

**Article: “The Political Iconography of Muhammad Cartoons:
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The Political Iconography of Muhammad Cartoons: Understanding Cultural Conflict and Political Action

The controversy over the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad in cartoons that swept the globe at the beginning of 2006 was arguably the second major event after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that brought “Muslims” as a group of political actors to the forefront of international politics. The crisis was sparked in late September 2005, by the publication of political cartoons, depicting Islamic prophet Muhammad, in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.¹ While the original cause of controversy was limited to a small country in northern Europe, political actions spread worldwide, ranging from peaceful protests to diplomatic sanctions to consumer boycotts, and finally to open violence against anything symbolizing “the West.” The levels of political action were muddled, and responsibilities as well as the potential to act were confused. Almost all of the actors involved in the controversy were left without an appropriate counterpart to address. For example, the Arab League and Muslim organizations blamed the

Danish government for the publication of the cartoons, and for not taking action against the independent publisher of *Jyllands-Posten*. Enraged Muslim citizens of countries as geographically distant as Lebanon, Sudan, and

Indonesia attacked and ransacked Danish embassies, and threatened anyone coming from a country belonging to the European Union. The editors of several newspapers—e.g., in France and Jordan—who had decided to reprint the cartoons either in an act of journalistic solidarity with *Jyllands-Posten* or to inform their Muslim readership about the cartoons, were fired. And, terrorist group Al Qaeda put the editor and cartoonists of *Jyllands-Posten*, as well as all of Denmark, at the top of its target list. The diplomatic fallout from the cartoon publication was enormous and has severely shattered relations between European and Arab countries. Despite the enormity of the event, the question of how the publication of 12 cartoons in Denmark could lead to a global crisis that dominated the news and kept diplomats and politicians on alert for more than three months remains unanswered.

This contribution aims at reconstructing the meanings of these political cartoons that sparked an international crisis. To this end, it is

necessary to interpret and understand the cartoons and their meanings as motivating factors for political action.

Methodologically, we apply an exploratory approach, using qualitative interpretation and political iconography to analyze the cartoons’ potential meanings by blending Western and Muslim perspectives. Due to its conceptualizing nature, this study remains largely descriptive, but is intended to lay the ground for future research aimed at creating and testing variables on the relationship of cultural conflict and political action.

Methodology

Visuals are rarely scrutinized in political science. When used at all, visuals are implemented merely for illustrative purposes. In this paper, visuals are treated as scholarly sources of information. Visual sources require different methodological tools than textual sources, because visual communication follows a different logic than textual communication (Müller 2003, 22). While academic and journalistic texts are based on argumentation and reasoning, visuals follow a logic by association, connecting different meanings that would not necessarily make sense if written down or communicated orally. Visual communication is based on visual similarity and individual experience with the visual motif. Thus, iconography as a method to analyze visuals must take their associative logic into account. Iconography was developed at the beginning of the twentieth century by the German cultural historian Aby M. Warburg, and later improved upon by art historian Erwin Panofsky, who also popularized this method of visual analysis in the United States (Panofsky 1972). Unnoticed by the non-German-speaking scholarly community, the interdisciplinary method “political iconography,” originally developed by art historian Martin Warnke, following in Warburg’s footsteps, has fused social science research questions and designs with art history traditions of image analysis. But since most of the publications from that scholarly tradition were only published in German, this method has (not yet) had an international impact on political science and other social science methodology (Warnke 1994; Müller 1997; 2004).

Iconography is a comparative method, aimed at disclosing the meanings of visuals in a specific context at a specific time. According to

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Panofsky (1972, 40–1), iconological interpretation² involves three methodological steps, beginning with an iconographic description, followed by analysis, and finalized by a contextualized interpretation of the visual. Without going further into methodological detail, the visual is always at the center of iconographical analysis. But, the visual itself is seen as a source of information, both on its production and reception contexts that, in turn, are of major interest to political and other social scientists.

The Culture-specific Meanings of the Muhammad Cartoons³

The following detailed political iconographic analysis studies five of the 12 cartoons to arrive at an interpretation and understanding of the conflicting meanings that the visuals implied in the West and for Muslim audiences.

