

Current Trends and Tendencies in Tackling Islamism in Denmark

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News:

Ahmed Akkari who played a leading role in the escalation of the Cartoon Controversy which spread from Denmark to all of the Muslim world in the winter of 2005-06 has published a book entitled “My Farewell to Islamism: The Cartoon Controversy, Double-dealing and the Battle for Denmark” (In Danish: “Min afsked med islamismen: Muhammedkrisen, dobbeltspillet og kampen om Danmark”, Berlingske Media Forlag, April 2014), in which he reveals how a group of influential Danish imams operated with two different agendas: One seeking dialogue in front of the Danish public and another seeking revolt and uprising when addressing Muslims in Denmark and abroad.

Summary:

This news analysis takes its point of departure in the controversial publication by Ahmed Akkari and – without discussing the content of the book in great detail – assesses the current trends and tendencies in how Islamism is tackled in Denmark currently. Within the last two months, four events demonstrate that Islamists are facing new challenges: Apart from Akkari’s book criticising named Imams’ Islamist persuasions and double-dealing, in February, Said Mansour – also known as the Bookseller from Bronshøj – was formally indicted for inciting terrorism and temporarily imprisoned for four weeks

during further investigations. The same month, the mosque in Baggesensgade in Copenhagen, Danish Islamic Centre (Dansk-Islamisk Center), hosted a lecture criticising the use of the concept “jihad” by jihadi organisations such as al-Qa’ida, Hamas and Lashkar-e-Ta’iba. And in March, the residents’ board of a housing estate affiliated with Hizb ut-Tahrir was dissolved by the housing association due to failure to comply with the needs of all residents. Together these four events demonstrate that individuals and organisations adhering to political interpretations of Islam are facing new kinds of criticism and challenges. Islamism is no longer only tackled in courtrooms and public debates regarding potential terror threats but also criticised from within for misinterpretation and misconduct.

Key Words:

Islamism, Akkari, Cartoon Controversy, Mansour, Hizb ut-Tahrir

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Analysis:

The main interest of the present news analysis is not so much the content of Ahmed Akkari’s recent publication – although the who-did-what-and-when of the Cartoon Controversy certainly is of great interest to many – but rather the fact that Akkari as former member of the Muslim Brotherhood speaks out and openly criticises his own role and the role of fellow members of the Mosque Coalition which travelled to the Middle East at the height of the Controversy in 2006. Seen in the light of other recent events concerning criticism of more or less radical Islamism, Akkari’s publication and voice represents a new tendency consisting of new critical voices and a more outspoken and visible debate amongst and with Muslims concerning political Islam in general and named organisations in particular. Political Islam is used here as a term covering Islamism and Jihadism based on the understanding that both build on interpretations of Islam as a political ideology. Since February of this year, an individual has been indicted with claims of enticing terrorism, a think tank has published a booklet criticising radical interpretations of the concept “jihad”, a residents’ board has

been dissolved due to failure to comply with the housing association's aims and an Imam has admitted to double-dealing and deceit all in the name of political interpretations of Islam.

Thus, in recent months in Denmark, critique of Islamism varying in degrees of radical content and expression has been put forward by different actors and institutions: the Danish legal system, a housing association, a think tank and former members. All in all, this constitutes a broader foundation for criticism than hitherto seen in Denmark.

The Cartoon Controversy and Akkari's Change of Heart

As Lars Erslev Andersen states in his review of Akkari's book¹, the starting point and developments of the cartoon controversy, here for the sake of clarity boiled down to: *Jyllands-Posten's* printing of cartoons of the Prophet in September 2005, the Middle East Ambassadors to Denmark's request to have an explanation of *Jyllands-Posten's* priorities from then Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen in October 2005, Fogh Rasmussen's refusal to meet with the Ambassadors and finally the Danish Imams' travels to Egypt, Lebanon and Syria and the attacks on Danish embassies in Damascus (4th February 2006) and Beirut (5th February 2006) have all been subjected to thorough analysis by Jytte Klausen (2009) and others already. So we know the Imams of the Danish mosque coalition were instrumental in bringing Muslim countries to the cause and advocating aggressive responses to the cartoons. However, Akkari's book contributes with insider information about how badly the Imams wanted to stir up things and create the riot that followed with embassies being burned down, boycott of Danish goods and overall tarnishing of the Danish reputation in Muslim countries. This agenda is, according to Akkari, closely linked to Islamism and the belief that Denmark and Danes deserved punishment for the treatment of Muslims.

