

The Cartoon Riots: A New Cultural Diplomacy

by Binoy Kampmark

In September 2005, riots erupted, diplomatic relations with much of the Muslim world were ruptured, two embassies were destroyed, and several lives were lost. In Syria, the Danish and Norwegian embassies were burned. In Gaza, Danish flags were set alight. In Yemen, 100,000 women marched in protest. This mayhem was the result of a Danish newspaper's publication of caricatures (commissioned illustrations for a children's book) depicting the Prophet Muhammad. The images were not flattering. One pictured Muhammad with a bomb-shaped turban. Another mocked Islam's purported ambivalence towards women's rights: heaven was apparently running short of virgins for suicide bombers. They were hardly humorous and the Danish Government, led by a stubborn Anders Fogh Rasmussen, defended the publication of the cartoons on the grounds of free speech.¹ How should these reactions be interpreted? Was the Muslim world entitled to take such measures?

The purpose of this article is to analyze the global reaction to the cartoons, within the broader context of diplomatic precedent, a task that has been neglected in favor of purely cultural critiques.² The study seeks out comparisons with previous events in order to posit how Islam and the West come to grips with the role of religion in their diplomatic relations and how the mechanics of those relations have developed. The paper also suggests that religion has been an important part of diplomatic history. As such, this current secular-religious clash requires another mode of analysis. What is needed is the realization that a new diplomacy – one that acknowledges the resurgent role religion and cultural considerations play in state relations – has developed. The nature of such diplomacy, it is suggested, undermines sovereignty and cultural independence by requiring nation-states, notably those of the West, to appraise ethnicity and statehood in a seemingly radical way, altering the current view of international statecraft as a secular practice.

Binoy Kampmark is a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, University of Cambridge. He has published on terrorism, international refugee policy, and genocide. He most recently wrote about the trial of Saddam Hussein for the *Contemporary Review*. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

RELIGION AND DIPLOMACY

It is an incontrovertible fact that religion has been the subject of diplomacy for centuries. While religion has ceased to be a putative feature of diplomatic engagement between most power blocs in the world (Europe, the Americas, Asia), religion as a feature of international relations has not entirely disappeared. Islam, as a case in point, acknowledges no such exclusion of religion from diplomatic practice, despite the acceptance by most Muslim states of a “secular approach to the conduct of international relations.”³ Historically, European states often employed the use of religion and culture in foreign affairs. Even after the Protestant-Catholic confrontation of the devastating Thirty Years War (1618–1648), when a nominally secular idea of the nation-state came into being after the Treaty of Westphalia, the existence of clauses protecting religious minorities were still part and parcel of treaty law. The secularization of diplomacy in the West has not precluded the use of religion for the sake of political gain or the use of religion in forcing a respect of cultural values in another state. The presence of religious and cultural values in interstate relations, in short, is a historically consistent process.

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In the age of imperialism, it was not unheard of to legislate protective clauses for religious minorities. New scholarship has furnished a previously unexamined example from the 1860s. England and Italy sought a commercial agreement that would go on to become one of many marking the first push for a “common market” in Europe.⁴ The particular agreement is notable because British representatives inserted a religious clause protecting the rights of Protestants in Italy in an otherwise commercial treaty.⁵ To retain such a clause was perceived as potentially insulting by the Italians. The religious liberties of Protestants, so claimed Italian officials, were sufficiently protected under the Italian constitution. But, it was not inconsistent with London’s desire to import Protestant values into a militant doctrine of free trade.⁶

Islam acknowledges no official separation between diplomacy and religion, just as it recognizes no official division between governance and faith. As has been pointed out in some scholarship on the subject, classical Muslims saw Islam as the “one, true, final and universal religion” and central to their concept of the international system. The division between the Islamic and non-Islamic world would be ultimately overcome by “the movement from *Dar al-Harb* (abode of war encompassing unbelievers; Land of War) to *Dar al-Islam* (the abode of peace, encompassing all Muslims).”⁷ The former encompasses non-believers, those outside the domain of Islam; the latter comprises the faithful, the submissive, the believers under the rule of Islamic law and governance.