1. Bomb in the Head

This black-and-white drawing portrays just the head of Muhammad, dissociated from the rest of his body. His face is grim and he seems to stare out of the picture without making eye contact with the beholder. The bushy eyebrows and wild beard, shadowy eyes, the absence of his mouth, as well as the furrows on his forehead in conjunction with an impressive nose, give his face a dangerous expression. This general alert is carried even further in the depiction of the upper part of Muhammad's head. His black turban takes on the shape of a large bomb with a lit fuse on top. At the center of this bomb-turban is a leaf-like ornament inscribed in green Arabic with the Islamic testimony of faith.⁴ The ideological threat perceived by the Danish cartoonist is pictorially translated into a fanaticized face, an inscription that is illegible to the intended audience, and a non-communicative attitude on behalf of the followers of the Prophet Muhammad, who are depicted as focused on destruction instead of dialogue.

This was the most criticized of the 12 cartoons. Followers of Islam must feel insulted by the image, which for them does not just symbolize the Prophet, but identifies the depiction as a *pars pro toto*, aimed at all Muslims who are potentially dangerous suicide-bombers. However, this generalization is not apparent to a Western audience which cannot read Arabic and for whom the picture depicts the danger of Islamic fundamentalist ideology and violence committed in the name of the Prophet.

2. Stop, We ran out of Virgins

This black-and-white drawing is a typical Western-style cartoon, featuring both visual and textual elements, with the text giving the depiction its intended meaning. The scene involves five male figures who are standing on clouds, symbolizing that this scene happens in the afterlife, when four men in torn and ragged clothes approach the gates of heaven. The four men, drawn with exaggerated big noses that give them a somewhat naïve and comic appeal, appear to be suicide bombers—parts of the bomb straps are still visible on the back of the first man. The martyrs' heads are not crowned by halos, which would be a typical attribute of saints in Christian iconography. Instead, smoke spews from their heads, with more to come, since more smoke clouds can be seen in the lower left of the picture. The four men seem astonished at what the Prophet Muhammad is telling them. Dressed in a long gown and vest with oriental pointy shoes and a white turban, the Prophet raises both his arms in a gesture of regret, which also bars the approaching martyrs from entering paradise with the phrase: "Stop stop, we ran

out of virgins." This alludes to the promise of paradise awaiting Muslims who sacrifice themselves for the holy cause in the afterlife. The depiction of Muhammad, though itself a blasphemous insult, is neither mean nor threatening. This cartoon uses humor to distinguish the Prophet from his fanatic followers, who have died and killed in vain, and who will not be granted the promised reward after all.

3. Muhammad in the Desert

The cartoonist appears to have taken the task of just depicting Muhammad literally, and he apparently chose a historic setting for his portrayal of the religious leader. For the Western viewer the pictorial elements imply Christian iconographic associations. The Prophet is standing upright, holding a staff, and facing the beholder. He wears simple white trousers and a long-sleeved shirt. His feet are bare in sandals. The hills in the back suggest that the Prophet is traveling on foot in the desert. A mule or donkey is seen in the background, carrying goods in red bags attached to the saddle. The drawing style renders the interpretation of Muhammad's facial expression difficult. Again, as in most of the cartoons, Muhammad is depicted as a silent man; his mouth is covered by his long black beard. His gaze at the beholder can best be described as defiant, but certainly not friendly. The red turban on his head gives Muhammad a somewhat crooked expression. The visual messages of this drawing are ambivalent. The simple white dress, bare feet in sandals, and staff and mule could be attributes of Jesus Christ. They are not derogatory visual elements in the context of Christian iconography. The question of whether they were intended as merely historical framework alluding to biblical iconography can only be answered by the cartoonist himself. But, in an Islamic visual tradition, where portrayals of the Prophet are considered blasphemous, depicting Muhammad as a poor peddler is twice as insulting. Also, the donkey in this context has a derogatory connotation, since many stories about the Prophet center around him traveling on a camel, which holds a higher rank in the social hierarchy of ancient transportation tools. In some Islamic contexts, the donkey carries explicitly negative associations, as demonstrated by an incident that took place in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum in reaction to the publication of the Danish cartoons. A violent crowd of about 50,000 demonstrators supposedly "wrapped a copy of a Danish flag around a donkey—regarded as a symbol of stupidity—and hoisted it as the crowd jeered" (The Press Association 2006).

