

THE CARTOON BACKLASH: REDEFINING ALIGNMENTS

By George Friedman

There is something rotten in the state of Denmark. We just couldn't help but open with that -- with apologies to Shakespeare. Nonetheless, there is something exceedingly odd in the notion that Denmark -- which has made a national religion of not being offensive to anyone -- could become the focal point of Muslim rage. The sight of the Danish and Norwegian embassies being burned in Damascus -- and Scandinavians in general being warned to leave Islamic countries -- has an aura of the surreal: Nobody gets mad at Denmark or Norway. Yet, death threats are now being hurled against the Danes and Norwegians as though they were mad-dog friends of Dick Cheney. History has its interesting moments.

At the same time, the matter is not to be dismissed lightly. The explosion in the Muslim world over the publication of 12 cartoons by a minor Danish newspaper -- cartoons that first appeared back in September -- has, remarkably, redefined the geopolitical matrix of the U.S.-jihadist war. Or, to be more precise, it has set in motion something that appears to be redefining that matrix. We do not mean here simply a clash of civilizations, although that is undoubtedly part of it. Rather, we mean that alignments within the Islamic world and within the West appear to be in flux in some very important ways.

Let's begin with the obvious: the debate over the cartoons. There is a prohibition in Islam against making images of the Prophet Mohammed. There also is a prohibition against ridiculing the Prophet. Thus, a cartoon that ridicules the Prophet violates two fundamental rules simultaneously. Muslims around the world were deeply offended by these cartoons.

It must be emphatically pointed out that the Muslim rejection of the cartoons does not derive from a universalistic view that one should respect religions. The criticism does not derive from a secularist view that holds all religions in equal indifference and requires "sensitivity" not on account of theologies, but in order to avoid hurting anyone's feelings. The Muslim view is theological: The Prophet Mohammed is not to be ridiculed or portrayed. But violating the sensibilities of other religions is not taboo. Therefore, Muslims frequently, in action, print and speech, do and say things about other religions -- Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism -- that followers of these religions would find defamatory. The Taliban, for example, were not concerned about the views among other religions when they destroyed the famous Buddhas in Bamiyan. The Muslim demand is honest and authentic: It is for respect for Islam, not a general secular respect for all beliefs as

if they were all equal.

The response from the West, and from Europe in particular, has been to frame the question as a matter of free speech. European newspapers, wishing to show solidarity with the Danes, have reprinted the cartoons, further infuriating the Muslims. European liberalism has a more complex profile than Islamic rage over insults. In many countries, it is illegal to incite racial hatred. It is difficult to imagine that the defenders of these cartoons would sit by quietly if a racially defamatory cartoon were published. Or, imagine the reception among liberal Europeans -- or on any American campus -- if a professor published a book purporting to prove that women were intellectually inferior to men. (The mere suggestion of such a thing, by the president of Harvard in a recent speech, led to calls for his resignation.)

In terms of the dialogue over the cartoons, there is enough to amuse even the most jaded observers. The sight of Muslims arguing the need for greater sensitivity among others, and of advocates of laws against racial hatred demanding absolute free speech, is truly marvelous to behold. There is, of course, one minor difference between the two sides: The Muslims are threatening to kill people who offend them and are burning embassies -- in essence, holding entire nations responsible for the actions of a few of their citizens. The European liberals are merely making speeches. They are not threatening to kill critics of the modern secular state. That also distinguishes the Muslims from, say, Christians in the United States who have been affronted by National Endowment for the Arts grants.

These are not trivial distinctions. But what is important is this: The controversy over the cartoons involves issues so fundamental to the two sides that neither can give in. The Muslims cannot accept visual satire involving the Prophet. Nor can the Europeans accept that Muslims can, using the threat of force, dictate what can be published. Core values are at stake, and that translates into geopolitics.

In one sense, there is nothing new or interesting in intellectual inconsistency or dishonesty. Nor is there very much new about Muslims -- or at least radical ones -- threatening to kill people who offend them. What is new is the breadth of the Muslim response and the fact that it is directed obsessively not against the United States, but against European states.

One of the primary features of the U.S.-jihadist war has been that each side has tried to divide the other along a pre-existing fault line. For the United States, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the manipulation of Sunni-Shiite tensions has been evident. For the jihadists, and even more for non-jihadist Muslims caught up in the war, the tension between the United States and Europe has been a critical fault line to manipulate. It is significant, then, that the cartoon affair threatens to

overwhelm both the Euro-American split and the Sunni-Shiite split. It is, paradoxically, an affair that unifies as well as divides.

The Fissures in the West

It is dangerous and difficult to speak of the "European position" -- there really isn't one. But there is a Franco-German position that generally has been taken to be the European position. More precisely, there is the elite Franco-German position that The New York Times refers to whenever it mentions "Europe." That is the Europe that we mean now.

In the European view, then, the United States massively overreacted to 9/11. Apart from the criticism of Iraq, the Europeans believe that the United States failed to appreciate al Qaeda's relative isolation within the Islamic world and, by reshaping its relations with the Islamic world over 9/11, caused more damage. Indeed, this view goes, the United States increased the power of al Qaeda and added unnecessarily to the threat it presents. Implicit in the European criticisms -- particularly from the French -- was the view that American cowboy insensitivity to the Muslim world not only increased the danger after 9/11, but effectively precipitated 9/11. From excessive support for Israel to support for Egypt and Jordan, the United States alienated the Muslims. In other words, 9/11 was the result of a lack of sophistication and poor policy decisions by the United States -- and the response to the 9/11 attacks was simply over the top.

