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# 'It is not what I want to happen'

**Young Danish Islamic scholar distributed booklets of photocopied cartoons to Muslim leaders in the Mideast, sparking a firestorm of anger around the world**

**DOUG SAUNDERS | POSTED AT 5:25 AM EST ON 08/02/06**

Globe and Mail Update

COPENHAGEN — In late December, a young Danish man flew to Beirut. In his suitcase was a package of spiral-bound booklets in green covers, neatly compiled using a colour photocopier. Their contents consisted mainly of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed.

He was unlikely to have stood out. A short man of 31 who could have passed for half that age, he had a feminine voice and soft hands and was somewhat toughened by his struggling beard and an air of calm confidence.

Ahmed Akkari, a young Islamic scholar and Danish activist, was on a mission. Having failed to get the Prime Minister to take action over the cartoons' perceived slight to Islam, he had sought help from esteemed figures in the Muslim world, he says.

Over the next few weeks, he would hand copies of his green booklet to the grand mufti of Egypt, the chief cleric of the Sunni faith, leaders of the Arab League, the top official of the Lebanese Christian church and others.

They stared in amazement at the images in the book, he remembered during a lengthy interview yesterday, and vowed to take action to help him.

"They said to me, 'Do they really say this is the Prophet Mohammed? They must really have no respect for religion up there in Denmark.' And they said they would make it known."

Mr. Akkari now finds himself regretting the results of his brief journey, the somewhat distorted message of which flashed around the Muslim world by Internet, newspaper and text message, and caused millions of Muslims to believe that Denmark and the Nordic countries had become home to blasphemies.

While the Koran does not forbid depictions of Mohammed, the prohibition stems from concerns the Prophet expressed that even well-intentioned images could lead to idolatry or show disrespect for Islam's founder.

Violent protests continued yesterday in cities around the world. As many as four protesters were shot dead in Afghanistan, raising the death toll to at least nine as the United Nations, the European Union and major governments struggled to contain the escalating unrest.

As he sat in one of Copenhagen's neat brown stone buildings yesterday and gazed at the melting snow, Mr. Akkari grappled awkwardly with the global emergency that has sprung from his mission. Friends, strangers and close family members are now blaming him for exactly the thing he says he was trying to prevent: the caricaturing of Muslims as violent fanatics.

The riots, he acknowledged, have placed his fellow European Muslims in a far worse position than they had previously known.

"Yeah, it has been more violent than I expected," he said. "I had no interest in any violence. . . . It is bad for our case because it's turning the picture completely from what this should be about, to something else -- and this is a dangerous change now."

This has led to a dramatic switch in his tone: While he still expresses anger at the media for glibly printing images considered offensive to his faith, Mr. Akkari yesterday was eager to find a way to quickly resolve the crisis -- and to send a message to the violent Muslim protesters that might cause them to cease and desist. He suggested a joint news conference with the Danish Prime Minister or with the editor of the newspaper that first printed the images in which both sides would demand that their communities cease their most offensive activities.

Such a *détente* now seems unlikely.

For his booklet contained not only the 12 depictions of the Prophet Mohammed that had appeared in the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September. He also filled it with hideous, amateur images of the Prophet as a pig, a dog, a woman and a child-sodomizing madman.

Flipping through the book yesterday, he explained that these images had been items of hate mail sent to his colleagues by right-wing extremists who disapproved of their activism. These images, he insistently demonstrated, were separated from the newspaper cartoons by several pages of letters. "How could anyone mistake these for the newspaper images?" he asked. "It cannot be that anyone would make this mistake."

But protesters in Lebanon and elsewhere have cited these images in their actions. So have the organizers of a worldwide boycott campaign against Danish products, which is costing the country's economy.

"You should understand," he said, "that the boycott was more widespread than we thought it could ever be. In fact, we didn't ask for it."

He even seemed embroiled in the same fear that has gripped most Danes this week. "This could get a lot worse, and it could make life worse for Muslims here. If we can sort it out, if we can do something to help, make people take responsibility -- all the people involved -- then we have a chance of this violence not happening any more."

