



The U.N. Plays with Lego The anti-Denmark campaign continues

Henrik Bering

Colaboraciones n° 870

March 29, 2006

Artists are often praised for their ability to peer into the future. When the hysteria over the Danish Muhammad cartoons was at its height last month, another cartoon circulated on the Internet depicting a Lego "Danish embassy" playset--complete with embassy ablaze, Danish flags going up in smoke, and little Lego Islamists carrying placards that read "Europe the cancer, Islam the Answer." In linking Lego toys, a symbol of Denmark and of childhood innocence, with the campaign of hatred against Denmark sweeping through the Arab world, the cartoonist was more prescient than we knew.

Because who could have guessed that Lego would indeed find itself sucked into the controversy? In connection with its International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on March 21, the Office of the United Nations Com-

missioner for Human Rights issued an antiracism poster. Under the headline "Racism takes many shapes," it featured a very red and very recognizable Lego building block.

Lego and the Danish foreign ministry immediately protested, and the agency had to cancel the poster. Afterwards, a U.N. spokesman disingenuously claimed that the use of the building block had been entirely accidental, and with a smirk apologized if this had hurt Danish feelings. Unfortunately for Lego, you can't sue the United Nations.

The Lego poster incident is just one of the international humiliations heaped on Denmark, which finds itself in its greatest foreign policy crisis since World War II. The current Arab campaign against Denmark is seen as a warning to the bigger European nations. Autocratic

regimes in the Middle East have a general interest in discouraging Western pressures for liberalization, while fundamentalists have a particular interest in presenting opposition to political Islam as an attack on the beliefs of ordinary Muslims.

In fact, Denmark has once before been the target of Arab wrath. In 1973, during the OPEC oil crisis, Prime Minister Anker Jørgensen cautiously suggested that Israel had a right to defend its borders. The Arab countries immediately upped their prices an extra notch especially for the Danes, who remember that as a rather cold winter. Not surprisingly, in the present crisis, the backing of Denmark's fellow E.U. members has been less than staunch.

The current anti-Danish campaign is well coordinated, and plays out on many fronts and forums. The special rapporteur for the U.N.'s Human Rights Commission, the Senegalese Doudou Diene, released his latest report on racism, discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance in February. He devotes several pages to the Muhammad cartoons published by the Jyllands-Posten newspaper and portrays Denmark as a nation that is profoundly hostile toward foreigners. The fact that Diene has never set foot in Denmark and that his accusations are unsubstantiated does not strengthen the report's credibility.

The absurdity of being called out by the U.N.'s notoriously corrupt human rights establishment is heightened by the fact that Denmark has been a model supporter of the U.N.,

always volunteering for U.N. projects, and urging respect for international norms. Some Danes hope that this naive belief in the United Nations may be giving way to a more realistic appraisal of the nature of the organization.

The past week, the focus shifted to Bahrain, site of a major conference of 300 leading Islamic lights. Not to miss out on the fun, some of the Danish imams who started the whole anti-Danish campaign went on a fresh mission to the Middle East. On their first trip back in December, you may remember, they slipped a few incendiary cartoons of their own into the briefing folder and spread the rumor that the Koran was being burned in the streets of Copenhagen.

This time around, they were in Bahrain at the International Conference for Supporting the Prophet, ostensibly on a mission to persuade their fellow imams to end the boycott of Denmark. But their image as conciliators was badly shaken when, at the same time they were in Bahrain, a French documentary aired showing a spokesman for the traveling imams, Ahmed Akkari, on camera suggesting that the leader of Denmark's Democratic Muslims organization, a moderate member of parliament named Naser Khader, should be blown up if he enters the government.

"If he becomes Foreign or Integration Minister, we should send a couple of guys to blow up both him and the ministry," Akkari said, not knowing he was on camera. Danish

police are now trying to decide whether the threats were made "in jest," as Akkari subsequently claimed. A tiny man with a scraggly beard and a high-pitched voice, Akkari had not previously been known as a great comedian.

In the same footage, Akkari's fellow imams Sheikh Raed Hlayel and Abu Bilal state that the campaign of hatred should be kept up against the *Jyllands-Posten*, which they describe as "owned and run by Jews." Incidentally, that was also the position of the conference's main speaker and most prominent figure, the learned Yusuf al-Qaradawi, whose weekly Al Jazeera program reaches an audience of 50 million. "Of course the boycott must continue. It must continue until the Danish government apologizes."

The documentary clearly demonstrates that the Danish imams have engineered the crisis to increase their own following, as part of their grand scheme to eventually impose Islamic law on Europe. The revelations of their actual agenda have led to demands in Denmark for the revocation of their residence permits.

As for the country's alleged hostility to foreigners, Mohamed Sifaoui, the respected journalist who shot the documentary for France-2, said, "We came to Denmark without preconceived ideas and found that you cannot call a country racist when it gives its minorities all rights and chooses three Muslims to parliament."

All this should ease some of the internal pressures on the center-right government of Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen. For months, the leftist opposition has been yammering about the harm done to Denmark's image abroad by the government's refusing to compromise on the issue of free speech, and it has been demanding a policy of never-ending self-abasement before the Middle Eastern despots.

The leftist demands have been supported by some members of the Danish business community. Arla, the Danish dairy giant that has lost its Middle Eastern export markets, took out full-page advertisements in leading Arab newspapers to issue an abject apology in connection with the Muhammad cartoons. "We understand and respect your reaction, which has led to a boycott of our products over this irresponsible and regrettable incident," the ads said. Apart from being craven and distasteful, such groveling, most analysts agree, will not work. These markets are lost for the foreseeable future.

Having himself recovered from a moment of going wobbly on the Arab television network Al Jazeera, Rasmussen, in a big interview in the daily *Berlingske Tidende*, went on the offensive, taking the media, timid Danish intellectuals, and parts of the business community to task for their fainthearted attitude towards free speech. He stated that it was time to separate the sheep from the goats, pointing out that Danish firms owe their existence and their success to the concept of free speech

and that free speech is essential for democracy's survival. In the prime minister's view, no one should gratuitously insult another man's religion, but freedom of speech is a vital weapon in the fight against the Islamists.

In tone, his remarks resembled those of George W. Bush after September 11, that in the fight against terrorism, you were either with us or against us. In Denmark, as in other European nations, the Bush position was originally criticized as simplistic, but increasing numbers of Danes are beginning to realize that in the fight against Islamofascism, fence-sitting is not an option.

The nation is now steeling itself for the upcoming trial of Fadi Abdullatif, the spokesman of the extremist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, against whom the Danish public prosecutor

has finally decided to press charges for making death threats and for incitement. In November 2004, after Friday prayers at a mosque in Valby, Copenhagen, the organization distributed a flyer that said, "So go and help your brothers in Falluja, and kill your rulers if they stand in your way." And on its homepage was found the exhortation to "kill Jews, wherever you find them." Abdullatif has previously received a 60-day suspended sentence for threats against Jews.

Many Danes are now asking what took the public prosecutor so long to put Abdullatif on trial, and why he didn't move long ago to seek a ban of the organization, which in other countries is regarded as a terrorist hate group. To most ears, "Kill your rulers" and "Kill Jews" sounds pretty unambiguous.

[Henrik Bering](#) is a journalist and critic.