Now an affair has blown up that not only did not involve the United States, but also did not involve a state decision. The decision to publish the offending cartoons was that of a Danish private citizen. The Islamic response has been to hold the entire state responsible. As the cartoons were republished, it was not the publications printing them that were viewed as responsible, but the states in which they were published. There were attacks on embassies, gunmen in EU offices at Gaza, threats of another 9/11 in Europe.

From a psychological standpoint, this drives home to the Europeans an argument that the Bush administration has been making from the beginning -- that the threat from Muslim extremists is not really a response to anything, but a constantly present danger that can be triggered by anything or nothing. European states cannot control what private publications publish. That means that, like it or not, they are hostage to Islamic perceptions. The threat, therefore, is not under their control. And thus, even if the actions or policies of the United States did precipitate 9/11, the Europeans are no more immune to the threat than the Americans are.

This combines with the [Paris riots](#) last November and the generally deteriorating

relationships between Muslims in Europe and the dominant populations. The pictures of demonstrators in London, threatening the city with another 9/11, touch extremely sensitive nerves. It becomes increasingly difficult for Europeans to distinguish between their own relationship with the Islamic world and the American relationship with the Islamic world. A sense of shared fate emerges, driving the Americans and Europeans closer together. At a time when pressing issues like Iranian nuclear weapons are on the table, this increases Washington's freedom of action. Put another way, the Muslim strategy of splitting the United States and Europe -- and using Europe to constrain the United States -- was heavily damaged by the Muslim response to the cartoons.

The Intra-Ummah Divide

But so too was the split between Sunni and Shia. Tensions between these two communities have always been substantial. Theological differences aside, both international friction and internal friction have been severe. The Iran-Iraq war, current near-civil war in Iraq, tensions between Sunnis and Shia in the Gulf states, all point to the obvious: These two communities are, while both Muslim, mistrustful of one another. Shiite Iran has long viewed Sunni Saudi Arabia as the corrupt tool of the United States, while radical Sunnis saw Iran as collaborating with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The cartoons are the one thing that both communities -- not only in the Middle East but also in the wider Muslim world -- must agree about. Neither side can afford to allow any give in this affair and still hope to maintain any credibility in the Islamic world. Each community -- and each state that is dominated by one community or another -- must work to establish (or maintain) its Islamic credentials. A case in point is the violence against Danish and Norwegian diplomatic offices in Syria (and later, in Lebanon and Iran) -- which undoubtedly occurred with Syrian government involvement. Syria is ruled by Alawites, a Shiite sect. Syria -- aligned with Iran -- is home to a major Sunni community; there is another in Lebanon. The cartoons provided what was essentially a secular regime the opportunity to take the lead in a religious matter, by permitting the attacks on the embassies. This helped consolidate the regime's position, however temporarily.

Indeed, the Sunni and Shiite communities appear to be competing with each other as to which is more offended. The Shiite Iranian-Syrian bloc has taken the lead in violence, but the Sunni community has been quite vigorous as well. The cartoons are being turned into a test of authenticity for Muslims. To the degree that Muslims are prepared to tolerate or even move past this issue, they are being attacked as being willing to tolerate the Prophet's defamation. The cartoons are forcing a radicalization of parts of the Muslim community that are uneasy with the

passions of the moment.

Beneficiaries on Both Sides

The processes under way in the West and within the Islamic world are naturally interacting. The attacks on embassies, and threats against lives, that are based on nationality alone are radicalizing the Western perspective of Islam. The unwillingness of Western governments to punish or curtail the distribution of the cartoons is taken as a sign of the real feelings of the West. The situation is constantly compressing each community, even as they are divided.

One might say that all this is inevitable. After all, what other response would there be, on either side? But this is where the odd part begins: The cartoons actually were published in September, and -- though they drew some complaints, even at the diplomatic level -- didn't come close to sparking riots. Events unfolded slowly: The objections of a Muslim cleric in Denmark upon the initial publication by Jyllands-Posten eventually prompted leaders of the Islamic Faith Community to travel to Egypt, Syria and Lebanon in December, purposely "to stir up attitudes against Denmark and the Danes" in response to the cartoons. As is now obvious, attitudes have certainly been stirred.

There are beneficiaries. It is important to note here that the fact that someone benefits from something does not mean that he was responsible for it. (We say this because in the past, when we have noted the beneficiaries of an event or situation, the not-so-bright bulbs in some quarters took to assuming that we meant the beneficiaries deliberately engineered the event.)

Still, there are two clear beneficiaries. One is the United States: The cartoon affair is serving to further narrow the rift between the Bush administration's view of the Islamic world and that of many Europeans. Between the Paris riots last year, the religiously motivated [murder](#) of a Dutch filmmaker and the "blame Denmark" campaign, European patience is wearing thin. The other beneficiary is Iran. As Iran moves toward a confrontation with the United States over nuclear weapons, this helps to rally the Muslim world to its side: Iran wants to be viewed as the defender of Islam, and Sunnis who have raised questions about its flirtations with the United States in Iraq are now seeing Iran as the leader in outrage against Europe.

The cartoons have changed the dynamics both within Europe and the Islamic world, and between them. That is not to say the furor will not die down in due course, but it will take a long time for the bad feelings to dissipate. This has created a serious barrier between moderate Muslims and Europeans who were opposed to the United States. They were the ones most likely to be willing to

collaborate, and the current uproar makes that collaboration much more difficult.

It's hard to believe that a few cartoons could be that significant, but these are.