIS or any other institution or organization. Additional perspectives on this issue are welcome.

Free Speech and the Muslim World by Yang Razali Kassim

Amid the worldwide Muslim anger over the Danish media's offensive caricature of the Prophet Muhammad, an unusual twist happened in Gaza where Hamas had just defeated Fatah in recent Palestinian elections. Armed Fatah followers had threatened to attack a Christian church in the Palestinian territory to retaliate against the Danish insult. But, interestingly, Hamas offered to protect the church, saying to its priest: "We are brothers."

In a similar vein, a former Israeli diplomat who served in Southeast Asia wrote an article Feb. 7 in Singapore's *Today*, in which he said the election victory of Hamas has reshuffled the Middle East deck of cards. Unlike many hardliners in Israel and the United States, the diplomat, Emanuel Shahaf, thinks that Hamas' victory will provide an opportunity for Israel. The rise of an Islamist party like Hamas, he says, will spur Middle East peace, not war. Muslims and Jews have a long history of living together. The common origins of their religion, Shahaf says, gives rise to hope that religious leaders on both sides will advance a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There is a message here that seems to be drowned out by the rage over the provocative cartoons of the Prophet. Those who are sometimes, or often, portrayed as militant may turn out to be moderate. Hamas, for all its radicalism in its struggle against Israel, may one day become an effective partner for peace in the Middle East. History is full of examples of leaders who, despite being radical in origin, ended up as preachers of peace and understanding when in power. Some even paid the price of transformation with their lives.

Muslim street-Muslim elite reaction

Hamas' position reflects the nuances that should be appreciated in the global outrage over the Danish cartoons triggered by their publication in *Jyllands Posten*. Still, the divergent response from the Muslim world to the cartoons is a familiar one; it is between the "Muslim street" and what can be broadly called – for the sake of contrast – the "Muslim elite." The Muslim street is reacting with strong emotion to what it sees as insensitive insults by some of the European media. The result is what we see – the burning of Danish flags and property, physical threats to Danish lives, and even the deaths of Muslim protestors by security forces trying to contain the fallout. The Muslim elite, however, is responding

more cautiously. It prefers peaceful protests and chooses the path of economic boycotts, legal actions, and diplomatic counter-initiatives. The media tend to characterize it as "moderate." While that may be so, it should not be taken to imply that the anger of the Muslim street is therefore militant, or radical, even extreme.

It would be wrong to view these contrasting reactions in terms of a "militant-moderate" divide. Indeed, it would be a tragic fallacy to reduce the storm that has been unleashed by the cartoons of the Prophet into an issue pitting freedom of speech, or expression, against Islam.

Those who defend the crude caricatures in the name of free expression have to be consistent. If the European media are "free to publish and be damned," it then logically follows that, in the name of free expression, Muslim protestors are free to vent their anger, whatever the consequences. Yet, it is no secret that the Western media can and do exercise restraint when necessary. During the invasion of Iraq, even CNN chose not to report news that was damaging to the U.S. military campaign.

The bigger danger of using the freedom argument is that it will increasingly turn the Muslim world off each time they hear freedom and democracy being preached to them by the West. If freedom of expression means one can wantonly spite and denigrate the faith of others, then what is the meaning of liberalism? The latest European stance plants seeds of distaste in the Muslim world for the very values of liberal democracy that the West says it wants to promote in the Middle East. This will be tragic because there is inherently no contradiction between freedom and Islam.

Contrasting U.S.-Europe response

In this respect, the noticeable change in the United States' response to the issue is significant. If this reflects new policy, the conciliatory U.S. position will play a major part, ironically, in containing Muslim rage and bridging the West and an agitated Muslim world.

Some European government leaders and media have chosen to defy Muslim demands for an apology, arguing that the principle of free speech has to be defended. In contrast, the U.S. has criticized the publication of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad as an incitement to religious hatred. The U.S. has said there is no such thing as unbridled freedom of the press and of expression. "We all fully recognize and respect freedom of the press and expression but it must be coupled with press responsibility. Inciting religious and ethnic hatreds in this manner is not acceptable," says the State Department.

In choosing to stand with the Muslim world, the U.S. has shown more sophistication. It seems to have learned from its experiences post-Sept. 11. It is drawing a clear line between its

war on terrorism and its respectful attitude toward Islam as a religion. The stance taken over the cartoons will help win over some Muslims if the same message is heard from President Bush himself. As the self-declared champion of free speech, the U.S. statement is powerful because it neutralizes the European argument that freedom of speech is sacred and cannot be limited.

Fundamentalists of free speech

Unfortunately, while the U.S. is showing more maturity in its understanding and treatment of the Muslim world, Europe is backsliding. Not too long ago, Europeans were the ones who showed more empathy and sophistication. While the new U.S. approach will help reduce animosity toward America, the shifting European attitude could stoke a new round of radicalism. There is a need to prevent this episode from spreading radicalism and its extreme form – terrorism.

The radical liberals in Europe who argue for unbridled freedom of expression need to review their “fundamentalist” interpretations of liberalism. Free speech or free expression is a noble value. But freedom must come with responsibility, which has been missing in this episode over the cartoons.

For its part, the Muslim world must show displeasure in no uncertain terms toward any violent response to the Western media provocation. The moderates must prevail over the Muslim street, no matter how difficult that is. The Muslim elite can play a part by showing the Muslim street that there is a better of way to show displeasure. Hit back where it will be most painful, if they must, but choose nonviolence. Economic boycotts are one example. Legal action, whatever the odds, is another.

The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Arab League have asked the United Nations to ban contempt of religious beliefs and to punish with sanctions those who do so. This seems to be a new development; although it may be tough to win support at the UN, there can always be a beginning.

Contempt toward religious beliefs is a global security concern because more than just free speech is at stake: world peace is at risk. If the Muslim world concludes that there will be no end to Islamophobia, the extreme fringe will win ground and mainstream moderates will, once again, lose their voice in a world dominated by extremists on both sides of the fence.

Yang Razali Kassim is a senior fellow with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University. This article originally appeared as an IDSS commentary on Feb. 9, 2006.