He had never meant this to be more than an internal Danish conflict, he says. It was meant to be a technical matter: How to get the government to acknowledge that something had gone wrong in this close-knit society, something that had caused its largest newspaper to ignore the feelings of a minority whose members number 180,000 in a country of 5.4 million.

His circle of Muslim leaders planned the overseas trip only after the domestic campaign had run aground. The newspaper had apologized for any offence the cartoons caused, but stood by the decision to publish them.

The leaders wanted a response from the Danish state. Mr. Akkari took part in efforts to bring legal action against the newspaper under hate-crimes laws, and to arrange a meeting between ambassadors from Muslim countries and the Danish Prime Minister. When these efforts were rebuffed, help was sought abroad.

But he had not intended his protest to go global. And he is horrified to find that the Danish people -- and he proudly considers himself a Dane -- have been demonized.

As he discussed strategies and messages that might lower the volume of the protests, Mr. Akkari was distancing himself not only from the Middle Eastern radicals, but from members of his own circle. Officially, he calls himself a spokesman for a dozen Muslim groups in Denmark, but he is closely associated with Ahmed Abdel Rahman Abu Laban, a 60-year-old Danish Imam who has recently spoken loudly in favour of the violent protests, and who told Al Jazeera television this week that he supports the boycott campaign.

Some Muslim commentators believe that Abu Laban organized and planned the Middle Eastern mission, and that Mr. Akkari was a somewhat unwitting messenger. While he would not comment on his relationship with Abu Laban, he said that the older cleric did not take part in the trip.

A gap has also emerged between Mr. Akkari and his family, who are secular Danes of Lebanese descent. He was born in Lebanon to a non-religious Muslim family. His father was forced to flee, as a political refugee, during the war in the 1980s.

"Maybe you could say I am more religious than he is," Mr. Akkari, who studied sociology at a Copenhagen university, said of his father. "But I don't think either he or I are on the extremes. Some people think I am very moderate, some think I am only a cultural Muslim, some think I am a fundamentalist."

Having provoked a deadly global confrontation between these poles, he said that he wasn't quite sure where to place himself.

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<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20060208.wxcartooncleric08/EmailBNStory/International/home>

# A tale of two Muslim Danes

DOUG SAUNDERS | POSTED AT 2:00 AM EST ON 11/02/06

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

When he was 11 years old, a shy young man named Naser Khader found himself transported from the swelter and bustle of Damascus, the only home he had ever known, to a land of cold weather, withdrawn people and incomprehensible customs.

He did not like it. The streets of Copenhagen felt like they belonged to some tight-knit private club. They were jammed with pristine bicycles that, then as today, are never locked — nobody fears theft in Denmark, because everyone seems to know everyone else.

Everyone, that is, except these new arrivals with coffee-coloured skin and a desert religion. His father, who had no education, worked as a meat packer; his mother was illiterate. Like many of the millions of young Islamic immigrants who entered Europe in his generation, he did not feel like he was part of the club, even as his parents struggled to be accepted. Young Naser kept asking when they were going to go home.

"For the first 10 years or so, I didn't want to be a Dane, I wanted to go back to the Middle East. Everyone my age felt that way. The majority of foreigners have not chosen themselves to come to Denmark; it's a choice taken by their parents."

Until he was in his early 20s, the only place he felt at home was in the mosque.

"My parents are religious. And I was very religious until I was 18 or so — then I started to read philosophers. I started to put question marks on things."

Mr. Khader had begun a trajectory that would lead him from the closed world of the Islamic diaspora into the centre of European public life, as a member of Parliament and the leader of a new movement of moderate Muslims who favour democracy, secularism and civil liberties. As the world has exploded in riots, killings and angry denunciations over the publication of images of the Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper, he has become part of the European answer.

Last week, he led a demonstration of Muslims demanding an apology from Saudi Arabia, for attacking Denmark's press freedoms. He has become one of several prominent voices in Europe arguing that non-religious, fully Europeanized Muslims are the silent majority and that they need to be heard.

