

Scandinavia

The Danish Cartoon Controversy

DENMARK WAS suddenly thrust into the international spotlight over cartoons of the Islamic prophet Mohammed, commissioned from 12 illustrators, which were published in the right-of-center newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005. The following month, Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen came under considerable domestic criticism for refusing to meet with ambassadors from 11 Muslim countries who wanted an apology for the cartoons. Rasmussen took the position that the government could not interfere with freedom of the press. Visits by Danish imams to Egypt and Lebanon in December further inflamed sentiment in the Muslim world, and the situation reached crisis level in late January 2006, when Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador from Copenhagen.

The controversy intensified as a boycott of Danish goods began in Saudi Arabia and quickly spread throughout the Muslim world, followed by mass demonstrations and violence directed against Danish flags, embassies, and, in isolated incidents, Danish citizens. The anger was often also directed against other European and American sites. Islamist organizations and terrorist groups, seeing an opportunity to gain visibility, entered the fray with death threats and violent attacks. The Danish Foreign Ministry issued warnings to Danish citizens to leave certain Muslim areas, including Gaza and Syria, and recommended not visiting a host of Muslim countries.

Adding to worldwide concern, radical Muslim groups rioted in some European capitals, and several Muslim states — Afghanistan, Bahrain, Indonesia, Iran, Syria, and Yemen — as well as the Organization of Islamic States issued statements of indignation against Denmark and demanded apologies. Moderate Islamic voices opposing violence were few and far between, although some Danish Muslims were among the first to speak out in conciliatory terms.

The intense reaction surprised and alarmed not only the people and government of Denmark, but the Western world as a whole. Responses varied. Many media outlets printed, televised, or uploaded all or some of the cartoons as a gesture of solidarity with the cartoonists and in sup-

port of freedom of expression. Some leading politicians expressed full backing for the Danish position. But other political and religious figures, including some Roman Catholic and Jewish leaders, condemned the cartoons as insensitive and insulting. Some editors responsible for republishing the cartoons were fired, including one in France and another in Jordan.

Interestingly, the other Scandinavian countries, although victimized by the international violence, were not particularly supportive of Denmark. After the Norwegian newspaper *Magazinet* published all 12 cartoons in January, the country's Foreign Ministry issued a statement expressing regret at the paper's decision. Similarly, when a Swedish political youth movement showed the cartoons on its Web site, Sweden's Foreign Ministry pressured the site to delete the images. Publicity about this government interference, which violated a 1789 Swedish law on the freedom of the press, eventually led to pressure on Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds to resign, which she did. Finland, which was acting president of the European Union during the controversy, issued statements of concern about the offense to Islam and to Muslim sensibilities.

There was hardly unanimity within Denmark itself. For example, quite early on in the controversy, Arla, a large Danish food-production company that did considerable export business with the Muslim world, printed ads in the Arab media apologizing for the cartoons. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Rasmussen stood by his original position backing freedom of the press, and retained the support of most of the country even as the controversy wore on. And while the Muslim economic boycotts took a toll on specific businesses and individuals, they had little effect on the Danish economy as a whole.

Violence appeared to subside somewhat in late February and early March, at which point Rasmussen sought to change the focus of the debate by agreeing to meet with the Arab ambassadors and, after the meeting, seeking to develop a cooperative relationship with local Muslim leaders. In turn, moderate Danish Muslims showed an interest in organizing themselves so as to play a more prominent role, and urged an end to the violence. Notably, there were no reported incidents of counterattacks on Danish Muslims.

A troubling new turn to the story came when an Iranian newspaper issued a call, in February, for cartoons about the Holocaust, claiming that this would serve to expose the alleged hypocrisy of the West on the subject of free speech. The cultural editor of the *Jyllands-Posten* initially embraced the idea and said his paper would run the cartoons concurrently

with the Iranian one, but his editor-in-chief vetoed the plan and the Iranian paper ran the Holocaust cartoons on its own, turning them into an international contest.

Some in the West, including Jewish groups, noted that Arab countries had for many years run anti-Semitic cartoons in their largely state-controlled media, but the argument had little impact and there was no substantial new pressure to rein in this form of hatred. The thrust of this Iran-based phase of the cartoon crisis—in effect encouraging the expression of anti-Semitism within Europe—reemerged in December, when Iranian president Ahmadinejad convened an international conference of Holocaust deniers in Tehran.

