What the Muhammad cartoons portray
By Martin Asser, BBC News (Dec 2010)

Twelve caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad published in 2005 had a huge impact around the world, with riots in many Muslim countries the following year causing deaths and destruction - so what do the drawings actually say?

They originally appeared in the best-selling Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten on 30 September 2005 to accompany an editorial criticising self-censorship in the Danish media. After that some media outlets republished the pictures in solidarity or outrage, while others - including the BBC - have refrained from publishing them to avoid causing offence to their audiences.

The issue arose after Danish writer Kare Bluitgen complained he was unable to find an illustrator for his children's book about the Prophet because he said no one dared break an Islamic tenet banning the portrayal of his image.

Jyllands-Posten asked cartoonists to "draw the Prophet as they saw him", as an assertion of free speech and to reject pressure by Muslims groups to respect their sensitivities. The paper chose as its central image a visual joke about the Prophet among other turban-wearing figures in a police line-up and the witness saying: 'I don't know which one he is'.

It is presumably an ironic appeal for calm over the issue, the suggestion being that, if a Danish illustrator were to portray the Prophet, it is not known what he looks like and is therefore a harmless gesture.

The humour comes from the fact that the line-up also includes people like Jesus Christ, the far-right Danish politician Pia Kjaersgaard and Mr Bluitgen himself.

'PR stunt'
Eleven other cartoons are printed around the edge of the page showing the Prophet in a variety of supposedly humorous or satirical situations.

One seems to criticise Mr Bluitgen for exploiting the issue for publicity to sell his book. He is portrayed holding a child's drawing of the Prophet, while an orange inscribed with "PR stunt" drops into a turban he is wearing. (The expression "orange in the turban" connotes a 'piece of luck' in Danish.)

Other images appear not especially critical of Islam in their content. One shows the Prophet wandering through the desert with the sun setting behind him. In another his face merges with an Islamic star and crescent.

Several cartoonists, however, do seem to take the Jyllands-Posten commission as an invitation to be deliberately provocative towards Muslims.

Critical views
The most controversial image shows the Prophet Muhammad carrying a lit bomb in the shape of a turban on his head decorated with the Islamic creed. The face is angry, dangerous-looking - a stereotypical villain with heavy, dark eyebrows and whiskers.

Another shows Muhammad brandishing a sword ready for a fight. His eyes are blacked out while two women stand behind him with their Islamic dress leaving only their eyes uncovered.

Two of the critical cartoons do not show the Prophet at all. One uses crescent moons and stars of David to form repeated abstract shapes, possibly showing women in Islamic dress.

A poem accompanies the shapes, that one translator has rendered as: "Prophet, you crazy bloke! Keeping women under yoke."

In the other, a schoolboy points to a blackboard on which it is written in Farsi: "The editorial team of Jyllands-Posten are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs!"

The boy is labelled 'Mohammed, Valby school, 7A', suggesting he is a second-generation Iranian immigrant to Denmark. "The future" is written on his shirt.

Humorous views
Other cartoonists have clearly attempted a more humorous approach - as with the central image - although the images will be no less offensive to Muslims.

For example, one shows Muhammad standing on a cloud holding back a line of smouldering suicide bombers trying to get into heaven.

"Stop, stop, we have run out of virgins," he says.

This is a reference to the supposed reward of 72 virgins in heaven for Muslim martyrs, although Islamic scholars often point out that there is no specific belief of this kind.

Another drawing shows Muhammad looking at a sheet of paper, but holding back two sword-wielding assassins.

"Relax guys, it's just a drawing made by some infidel South Jutlander (ie from the middle of nowhere)," the figure says.

One cartoonist portrays Muhammad with a kind of halo around his head, but it could be a crescent moon, or a pair of devil's horns.

Anger and confusion
The last cartoon on the page goes back to the theme of artistic freedom: a cartoonist draws an Arab face with headdress, inscribed 'Mohammed', but he crouches over the drawing and shields it with his hand.

The Jyllands-Posten cartoons do not include some images that may have had a role in bringing the issue to international attention. Three images in particular have done the rounds, in Gaza for example, which are reported to be considerably more offensive and were mistakenly assumed to have been part of the Jyllands-Posten set.