Back in the 1970s, as he was beginning that transition from exotic outsider to a leader of society, another Arabic boy was moving into the same dull working-class neighbourhood in western Copenhagen.

His neighbour, Ahmed Akkari, 10 years younger, was the child of secular, moderate, liberal parents who had fled the violence of the Middle East and tried hard to become Danes. Young

Ahmed, following the path of a surprising number of young Europeans from the Mideast, turned away from his parents' secular liberalism and toward fundamentalist religion, conservatism and active opposition to Europe's values.

While the young Mr. Khader was falling under the sway of Friedrich Nietzsche and other European thinkers, and becoming an important figure in Danish centre-left politics, Mr. Akkari was becoming a devotee of Ahmad Abu Laban, a radical imam 30 years his senior who has admitted ties to violent Islamist organizations in the Middle East and who preached a harsh adherence to sharia law.

This year, their trajectories crossed. It was Mr. Akkari who, at Mr. Abu Laban's behest, travelled to Lebanon, Syria and Egypt in December to spread the news — and some false rumours — about the cartoon images of the Prophet Mohammed. And it has been Mr. Khader, the parliamentarian, who has led the moderate Muslim protest against the riots, killings, boycotts and calls for censorship that have sprung from Mr. Akkari's actions.

For moderate, Europeanized Muslims like Mr. Khader, it seems as if their world has been invaded by their extremist cousins.

"I'm like most Muslims in Europe — I call myself Muslim, but Muslim in a light way — a cultural Muslim, not practising," Mr Khader said the other day. He spoke, in measured tones, in his office in Denmark's elegant Parliament buildings.

"You have two movements. One is those whose parents were secular, they became more and more religious. But a larger movement, it's my movement. We don't want to define ourselves by our religion — we say, 'My religion is private.'"

Are these "cultural" Muslims really the majority? Almost certainly.

Denmark, a fairly typical European country in this respect, has an estimated 180,000 Muslims out of a population of five million. They are served by 80 to 100 mosques, with an estimated 15,000 worshippers. In other words, fewer than 10 per cent of Denmark's Muslims are even religiously observant. A similar majority of Western Europe's Muslims are believed to be secular — in France, only 5 per cent visit a mosque weekly. The rest presumably view Islam as a culture rather than a religion or a basis for politics.

That was evident last year when France, whose six million Muslims are the continent's largest population, passed a law that bans the wearing of head scarves by girls in schools. It was fiercely opposed by the fundamentalist Muslim leadership — by the French counterparts to Mr. Akkari. But after the law came into effect, the number of girls who tried to defy it, nationwide, numbered in the low hundreds. For all but a tiny group of Muslims, expressing the orthodox version of their faith held no interest — but being French, and European, was very important.

This is a frustrating question for Danes, who have seen their nation transformed almost overnight from a byword for tolerance and peacefulness into a country that is demonized by Muslims everywhere and viewed by other Western democracies as being somehow guilty of creating

a monster. It is an even more frustrating question for Danes who happen to be Muslim, like Mr. Khader. They wonder how a tiny and ill-respected group of orthodox believers in their midst have poisoned an entire community.

Some observers believe that the small and powerless nature of Muslim immigrant communities actually creates this harsh polarization. Muslims — mainly Turks, as well as people from the Indian subcontinent in Britain — began arriving in western Europe in the 1960s, in guest-worker programs. They tended to be politically moderate and non-religious, and have come to play a major role in many European cultures.

Arabs, however, began arriving only in the 1970s, through refugee programs. Those programs mostly ended, abruptly, in the 1990s. Denmark stopped all immigration in 2002, imposing Europe's most restrictive immigration laws.

The Arabs were desperately poor, usually illiterate, and often had left not because they wanted to join Europe but because they were forced to flee. Lacking a successful, assimilated elite who could create role models for harmonious membership in society, the orthodox religious extreme — never very large in number — became the leaders and figureheads of Arab Muslims. This not only gave Muslims few visible alternatives, but turned them into figures of fear and revulsion.

