Cartoon Confusion

"Can Muslims be reasonable?" Jihad Momani challenged self-destructively as he re-printed some of the controversial cartoons in his Jordanian publication. Predictably, he was arrested and his publication shut down. Should he have known better? Should Ken Livingstone have known better when he sparked controversy by likening a Jew to a Nazi concentration camp guard? How much free speech is tolerable? Or, more appropriately, advisable?

In a perfect world, everyone should be allowed to say what they please. Free speech, without limits. Yet is discretion too much to ask for? Is it so wrong to think before you speak? Did the Danish cartoonist actually think through the ramifications and decide selfishly to publish his piece in spite of what may come later? Or is there something more sinister involved here? Could the Danish publication have published the cartoons because of what would come later?

Questions of this nature plague the minds of Muslims wishing to exert moderate influences. Could we be fighting a losing battle? United in their condemnation of the cartoon content, Muslims find themselves once again split over their method of protest. From those very few who would rather turn the other cheek to the violent masses burning down embassies, government buildings and everything else on the way, Muslims battle among themselves in the aftermath of the cartoon controversy. I argue against a boycott of Danish goods on the one hand, but when I read that the dentist I am due to visit this week schooled in Copenhagen, I cancel my appointment. Not because I want him to lose out on my business, but because I am scared. Would he deliberately infect me with some deadly disease if he found out I am Muslim? Extreme thought, yes, but I would rather not run the risk.

I am nearly sure that the Danish publication could not have imagined such far-reaching consequences of a simple cartoon. Yet when free speech translates into hate speech, it necessarily breeds mistrust between communities. Why are Muslims so sensitive to anything remotely condescending towards their Prophet or the Quran? Why is it that if ten thousand Muslims were to die at the hands of western powers we would almost certainly not see the type of lasting and bloody protests that we have seen over the cartoons?

Clearly, it is a clash of values. In the western world, human life is supreme. But in the Muslim world, religion is sacred. It is quite alright, even honourable, to die if it is in the name of protecting one's religion. That is not to say, that the violent protests over the cartoons did anything to protect the religion. But they did manifest the absolute anarchy that can result from a perceived attack on religion. In the western world, the concept is alien, even baffling. What is the big deal? So what if some measly cartoon was published, I can picture many thinking. But why must they do it, comes the response from the other side. Why must they repeatedly target our sensibilities, knowing full well as they must by now, that it results in mob violence and anarchic destruction.

I have no answer. It reminds me of my early college days in America when a fraternity on campus decided to host a "Mecca party". Each man had to show up with four women in order to enter the soiree. It hurt our feelings, us handful of Muslims who had made their way to the south of Virginia to study at the illustrious institution. We protested. In a letter to the editor of The Flat Hat, the college newspaper, the Secretary of the ten-strong Islamic Cultural Society explained why the party theme had been offensive and under which limited set of conditions the possibility of four wives was permissible in Islam. Immediately, an apology was issued in the same newspaper from the fraternity responsible, and the issue was resolved. It took a while before the ill-feeling disappeared but eventually all was forgiven.

Unfortunately, we cannot expect the level of civility prevalent amongst college elites to also manifest itself in communities at large. And, adding fuel to the fire, we live in a global village with the internet at everyone's fingertips. Thirty years ago, if a Danish cartoonist had made fun of Muslims, perhaps the only ones who would have seen it would have been the few Muslim immigrants to Denmark, who probably would have been too scared to remark upon it. Nowadays,

things are different. The whole world watches. And reacts. Immigrant communities are stronger than before, more aware of civil liberties, more eager to speak up.

If September 11 has taught us anything, it is that violence begets violence. A group of terrorists attack America. America attacks Afghanistan and Iraq. As the death toll of American and British troops rises, more and more Muslims are tortured in Guantanamo. Oil installations are targeted in Saudi Arabia at a time of prohibitively expensive energy costs. Iraq is at the verge of civil war. Iran and Syria are on the edge of a possible military confrontation with America. Mobs of violent looters wreak havoc in the streets of Pakistan. The Middle East at large is in a state of turmoil.

Is this really a time to be printing provocative cartoons? Harmless as it may seem at first, is it really worth the extra ill-will? Aren't things bad enough as it is? What could we possibly achieve from alienating each other further?