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GCSP Policy Brief Series

The GCSP policy brief series publishes papers in order to assess policy challenges, dilemmas, and policy recommendations in *all aspects* of transnational security and globalization. The series was created and is edited by Dr. Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan, Senior Scholar in Geostrategy and Director of the Program on the Geopolitical Implications of Globalization and Transnational Security.

GCSP Policy Brief No. 7 Danish Cartoons: A Symptom of Global Insecurity

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Abstract

The Danish cartoon controversy reflects rising resentment and a challenge not to the mobility of Euro-Atlantic goods and commodities but to the region's dominant cultural norms and values. The resonance of the reaction to the publication, particularly in the Middle East, shocked the Danish political elite and public, and the cartoon controversy represented, for some, the worst foreign policy disaster since the Second World War. The backlash to the controversy damaged Denmark's reputation in the Middle East; stigmatized its diplomatic efforts, and so its effectiveness as an internationalist political actor; and raised questions about the durability and place of its core identity and values in an ever more interconnected world. As an event, however, it may have facilitated the creation, albeit unplanned, of a global civil society.

Policy Challenges

The Danish cartoon controversy provides an unusual example of cultural globalization, where it has been possible to track the origin, measure the flow, and gauge the effect of an idea. On September 30, 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllandes-Posten* published 12 cartoons that satirized the Prophet Mohammed as, for example, a cleric wearing a bomb for a turban. By February 2006, after a four-month interval, promoters of Muslim discontent organized propaganda campaigns in Europe and the Middle East, and the international press reported attacks on the Danish and Norwegian embassies in Damascus; mobs in Tehran, Cairo, and Beirut; protests in London, Paris, and Copenhagen; and the deaths of 11 people in related violence in Afghanistan.

The violent response to the cartoons caused a number of policy challenges for Western liberal democratic and secular governments. For example, they were forced to consider whether the freedoms of thought and expression were unconditional or whether they could be limited, as well as the relationship between those freedoms and the responsibility not to incite hatred. In addition, governments were forced to consider their relations with the Muslim world, including ways to bridge growing divides in terms of values, religion and culture.

Responses

The cartoon issue has fuelled Islamophobia in Europe and helped reinforce and authenticate extremist narratives in both Europe and the Middle East that reflect atavistic binary thinking and that divide, rather than unite, societies. Some have argued that Western newspapers printed the cartoons to boost their circulation rather than to show support for freedom of expression; that freedom of expression does not mean freedom to be insensitive, unnecessarily gratuitous, or hostile to the growing diversity within Western societies. For others, the protests were a *coup de theatre* intended to achieve a secular political result, as *agents provocateurs* circulated the cartoons widely to incite riots.

In Denmark, the issue helped polarize society, as it occurred in the context of an ongoing debate over immigration and amid a rise in extreme right-wing parties. Kamal Qureshi, a member of the Danish Socialist People's Party, argued: "The cartoons were the symbol of a very xenophobic agenda that has been going on which is led by the Danish People's Party, which is a radical, racist party in the Danish parliament." He noted: "It's very important to know why this happened in Denmark, and why this didn't happen in some other country... The approach in Norway and Sweden towards the ethnic minorities has been completely different. Sweden created a mosque many, many years ago in one of the biggest cities. In Denmark there is still to be built a mosque where the Muslims can go and have their prayers."¹ The role of a hitherto durable dominant political culture based on political anti-elitism and egalitarianism was challenged by these events, leading to a greater questioning of hidden assumptions concerning the nature of Danish identity and self-image.

Dilemmas

Situations that require a choice between two alternatives that are or appear to be equally unfavorable or mutually exclusive place states and their policy makers “between the devil and the deep blue sea.” When we reflect on the issues addressed in this policy brief, it becomes apparent that the classical security dilemma, first coined by John Herz in 1950, needs to be reconsidered when states and non-state actors occupy and are increasingly at cross purposes within a globalized world. According to Herz, a security dilemma occurs where the security of one state requires or leads to the insecurity of another. However, the Danish cartoon controversy demonstrated that, as the scale and intensity of globalization increases, the appropriate functioning of non-state actors (an independent newspaper) within a state (Denmark) can result in challenges by external non-state actors (mobilized public opinion in the Middle East) leading to symbolic and actual undermining of state security (Danish Embassy attacked and economic boycott of Danish goods). This might be termed a state/non-state security dilemma.