Such views are inherently antithetical to territorial considerations reflected by conventional doctrines of international engagement, such as the recognition of

states and governments: Islam has no boundaries and its kingdom is borderless. Some writers have gone so far as to see *Dar al-Islam* as a grim world, where non-Muslims incorporated into the boundaries of Muslim empires were given the rather limited choices of death, conversion, or the status of *dhimmi*—a second-class caste of citizens, deprived of the rights and status assured to Muslims.⁸

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the objections of Muslim governments to attacks on Islam should transcend the conventional limits of the State. Islam has been affronted and requires defense; it faces a world of conflict beyond its borders, which constantly presents challenges that are difficult to overcome. Scholars argue that Western nations have been insensitive. Such humor masks old ethnocentric insensitivities, eschewing cultural difference and tolerance. Muslim delegations have been sent to Denmark and they have complained of being “hurt.” Islam is affronted; the Prophet is inviolable, beyond representation, beyond parody.

The charge of being “hurt” should be taken seriously. Cultural hurt is the inevitable outcome of humor and parody. Parody is a weapon, recognized in cultures across the globe. Humor liberates. It attacks conventions and dogmas, subverting oppressive social structures.⁹ But the question to ask here is not whether the global village is humorless, but whether new international conventions have arisen, modifying cultural behavior within and beyond nation-states. Religion has again entered the equation of international relations, challenging the way states, notably those with Muslim immigrants, deal with their culturally diverse citizenry. Such citizens have affinities not merely with their adopted homeland, but with the countries of their faith. The protests caused by the cartoons must themselves be rationalized as part of this evolution. After all, there are representations of Muhammad in other parts of the Western world, too numerous to enumerate here. The US Supreme Court embosses the Prophet in its façade and still stands without a murmur of protest. An understanding of the cultural diplomacy that has developed is useful to such ends. How, for instance, were these protests instigated?

A NEW DIPLOMACY

There is a fundamentally new strain of international engagement that has arisen from the globalization of cultural debates. We think of the sensitivities posed by the question of the Holocaust, and the sensitivities associated with its commemoration or denial.¹⁰ As common citizens gradually break out of the cage of sovereignty, the individual is far more significant, not merely from the viewpoint of rights, but from the viewpoint of expression. The field of religious expression is one feature of this revolution.

The closest parallel to the current crisis is the controversy that surrounded the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by the British author Salman Rushdie.¹¹ With the release of the book in 1988, global tremors were felt. In October 1988, Islamic diplomacy (or rather, belligerent statesmanship) entered the fray, with Saudi Arabia taking up the cause in protesting against the book. As happened in the Danish case,

local Muslim representatives organized protests. Muslim representatives in Britain drummed up support for their cause by emphasizing the blasphemous quality of the work. Faiyazuddin Ahmad, of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, England, was invited to Jidda, Saudi Arabia to consult officials about mobilizing support against the book.

In February 1989, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini decreed that a bounty be put on Rushdie's head for having written a work he considered blasphemous.

The historical parallels between the Rushdie case and the Danish cartoons incident are striking. There were first protests in India, rather than the country of Rushdie's residence, Great Britain. Muslim members of the Indian parliament campaigned to have the book banned after excerpts and reviews in *India Today* and *Sunday* came to their attention.¹² Book burnings took place and there was a violent protest in Islamabad on February 12, outside the American Cultural Center. There were six casualties in all.¹³

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The reaction toward the cartoons in the Danish case was similar. The difference, if anything, was the effectiveness of the agitation and the speed with which the message against their publication was disseminated. The Muslim community in Denmark spread the word by telephone and the blogosphere was filled with discussion. Boycotts of Danish goods took place, first in Saudi Arabia, where text messaging spread the word with incredible speed. Arla Foods, a Danish dairy company with a highly profitable cheese business in the Middle East, suffered losses amounting to €1.5 million per day.¹⁴ But the key factor, the effective mobilization of low-level organizations and activists, managed to convince member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, a group of fifty-seven Islamic countries, to boycott a Danish exhibition to be held in Denmark that summer. Flushed with indignation, a group of Danish Imams led by such figures as the truculent spokesman Ahmed Akkari and Sheikh Raed Hlayhel, journeyed to the Al-Azhar University in Cairo with the express purpose of consulting prominent Muslims, amongst them the Grand Mufti and Arab League officials. They were armed with a dossier of inflammatory publications highlighting the plight of Muslims as a minority in Denmark. The forty-three page document in their possession placed less emphasis on the original cartoons of the prophet than other newly acquired material – amongst them clippings from the *Weekend Avisen* and samples of hate mail.¹⁵ It took time to take hold, but in January, when the photos were rerun, the seeds of anger flourished.