4. Muhammad with Sabre and Two Veiled Women

This cartoon is enigmatic. Muhammad is shown at the center of the picture, protruding from the green frame both on top and on the right side. The Prophet is dressed in a white gown with a long grey scarf draped over his left shoulder. He is holding a scimitar or sabre in his right hand, just in front of him, and is seemingly approaching the beholder and defending two veiled women who hide behind his back. A long and wild grey beard as well as a long moustache and thick eyebrows dominate his face, but his eyes are blindfolded or rather blackened like in press photographs, where, due to strict privacy laws in Western societies, the eyes of suspects have to be covered as long as they have not been sentenced for a crime. This implicit presumption of innocence clashes, however, with the aggressive dagger-wielding impression of Muhammad, whose depiction conjures up televised images of Al Qaeda terrorist leader Osama bin Laden. Of the man in the picture, everything is shown but his eyes. The opposite is true for the two females, who are presumably both Muhammad's wives. Thus, the cartoon is pointing at female oppression and bigamist traditions in

fundamentalist Muslim societies. The full black veils worn by the women hide their bodies except for their eyes, which give a frightened, if not terrified, expression. The green background uses the color of Islam, possibly to denote the wall of a house to which the two women are confined by their violent husband, who terrorizes not only them, but also the rest of the world.

5. Sultan Muhammad Cautioning the Palace Guards

This colorful watercolor imagined the reaction of Muhammad to the cartoon's publication. Set in an oriental palace with two columns, a round arch crowned by a golden crescent, and colored floor tiles, Muhammad, who is dressed in a long green gown, wearing a blue turban, and holding a piece of white paper in his left hand, reaches out with his right hand to stop two approaching palace guards in blue robes and turbans from getting violent. Both of them have weapons. The first carries a large sabre; the second holds a bomb and carries a rifle on his back. The Danish subtitle translates into: "Relax folks it is just a sketch made by a Dane from the south-west Denmark."⁵ This sketch was not meant to depict a historically correct setting. But for Muslims, the implicit insult, apart from the explicit depiction of Muhammad, lies in exactly this non-literal interpretation of Muhammad's life, since Muhammad was not a sultan, nor did he live in a palace.

Again, as in the cartoon "Stop, we ran out of virgins," all three men are portrayed as wild, primitive, and aggressive, but the Prophet is once again distinguished from his violent followers, whom he holds back from committing acts of violence against the Danish newspaper and the West in general.

Contextualizing the Cartoons

Summarizing the general characteristics of the drawings, it becomes apparent that the majority of the Muhammad cartoons depict the Prophet in an unpleasant, threatening way. In most of the cartoons, Muhammad is depicted with aggressive looks, a dark and wild beard, and thick eyebrows. Overall, the head cutouts have the strongest impact, since they draw attention directly to his face. This was the case with the most controversially discussed cartoon, "Bomb in the Head." When Muhammad is shown in front of a backdrop, he is depicted either as a heavenly creature, as a pauper in the desert, or as an oriental sultan in a palace. The dominant colors are black, white, and green, the latter being considered the color symbolizing Islam. The visual messages are clear, but the meanings attributed to images depend on the social, cultural, and political context in which they are perceived. Thus, the cartoons have to be interpreted in the light of their reception contexts, which, in this case, are highly culturally coded.

The Danish Reception Context of the Cartoons

Denmark is a small Scandinavian country with a population of 5.4 million. The first Muslim immigrants started to arrive in the country during the 1960s and 1970s (Yilmaz 2006). Currently, the Muslim population in Denmark accounts for about 150,000 people, a very small percentage of the Danish population.⁶ Denmark is a parliamentary monarchy ruled by liberal democratic principles. Freedoms of expression, including freedom of the press, are important human and civil rights in Denmark. In 2005, Freedom House ranked Denmark among the top countries worldwide in providing and protecting freedom of the press (Freedom House 2005). *Jyllands-Posten* is Denmark's largest newspaper with a circulation of about 175,000 (Klausen 2006). *Jyllands-Posten* is a conservative newspaper that usually

pays attention to the religious and political sensitivities of its readership, which are "mainly the Lutheran farmers and the provincial middle class" (Klausen 2006). Three years ago, the newspaper refused to publish portrayals of Jesus Christ on the grounds that this would offend readers (Spiegel Online 2006a). Allegedly, the newspaper is also tied to the government "not by ownership but by political affinity and history" (Klausen 2006).

Recent literature and reports on the situation of minorities in Denmark point to an increasingly negative trend with respect to attitudes toward the Muslim minority. Studies conducted as early as 1995, reported that cultural racism is gaining ground in Denmark and that the media play a significant role in spreading stereotypical images of Muslims (Wren 2001). Another Danish study "points to the media's role in popularizing a neo-racist discourse that positions the Muslim identity as a direct negation of the 'Danishness'" (Hussain 2000, 96). And for Wren (2001, 158), the "construction of immigrant as a 'problem' has become real in its consequences through informing generally racist practices within a variety of institutions."

