

Post 9/11 Attacks on the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) – Causes, Consequences, and Remedies¹

INTRODUCTION

Recently the number of attacks in the West on the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) have increased dramatically. The International Committee for the Support of the Final Prophet (hereafter “ICSFP”), a nonprofit organization based in the United States and dedicated to the support of the Prophet Muhammad, has been active in responding to these attacks and, as a result of its activities and experiences, it has established a protocol for dealing with such attacks as they arise. This paper examines the sources and causes of the increase in these attacks and then addresses the consequences the attacks. The paper concludes by setting forth a proposed multi-faceted, staged approach for dealing with the attacks, which approach is based on ICSFP’s activities in response to the publication by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten of offensive caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Before moving to the body of the paper, as Muslims we must realize that the Prophet was under attack from the very beginning of his mission. Specifically, when the Prophet first announced that he had been charged with delivering Allah’s

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message his uncle, Abu Lahab, along with Abu Lahab's wife, attacked him.² This was but the first of many personal attacks on the Prophet during his lifetime. The Prophet's own responses to those attacks should guide our efforts.

The Qur'an instructs us how to deal with attacks on our religion: We must respond quietly and with the best of discourse. We are specifically enjoined from attacking the religious beliefs of the attackers.³ In all things, and particularly in matters religious, we must practice moderation and rely upon patient perseverance.

² Ibn Abbas narrates that when the verse, "And admonish the nearest kinsmen," (Surah *Shu'ara* No. 16, v. 114, was revealed, the Prophet was commanded to call his close family and announce that Allah had given him a mission. Thus he climbed to the top of Mount Safa and called his family. It is narrated in _____:

When the people heard the call of Mohammad . . . , they went to him. He pointed out the different Arab tribes by name and addressing the assembly, asked: "If I tell you that there is a huge enemy army camping at the foot of this mountain, on the other side, will you believe me?" The whole assembly unanimously said: "Certainly we will believe, for thou hast never told a lie". "Then", said the holy Prophet (s): "I have come from Allah as a warner to preach the Unity of the Lord". Hearing this, Abu Lahab exclaimed: "Perdition to thee! Was it for this that thou assembled us?" It was at that moment that this Surah was revealed, saying: "May the hands of Abu Lahab perish, may he (himself) perish".

³ Surah 6, *Al An'am*, v. 106-08 (Yusuf Ali translation):

Follow what thou art taught by inspiration from thy Lord: there is no god but He: and turn aside from those who join gods with Allah. If it had been Allah's plan, they would not have taken false gods: but We made thee not one to watch over their doings, nor art thou set over them to dispose of their affairs. Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus have We made alluring to each people its own doings. In the end will they return to their Lord, and We shall then tell them the truth of all that they did.

These are the attitudes that should guide Muslims as we respond to attacks on the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The reckoning for the attackers is in Allah's hands, not ours. See Sura Abu Lahab, No. 114.

THE PROBLEM: ATTACKS ON THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD (PBUH)

Introduction

Recently there have been a number of very high profile attacks on the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in the Western media. These attacks are part of a larger phenomenon: the growing incivility of the Western media (and, indeed, increased hostility by many in the West) toward Islam and Muslims. The examples are many; the two most prominent ones are the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten's publication of caricatures of the Prophet that it had actively solicited and Pope Benedict's quoting of an obscure mediaeval source that cast aspersions on both the Prophet and Allah's teachings in the Qur'an. ICSFP has been very active in addressing both situations and I believe that its actions might be used as a possible model to guide other Muslims' responses to such provocations.

The attacks in Jyllands-Posten newspaper and by the Pope were entirely unexpected and unprovoked; they were not triggered by any particular immediate event on the world or local stage but, rather, each appears to have been driven by ignorance and ill will. The first question is why the attacks came at all and, more to the point, why now.