1. States should protect the fundamental freedoms of their populations, but when connectivity causes local actions to have a global impact, and states are punished over actions they are not responsible for and are unable to respond to without changing the nature of their governance, how can states respond meaningfully while maintaining their integrity?
2. The right to provoke and freedom of expression are key tenets of liberal democratic states, as are the responsibility to respect the views of others and not to incite hatred or violence. But favoring one side of this balance weakens the other, which raises the question of where to draw the line without damaging both.
3. How can homogenous states (where there is one dominant ethnicity, religion, and value base) best maintain the core identity of the societies within it while integrating ever more closely into a globalized world where identities and values can clash?
4. Those states and communities that can access and adapt new technologies gain the benefits of globalization, but, at the same time, the greater the connectivity offered by information and communication technologies, the sharper and more immediate the clash in values, ethics, and religions between communities, the greater the resulting instability, and the more globalization is undermined. How can this be managed, and can an equilibrium be found when low- and high-context cultures inevitably clash?²

Implications

The foreign policy implications of the cartoon controversy placed a spotlight on the extent to which the freedom of the press and speech can infringe on a discourse of tolerance and respect. It raised a number of questions that are unresolved in democratic states and societies: How are the two to be balanced – should individuals and communities be willing to tolerate insults, mockery, and ridicule? Who decides? What is the role of religion and religious

sensitivities in a secular and democratic state? How can minorities that do not share the same ethnicity, language, or religion best be integrated?

The constructed self-image of the Danish nation, whose core identity is based on an ethnically and culturally homogenous imagined community, was challenged as the growth (5.4 percent of the population), attitudes, and expectations of Muslim communities became much more visible within Denmark. This has important implications and has helped Denmark's identity evolve.

The cartoon episode also highlighted the way in which Danish, and to a lesser extent European, news media were increasingly prone to depict Muslims as radicals and terrorists. The media distorted the fact that 80 percent of Denmark's Muslims were drawn from countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, and Somalia. They were not members of political or religious groups. Indeed, only 5 percent describe themselves as religious, although the "stigmatization of Muslims in this country risks turning the cliché of the radical Muslim into a reality."³

This stigmatization raised a more fundamental issue that has profound policy implications: how the relationship between Islam and culture is understood in the West. Islam provides a core part of a Muslim's identity, and so the reaction to the cartoons is explained by a reaction to an identity; however, not all Muslim responses were violent. The Muslim world is not monolithic, and a clear policy implication is to formulate policies that take into account how culture affects people's perception of the world and, in turn, helps determine their understanding of events. In the US, for example, Muslim leaders shared the universal anger and outrage over the publication of the cartoons yet argued that the violence perpetrated by some Muslim communities and groups should stop because the Prophet Mohammed would never have approved. Presentation and perception matter as much as policies themselves.

This event has highlighted the way in which different globalization processes (economic, political, and cultural) are cross-cutting and intertwined, the way in which cultural and religious issues can have economic bearing, and the ways in which state and non-state actors can themselves be bound in a security dilemma: Globalization allowed communities to organize an economic boycott of goods from Denmark in retaliation for a perceived cultural/religious attack and provocation by a non-state actor over which the state had no control.

It also illustrated that publishing can no longer be considered local. The interaction of peoples from different cultural and religious worlds has broken the bounds of geography, and this requires a constant awareness of the interrelatedness of our world and the consequences of this for states, identities, and norms.

Future Trajectories/Scenarios

The concept of Denmark as a state within which lives a homogenous nation can only be weakened and adapted as the free movement of labor within the EU continues and as immigration into the EU increases. The question of the integration of minorities into Danish society (and indeed into Scandinavian societies more generally) will continue to be controversial, and higher unemployment, crime, and school dropout rates, as well as cultural isolation, will continue to testify to this fact.

