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Cartoon Awakening: Toward a Positive Media Strategy

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Much has been said and done in response to the deliberately offensive anti-Muslim cartoons published late last year by a conservative Danish newspaper, and profusely printed in many Europeans and non-European media, including South Africa, Jordan and Malaysia.

While the prevalent narrative in the mainstream Western media has treacherously defended the essentially Western emphasis on freedom of speech and expression, an equally forceful reading of the event also took hold; one that incessantly wishes to differentiate between hate speech and freedom of the press, using legally enforced anti-Semitism laws and doctrines as a model.

In Arab and Muslim media, few condoned the aggressive protests, embassy burnings and threats of violence awakened by the global cartoon campaign. Except of a few holier-than-thou Arab and Muslim journalists, however, there seemed to be consensus among most commentators that both appreciate the enormity – and harm- of the inherent anti-Muslim bias in Western societies and acknowledged the need to respond to such vilification of Muslims and Arabs on a collective level, even if it includes modes of pressure and muscle flexing. Even prominent Egyptian Arab novelist and Literature Nobel Prize recipient Najib Mahfouz was of the opinion that economic boycott must be utilized on a large scale, for the West only understands the language of power, of which economy is a major factor.

Consequently, there were some attempts, however minor, to channel one's resentment of racism and bias into positive energy to pressure the increasingly polarized Western media into a more objective reading of Muslim discourse, culture and belief. Malaysia fired a call for dialogue through an international conference; Indonesia held their own conference and a few genuine and levelheaded Arab and Muslim voices were allowed to trickle in through Western media itself. Nonetheless, few dared to wander far from this equilibrium that identified with Muslim fury on one hand and condemned the use of violence and intimidation on the other.

But what is effectively lacking in the Arab and Muslim debate is the most fundamental issue of all: how can they respond as a collective to growing anti-Muslim sentiment, touted through the media and further inflamed through belligerent right-wing political forces in the West, and, dare I say, belligerent and self-defeating Arab and Muslim voices whose obnoxious and inconsistent response is playing well into the hands of their adversaries?

Unfortunately, Arabs and Muslims have proven incapable of departing from their decade-long posture of simply recognizing Western media bias and, at best, offering their version of counter bias, which is equally distasteful and counter productive. For example, since Jesus is

considered one of Islam's greatest prophets, an Iranian newspaper chose to offset the Western media demonizing of prophet Mohammad, by announcing a Holocaust drawing contest, aimed at mocking and doubting the catastrophe. Not only repugnant, but strategically flawed as well.

And as the countdown to the cartoons protests is drawing to an end, reprehensible video footage of British soldiers abusing Iraqi teenagers – in what seems like a routine practice by the British army – amid the nauseating cheers of the cameraman, emerges. While these chilling images served as a reminder which – once again – underlines the obscene lie that Brits – and Americans – stretched their armies thin for the sole purpose of 'liberating' the Iraqi people, it is likely to underscore a major flaw in Arab and Muslim inconsistency in the face of such formidable tragedies.

Chances are the latest tragedy in Iraq will be whitewashed just as abruptly as it materialized. We know so because hundreds of similar tragedies have befallen Muslims, from Iraq, to Palestine, to Chechnya, to Bosnia, to Afghanistan without any meaningful and durable popular retort. The devastating mid-January CIA bombing of a Pakistani village in the northwestern tribal region of Bajur, which killed and wounded scores of innocent people, didn't inspire one major rally of protest in any other Muslim country, save Pakistan itself. It goes without saying that violations of human rights committed by Muslim governments themselves are equally and just as swiftly brushed off, as bearable facts of life.

It's tempting to declare that the Prophet Mohammad cartoon travesty 'exposed' the bias of the mainstream Western media, but I will refrain, for only a naïve would doubt such a fact in the first place. Late intellectual Edward Said's "Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World,' is a sufficient testimony to that claim. However, what the cartoons truly exposed – among many other realizations – is the frightening extent of vulnerability among Arab and Muslim nations and the lack of any meaningful and effective Muslim and Arab media strategy that forcefully attempts to alter the misconstrued Western discourse that endlessly denigrates their culture, disparages their religion and positively questions their humanity.

By a strategy, I am neither referring to political conferences with no specific objectives, nor to an occasional appearance of an Arab or Muslim dignitary on European or American television to market his country's 'moderate' positions, contrasting them with the misguided and unrepresentative 'extremists' elsewhere. I am specifically referring to an investment in a potent, unremitting, unapologetic, yet eloquent and collective media strategy that makes use of squandered Muslim and Arab talents all over the globe and empowers the unforgivably neglected voices of justice and reason throughout the West. Neither counter bias nor Holocaust contests will restore the widening gulf between the West and the Muslim world. Of that I am sure.

It's of no use to deny the importance of cultural dialogue in this critical juncture where opponents of civilization clash theories have recently received an unequaled boost. This leaves Arab and Muslims – who are vilified as one group – with a formidable challenge, or an awesome opportunity, to respond with reason as a collective using their immense resources and hidden talents, or to carry on with fiery Friday sermons and futile flag burnings.

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