As the year ended, the legacy of the cartoon controversy was unclear. Many claimed that the strong Muslim response to the cartoons and the West's confused and divided stand marked a clear victory for militant Islam, and that from now on the world media would be careful not to offend Muslims. Others, particularly Danes, believed that the affair strengthened the standing of moderate Muslims within Denmark, who, for the first time, identified themselves as a coherent group. In fact, while the standing of moderate Muslims did rise within the country, radical Danish Muslim leaders saw their prestige rise within international Islam. Saudi Arabia, for example, donated a significant amount of money to build a new mosque in Copenhagen, whose imam was believed to be a radical.

The cartoon controversy also played into a larger national debate within Denmark that had been going on for some time. As early as 2001, Rasmussen's two-party conservative coalition had made overtures to the right-wing nationalist Danish People's Party, which took a strongly anti-immigration stance and highlighted what it considered insurmountable problems in integrating Muslims into Danish society and culture. Indeed, Muslims constituted the largest religious minority in the country (this was the case in Norway as well), with estimates ranging from 2 to 5 percent of the population, and certain Copenhagen neighborhoods were heavily and noticeably Muslim. Capitalizing on the perceived Muslim threat, the Danish People's Party won 13.3 percent of the vote in 2005. Since then, although not part of the formal government coalition, the party was "tolerated," since its support was necessary for the government to sustain a parliamentary majority.

In this way the People's Party's negative views about the Muslim minority gained a much wider hearing, and Denmark passed restrictive immigration and asylum laws. This, in turn, had the effect of polarizing

society, as many Danes, particularly on the political left, saw these measures and the rhetoric accompanying them as draconian and racist, and strongly contrary to their own view of the country as a haven of decency and tolerance. Then, when the cartoon controversy hit, each side claimed to be vindicated: the Danes who were already wary of Muslims wanted even harsher measures taken against them, while those on the other side saw the need for reaching out to the Muslim community. What no one would deny was that the affair brought the issue of integrating the Danish Muslim minority, previously somewhat muted, much more into the open.

Israel and the Middle East

Up until the late 1960s, Scandinavians had been generally sympathetic to Israel, visiting the Jewish state by the thousands each year. They were especially impressed with the Israeli kibbutz for its socialist and humanitarian values. Such positive sentiments began to change with the Six-Day War of 1967. Public opinion turned pro-Palestinian, as Scandinavians increasingly saw Israel as a conqueror and colonizer. By the early twenty-first century, the Scandinavian countries' generally left-leaning outlook made them among the leading critics of Israel within Europe, particularly in regard to Israel's handling of the Palestinian conflict and treatment of Palestinians in the territories. The same was true of much of the Scandinavian media. People-to-people contact with Israelis also declined dramatically.

Several Scandinavian countries were leading proponents and funders of Palestinian networks and groups, not all of which were committed to peaceful means of asserting themselves against Israel. Finland, for example, annually contributed about seven million euros toward the publication of Palestinian textbooks, many of which were criticized by Jewish groups for denying Israel's existence.

Sweden presented a particular problem for Israel—in fact Oded Eran, who served as Israeli ambassador to the European Union, cited Sweden and Ireland as “the countries that most frequently raise their voices against Israel.” In May 2006, when the EU, like the U.S., refused to recognize the newly elected Hamas government of the Palestinian Authority because it espoused violence and did not recognize Israel, Sweden issued a visa to a Hamas delegation, including a cabinet minister, to visit an NGO in southern Sweden. Thus Sweden became the first European

country to break the diplomatic boycott of Hamas—a group officially classified as a terrorist entity by the EU.

In the early years of his tenure, Swedish prime minister Göran Persson, who took office in 1996, had presented himself as a friend of Israel, initiating the Living History project to commemorate the Holocaust and teach its lessons to all Swedish citizens, and then in 2000 sponsoring the Stockholm International Conference on the Holocaust. Later, however, he maintained a low profile on issues of Jewish concern and remained silent while the Foreign Ministry leveled strong criticism of Israel. In April 2006, Persson defended a Swedish decision to withdraw from a joint NATO Partnership for Peace exercise in Italy in which Israel was participating.