The agitation of the Muslim diaspora against the Danish caricatures demonstrates the remarkable mobilization of its members in combating a style of behavior, common within secular societies, but regarded in Islamic societies, as

offensive. But, there is a transnational dimension as well, one that defies territorial constraints associated with traditional diplomacy. An efficient group of clerics and intellectuals have facilitated an effective Muslim voice in the international community. They have developed philosophies that meld into local environments. The logical connection between national (the cleric preaching in a Copenhagen mosque) and international actions (the same cleric protesting to representatives of the Arab League) reveals a common strategy: individuals within the diaspora campaign for the rights of Muslims within non-Muslim societies while making their positions known in the Muslim world through such remarkable networks as Al-Jazeera. While doing so, they pacify their non-Muslim hosts with promises of integration and tolerance. The cleric, Ahmed Abu Laban, a leading figure in the NGO, Islamic Faith Community—a body comprising the membership of approximately twenty-seven Muslim organizations—is a case in point. While professing to be conciliatory, he still co-authored, along with Akkari, the vengeful dossier illustrating acts of anti-Muslim fervor committed by Danes.¹⁶

But there are others. Figures such as Dyab Abu Jahjah of Antwerp or Tariq Ramadan of Switzerland, grandson of Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, have insisted that Islam's identity trumps Western norms within the non-Muslim setting. Abdurhahman Alamoudi, now serving a twenty-three-year prison sentence for breaching anti-terrorist laws in the US, was feted by the Clinton and Bush administrations as a voice of tolerance and "mainstream" American Islam. Yet, in 1996, at an address to the Islamic Association for Palestine, he was quoted as saying, "I think if we are outside this country, we can say 'Oh, Allah, destroy America.'" At other stages, after his arrest in 2003, he shifted his focus from the US to targets in Europe and Latin America.¹⁷

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There is, in short, an entire dimension of international diplomacy that is happening outside official channels. A twenty-first-century global village has now mobilized political actors outside the State Department, the White House, and UN headquarters in New York City. On the one hand, human rights and environmental NGOs have diminished the conventional role of nation-states as the exclusive actors of international relations. But, there is a far more pressing modern phenomenon that has come on the heels of such agencies: religion. Non-state actors, specifically religious figures with transborder connections, feed their faithful with messages that are duly adapted for the politics of the moment.

The Muslim diaspora has become a potent force in this new diplomacy due to the highly effective way its religious representatives within non-Muslim societies have rallied support for Islamic causes. The danger posed by the actions of such representatives is the powerful show of support for their causes from States of the *Dar al-Islam*. Iran and Syria, who were keen to promote the demonization of Denmark and the West in the aftermath of the publications, come to mind as examples.¹⁸ Such a phenomenon has triggered worries that multiculturalism is not

merely weak but fatal, protecting the very agents that seek to undermine it.¹⁹ But such concerns are extreme. Turkish Muslims in Denmark have proven remarkably resilient in adapting to existing conditions. Most do not seek to convert the western state into an abode of the Islamic faithful. Given Islam's enormously diverse pool of immigrants in the West, the problems and aspirations of various Muslim groups vary.

SOVEREIGNTY MATTERS

The implications of conducting cultural diplomacy through non-state actors are significant. First, cultural diplomacy is, by nature, a breach of sovereignty. Second, when such diplomacy is backed by states (Iran, Syria) it becomes a danger to territorial integrity. Cultural diplomacy is anathema to sovereignty: it requires one nation to alter its domestic approach to cultural values to make it acceptable to a concert of other nations. Islam only knows its own sovereignty. Here is the impasse. The prophet may be inviolable, but so is Danish sovereignty.

Sovereignty is enshrined in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, a legacy of post-war security agreements. True, these agreements have been challenged. The current global order undermines state borders at short notice: international disease, refugee flows, and terrorism know no specific boundaries. There is, additionally, a debate about global citizenship, the idea of a universal morality, and a common basis for politics and governance that transcends the limits of the individual state.²⁰ But the notion that a state must increase its control on the press or impose penalties for alleged infractions of cultural sensitivities poses a challenge to the internal order of nations. Is there a solution to this problem?