One of the pictures, a photocopied photograph of a man with a pig's ears and snout, has been identified as an old Associated Press picture from a French 'pig-squealing' contest. It was reportedly circulated by Danish Muslims to illustrate the atmosphere of Islamophobia which they say they live under.

There is no doubt that the some of the original Jyllands-Posten cartoons are sufficiently hostile in nature to be taken as provocative by the Muslim community, whatever their intention.

But some critics have said all the drawings and the manner of their publication betray European arrogance and Islamophobia. Muslim writer Ziauddin Sardar likens them to anti-Semitic images published in Europe in the 1920s and 30s, with Muslims being demonised as violent, backward and fanatical.

"Freedom of expression is not about doing whatever we want to do because we can do it," he wrote in the Independent on Sunday.

"It is about creating an open marketplace for ideas and debate where all, including the marginalised, can take part as equals."

"Every victim of violence cannot be a terrorist, just as every victim of violence cannot be a non-believer," he added.

"The attack on this cartoon is the attack on freedom of speech and free expression, not on the prophet. Muslims are not the only people who have freedom of expression, but we need to express ourselves ('freedom of expression' is enshrined in the French constitution), and not just rely on magazines and newspapers to do it for us," he said.
Denmark holds 'Muhammad cartoon plotters'

Police said they had been trailing the suspects for several months

Five suspected Islamist militants have been arrested for planning a gun attack at the Copenhagen offices of a Danish newspaper that printed cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005, police say.

The men intended to burst into the Jyllands-Posten office and kill as many people as possible, officials said.

Justice Minister Lars Barfoed said the "outrageous" plot was "the most serious attempt at terror so far in Denmark".

Four suspects were held in Denmark and the fifth was detained in Sweden.

Denmark's security agency Pet said the suspects included two Swedish residents with Tunisian backgrounds, one Lebanon-born Swede, and an Iraqi. The other was described only as Swedish.

Earlier this month, an Iraq-born Swedish Muslim blew himself up in Stockholm - apparently as he was preparing a suicide bombing.

Swedish police say the suspects held on Wednesday are not thought to be linked to the Stockholm bomber.

The publication of the cartoons in 2005, one of which depicted the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb-shaped turban, caused mass protests among Muslims across the world.

Muslims regard any visual representation of the Prophet as blasphemous.

Cartoons used 'efficiently'

The four held in Denmark were picked up in raids on flats in the Greve and Herlev suburbs of Copenhagen.

Police searches uncovered an automatic weapon, a silencer and live ammunition.

Jakob Scharf, head of Pet, said the four had been planning to enter the building housing the Jyllands-Posten and "kill as many of the people present as possible".

He said an "imminent terror attack" had been foiled, and that the suspects belonged to a "militant Islamist group and they have links to international terrorist networks".

"Obviously the cartoons have been used very efficiently by militant Islamist groups worldwide in targeting Denmark specifically and trying explain why the violent extremism is necessary," he said.

Sweden’s security chief Anders Danielsson said they had known for months that the group was planning an attack, but the authorities had to wait until they had enough evidence for a prosecution.

Cartoonist under guard

As a result of the row over the cartoons, Saudi Arabia recalled its Copenhagen ambassador, Danish firms were forced to scale back operations in some parts of the world, and gunmen raided an EU office in Gaza to demand an apology.

But many in the West have defended the media’s right to publish the caricatures, and several European newspapers have republished some of the drawings.

Kurt Westergaard, the cartoonist who drew the image of the turban bomb, has been honoured with awards by free-speech groups, but he now lives under police guard amid death threats from radical groups.

He was the subject of an attempted attack in January when a Somali man got into his home armed with a knife and an axe.

And police across Scandinavia have arrested several groups of people in raids linked to the cartoons.
Limiting the publication of cartoons of Muhammad avoids fueling extremism, he said. "I don't think this is the right way to explain freedom of expression to children," Mr. Moussaoui said of the caricatures in an interview with France Info. The duty of brotherhood imposes on all to renounce some rights. In a subsequent statement, Mr. Moussaoui said that his suggestion to renounce some rights had been clumsy. But he added: "Freedom of expression gives the right to be satirical or humorous, we can understand that cartoons putting a prophet who is fundamental to millions of believers in such a light ..."

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