"Our newspapers for years have been absolutely full of headlines about the perceived threat to fundamental values of tolerance and freedom from these Muslims, even though they are almost invisible and have no power to change anything," said Garbi Schmidt, who, as director of the Research Programme on Ethnic Minorities at the Danish National Institute for Social Research, is one of Europe's leading authorities on Muslim immigrants.

Because their rank-and-file are so unknown and invisible to Europe's mainstream, people hear the only voice that is speaking loudly and clearly. In many countries, this is the radical, orthodox religious leaders, who often, like Mr. Abu Laban, resemble extremist politicians more than preachers. In places like Denmark, where Hitler's rampage left terrible memories, the hateful messages of people like Mr. Abu Laban, and their calls for censorship of the media and repression of women, strike a troubling chord.

That helps explain the freedom-of-speech debate that led the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten to publish the offensive Mohammed cartoons. To outsiders, it seemed a bit bizarre: Denmark's freedom of speech has never been challenged, and the country's Muslims, most of whom live in grubby neighbourhoods and work in shipping industries, and who have only three MPs in a Parliament of 179 seats, have never had the power to challenge it.

The worry, of course, is that this perception builds a high wall around Arab-Muslim groups, forcing them to make a harsh choice: to erase their roots entirely, undergoing the tough rite of passage required to become unquestionably European (as Mr. Khader has happily done) or to become a permanent outsider, defining yourself as a member of "Islam," a nation opposed to Europe's hegemony (as Mr. Akkari appears to have done).

Extreme Islamist and terrorist movements have their roots in the Middle East, in conflicts that have little to do with Europe. But for young men who face these increasingly difficult barriers to membership in the exclusive club of normal European life, these violent foreign movements hold great appeal. They are one way to get over that wall.

And the Muslims who join those movements become the most visible, well-financed and outspoken figures in their local Islamic communities, far more articulate and organized than the moderate majority. This sows fear among mainstream Europeans, who see millions of potential extremists in their tatty suburbs.

In Denmark, this effect has been dramatic — in part because it is a small country with its own insecurities (its cultural relationship with Germany, its much larger southern neighbour, is much like Canada's with the United States). The thought of a very different, very un-Danish immigrant group asserting itself led many Danes to erect previously unheard-of walls of "Danishness."

This, in turn, forced some Muslims into extremism. And that extremism, in turn, led Danes to assert themselves even more loudly, against a tiny, but frightening, threat to their identity.

That is what led to the offensive Mohammed cartoons.

"In Denmark, it is one of our traditions that we act a little bit like Vikings. We are a little bit rude and we are not very politically correct. We insult each other for fun — that was just something we did, but during this battle it became a matter of patriotism to be rude and insulting, and we made a point of demonstrating it," said Soren Sondergaard, a senior official with the Danish People's Party, which opposes immigration and is part of the governing coalition.

With each cycle of conflict, to use that analogy, the Europeans became a bit more Viking, and the small group of Muslims became a bit more like the rampaging Moors of mythology. The effect, in the words of Ms. Schmidt, is "mental segregation." Most Muslims continue to identify themselves as members of society, but some take the rhetoric seriously and turn themselves into the fearful jihadists of the European imagination.

Fleming Rose, the cultural editor of the Jyllands-Posten, stated this clearly to a German newspaper this week, a day before he was forced to resign for planning further offensive publications. He was trying to defend the publication of the cartoons, a noble cause, but his words, in retrospect, look like the perfect recipe for the dirty bomb of European-Islamic relations.

"By making fun in this way, we've not only created Muslims [i.e. extremists], we've also created Danes," he said. "Humour, even offensive humour, brings people together. Because by making fun of people we're also including them in our society. It's not always easy for those concerned, but that's the price they've got to pay."

This is the threat: That frightened Europeans will continue to manufacture "Muslims," transforming promising young children of immigrants into closed-minded extremists. And that those orthodox Muslims will in turn create angry, closed-minded "Europeans."

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