Causes

Ignorance and Fear

The first cause of the attack is both historical and psychological. Many Muslims simply assume that non-Muslims are as familiar with Islam as Muslims are familiar with Christianity and Judaism. This assumption, however, is profoundly wrong. Islam incorporates major portions of the fabric of Judaism and Christianity in the Qur'an and points out how those portions are inconsistent with the truths as revealed by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). As Muslims we often overlook the fact that Jewish and Christian religious learning and instruction ends with the Old Testament (the Torah) and the New Testament, respectively; while Muslims treat all of *The Book* as divinely inspired if not divinely transmitted, Jews and Christians simply do not study the Qur'an as a part of their religious training or background. Moreover, when Jews and Christians do study the Qur'an they encounter the Qur'an's corrections and importunings to their own long-held and cherished doctrines (such as, in the case of Christians, Trinitarianism). These corrections often cause discomfort and, if presented or understood out of the proper Islamic context, hostility arising from defensiveness.

As Pope Benedict's September 12, 2006, lecture points out, not all attacks on the Prophet are the consequence of a lack of study. Pope Benedict is admired in the West for his academic abilities, and most particularly in the field of religion. His

attack – in a carefully prepared and tightly reasoned speech given at the University of Regensburg – nonetheless reflected several areas of ignorance. For example, Pope Benedict erroneously ascribed the ayat that there must be no compulsion in religion⁴ to the early (Meccan) period of revelation when, in fact, the ayat was revealed in Medina. The intention behind these attacks appears to be to attack Islam and marginalize Muslims rather than fostering dialogue among peoples.

Closely related to ignorance as a cause of attacks on the Prophet is fear. Fear is a common companion of ignorance; indeed, in many cases it seems that fear is the necessary fruit of ignorance. It is precisely because the West lacks knowledge about the true basis and practices of Islam that they fall prey to those who wish to discredit and vilify the Prophet.

Why Now? – 9/11

The “Why now?” question has an easy answer: 9/11. The events of 9/11 came as a shocking surprise to most in the West. When the attacks came, the Bush Administration had several paths open to it. First, it could treat the attacks as largely a police matter that could be handled by existing authorities and marginally expanded powers. Instead of taking this course, however, the Bush Administration declared a “war on terror,” hyped up the threats to America and the West, enacted legislation restricting Americans’ traditional civil and political rights, and then

⁴ Surah 2, *Al Baqarah*, v. 256.

morphed that “war on terror” into a number of disastrous avenues, primary among them the ill-fated war in Iraq. Ultimately the Administration’s policies have been enormously destructive: The United States squandered the sympathy of the world, it increased the threat of global terrorism, it severely depleted the strength of the American armed forces, and it created chaos and unrest in the most volatile region of the world.

Consequences

Quite simply, Muslims have suffered enormously as a result of the increased hostility against Islam. In the United States individuals involved in Dawah are arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned for terms up to life for such things as “inciting” others. Today fear grips the Muslim community in many Western countries, and each attack on the Prophet brings humiliation and, indeed, danger to the Muslim community. It is time for Muslims everywhere to take responsibility for addressing these attacks. The next portion of this paper addresses how these attacks might be countered effectively.

The Five Steps of Response – The Danish Experience

The case of Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten’s publication of offensive caricatures of the Prophet required ICSEFP to think through the problem of an appropriate response subject to Islamic restrictions on argument and actions, and this process has led to the creation of a roadmap for how responsive actions might be

structured. In the Danish case, ICSFP developed a five-step approach to responding to attacks on the Prophet. Of course, each country's laws are different, and those differences will require adjustments to some or all of the steps set forth below. Nonetheless, it appears that the manner of proceeding in response to the Danish provocations might serve as a model of how to proceed in other circumstances and places.

Step 1: Informal Contact with Source of Offense. The first step is to contact the offending publication or individuals and inform them of the harm that their activity is causing in the Muslim community.⁵ Of course, in some cases the offenders know full well that their activities are harmful; indeed, occasionally that is precisely why the offenders undertook those activities. If satisfaction is not achieved at this stage the response should move to Step 2.