The outbreak of the summer war between Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon brought a loud reaction from all of Europe, including the Scandinavian countries. Finland, in its role as EU president, issued a statement on July 13 saying that the EU was concerned about “disproportionate use of force by Israel,” while also acknowledging that Israel’s action was a “response to attacks by Hezbollah on Israel.” The Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish foreign ministers issued similar calls, criticizing both Hezbollah and Israel, and calling on the former to return the two soldiers it had kidnapped and the latter to avoid escalation of the conflict.

Suggestions that Israel was violating the requirement of “proportionality” in responding to Hezbollah were first raised in regard to strikes on Lebanese infrastructure at the outset of the war, and escalated with the attack on Qana, which resulted in a heavy civilian death toll and negative media images around the world. From that point on, government and media voices in Scandinavia turned increasingly critical of Israel, as was the case elsewhere in Europe. For good measure, Norway also condemned Israel for its actions in Gaza, describing them as “collective punishment.”

On August 5, Jostein Gaarder, the well-known Norwegian writer and author of the 1991 international best-seller *Sophie’s World*, wrote an article titled “God’s Chosen People” that was published in Norway’s leading newspaper, *Aftenposten*. Written in a biblical, prophetic style, it declared that post-1967 Israel—that is, the Israel of today—had no right to exist. Gaarder charged that Israeli attacks on Lebanon demonstrated complete disregard for the lives of non-Jews, blamed the Jewish “chosen people” idea for this behavior, and concluded, “We call this racism.” The article set off an international controversy, as many felt that

the focus on Israel as a state that embodied objectionable Jewish beliefs constituted anti-Semitism. Gaarder responded that he had been misunderstood.

In late July, Denmark — whose foreign policy was more aligned with the U.S. than those of its Scandinavian neighbors — issued a statement urging Hezbollah and Hamas to disarm and recognize Israel as a necessary step toward ending the larger conflict. Denmark served as a temporary member of the UN Security Council during 2005–06. Its UN ambassador, Ellen Margrethe Løj, fully supported Israel's right to self-defense in speeches to that body, and called repeatedly on Hezbollah to release the two Israeli soldiers it was holding.

On August 11, Per Stig Møller, the Danish minister for foreign affairs, cast his country's vote in favor of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, calling for the cessation of hostilities in Lebanon and extending and strengthening the mandate of UNIFIL to monitor the cease-fire. Before the vote he told the Security Council that Hezbollah was the main cause of the conflict and that Syria and Iran should be urged to "act responsibly." He also called on Israel to "exercise restraint" and avoid "disproportionate force."

With the passage of the cease-fire resolution, Sweden volunteered to host an international donor conference for Lebanon recovery on August 31. Pledges at the conference from more than 60 countries and from international aid organizations totaled over \$940 million. According to reports, leftist groups in Sweden participated in pro-Hezbollah demonstrations immediately following the war.

Anti-Semitism

As in other parts of the world, intense criticism of Israel occasionally crossed the line into anti-Semitism in the Scandinavian countries. This was clearly the case with the Gaarder article during the war in Lebanon, mentioned above. Some Jewish groups also criticized Norwegian papers for publishing anti-Israel cartoons during 2006 that employed imagery reminiscent of Nazi propaganda. Some depicted Israeli leaders with classically oversized noses, others suggested that the State of Israel employed allegedly "Old Testament" eye-for-an-eye tactics in combating the Palestinians, or that Israel was engaged in Nazi-style genocide.

A number of attacks on Jews and on synagogues took place in Norway during the year. On February 3, a Molotov cocktail was tossed at the Jewish community center in Trondheim, but no damage resulted.

On July 15—soon after the onset of the Israel-Hezbollah war—a Jewish man wearing a *kippah* was assaulted on an Oslo street. The Mosaic Religious Community, the official organization of Norwegian Jews, responded by advising its members not to wear Jewish emblems in public and not to speak Hebrew loudly. On August 2, someone defecated on the steps of the Oslo synagogue, an act captured on video by security cameras. The culprit escaped.

The front of that synagogue was the target of ten gun shots on September 17; luckily, no one was injured. Officials promised to provide tighter security. Nevertheless, Israel's ambassador to Norway, Miryam Shomrat, criticized the Norwegian reaction, noting that neither the royal family nor the prime minister had publicly condemned the latest violence or expressed solidarity with Norwegian Jewry, and claiming that the Jewish community felt very much alone. But the spokeswoman for Oslo's synagogue and the Mosaic Religious Community said that neither body shared the ambassador's view, and that her remarks overstepped her position. Shomrat then apologized for dragging the royal family into politics. The incident demonstrated a real split between Israel's representative in the country and the Norwegian Jewish community.