Akkari's new message seems to be that he not only takes part of the blame for the escalation of the controversy 8 years ago, but furthermore that he finds the underlying line of thought, namely an Islamist attitude involving blaming the West for everything wrong in the world flawed. He now supports Western style democracy and protection of freedom of expression as to allow future *Jyllands-Posten* style provocations. Today, Akkari holds the view that Islamism is to blame for many of the integration difficulties faced by institutions and individuals in Denmark, simply because Islamism propagates the superiority of Muslims, segregation between people of different faith and the necessity to form an Islamic state.

¹ Politiken on 9th April 2014

Jihad Propagation and Contestation

Said Mansour, for one, remains an advocate for Islamism and the reestablishment of an Islamic state. Mansour is a known supporter of al-Qa'ida and has previously received sentences for breaching Danish terror legislation. He has served 3,5 years in prison already and was indicted on similar grounds in 2013.

Based on an account of Copenhagen Police's charges,² we know that in February 2014, just two months ago, Mansour was charged with violation of a number of paragraphs in the Danish criminal code: propagating terrorism, discriminatory exclamations concerning individuals of other faith, race, nationality and/or ethnicity, on behalf of other individuals affiliated with terror organisations – amongst these al-Qa'ida – praising and advocating participation in holy war (*jihad*) on social media, appraisal of the terror attacks on New York and Washington on 11th September 2001 and leading Danish Jihadists, publication and distribution of video clips of the execution of Syrian and Iraqi soldiers, expression of threats towards French (Mansour is of Moroccan origin) and American interests as well as the Egyptian parliament and Danish citizens, and finally, invitations to join al-Qa'ida's al-Nusra front in the war in Syria.³

Also in February, a series of talks hosted by the Islamic Danish Centre and the Christian-Muslim Study Centre in Copenhagen focused on the challenges posed by Islamism and Jihadist organisations, however, here the purpose was to voice a theologically founded criticism of Islamist readings of the Qur'anic concept *jihad*. The London based think tank *The Henry Jackson Society* has published a report entitled *A Guide to Refuting Jihadism: Critiqueing Radical Islamist Claims to Theological Authenticity*, which aims at analysing the underlying understanding and usage of "Jihad" in ideological material by the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Hamas in Gaza, al-Qa'ida and one of the largest Pakistani based terror organisations operating in Kashmir: Lashkar-e-Ta'iba. In the report, by comparison between the mentioned Islamist and jihadist organisations' interpretations of *jihad* and classical as well as contemporary theological interpretations, they make two points: The first is that the Islamist and Jihadist interpretations of the concept *jihad* and related concepts deviate from classical and contemporary interpretations, and second, that the mentioned organisations have little or no theological basis for their interpretations of *jihad* and related concepts whereby they lure individuals to commit suicide bombings and

² Account provided by Politiken on 12th February 2014

³ <http://www.dr.dk/Nyheder/Indland/2014/02/12/085750.htm>

participate in other terrorism activists on false claims. As it is stated in the report: “As a result, the report directly refutes the groups’ claim that there is no acceptable theological approach to these issues other than the one presented by them, and challenges the resultant idea that traditional Islam mandates a view of scripture along Jihadist lines” (Ali and Stuart, 2013: 11).

