

# What is to be done?

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The Muslim world, awakened, refuses to go back to sleep. If one was to take the precedent of the Quranic desecration at Guantanamo Bay, the protests should have petered out by now. But they continue. Muslim governments all have a hard task containing the rage that Muslims are feeling because of the insult to their Prophet (PBUH), and which is being fuelled by their sense of helplessness at what is to be done.

There is now a move to convene the OIC Foreign Ministers on this issue. That it has come so late indicates that it is not an initiative from the member governments, but is the result of a need felt to dissipate the heat the members are facing. Because the members' interests are disparate, it is unlikely to come up with any strong action. It has already been warned by the European Union that any sanctions against Denmark will be met with all-EU sanctions against the sanctioners. While one head of government might be willing to take on the EU head-on, as Iranian President Mehmooh Ahmedinejad has done over his country's nuclear issue, for 57 heads of government to do so is almost unthinkable.

One solution would be for the OIC to issue guidelines suggesting various levels of sanctions, which members could adopt as they wished, but who would vote for them, and then not follow them? The easiest way out would be to pass a resolution condemning the cartoons in the strongest of terms, maybe call on the Danish government to apologise, and to call for the passage of laws by Western countries protecting religious figures from blasphemy. There would be no 'or-else'. If the countries addressed refused to tremble in their shoes, too bad.

Yet it is certainly interesting that the OIC is moving to tackle this issue. The last parallel protests, during the Rushdie affair, moved the OIC Foreign Ministers' Conference in 1990 in Cairo to insert as Item 87 (of 95) of its Final Declaration the following: "The Conference expressed profound concern on the continued attempts to vilify or denigrate the noble values of Islam, its most respected and revered personalities and places of sanctity. It urged the Member States to take steps to safeguard the lofty Islamic principles and to adopt coordinated efforts to face any blasphemous attempt. The Conference urged the international community to respect the sentiments of all religious communities and not to allow any transgression of norms of civility and morality under the cover and pretext of freedom of thought or expression."

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upbeat then, as the meeting was in progress (31 July-5 August) when Iraq invaded Kuwait (August 2), and the loss of innocence that followed the Gulf War was still in the future, and 9/11 not even on the horizon. Therefore, the OIC governments are feeling much more heat this time around, and feel the need to relieve pressure from their publics.

Are Muslims more radicalised now than then? Perhaps. Have their frustrations at their helplessness grown? Probably. Have they grown more dissatisfied with their regimes, more disillusioned with their ability to defend not just their vital national interests, but also the collective interests of the Muslims as a whole? It seems likely. Will they be fobbed off with a mere resolution at the OICFCMC? Probably not. Will they be moved to do something about it? At this point, unlikely.

The problem is that the civilised solutions to this issue are simply not satisfying enough. The special reverence in which the Prophet (PBUH) is held, demands that the blasphemers be punished according to Sharia, which prescribes the death sentence, and the death sentence alone. However, that is not a feasible option at this point. A Muslim government may emulate the Israeli example of sending in assassins (as it did with Iraqi nuclear scientists), but it would come under tremendous pressure, perhaps too much to expect it to bear. A boycott of Danish goods is questionable: pork is not *halal* even if it is Pakistani (a few wild pigs are consumed by foreign and local non-Muslims); milk will not become *haram* just because it is Danish.

The demand for legislation protecting the revered figures of all religions is compatible with the concept of freedom of expression, because it is feasible to place restraints on freedom. However, it could lead to rather odd situations. It might mean, for example, that anyone who claims some form of prophethood within the Abrahamic tradition, as did Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormons, and Mirza Ghulam Ahmed, founder of the Ahmadi Jamaat, in the 19th century, or even godhead within the Vedic or Buddhist tradition, as did the Maharishi in the 20th, would be as protected as Muhammad (PBUH), Jesus Christ, Buddha or Ram. It might even provoke a spate of decla-



rations of revelation, for the Western understanding of freedom of expression, freedom of conscience and toleration equates these religious leaders with whoever else might make a claim.

It is also not just a matter of hurt feelings. Blasphemy against the Prophet (PBUH) is severely punished, even though other forms of abuse, while hurtful, are to be ignored, or merely rebutted. Denials of the prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH) can be ignored, for example, or debated, but they are not in themselves blasphemous. After all, a non-Muslim by definition is a denier. However, it is reasonably clear that certain mocking or insulting portrayals or epithets are unacceptable, such as the Danish cartoons.

So should Muslims ask for very specific legislation about the person of the Holy Prophet (PBUH)? They can ask, and probably should, but this creates difficulties of its own. The USA was the first state to declare a complete separation between church and state. No religion is to be 'established' in the USA under the First Amendment, in the sense of having special privileges or any superiority over others. To ask it to pass a law specific to the Holy Prophet (PBUH), would technically be asking it to 'establish' Islam.

Here we do see the seeds of a clash of civilisations. The honour of the Prophet (PBUH) is not open to compromise for Muslims. Nor is the prohibition on 'establishing' any religion for Americans of whatever creed. Ask we must. Refuse they must. And pity the poor soul who is both 'we' and 'they'. Muslims hold that they are bound by everlasting and immutable limits, prescribed by the Almighty Himself in the Quran and through the Sunnah. Americans (and the West as a whole) hold that the only absolute is freedom, and any limits are determined by the people, who can change them as they will. These are incompatible. Either Muslims must accept mutability, or the West must reject its own principles.

Meanwhile, of course, expect Muslims to subside into inaction once again, at least until next time. Many have noted that all the Muslims of today need is the right leader, who is not present among the luminaries gracing OIC Summits. If pushed enough, though, the Ummah will search for a leader in earnest, and find him, even if it means forcing him to accept the task.

The main problem before the world today is not how to avert a clash of civilisations, but how to manage it in a way that prevents some form of ultimate disaster. After all, even in warfare, there is a difference between warfare between 'terrorists' and counter-terrorists, in which anything goes, and that between two armies observing the rules of war, and the courtesies of the profession of arms.

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