

Muslim Organisations in Denmark – Five years after the Cartoon Controversy

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The “cartoon controversy” in fall 2005 and spring 2006 had immediate consequences for the Muslim population in Denmark. In many regards, the debates triggered by the cartoons and by the following protests encouraged Muslims to organise and to voice their views and opinions. This article examines how this new activism has developed over the last five years: Did these new initiatives last?

This article discusses tendencies among Danish Muslim organisations in the aftermath of the so-called Cartoon Controversy that started with *Jyllands-Posten's* printing of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad on 30th September 2005. During the controversy, it became clear that not only established political parties but also Muslim organisations used the controversy to underline profiles and opinions. Denmark's Muslims stood out as the highly complex and differentiated minority it is, and a battle regarding the right to represent Islam in Denmark was evidently taking place. As such, this is not a new phenomenon, but new and different voices were heard and recognised in the media in the wake of the controversy and there was a tendency among Muslims to get more organised. In some cases cooperation and new alliances appeared, in others oppositions were marked. In the following, we shall take a look at Muslim responses to the controversy and following developments up till today.

Religious Revival and "Assertive Islam"

Whereas a considerable proportion of the Muslim population is not very religious, there seems to be a religious revival taking place among parts of the younger generation.(1) This revival often involves an attempt to distinguish between what is understood as culture and what is "pure" and authentic Islam as found in Islamic scriptures.(2) In many cases, the interpretation of the scriptures is developed in discussions with friends or with new religious authorities found on the internet rather than with traditional authorities such as parents or local Imams. Furthermore, there is a new tendency among young revivalist Muslims to organise across ethnic boundaries.(3) This tendency can be explained as a result of the coexistence of young Muslim immigrants of different ethnic backgrounds who share similar experiences of belonging to a minority as Muslims in Denmark. However, the revival takes different forms.

One of the truly cross-ethnic organisations in Denmark is Hizb ut-Tahrir which is an international Islamist organisation originally founded in Palestine in the early 1950s. In Denmark, the organisation attracts young Muslims with its radical views and rejection of democracy. Hizb ut-Tahrir did not play a leading role in the protests following the cartoon controversy; however, in the aftermath of the controversy, the group made efforts to end its isolation within the Muslim community and initiated cooperation with the Islamic Congregation (Islamisk Trossamfund) in matters of common interest with some success. Nevertheless, today, five years after the height of the controversy, Hizb ut-Tahrir seems to have returned to its own part of the pitch with its easily recognisable rhetoric and events. The organisation only hosted two events with other Muslim organisations, and initiatives to come forward as more "integratable" in 2010 (emphasising the need for Muslim minority individuals to be model citi-

zens) have been succeeded by more characteristic and thus confrontational events in 2011 (for instance in January legitimising attacks on Danish troops in Afghanistan).

Another and stronger tendency among revivalist Muslims can be referred to as “assertive Islam”.⁽⁴⁾ “Assertive Muslims” relate to Denmark as their home country and wish to create a place for Islam in the public sphere and to engage in new questions arising in a European context. Thus, assertive Islam is in opposition to a more defensive form of Islam characterised by migrants longing to return home. Assertive Muslims challenge the common division of moderate versus Islamist Muslims, non-religious versus religious Muslims. An example of a new organisation which was founded as a direct response to the cartoon controversy and represents “assertive Islam” was “The Network” which arranged, among other things, a demonstration for dialogue and offered companies and others to “book a Muslim” in order to get more information about Islam. The Network still exists, however, it is not getting very much publicity and it has not organised demonstrations or other public events since 2006.

At the height of the cartoon controversy in the early Spring of 2006, Naser Khader among others formed the organisation “Democratic Muslims” (Demokratiske Muslimer) with the aim to unite moderate Muslims and to react to “absurd statements” given by “foolish Imams”. Democratic Muslims was very successful in the beginning, probably due to the amount of political and financial support from non-Muslims and the timing of its founding. With its approximately 1,000 members, the organization quickly grew bigger than any other Muslim organization in Denmark, but despite the popularity, Democratic Muslims has seldom taken part in discussions after the controversy, and Muslims have criticised the organization for implying that it is impossible to be a dedicated Muslim and democratic at the same time.

The reference to “absurd statements” expressed by “foolish Imams” was a direct reference to one of the main actors in the cartoon controversy, namely “The Coalition Defending the Prophet’s Honour”. The coalition consisted of organisations with Arab, Somali, Turkish and Pakistani ties. The diversity in itself was unusual considering that Muslim organisations in Denmark have very seldom managed to cooperate – especially across ethnic lines. The organisations involved were, however, not in any sense representative of Denmark’s Muslims at large, although they did represent an increasing tendency towards cross-ethnic cooperation. Immediately after the Muhammad cartoons were published, Imam Raed Hlayhel, who is known for his Wahhabi affiliations (infamous for carrying the view that women should cover themselves completely), Iman Ahmed Akkari and Iman Abu Laban both from the Islamic Congregation, still one of the biggest congregations in the country, teamed up with the aim of

uniting Danish Muslims against *Jyllands-Posten* and what was seen as a general Danish campaign against Muslims and spreading the knowledge of the cartoons and the Danish situation to the Muslim worlds. They sought an apology from *Jyllands-Posten* and found that the best way would be to gain international support for their cause and hence they organised two delegations to Muslim countries in the Middle East. Later, researchers have debated whether these delegations would have been carried through, had a country like Egypt and an organisation like the "Organization of the Islamic Conference" not found the cause useful and suitable to fit their own agendas.(5)

As mentioned, the founding of Democratic Muslims was a direct response to the initiatives from The Coalition of the Defence of the Prophet's Honour. Another response came from the head of Muslims in Dialogue (Muslimer i Dialog), Zubair Butt, who offered to travel to the Middle East and settle the dispute over the cartoons. However, he was not taken up on his offer, and after the controversy, the majority of prominent members of Muslims in Dialogue withdrew from the public debate and kept a lower profile.