APPROACHES AND SOLUTIONS

It is apposite to see the cartoon riots as fundamental to a broader problem between Islam and the West. But such problems are solvable through a historical approach, which finds its solution in diplomatic precedent. Islamic and non-Islamic states have engaged in remarkably enlightened discussions in the past, exempt from the warring features and hostility that often characterize these culture wars that have become the stock and staple of history. One of the most remarkable treaties ever signed between a Muslim and non-Muslim state is the 1535 Treaty of Alliance between Sultan Sulayman the Magnificent and the then King of Spain, Francis I. Its framework guaranteed peace between the powers. The treaty granted reciprocal rights between subjects, allowing freedom of worship for French subjects within Ottoman territories and exempting them from the poll tax. It allowed the French to send a bailiff to Ottoman territories to assess disputes that might arise between Ottoman subjects and French merchants.²¹ Given the rather parochial standing of the prominent jurists of international law at that time—Albericus Gentilis and Hugo Grotius favored discrimination against non-Christian states—the agreement seems somewhat miraculous. The current sea of hostilities, the language of rogue states, and the accusations of Islam's backward orientation can give way to rapprochement.

The shape of such an agreement is admittedly complex; it is merely sufficient in this short note to illustrate precedents.

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The basic fact that Islam seemingly abrogates any form of division between state and religion should not imply the incapacity of Islamic states to exert a constructive influence over this modern phenomenon of cultural diplomacy. In 1956, a scholar writing for the flagship journal of the American Society for International Law, argued that Muslim states, in the twentieth century, had proven "active" in participating in "international conferences, in the League of Nations, and the United Nations and its agencies" demonstrating the case that the *Dar al-Islam* had "reconciled" its dictates with the *Dar al-Harb*.²² Despite their refusal to accept the international dimension of other legal systems, a corollary of Islamic states' refusal to accommodate the non-Islamic world, Islamic nations gradually established those features associated with a "law of nations." In other words, even in the field of international relations, religious states have a constructive role to play within the *Dar-al-harb*. Even if there was a supposition that the entry into negotiations with a state, the signing of a treaty, or the establishment of any formal relations was only based on the premise of convenience—Islamic states would not recognize the non-Islamic state—the very fact that such engagement took place demonstrates the importance and utility of understanding the curious manner of such states' conduct. In short, we can appreciate the concept of *Dar al-Islam* (Land or House of Islam) without endorsing pro-Arab designs or a repudiation of Judaic or Western models of cultural-diplomatic understanding.²³

Certainly, Muslim states are capable of more moderate approaches on the issue of cultural sensitivity, which would assure the sovereignty of other states in the international system. The Malaysian reaction to Britain in the Rushdie affair is illustrative of such an approach. The Muslim fundamentalists' Malay party, Parti Islam Semalaysia (PAS), endorsed the Ayatollah's fatwa, but the government did not. An official from PAS was noted as saying that the government needed to regard the "hypocrisy and insult of European countries and the US towards the Islamic ummah" and support the Khomeini's directive to "kill the enemies of Islam" with greater seriousness. The same official also argued that there was widespread disapproval of Britain's participation in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). "We are not anti-British but we do not want Britain to shelter acts that insult Allah and his prophet."²⁴ The Malaysian government was far more open to respecting the municipal laws of Britain, warning against the dangers of seeing Islam as a monolithic front.²⁵

There is a final point that should be heeded. The value of modern, instant communication should not be underestimated. There is a yawning chasm between

the developed and developing world and that is not merely economic, but cultural. Civil servants have lamented the decline of “public diplomacy”—the promotion of cultural values through global institutions such as the Goethe Institute, BBC services, the Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe.²⁶ Islam has been increasingly effective in garnering its forces within non-Muslim domains and facilitating sophisticated channels of communication through twenty-four hour exposure and establishing audiences in both European and Islamic societies. This comes on the heels of the establishment of Muslim schools and educational institutions in the *Dar al-Harb*. It seems logical that for the West to improve the accessibility of its messages, whether they be on the war on terror (that is, reiterating that the conflict is not one against Islam per se but its aberrant followers) or an amelioration of poverty in the third world, funding to its flagship broadcasters must be increased and its diplomatic exchanges improved. More effective communication channels might have countered militant reactions in the Islamic world at shorter notice. At the most basic level, the Danish Prime Minister, whilst holding to the view that Denmark’s press was entitled to express its views on the subject of depicting the Prophet, might have still engaged his Muslim counterparts with empathy. He might have at least met with the eleven Islamic ambassadors seeking his audience in October 2005. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit made it clear that punishment of the *Jylland-Posten* was not sought, merely a statement acknowledging “the need for and obligation of respecting all religions and desisting from offending their devotees” to quell prospects of an “escalation” in the crisis.²⁷

We have, in the final analysis, a departure from the norms of diplomatic engagement in the way Muslims in their non-Muslim settings reacted to the cartoons of the Prophet. International diplomacy is no longer exclusively fueled by conflicts of secular ideology (a free-market versus a command economy; liberalism versus communism). Religion, with its complex cultural, cross-border considerations, has become a paramount consideration in making policy. This requires that states realize how the highly mobile nature of the modern Muslim activist, operating from their adopted homes within the *Dar al-Harb*, may voice their grievances in the *Dar al-Islam*. A new diplomacy, aware of the cultural pitfalls brought on by this change of circumstances, is required. The twenty-first century, as the Gaullist Minister for Culture André Malraux posed, may indeed be an age of religion.

