

February 9, 2006
The Protests

At Mecca Meeting, Cartoon Outrage Crystallized

By HASSAN M. FATTAH

BEIRUT, Lebanon, Feb. 8 — As leaders of the world's 57 Muslim nations gathered for a summit meeting in Mecca in December, issues like religious extremism dominated the official agenda. But much of the talk in the hallways was of a wholly different issue: Danish cartoons satirizing the Prophet Muhammad.

The closing communiqué took note of the issue when it expressed "concern at rising hatred against Islam and Muslims and condemned the recent incident of desecration of the image of the Holy Prophet Muhammad in the media of certain countries" as well as over "using the freedom of expression as a pretext to defame religions."

The meeting in Mecca, a Saudi city from which non-Muslims are barred, drew minimal international press coverage even though such leaders as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran were in attendance. But on the road from quiet outrage in a small Muslim community in northern Europe to a set of international brush fires, the summit meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference — and the role its member governments played in the outrage — was something of a turning point.

After that meeting, anger at the Danish caricatures, especially at an official government level, became more public. In some countries, like Syria and Iran, that meant heavy press coverage in official news media and virtual government approval of demonstrations that ended with Danish embassies in flames.

In recent days, some governments in Muslim countries have tried to calm the rage, worried by the increasing level of violence and deaths in some cases.

But the pressure began building as early as October, when Danish Islamists were lobbying Arab ambassadors and Arab ambassadors lobbied Arab governments.

"It was no big deal until the Islamic conference when the O.I.C. took a stance against it," said Muhammad el-Sayed Said, deputy director of the Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo.

Sari Hanafi, an associate professor at the American University in Beirut, said that for Arab governments resentful of the Western push for democracy, the protests presented an opportunity to undercut the appeal of the West to Arab citizens. The freedom pushed by the West, they seemed to say, brought with it disrespect for Islam.

He said the demonstrations "started as a visceral reaction — of course they were offended — and then you had regimes taking advantage saying, 'Look, this is the democracy they're talking about.'"

The protests also allowed governments to outflank a growing challenge from Islamic opposition movements by defending Islam.

At first, the agitation was limited to Denmark. Ahmed Akkari, 28, a Lebanese-born Dane, acts as spokesman for the European Committee for Honoring the Prophet, an umbrella group of 27 Danish Muslim organizations to press the Danish government into action over the cartoons.

Mr. Akkari said the group had worked for more than two months in Denmark without eliciting any response. "We collected 17,000 signatures and delivered them to the office of the prime minister, we saw the minister of culture, we talked to the editor of the Jyllands-Posten, we took many steps within Denmark, but could get no action," Mr. Akkari said, referring to the newspaper that published the cartoons. He added that the prime minister's office had not even responded to the petition.

Frustrated, he said, the group turned to the ambassadors of Muslim countries in Denmark and asked them to speak to the prime minister on their behalf. He refused them too.

"Then the case moved to a new stage," Mr. Akkari recalled. "We decided then that to be heard, it must come from influential people in the Muslim world."

The group put together a 43-page dossier, including the offending cartoons and three more shocking images that had been sent to Danish Muslims who had spoken out against the Jyllands-Posten cartoons.

Mr. Akkari denied that the three other offending images had contributed to the violent reaction, saying the images, received in the mail by Muslims who had complained about the cartoons, were included to show the response that Muslims got when they spoke out in Denmark.

In early December, the group's first delegation of Danish Muslims flew to Cairo, where they met with the grand mufti, Muhammad Sayid Tantawy, Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit and Amr Moussa, the head of the Arab League.

"After that, there was a certain response," Mr. Akkari said, adding that the Cairo government and the Arab League both summoned the Danish ambassador to Egypt for talks.

Mr. Akkari denies that the group had meant to misinform, but concedes that there were misunderstandings along the way.

In Cairo, for example, the group also met with journalists from Egypt's media. During a news conference, they spoke about a proposal from the far-right Danish People's Party to ban the Koran in Denmark because of some 200 verses that are alleged to encourage violence.

Several newspapers then ran articles claiming that Denmark planned to issue a censored version of the Koran. The delegation returned to Denmark, but the dossier continued to make waves in the Middle East. Egypt's foreign minister had taken the dossier with him to the Mecca meeting, where he showed it around. The Danish group also sent a second delegation to Lebanon to meet religious and political leaders there.