In Sweden, Chancellor of Justice Gorin Lambertz halted an investigation into the selling of anti-Semitic cassettes at the Grand Mosque of Sweden that called for the killing of Jews, saying that the issue was related to the political situation in the Middle East and therefore not under his jurisdiction. Many critics viewed this as using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to excuse anti-Semitism.

The Swedish national elections in September 2006 ended the 12-year rule of the Social Democratic Party and brought to power a center-right coalition led by the leader of the Moderate Party, Fredrik Reinfeldt, who would be prime minister. Economic and other domestic issues, rather than foreign policy, decided the election. The new government quickly took steps to ease Jewish fears. In November, it declared that the government would pay for \$424,000 of the \$707,000 that the Jewish community annually spent for security. The previous Social Democratic government had consistently refused to contribute any funds for that purpose. There was also some hope that relations with Israel would improve under the new coalition.

Reports of anti-Semitic incidents in Denmark picked up at the onset of the cartoon controversy with allegations that Jews were behind the publication of the images. Although there were no acts of violence, threatening comments and letters induced many Jews in Denmark, as in Nor-

way, to avoid publicly identifying themselves as Jews. In the fall, a conference on anti-Semitism under the name "With Our Backs to the Walls" was held in the Danish parliament building in Copenhagen.

The leader of Hizb Ut-Tahrir, the most extreme Muslim anti-Israel group in Denmark, was sentenced to two months in prison for distributing fliers urging the killing of Jews. His legal defense was that he had targeted Israeli Jews who were subjugating Palestinians and taking their land, not Danish Jews.

Holocaust-Related Matters

Several Holocaust commemorations in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway—some marking the anniversary of Kristallnacht, some Holocaust Memorial Day, and others noting different events—were hijacked by leftist groups that had anti-Israel agendas. In an ironic twist on the duty of historical remembrance, they used these occasions to focus attention on the "modern-day racism" of Israel. The Jewish organizations in these countries therefore refused to participate, and sometimes staged their own separate ceremonies.

Memory of the Holocaust rescue efforts conducted in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway during World War II was kept alive by Thanks to Scandinavia, a New York-based institute of the American Jewish Committee. It funded scholarships for Scandinavian teachers, students, and medical professionals to study in the U.S. and Israel (including a special program at Yad Vashem), and sent an annual delegation of Scandinavian journalists and politicians for a weeklong visit to Israel.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

The Scandinavian country with the largest number of Jews was Sweden, whose three communities totaled 10,000 registered members, with another estimated 10,000 Jews living outside the communal structure. Denmark had 2,200 registered Jews and about another 2,500 unregistered. For Finland the numbers were 1,200 official community members and less than 200 nonmembers. The smallest group of Jews lived in Norway, with a total of 850 registered members in the two cities of Oslo and Trondheim, and about 300 more outside these communities.

Scandinavian Jewish communities survived through the taxation of their registered members, but were also eager to receive contributions

from other sources. Those who did not join the official communities tended to be of two types: families containing non-Jewish spouses, and Israeli citizens.

The year 2006 marked several milestones for the Jews of Finland. Most important, it was the centennial year of the Helsinki synagogue. The Finnish president and her husband, Scandinavian and Israeli dignitaries, and religious leaders from across the country participated in the celebration. Two important publications were released to mark the event: the first-ever Jewish prayer book containing both the Hebrew text and a Finnish translation, and a book featuring photos of the Helsinki Jewish community from 1850 to 1950. Also, the Maccabi Jewish sports club marked a century of activity in Finland. Finally, Finnish WIZO was alone among the Scandinavian branches of the movement to mark the international women's Zionist organization's 80th anniversary.

Paideia—The European Institute for Jewish Studies in Sweden, based in Stockholm, played a major role in the education and training of Jewish academicians, artists, and communal leaders not only for Scandinavia but for all of Europe. Established in 2000 as a nondenominational academy with financial support from the government, it promoted the study of Jewish texts, hosted short courses and guest lectures by international scholars, and sponsored programs in Israel.

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