Although not playing a prominent role in the controversy, Muslims in Dialogue remains one of the most important new organisations representing "assertive Islam" in Denmark. The organisation was established in 2004 as an attempt to form a broad and inclusive organisation for Sunni Muslims. So far it mainly consists of young "revival" Muslims and converts. The organisation is led by former leaders of the youth organisation under Minhaj al-Quran, a conservative and family-oriented international organisation with Pakistani roots and leadership, as well as by two of the most well-known Imams; Fatih Alev, who has a Turkish background, and the Danish convert Abdul Wahid Peder- sen, who are both involved in other initiatives and organisations, too.

Asmaa Abdol-Hamid, who in reaction to the publications of the Muhammed cartoons took legal action against *Jyllands-Posten* is a member of Muslims in Dialogue; she became a public figure in Denmark in the aftermath of the cartoon controversy when she co-hosted a debate program on religion on national TV. Recently, she has become more involved in politics and has been put forward as candidate for the Parliament for the Danish Red-Green Alliance (Enhedslisten). Her public presence has aroused a heated debate in Denmark about whether she, a dedicated, veiled Muslim could be a member of Parliament and she has been accused of talking with two tongues. Abdol-Hamid is currently on leave from her political obligations but continues to give public talks.

Muslim Organisations in Denmark Today

Today, five years after the cartoons were printed in *Jyllands-Posten*, it is evident that what seemed as a window of opportunity in the first couple of years following the controversy – an opportunity that would give leeway to new organisations representing a new generation of Danish Muslims and new political agendas – should perhaps be seen as a parenthesis in the history of Muslim organisations in Denmark. In the spring of 2011, it is the well-established organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Congregation and Hizb ut-Tahrir that show the clearest evidence of durability. Put differently, the noticeable optimism on the part of both younger political and aware and active Muslims and scholars studying Muslims in Denmark that was seen up until around 2008 has faded and we are once again discussing the organisations led by older generations. This is not to say that the umbrella organisation, The Muslim Council of Denmark, and Muslims in Dialogue will not continue to exist and to influence young Muslims, but so far it seems that the scope of their influence has been reduced once again. Their public platforms remain but as long as they refuse to take part in the rhetorical ping-pong with the political far-right as Hizb ut-Tahrir is prone to, it seems they will find themselves removed from the centre of the stage.

Muslims in Dialogue has attempted to take the lead among Muslim organisations and has initiated new forms of cooperation. They have founded the “Muslim Council of Denmark” (Muslimernes Fællesråd) which is backed by various mosques and individual Muslims to represent the Muslim community in Denmark. They have not, however, succeeded in involving important mosques such as the Islamic Congregation, although many of the active members of this congregation are involved on an individual basis. Whether the Muslim Council of Denmark will gain further influence or not is likely to depend on the developments concerning the establishment of a mosque in Copenhagen. So far, Denmark has only two purpose built mosques and they both lack the visible characteristics of a mosque, and currently, the Muslim Council of Denmark is playing a lead role in the project of establishing a mosque in Copenhagen carrying characteristic architectural, audible and symbolic features, but the difficulties faced are many – first and foremost related to financing but also questions concerning language and ethnicity of the users are causing disputes.

Although Denmark witnessed a political radicalisation of opinions concerning potential terror threats and integration as other Western countries in the aftermath of 9/11, and although the cartoon controversy can be seen as linked to the “us versus them”-thinking that has been prevailing in Danish politics since the Liberal-Conservative coalition formed government in the autumn of 2001, the cartoon controversy also added more nuances to the debate. New Muslim

groups entered the stage and expressed a willingness to discuss the future for Muslims in Denmark in a proactive and optimistic manner. However, these differentiated voices seem to have disappeared from the debate once again and one might wonder if it going to take a new cartoon controversy or changes in the political climate for them to be heard again.

1 Karen-Lise Johansen (2002) *Muslimske stemmer: religiøs forandring blandt unge muslimer i Danmark*. Viborg: Akademisk.dk.

2 Peter Mandaville (2001) *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the umma*. Routledge Research in Transnationalism. London and New York: Routledge.

3 Kate Østergaard (2004) "Muslim women in the Islamic field in Denmark – Interaction between converts and other Muslim women" in *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 1, pp.29-46.

4 Jørgen Bæk Simonsen (2001) *Det Retfærdige Samfund*, Copenhagen: Samleren, pp. 176-183.

5 Jytte Klausen (2010) *The Cartoon That Shook the World*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. pp. 63-113.