Step 2: Formal Contact with Local/National Political Leaders. If the perpetrators themselves are unwilling to take appropriate steps the next level of response is to involve the local/national political leaders. The purpose here is to obtain a clear statement to the effect that the attacks on the Prophet are wrong and intolerable and a clear, public apology for any offense caused by those attacks. In

⁵ This activity might be institutionalized and made part of a long-term effort; for example, ICSFP prepared and has recently released a one-minute video showing a young Muslima explaining how Islam views all prophets and explaining why Muslims become upset when any prophet is attacked or derided.

some circumstances such a statement and apology may be sufficient; each case will have its own determinants in making such an evaluation.⁶

In the Danish cartoon controversy the national political leaders refused even to meet with representatives of the Muslim community. Had such a meeting occurred it is possible that the negative consequences of the insults to the Prophet could have been limited. Instead, the Danish political leaders suggested that those offended should take their case to the Danish courts.

Step 3: Formal Criminal Complaint to Local/National Legal Authorities.

Once again, the laws of the state in which the offense occurred will govern how fruitful resort to formal criminal processes will be. In some instances there are explicit legal protections against defaming religions or religious figures that provide criminal sanctions for offenders. In the Danish cartoon situation ICSFP sought criminal prosecution of the Jyllands-Posten newspaper. The Danish public prosecutor, however, refused to prosecute on the grounds that Danish fundamental law prohibits inhibitions on freedom of speech. A local appellate court recently upheld that decision; at the present time the issue of a further appeal is under study.

⁶ It appears that the Danish authorities may have learned from the Jyllands-Posten experience. When a video of insults to Islam and the Prophet engaged in by a right-wing, anti-Muslim Danish political party was broadcast by Danish and subsequently international television stations, the Danish political leadership quickly stated that it found the video reprehensible and disassociated the political leadership of the country from the video.

One of the difficulties arising from resort to legal authorities is that the Muslim community loses control over the process, and therefore this Step 3 may not be optimal in many instances. Nonetheless, this process should definitely be considered and evaluated prior to moving further up the matrix of response.

Step 4: Formal Civil Action against Offenders. Each state has legal protections for individuals and groups defamed by the actions of others. In the West such actions are called “defamation,” “libel,” or “slander.” Once again, each state’s laws will determine how effective resort to this Step 4 will be; for example in the United States it is very difficult to bring a defamation action against a public figure, while in the United Kingdom such actions are not only possible but somewhat commonplace. The purpose of this avenue would be both redress for the wrong and a public apology for the offense. In the Danish situation ICSFP sought civil redress for the publication of the offensive caricatures of the Prophet; that effort is still underway but it appears unlikely that substantial relief will be afforded.

Step 5: Formal International Action: United Nations Venues. There are at least two possible avenues of recourse at the United Nations. The first is the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which has the power to investigate offenses against racial and cultural minorities. ICSFP complained to CERD and obtained formal recognition that Denmark’s attitude and actions were

insufficient in face of the harms created by Jyllands-Posten's publication of the offensive caricatures. The Committee responded as follows:

The Committee, while taking note of the State party's efforts to combat hate crimes, is concerned about the increase in the number of racially motivated offences and in the number of complaints of hate speech. The Committee is also concerned about hate speech by some politicians in Denmark. While taking note of the statistical data provided on complaints and prosecutions launched under Section 26 6 b of the Criminal Code, the Committee notes the refusal by the Public prosecutor to initiate court proceedings in some cases, including the case of the publication of some cartoons associating Islam with terrorism. (articles 4 (a) and 6))

The State party should increase its efforts to prevent racially motivated offences and hate speech, and to ensure that relevant criminal law provisions are effectively implemented. The Committee recalls that the exercise of the right to freedom of expression carries special duties and responsibilities, in particular the obligation not to disseminate racist ideas, and recommends that the State party take resolute action to counter any tendency to target, stigmatize, stereotype or profile people on the basis of race, colour, descent, and national or ethnic origin, especially by politicians. Bearing in mind its General Recommendation 31 (2005) on the prevention of racial discrimination in the administration and functioning of the criminal justice system, the Committee also requests the State party to remind public prosecutors and members of the prosecution service of the general importance of prosecuting racist acts, including minor offences committed with racist motives, since any racially motivated offence undermines social cohesion and society as a whole.