Mr. Akkari went on that trip. The delegation met with the grand mufti in Lebanon, Muhammad Rashid Kabbani, and the spiritual head of Lebanon's Shiite Muslims, Sheik Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, as well as the patriarch of the Maronite Church, Nasrallah Sfeir. The group also appeared on Hezbollah's satellite station Al Manar TV, which is seen throughout the Arab world.

Mr. Akkari also made a side trip to Damascus, Syria, to deliver a copy of the dossier to that country's grand mufti, Sheik Ahmed Badr-Eddine Hassoun.

Lebanon's foreign minister, Fawzi Salloukh, says he agreed to meet in mid-December with Egypt's ambassador to Lebanon, who presented him with a letter from his foreign minister, Aboul Gheit,

urging him to get involved in the issue. Attached to the letter were copies of some of the drawings.

At the end of December, the pace picked up as talk of a boycott became more prominent. The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, comprising more than 50 states, published on its Web site a statement condemning "the aggressive campaign waged against Islam and its Prophet" by Jyllands-Posten, and officials of the organization said member nations should impose a boycott on Denmark until an apology was offered for the drawings.

"We encourage the organization's members to boycott Denmark both economically and politically until Denmark presents an official apology for the drawings that have offended the world's Muslims," said Abdulaziz Othman al-Twajri, the organization's secretary general.

In a few weeks, the Jordanian Parliament condemned the cartoons, as had several other Arab governments.

On Jan. 10, as anti-Danish pressure built, a Norwegian newspaper republished the caricatures in an act of solidarity with the Danes, leading many Muslims to believe that a real campaign against them had begun.

On Jan. 26, in a key move, Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador to Denmark, and Libya followed suit. Saudi clerics began sounding the call for a boycott, and within a day, most Danish products were pulled off supermarket shelves.

"The Saudis did this because they have to score against Islamic fundamentalists," said Mr. Said, the Cairo political scientist. "Syria made an even worse miscalculation," he added, alluding to the sense that the protest had gotten out of hand. The issue of the cartoons came at a critical time in the Muslim world because of Muslim anger over the occupation of Iraq and a sense that Muslims were under siege. Strong showings by Islamists in elections in Egypt and the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections had given new momentum to Islamic movements in the region, and many economies, especially those in the Persian Gulf, realized their economic power as it pertained to Denmark.

"The cartoons were a fuse that lit a bigger fire," said Rami Khouri, editor at large at the English-language Daily Star of Beirut. "It is this deepening sense of vulnerability combines with a sense that the Islamists were on a roll that made it happen."

The wave swept many in the region. Sheik Muhammad Abu Zaid, an imam from the Lebanese town of Saïda, said he began hearing of the caricatures from several Palestinian friends visiting from Denmark in December but made little of it.

"For me, honestly, this didn't seem so important," Sheik Abu Zaid said, comparing the drawings to those made of Jesus in Christian countries. "I thought, I know that this is something typical in such countries."

Then, he started to hear that ambassadors of Arab countries had tried to meet with the prime minister of Denmark and had been snubbed, and he began to feel differently.

"It started to seem that this way of thinking was an insult to us," he said. "It is fine to say, 'This is our freedom, this is our way of thinking.' But we began to believe that their freedom was something that hurts us."

Last week, Sheik Abu Zaid heard about a march being planned on the Danish Consulate in Beirut, and he decided to join. He and 600 others boarded buses bound for Beirut. Within an hour of arriving, some of the demonstrators — none of his people, he insisted — became violent, and began

attacking the building that housed the embassy. It was just two days after a similar attack against the Danish and Norwegian Embassies in Damascus.

"In the demonstration, I believe 99 percent of the people were good and peaceful, but I could hear people saying, 'We don't want to demonstrate peacefully; we want to burn,' " the sheik said.

He tried in vain to calm people down, he said. "I was calling to the people, 'Please, please follow us and go back.' " he said. "We were hoping to calm people down, and we were hoping to help the peaceful people who were caught in the middle of the fight."

Reporting for this article was contributed by Craig S. Smith from Paris, Katherine Zoepf from Beirut, Suha Maayeh from Amman, Abeer Allam from Cairo and Massoud A. Derhally from Dubai.