When placed within this context, the negativity of the cartoon depictions of Muhammad takes on a different dimension. It is possible to imagine and draw faces in different ways. But, of the five cartoons examined here in detail, all but one preferred to depict Muhammad in clearly negative terms.⁷

Obviously, the existing public discourse of the "Muslim threat" had an influence on the choices made by the artists. They were asked by *Jyllands-Posten's* cultural editor to depict Muhammad's face as they see him, and they imagined him not as a positive figure, but rather as an unfriendly and dangerous fellow. One can argue that the artists were guided by the medium in which they worked: the essential stylistic elements of the cartoon as an art form are exaggeration, ridicule, and distortion.⁸ Still, the argument is not sufficient to explain the overall negative tone of the cartoons. It is possible to mock a person, as in the cartoon "Stop, we ran out of virgins," without portraying him as an ugly and aggressive figure. It appears, rather, that the derogatory elements in the depictions of Muhammad are related to the particular anti-Muslim discourse in Denmark, which predates the events of 9/11. On the other hand, taking the spread of Muslim fundamentalism and two Islamist terrorist attacks inside of Europe following 9/11 (Madrid in March 2004, London in July 2005) into account, the cartoons also reflect the pervasive and understandable association of Muslims and Islam with terrorism.

The Muslim Reception Context of the Cartoons

Modernization and Westernization in Muslim countries have a long history, resulting, among many failures, also in some successful transformation processes. Problems relating to the adjustment of non-democratic systems to the demands of modernization and democratization still present an important challenge in a number of Muslim countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In fact, democracy, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press are alien, and sometimes contested, terms to Muslim citizens in a variety of contexts. In former colonies with Muslim populations, a general resentment against Western "imperialism" is as pervasive as it is influential in forming public opinion. Moreover, the Muslim world in general still has to deal with historic imprints of the traumatic shift in power relations between the East and the West. As Farhang Jahanpour (2006, 1) notes: "Up to the end of the 17th century, there was not such a big economic, social, artistic or intellectual gap between Islamic and western countries." The historical developments that led to Western domination over the world entirely changed this balance with negative consequences for the

Muslim world. To quote again from Jahanpour (2006, 1–2): “When Islam led the world in science and learning, it was self-confident and tolerant. By contrast, the present anger demonstrates a loss of self-confidence. In its heyday, Islam encouraged science, philosophy, literature and arts, as well as theology. It is truly sobering to think that over nine hundred years ago, Omar Khayyam, one of the greatest agnostics the world has ever seen, could write and preach what many Muslims dare not repeat now.”

The situation indicated in the above remarks presents a real challenge to many Muslim societies today. Even though the cartoons are stereotypical, and targeted particularly against people of Muslim faith, they are also telling of the enormous frictions in the contemporary Muslim world.

No matter how forcefully moderate Muslims denounce violence, the terrorists of September 11, 2001, and of the Madrid and London bombings were self-declared Muslims who committed those crimes in the name of Muhammad. Their political actions, as well as their underlying religious motivations, create global public awareness and “brand” Islam with the stigma of being the cradle for terrorist mass-murderers and lunatics of all sorts. The majority of moderate Muslims’ lives are overshadowed by Muslim extremism in two ways: they are both abhorred and terrified by the terrorist actions, and they are associated with this same threat due to their shared religious belief. Moderate Muslims need to find ways to combat fundamentalism and extremism, and revive the self-confident, tolerant tradition which lies in the Islamic past. As Tariq Ramadan, a Muslim intellectual living in Europe, points out “because the radical voices are loudest and are covered more by the media, they have the upper hand. We have to turn up the volume of reason and ensure that our discourse gets the upper hand” (Spiegel Online 2006b).

In trying to delineate the general problems facing the Muslim world, it is important not to lose sight of the tremendous variety of Islamic beliefs and lifestyles, many times unnoticed and unacknowledged in the West. For some authors, the talk about “Islam” in the West, especially in the media, creates an illusory unity which does not correspond to the diversified realities in the Muslim world’s wide geography. Yilmaz (2006, 1) goes as far as to argue that “Islam does not exist. It is impossible to locate it as a unified or homogenous set of practices, ideas, or beliefs.” According to this view, it is the talk about Islam that presents it as a homogenous unit. Thus, approaching Islam as a homogenous unit is misleading—not only for societies in the West, but also for Muslims themselves. One example of how generalizations can lead to wrong interpretations is the association between Islam and iconoclasm. It is correct that the image of the Prophet Muhammad is sacred and thus cannot be depicted by humans. But to conclude from this that Islam in general forbids any visual depiction of human beings is simply wrong. This generalization is not only often repeated by Western, but also by Muslim commentators. In fact, the Shi’a tradi-

tion of Islam generally represents a tolerant stand toward visual depictions (Devji 2006, 2) and Sunni Islam even saw times of allowing Muhammad depictions, though with a veiled face.