The discussions of this comparative analysis and report at meetings held in a Copenhagen mosque and religious study centre deserve to be highlighted as they constitute a first in Denmark: It is the first time a serious analytical approach to taking apart Islamist and Jihadist ideologies and methodology is discussed in public debates hosted by Danish Muslims. This is of huge importance as mosques and imams still form important sources of influence on their constituents and not least young generations of Muslims in Denmark. Although Denmark has had a handful of Imams and Muslim individuals knowledgeable of religious issues who repeatedly and tirelessly have taken it upon themselves to engage in public debates and dispute the Islamist narrative, these individuals have lacked a tool that would be recognised by their opponents. Now, they have a prominent theological basis for their views and this makes a difference in the eyes of fellow-believers. Furthermore, this publication provides a useful tool for a variety of actors, as the views represented are not tied to a specific (Muslim) organisation, tradition or school.

If we continue to the month of March 2014, the Danish public witnessed another novelty related to Islamism and Islamist viewpoints as a residents’ board of a housing estate in Kokkedal north of Copenhagen was dissolved by the Housing Association due to the board’s inability to accommodate wishes and needs by all residents in the area. Behind this story lies the fact that the board had been influenced by individuals associated with the Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir which resulted in activities in the area being changed and groups amongst residents feeling ignored if not maltreated. The board had accommodated the needs of the Muslim majority population in the area – hosting Eid celebrations for instance – but had done so at the expense of the non-Muslim minority in the area – exemplified by not investing in the traditional Christmas tree in the square. As this was not the only examples of unequal treatment of residents and as attempts to engage the board in dialogue failed, the housing association saw no other solution than to dissolve the board.

Hizb ut-Tahrir has existed in Denmark since the middle of the 1990s. It is a worldwide organisation with at least 49 national branches that all work towards re-establishing an Islamic state, the Caliphate. However, what is of interest here is not whether or not infiltrating a residents’ board brought Hizb ut-Tahrir one step closer to the Caliphate or not – which it should be emphasised it did not – but rather how well the Housing

Association have handled the matter. All along they have referred to the Association's rules. They let residents of the local areas run for the board and change priorities in the local areas, but intervened once the developments took a wrong turn and residents' interests were not met. It was never a question of pro or con Islamism or Hizb ut-Tahrir but rather a matter of keeping the focus on the protection of the needs and interests of all residents in the area.

The Kokkedal situation is another first in a Danish context and this emphasises the importance of the Housing Association's handling of the matter as others are likely to look to them for advice in the future. Also, this situation has demonstrated a new venue for Islamists seeking to promote their agenda, and as they have been unsuccessful, it provides new arguments countering Islamism in Denmark.

New Trends and Tendencies for Tackling Islamism in Denmark

Traditionally, Islamism and especially Jihadism is debated within legal frameworks as illustrated by the Mansour case. However, within the past two months in a Danish context, we have seen examples of how Islamism is being tackled by new types of actors. New institutions have taken it upon themselves to tackle Islamism and Islamists. As shown in the above, think tanks, mosques and Housing Associations are finding ways of dealing with Islamism that differ from the typical discussion of links to terror networks as known from court cases and public debates.

Moreover, although individuals who have left Islamist enterprises have shared their stories before, Akkari's story is more than his individual account of his way in and out of Islamism, it is an apology to the Danish public: He is not merely telling his own story, explaining how things derailed for him, but rather explaining how the Islamist narrative implies double-dealing. So far these allegations have been made by politicians and other individuals on the political right mainly – not from within. The ongoing debate includes the view that Akkari is an opportunist who is merely trying out new paths for political influence in Denmark. And while this may be so, his publication represents yet another voice criticising the opinions and worldviews held by Islamists and this should be recognised as useful and beneficial in and of itself.

Criticism of Islamism from within or below – from former Islamists or from actors in local areas – demonstrates to the Danish Muslim and non-Muslim public that the road towards the re-establishment of the Caliphate is paved with unsurmountable obstacles which might serve to calm down the far-right and scare off potential new recruits. Furthermore, the recent examples from a Danish context demonstrate that tackling Islamism is becoming a normalised part of everyday life.

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