Notes

¹ “Danish Cartoons Raises Few Smiles in Arab World,” *Middle East Economic Digest* 50, no. 5 (February 3, 2006): 3.

² “Prophetic Insults: Free Speech Clashes with Religious Sensitivity,” *Economist* 378, no. 8459 (January 7, 2006): 44.

³ Majid Khadduri, “Islam and the Modern Law of Nations,” *American Journal of International Law* 50, 2 (April, 1956): 358-372.

⁴ P.T. Marsh, *Bargaining on Europe: Britain and the First Common Market, 1860-1892* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁵ Article 16 of the agreement is notable for this: Draft treaty attached to the letter Edmund Hammond (Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs) to Sir J. Emerson Tennent, April 24, 1862, F.O. 881/1276 (Foreign Office Records), Public Records Office (PRO), Kew, England.

- ⁶ Hudson to Lord Russell, August 1, 1863, F.O. 45/42, PRO, Kew. I am indebted to Danilo Raponi's fine "Religion and Trade: the Anglo-Italian Commercial Treaty of 1863," as yet unpublished, for this point.
- ⁷ Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.
- ⁸ David Pryce-Jones, "Muslims: Integration or Separatism?" *New Criterion* 24, no. 6 (February 2006): 4-9.
- ⁹ For an analysis of this function, see Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Folk Humour and Carnival Laughter," in *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).
- ¹⁰ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (February 2002): 87-106.
- ¹¹ Salman Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1989).
- ¹² Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1990), 19.
- ¹³ Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair*, 24.
- ¹⁴ Kristina Bergmann, "The Comic Jihad: Throwing Oil on the Fire," *Spiegel Online*, February 4, 2006. Available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,398984,00.html> (Accessed August 28, 2006).
- ¹⁵ "Alienated Danish Muslims Sought Help from Arabs," *Spiegel Online*, February 1, 2006. Available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,398624,00.html> (Accessed August 28, 2006).
- ¹⁶ Karl Ritter, "Danish Imam accused of fuelling Cartoon Conflict says West must learn to Respect Islam," *Associated Press Newswires*, Feb. 11, 2006, Factiva Electronic Resource (Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive), accessed Feb. 28, 2006.
- ¹⁷ Joseph Braude, "Misled: Moderate Muslims and their Radical Leaders," *New Republic* 234, no. 7 (February 27, 2006): 19.
- ¹⁸ *APS Diplomat Recorder*, "Syria and Iran Accused Over Cartoon Riots Strife," 64, 8 (Feb. 11, 2006), Expanded Academic, Infotrac, Aug. 28, 2006.
- ¹⁹ See Daniel Johnson, "Terror and Denial," *Commentary* 122 (Jul-Aug., 2006), 83-5.
- ²⁰ Rainer Bauböck, *Transnational Citizenship* (Aldershot, Hants, England/Brookfield, Vermont: E. Elgar, 1994); Richard Falk, "The Making of Global Citizenship," in *The Condition of Citizenship*, ed. Bart van Steenbergen (London, England: SAGE, 1994), 127-140.
- ²¹ Khadduri, "Islam and the Modern Law of Nations," 361.
- ²² Khadduri, "Islam and the Modern Law of Nations," 370-1.
- ²³ Manoucher Parvin and Maurie Sommer, "Dar al-Islam: The Evolution of Muslim Territoriality and its Implications for Conflict Resolution in the Middle East," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 1 (February 1980): 1-2.
- ²⁴ Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, 167, fn 67.
- ²⁵ Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, 146-147.
- ²⁶ Mark Leonard, "Diplomacy by Other Means," *Foreign Policy* 132 (September/October 2002): 48.
- ²⁷ Statement in "Egypten gav Fogh mulighed for forsonig" [Egypt gives Fogh the possibility for reconciliation], *Politiken*, February 22, 2006.