Conclusion

The reaction to the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad in Danish cartoons transcended multiple levels of political action—local, regional, national, international, transnational, and finally global—that are usually kept apart from each other. At each level, different agents and actors were involved in the crisis. The cartoons themselves, which triggered political actions that varied from the peaceful to the violent in Muslim countries, acquired different levels of meaning throughout their journey from a local national newspaper to the agenda of global politics.

The cartoons can be interpreted as reflections of racial biases that have been building up inside Danish society well before the 9/11 terrorist attacks. On the other hand, the depictions also reflect an imminent, valid, and pervasive fear of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism that has been haunting European societies since the Madrid bombing attacks in March 2004.

From the perspective of Danish Muslims, the cartoons reinforced two well-entrenched stereotypes of the Danish: that they disrespect Muslim religious beliefs, and that they collectively stigmatize all Muslims as dangerous “Muslim terrorists.” Disappointed by the lack of attention paid to their pleas in late 2005, representatives of Danish Muslim communities turned to powerful Muslim organizations and leaders in the Middle East. This increased attention led to further action against Danish authorities and dissemination of the cartoons to a wider international audience, resulting in the outbursts of violence against Denmark and other Western countries and their symbols abroad.

The cartoon crisis thus can be seen as a mutual failure to understand the cartoons’ meanings and emotional connotations. The political actions though appear to be less motivated by the cartoons themselves, than by the lack of political dialogue and discussion in the immediate aftermath of the cartoons’ publication. This communicative void between organized state actors and unorganized actors of civil society allowed for the intervention of fundamentalist actors who “occupied” the topic and instrumentalized the cartoon controversy for their violent goals. If a comparable incident is to be prevented in the future, channels of communication between Western civil societies and Muslim countries have to be established that enable controversial, but peaceful, exchanges of opinion. Additionally, both state and non-state political actors in the West have to become more self-assured of what is at stake: freedom of expression and freedom of the press as core values that cannot be compromised. This seems an enormous challenge, but not an impossible task. For political science, the cartoon crisis implies that the concept of “the political actor” has to be enlarged and adapted to the new conditions of globalized political communication.

Notes

1. The publication of the cartoons could be described as a form of “journalistic experiment,” testing the limits of tolerance in Denmark. *Jyllands-Posten’s* cultural editor had received a complaint from a Danish author, who described to him how difficult it was to find artists to illustrate his children’s book on Muhammad because Danish illustrators were self-censoring due to pressures from Muslim groups. The newspaper editor then commissioned 12 cartoonists to draw Muhammad from their individual and professional points of view (Rose 2006).

2. According to Panofsky (1972), iconography and iconology operate on different methodological levels. While iconography is a descriptive method, iconology entails interpretation of the images’ meanings.

3. This article deliberately avoids reprinting the images in favor of an academic analysis. To this end, images of the original cartoons were last accessed on January 30, 2006, at: <http://face-of-muhammad.blogspot.com/>.

4. The inscription reads: “La ilahe illallah Muhammadun rasulullah” (There is no God but Allah; Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah). Recitation of this testimony is considered one of the five pillars of Islam by Sunni Muslims. Sincerely speaking these words signifies that the person has converted to Islam.

5. Translation from the following web site: www.brusselsjournal.com/node/698. January 31, 2006.

6. No exact figures could be obtained, due to the fact that in Denmark "national laws prohibit registration of people according to their faith" (Hussain 2000, 97). In 2000, Hussain presented an estimated number of Muslims living in Denmark of 130,000 to 150,000.

7. Of the remaining seven cartoons, three others might be interpreted as negative visual and textual associations, i.e., tilting the crescent to make it look like a horn; or using the star to cover a single eye like a pirate. One drawing is more like a sketch: it does not depict Muhammad but its text reads "Prophet! daft and dumb, keeping woman under thumb." From the remaining four, one focuses on the cartoonist's fear while making a simple

drawing and the Muhammad drawing in this cartoon seems rather simple and innocent. The remaining three cartoons can be said to have more culturally specific connotations that probably make more sense in the Danish context and for the Danish audience; two of these cartoons seem to refer to the discussions preceding the publication of the 12 cartoons and depict the author of the children's books who complained about the difficulty in finding illustrators to portray Muhammad. Overall, seven out of the 12 drawings carry negative visual or textual associations.

8. For a similarly problematic cartoon case inside the United States, see Knieper and Müller 2006.

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