The cartoon controversy made ordinary Muslims in Western Europe realize how rapidly perceptions about their role and place in society could deteriorate and how fragile and transitory their civic integration was. As one Muslim born in Africa and living in a major Western European city noted: "They think we are stupid, easily manipulated, and offended by trivial matters. And increasingly, we feel they do not want us around."⁴ The nature of the challenge posed by the cartoons highlighted the fact that existing dialogue mechanisms between Western European governments and Muslims have failed and need to be replaced in order not to reinforce the current trajectory.

Denmark's commitments to securing stability in Afghanistan and Iraq are likely to come under much greater scrutiny by the people and parliaments in those countries. Thus, an attempt to clearly link such interventions to Danish security interests and strategy will have to be made. Over the longer term, active Danish internationalism in Middle East security politics will recover. However, its reputation has been damaged, and it will be much harder, for example, for Denmark to push democratization efforts in political governance as a result of its handling of this controversy, which can be utilized by conservative factions to demonstrate the destabilizing effect of democratization efforts. In particular, the Wider Middle East Initiative that was launched by the Danish government in 2003 will find less support.

The idea of a long-term evolution toward a global civil society has also been brought into question by the cartoon controversy, because it constituted and registered as a global event that caused a global reaction. In its aftermath, it has triggered a renewed emphasis on dialogue and understanding, the very lifeblood necessary for the formation of a global civil society. By forcing a debate on the issue, the cartoon controversy did have a constructive role: It highlighted the fact that people can have multiple identities (Muslim, democrat, Danish citizen) and underlined the importance of the values of tolerance, respect, and religious and cultural acceptance in a globalizing world. Though not universal, as an event it most likely facilitated the continued, albeit unplanned, construction of a global civil society: The integration of Muslim minorities into the mainstream has become a new national priority for many European countries. In addition, religious but peaceful activism in the Middle East in opposition to the cartoons can undercut the power and appeal of groups like al-Qaeda to recruit among disaffected youth on the grounds that only they are standard-bearers and

defenders of their self-declared “true Islam.” Such activism allows Muslims to act on behalf of their religion in a positive way and limits the attraction of extremist groups.

The ability of elites or non-state actors to capitalize on such controversies, indeed to publicize and disseminate images or messages in order to achieve their own local political objectives, will likely become more pronounced. But the greater the connectivity between societies, the greater the immunization of societies to such images and the less powerful their effect.

Policy Recommendations

States must implement awareness-raising campaigns to increase recognition among policy makers, politicians, the media, civil society, and the general public of the dilemmas associated with each aspect of globalization. Globalization carries with it the triggers that can cause a backlash against the processes it promotes. In particular, such campaigns should focus on the following:

1. The governments of democratic states should be quick to apologize for offenses caused to people’s religious feelings but should not apologize on behalf of non-state actors that cause such offenses. Western states should engage in more thoughtful cultural diplomacy, explaining the realities and complexities of Western societies behind closed doors and openly where appropriate.⁵
2. Governments should encourage the media in their countries to correlate freedom of expression with responsibility and cultural sensitivity.
3. Governments on all sides of the debate should behave, through policy and statements, in a way that encourages cultural respect and minimizes xenophobia. In addition, they should enact legislation that punishes hateful statements and actions.
4. Governments should encourage education and media programs about other cultures and their specific sensitivities to build bridges and promote mutual understanding of different cultures and religions.
5. Governments should work harder to overcome failures to promote integration and assimilation in order to forge a civic identity and ameliorate feelings of exclusion and victimization and thus undercut radicalization and intolerance.

References

¹ S. Suri, “Denmark: Politics Infused with Xenophobia, Muslim MP Says”, *Global Information Network*, May 4, 2006.

² A low-context culture is one in which messages are delivered directly without consideration of accepted cultural customs and mores. A high-context culture is one within which messages are given indirectly without degrading or hurting the feelings of others. “Expert links cartoon incident with cultural differences between states”, *Turkish Daily News*, February 7, 2006.

³ D. Bilefsk, “Cartoon Dispute Promotes Identity Crisis for Liberal Denmark”, *The New York Times*, February 12, 2006, p. 1, p. 22.

⁴ S. Schwartz, “More Fallout From the Carton Jihad”, *The Weekly Standard*, May 29, 2006, Vol. 11, Issue 35, p. 14.

⁵ Z. Hussein, “Danish Envoy to Singapore Meets Muslim Groups”, *The Straits Times*, February 21, 2006.