



Anders Fogh Rasmussens tale til ambassadørerne ifm. Muhammed- tegningerne

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Dato

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Christiansborg

Ambassadors, Your Excellencies,

Thank you for coming at such short notice. As you are well aware Denmark has been faced with protests from the Muslim world concerning the publication of drawings of the Prophet Muhammad in the independent newspaper Jyllands-Posten. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and I have invited you today to inform you on the facts of the matter as well as the position of the Government of Denmark.

The drawings were brought in the newspaper Jyllands-Posten in late September 2005. In October I received from 11 ambassadors representing Muslim countries a letter in which they referred to the drawings and to other public statements. They requested a meeting and called on me to take action in the matter.

In my response to the 11 ambassadors I clarified the position of the Danish Government vis-à-vis the publications. I emphasised the need for mutual respect and tolerance between countries and religions. I also made it clear that

the Government could not interfere with the media nor take any legal steps against them.

As you are well aware the cartoons caused a widespread public debate during the autumn. Therefore, I devoted a large part of my New Year's Speech to the very issue of ensuring a respectful dialogue and the principle of freedom of expression.

In the speech, I made it clear that I condemn any expression, action or indication that attempts to demonise groups of people on the basis of their religion or ethnic background. It is the sort of thing that does not belong in a society that is based on respect for the individual human being.

As you, Ambassadors, have witnessed during your stay in Denmark, the freedom of expression has a wide scope here. The Danes are known for presenting their views in a frank and straightforward manner. We also use humour and satire, especially when questioning authorities. And in our culture of debate, we consider humour and satire a softening and mollifying way of expression. And certainly not an insulting way of expressing oneself.

However, as I pointed out in my New Year's Speech we should always use the freedom of expression with mutual respect and understanding.

At first, my call for respect and tolerance was well received among Muslim communities in Denmark and abroad.

However, the situation escalated a couple of weeks ago. It was indisputable that many Muslims have been hurt and offended by the drawings. At the same time, misinformation was starting to spread.

Therefore, I was pleased that the newspaper Jyllands-Posten three days ago apologized to the Muslim world for the offence caused by the drawings. I hope this will bring comfort to those people that have been hurt. I am deeply distressed that many Muslims have seen the drawings in the newspaper as a defamation of the Prophet Muhammad.

On Tuesday, I made a statement, where I made it clear that the Danish Government respects Islam as one of the world's major religions. I also emphasised that the government has no intention to insult Muslims and does not support such activities. I have also made it clear that personally I would never depict any religious figure in a way that could hurt other people's feelings.

Yesterday, I appeared on the Al Arabiya satellite TV channel to explain the situation directly to people in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Arab world.

I sincerely hope that we have reached a point where we can return to a

constructive dialogue between the people of Denmark and the Muslim world.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs will inform you on all the diplomatic measures being taken by Denmark. The Foreign Minister will also give you a broad outline of the Wider Middle East initiative launched by the government two years ago to strengthen the very dialogue with the Arab World.

Already now I want to thank all those that personally or on behalf of their governments have shown us solidarity and worked with us in a constructive way to solve this crisis. I want to emphasise that our gratitude goes to representatives of both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. It is my sincere hope, that you will all take part in our endeavours to re-establish and strengthen the relations between our cultures.

We are faced with a problem, which can grow to a more global problem. The cartoons have now been reprinted in a number of newspapers all over Europe. And if the protests in the streets escalate further we maybe faced with unpredictable repercussions in all the affected countries.

Therefore, I think we have a common interest in calming down feelings and in settling this affair.

As you know, the present situation has caused a heated debate in Denmark as well. I have called on all parties to abstain from any statement or action that will create further tension. I have called on representatives of the Muslim communities – including religious authorities – to convey the same message to fellow Muslims in Denmark and abroad. I have also asked the same people to help us correct the vast amount of misinformation that we have seen in the press in a number of countries.

On a final note allow me to look ahead. It may seem premature, as we do not know exactly how this will develop. Nevertheless, we do know that the debate on the very basic principles will continue. We are now witnessing a heated public debate here in Denmark and Europe as well as in Muslim countries. It is evident that we are dealing with core values in democracies and religious societies.

The real challenge is to avoid a clash of those values. We all have a responsibility to ensure that this does not happen. It is my firm belief that the only way ahead is a dialogue that allows us to strengthen our insight and understanding of each other.

Mutual understanding is a must in today's globalized world. For centuries, Denmark has been a firm supporter of free trade and exchange of ideas as a way to foster friendship and prosperity between all nations. Increasingly, the media, information technology and migration stimulate that development. It also makes us acutely aware of events taking place in far away countries. And it makes us sensitive to misinformation.

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are the very cornerstones of any democratic society. I firmly believe that it is the very right to question the status quo that allows a society to develop and prosper.

But freedom of expression should always be combined with freedom of religion and respect between religions and cultures. Those are fundamental values in the Danish society – and in many other societies.

The same basic values should guide the relations between our nations and cultures. I believe that the free exchange of goods and ideas while – at the same time – understanding and tolerating the view of other people and cultures, would allow us all to benefit from today's globalized world.

Tags

Politisk tale, Venstre

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