CERD Decision, ¶ 11 (August 18, 2006).

The second United Nations venue is a formal complaint to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland. ICSFP filed such a complaint on behalf of Danish Muslims at the same time it filed its CERD papers. That complaint, which formally requests that the Human

Rights Committee intervene to compel Denmark to enforce its criminal laws against the perpetrators of the attacks on the Prophet, has yet to be adjudicated.

While the United Nations has no specific enforcement power of its own, its determination of a violation of civil, political, or human rights can have severe and long-reaching consequences for the country so convicted. ICSFP understands that a number of representatives from Denmark felt personally chastened by the CERD decision quoted above.

Avoiding Wrong Actions: Violence and Harming Innocents

In addition to having a plan in advance to deal with attacks on the Prophet and Islam, it is also important to understand the bounds of permissible responses. The Qur'an instructs that, "Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for Allah does not love transgressors."⁷ This injunction has particular importance when Muslims defend the Prophet. During the course of the Danish cartoon controversy ICSFP provided leadership not only on what should be done but also on what should *not* be done.

Violence: ICSFP first addressed the problem of violent responses to the attacks on the Prophet. ICSFP emphatically and specifically condemned the use of violence in response to the attacks on the Prophet. The proper way of dealing with

⁷ 2:190.

ignorance is reasoning and education, not threats and violence. Using violence will only drive the perpetrators farther from the correct path. Moreover, using violence creates public sympathy for the perpetrators and this harms the cause of Islam. In sum, violence should not be used in the face of this type of provocation.

Harming Innocents: In addition to physical injuries caused by violence, there are injuries to relationships, social standing, and economic interests. Even in the face of provocations of the magnitude experienced in Denmark it is wrong to harm those types of interests of persons or companies that themselves did not insult the Prophet or disparage Islam. During the controversy in Denmark, ICSFP emphasized that innocent individuals, groups, and companies should not be threatened, targeted, or harmed in any way. The legitimate restriction for the protection of innocents, which is fundamental in Islam, had particular applicability in the Danish cartoon controversy, where well-meaning Muslims decided that *all* Danish persons and companies should suffer because of Jyllands-Posten's publication. Specifically, some leaders urged a boycott of Danish products (and particularly foodstuffs produced by Arla Foods of Copenhagen, Denmark). ICSFP took the contrary position: Such a boycott was wrong in the absence of proof that the target actually supported the attacks on the Prophet; in the case of Arla Foods, ICSFP was convinced that the company itself strongly opposed and condemned the attacks on the Prophet and accordingly encouraged Muslims to cease the boycott.

CONCLUSION

9/11 is the most immediate cause of increasing attacks on Muslims and on Islam itself. ICSFP believes that Islam teaches restraint and moderation even in the face of these affronts. The Qur'an many times emphasizes that Muslims must exhibit patient perseverance – "sabr." This restrained, patient path suggests that the first step in responding to attacks on the Prophet is for informal protests to be delivered in a measured, reasoned fashion. If that first step does not produce the desired result, the legal process available in the host country should be invoked for redress to the extent possible. Those avenues should be pursued to the highest levels. Finally, if the country itself refuses to provide adequate redress to attacks on the Prophet, recourse should be taken to the United Nations.

The overriding goal in responding to provocations directed at the Prophet and at Islam is to conform our actions to the teachings in the Qur'an. By doing so we will be assured of success.