

## We have lost our voice

Moderate Muslims, from Denmark to the Middle East, are caught in the vice of a manufactured conflict



**Tabish Khair** in Aarhus  
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[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

When I first saw them, I was struck by their crudeness. Surely Jyllands-Posten could have hired better artists. And surely cartoonists and editors ought to be able to spot the difference between Indian turbans and Arab ones. In some ways, that was the essence of the problem to begin with. It is this patronising tendency - stronger in Denmark than in countries such as Britain or Canada - that decided the course of the controversy and coloured the Danish reaction.

One could see that the matter would take a turn for the worse when, late last year, the Danish prime minister refused to meet a group of Arab diplomats who wished to register their protest. In most other countries they would have been received, their protest accepted. The government would have expressed "regret" and told them it could not put pressure on any media outlet as a matter of law and policy. In their turn, having done their Muslim duty, these diplomats might have helped lessen the reaction in their respective countries. By not meeting them, the prime minister silenced all moderate Muslims just as effectively as they would be later silenced by militant Muslims around the world.

Like many other moderate Muslims, I too have been silent on these cartoons of the prophet Muhammad and the ensuing protests. Not because I do not have anything to say, but because there is no space left for me either in Denmark or in many Muslim countries.

This does not appear so to many Danes. Here the local controversy seems to be raging between two "Danish Muslim" public figures: Abu Laban, the Copenhagen-based imam who has coordinated much of the protest, and Nasser Khader, a member of the Danish parliament. Khader, liberal, clean-shaven, is posited against the bearded Abu Laban and seen as standing on the side of such "Danish" values as freedom of speech and democracy. He is supposed to represent sane and democratic Muslims. On the other hand, there is repeated talk of kicking Laban out of the country.

In actual fact, of course, both Khader and Laban make it even more difficult for moderate Muslims to be heard. Laban is not afraid of being kicked out of Denmark, because it is not his political territory. Similarly, Khader does not depend on Danish Muslim votes for his survival in politics; he depends on the votes of mainstream Danes, and his politics are geared towards that end. The prime minister's refusal to meet the diplomats was also partly the result of local political considerations: his government is supported by the xenophobic and anti-Islamic Danish People's party.

So much for Denmark, where complacency and smugness have reached extraordinary heights. In Muslim countries too we meet a similar string of local considerations. Surely the tensions between Hamas and Fatah played a role in the disturbances on the West Bank? Surely, some of the reactions - especially in Syria - were the working out of Islamic and pro-Iraqi frustrations on one of the allies of the US's invasion of Iraq?

One could, of course, follow the Qur'an's injunction against portraying Allah or Muhammad without forcing it on people who do not share one's faith. But then the question arises: why should people who do not share one's faith bother with images of one's prophet? For the sake of freedom of expression, said Jyllands-Posten. The only

thing expressed by the cartoons, however, was contempt for Muslims.

But why, you might ask, should Islamic fundamentalists be worried about respect from a west that they mostly find unworthy of emulation? The answer to this lies in the histories of Islamic fundamentalism and European imperialism, aspects of which are horribly interlinked. As a reaction to European imperialism and, later, a political development of the west's fight against communism and socialism, Islamic fundamentalism is a quintessentially modern phenomenon. Hence, in their own way, Islamic fundamentalists are much more bothered about the opinion of "the west" than a person like me!

The Danish government should have apologised long before it did - but was right not to act against Jyllands-Posten. Freedom of expression is necessary not because it is a God-given virtue, but because if you let the authorities start hacking away at it you are liable to be left with nothing. But along with the right to express comes the duty to consider the rights of others. This applies as much to Jyllands-Posten as to the mobs in Beirut.

Between the Danish government and Islamist politicians, between Jyllands-Posten and the mobs in Beirut, between Laban and Khader, the moderate Muslim has again been effectively silenced. She has been forced to take this side or that; forced to stay home and let others crusade for a cause dear to her - freedom - and a cultural heritage essential to her: Islam. On TV she sees the bearded mobs rampage and the clean-shaven white men preach. In the clash of civilisations that is being rigorously manufactured, she is in between. And she can feel it getting tighter. She can feel the squeeze. But, of course, she cannot shout. She cannot scream. Come to think of it, can she really express herself at all now?

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