

Danish Cartoons and Muslim Reaction: Two Wrongs and No Right
By Faisal Sanai

The Muslim reaction to three blasphemous cartoons in an obscure Danish newspaper was more violent than the American reaction to terrorists flying planes into our buildings and killing 3,000 people. This statement, in itself, is absolutely unbelievable. After 9/11 no embassies were firebombed, no people were kidnapped, no mobs chanting "Death" were formed...just a random report or two of some ignorant redneck somewhere who spray-painted a mosque or threatened a Muslim, and who was quickly dealt with by authorities. Now after a daily drumbeat of suicide bombings, beheadings, riots, death-videos, kidnappings, murders, my belief that Islam is a religion of peace is quickly fading...

— Peter Day

What disturbed me was not the content of this letter but that this was a rare voice of reflection in an ocean of arrogance and insensitivity. Commentators from across the Western world seem dismissive of the Muslim angst and almost impervious to our bruised sentiments. The general impression that transcends the non-Muslim society is that the Muslims are pathetically out of touch with reality. Repetitively, the same questions are being asked of the Muslims, while we continue to dole out the same clichéd answers.

Is the Muslim community so self-absorbed that it cannot look beyond its own fractured sentiments? In addition, before we take up knee-jerk defensive postures let us concede one simple fact — the issue is not limited to the ongoing cartoon controversy. It goes much deeper and in fact reaches the core of Muslim double standards.

One can hardly dispute that the Muslim community takes to violence too easily. We seem unable to harness the incalculable power of the mind over adventurism of the heart. We believe that "the ink of a scholar is mightier than the blood of a martyr", yet we do not put this into practice. If we strain across the chasm of perception that divides "us" from "them", then we, Muslims, cannot ignore our burden of guilt. For starters, let us at least admit that our guilt lies more in omission than in acts of commission.

While I accept that there must be protests, certainly there are better ways at hand. The deaths from the cartoon riots have demonstrated to the Western world not our love for our Prophet (peace be upon him), but the flippancy with which we regard human life. What benefit has the loss of another fifty Muslim lives brought? What good has the burning and vandalism of embassies done? For what fault were the Nigerian Christians attacked and their churches destroyed? We speak of the non-Muslim world's need to respect Islamic sentiments and yet we cannot reciprocate the same toward other religions. Sadly, it seems the scope of our tolerance extends only to those who tolerate us. And in doing so we appear just as bad as those whom we criticize.

Where is our vociferous condemnation of the killings of innocents, be they in Bali, Beslan or in Baghdad? Have we ever demonstrated our outrage at the mass killings perpetrated by Muslim terrorists with the same ounce of protest that we reserve for the death of our own? Where was our outrage when the bodies of American civilians were being dragged across the streets of Baghdad, or the ones of Israeli soldiers being desecrated in Gaza? Can we honestly compare our muted head-shaking over the beheadings of Westerners with our ongoing violent protests against the cartoons? Yes, we do express "concern" or "disapproval", but this by no means matches the zeal with which we decry such injustices inflicted upon our own.

However, we cannot ignore the flip side of the coin. But for any meaningful dialogue to take place, it must be objective, and at the same time sensitive to the "victim mentality" that Muslims have for decades struggled with.

Muslims have suffered far more than what the author of the above letter has would have us believe. Consider the American response to the 3000 lives lost on 9/11 — it has to date claimed more than 70,000 Muslim lives, both civilian and military. This is not including the countless others who lie elsewhere — injured, maimed and dispossessed. Is this response equal and balanced?

The ongoing intifada in the Palestinian territories has claimed almost 4,000 Palestinian lives compared to the 900 Israeli ones. The Israeli Army continues to kill with impunity paying scant heed to international law and human rights. We barely sense any unease, leave alone actual condemnation over the atrocities that continue unchecked.

Muslims and Arabs have suffered on all counts of rape, pillage, humiliation and torture. The recent UN report on Guantanamo Bay detainees is testimonial to this. Witness the torture of Guantanamo Bay detainees, the abuse by the British military in Basra, or the horror within Abu Ghraib, and one senses a pattern of deliberate humiliation. Where has the moral and official culpability gone? Can we ignore the fact that no senior military officer has been convicted in these abuse incidents?

Can we overlook the systematic destruction of Jenin, Fallujah and Samarra? When Muslim terrorists destroyed buildings, such acts were labeled as heinous crimes. But when occupying forces destroy entire cities, they are "collateral damage". By what logic was the destruction "unintentional"? We lament, we protest, but nothing changes and no amends are made.

But, two wrongs do not a right make. Our anger simply cannot be used to justify this persecution complex. We cannot use past excesses to justify our present grievances. We must learn to recognize a wrong, no matter who commits it. A spade must be called a spade and this applies to both, "us" and "them". If Muslim terrorists were wrong for the perverted attacks of 9/11 then so are the Western leaders for the death of thousands of innocent ones. If the Western media was wrong in publishing caricatures of the Prophet, then we in the Islamic world are also wrong in our manner of protest.

However, before we point fingers at others, let us set our own house in order. For, we must realize that we too live in glass houses.

The Muslim community and the Western world have each labored over either side of the same coin. We harbor similar grievances and we each have our work cut out for us. Only when we learn to condemn our individual wrongs with the same ferocity as we condemn others' can this slugging match end.

/ Faisal Sanai