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Cartoon Fury Hardens East - West Lines

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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MADRID, Spain (AP) -- The images have been shocking: a mob pouring over the ruins of a fire-gutted Danish Embassy. Bullets cutting the air as thousands try to storm a U.S. military base in Afghanistan. A British Muslim protester's banner urging "Behead those that insult Islam."

The firestorm that has swept the globe since European newspapers published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad is an alarming demonstration of the growing friction between Islam and the West. Beyond the recent drama is a complex debate that goes to the heart of what a liberal democracy should be.

Can it be so tolerant that it accepts the most provocative speech? Can it survive if it bows to those who reject its liberties on religious or cultural grounds?

With the threat of Islamic terrorism lurking, Europe and the West are grappling with questions such as how to set the limits of freedom, and what cultural values immigrants must adopt as the price of admission.

"It is very difficult for a liberal democracy to deal with those that want to completely undermine the fabric on which liberal democracy is built," said Richard Whitman, an analyst at Chatham House, a London think tank. "This is an absolutely new challenge for liberal democracies."

The controversy erupted after cartoons first published by a Danish newspaper in September were reprinted by a Norwegian paper last month. The drawings have subsequently appeared in other media, mostly in Europe, with some newspapers arguing their publication is a matter of free speech.

Millions of Muslims see the cartoons as a deliberate insult to their religion, which is interpreted to forbid any depiction of Muhammad.

The battle lines between Islam and Europe have been hardening for years, spurred on by global conflicts and local discontent.

From the grim housing projects of Paris to the ethnic Pakistani community of Leeds, England, high unemployment, discrimination and a lack of acceptance have fostered a sense of persecution and exclusion. Anger over the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the tough European stance on Iran's nuclear program and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians have stoked the fire.

Some also see darker forces behind the protests. Lebanon's interior minister -- who submitted his resignation after rioters attacked the Danish Embassy there -- said Islamic radicals were stirring up the violence, and police said more than half of those arrested in Beirut were from Syria and the Palestinian territories.

The U.S. military in Afghanistan, where 11 people have died in protests, said the United States is examining whether extremist groups may be inciting the unrest.

Security officials in Pakistan told The Associated Press they have noticed members of banned militant groups in some demonstrations.

The cartoons have undoubtedly led to real anger among the masses. Many in the Arab and Muslim world see a double standard when it comes to free speech -- since some European states outlaw denying the Holocaust and have cracked down on anti-Semitism.

"If I understand the Western democracy correctly, it allows the publication of cartoons that insult a prophet, religion and the followers of that religion because publication is part of freedom of expression, while it bans anyone to question the number of Jews that died in the Holocaust, because such talk violates freedom of expression," wrote Lebanese columnist Jihad al-Khazen.

One Iranian newspaper has vowed to publish provocative cartoons about the Holocaust to test whether the West extends freedom of expression to the Nazi genocide.

Dyab Abou Jahjah, the Brussels-based head of the Arab European League, said the latest flare-up must be viewed in context.

"The reaction would have been much more restrained" at a "more positive juncture in the Arab and Muslim world," he said. "Muslims do feel attacked."

They are not alone.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, London and Madrid have suffered deadly Islamic bombings, and the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was slain by a Muslim who was offended by a film depicting Islam as cruel to women.

Many European nations have responded with anti-terror legislation that gives police greater latitude in dealing with suspects, outlaws speech that incites or glorifies terror and makes it easier to deport offenders.

Across the continent, extreme nationalist parties like the Flemish Bloc in Belgium and the National Front in France have made gains by exploiting fears of a rising tide of immigrants and refugees.

In the Netherlands, Van Gogh's slaying produced a swing to the right. New laws require mandatory citizenship and language classes for immigrants, restrict the entry of foreign brides and boost work permit fees. The country has also announced it was deporting 26,000 rejected asylum-seekers, and that it would keep new arrivals in detention camps. Immigration has been cut in half since 2001.

Immigration laws were tightened in Denmark in 2002, and that was followed by restrictions on bringing in foreign-born spouses -- measures introduced by the government and backed by an anti-immigration party.

Britain, still coming to grips with the fact that homegrown Islamic radicals were behind the July 7 transit attacks, has begun administering a citizenship test to prospective newcomers.

German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble told the Focus news weekly that those who want to live in Germany "must meet certain conditions," like eschewing forced marriage.

"Why do we make such a fuss about integration? So that we remain a friendly, open country, also for minorities, not least in the interests of immigrants," he said.

In France, questions of identity and integration have loomed large since passage of a law banning head scarves in schools and last fall's riots in poor neighborhoods. The violence started among alienated youths, many from Muslim immigrant families, and drew attention to the divide between the ruling elite and the increasingly diverse citizenry.

"The messages we are receiving from Europe these days are really ugly," said Mustafa Ceric, head of the Islamic community in Bosnia. "Europe needs to cure itself from this disease -- Islamophobia."

Added Magnus Ranstorp, who has been studying al-Qaida recruitment for the Swedish National Defense College: "You have these waves of global conflicts that are unresolved that are fueling this anger, combined with a failure of integration. ... These tensions are bubbling beneath the surface, and sometimes it just takes a very small thing to bring them up."

European nations are finding that their approaches to assimilating immigrants have not worked.

"In France, the idea was that everybody was going to become French. The UK and The Netherlands had more tolerant multicultural approaches. But nobody has found a quick fix," said Whitman, the analyst at Chatham House.

Some advise looking to the past for guidance.

Mansur Escudero, head of the Islamic Commission of Spain, noted that major religions lived in relative harmony during the 700 years Muslims ruled Spain.

"We must search for common values and work together because we don't have any other option," he said. "Globalization means we are all together, even if we are not all the same."

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