

## Connecting the Danish cartoon dots is not pretty

By Bob Bergen

Question: What do the now infamous Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, Hamas's election in Palestine and Iran's nuclear ambitions have in common?

Answer: These three issues could all gel into a mind-numbing incendiary crisis that may drag the United Nations Security Council into it if a number of very ugly ducklings fall into line.

The Security Council will be asked some time after the International Atomic Energy Agency reports next month to consider getting tough with Iran over its uranium enrichment program that could lead to the development of Iranian nuclear weapons.

In June, Denmark – home of the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper that last September originally published the cartoons that have inflamed militant Muslims – will assume the rotating Security Council presidency.

There is no telling when the glacially-paced UN will actually deal with the Iranian nuclear issue, but noted Iranian author Amir Taheri speculates that it may well land at the Security Council under the Danish presidency.

There are a lot of ifs in that scenario, but Hariri astutely observes that the Danish cartoon furor handed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a golden opportunity to harness Muslim outrage and portray Denmark as Islam's enemy.

Along the way, Ahmadinejad has positioned Iran as the Muslim world's champion against Denmark and other European nations that published the cartoons ostensibly in the spirit of solidarity and freedom of speech.

It gets worse. More ugly ducks have recently fallen into line after a January meeting in Damascus among leaders of Palestine's Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad and Iran's Ahmadinejad.

The anti-Israel anti-Western group has been emboldened by the Hamas electoral victory, Iran's nuclear ambitions and Iran's willingness to snub its nose at the international community by removing UN seals on its Natanz uranium plant in January.

Hamas would annihilate Israel if it could and Ahmadinejad is feared to be attempting to develop the very weapons that would enable Iran to do just that.

Meanwhile, of immediate concern is Israel's decision to withhold \$50 million a month in tax revenues from the Palestinian authority, exiled Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal's support-seeking visit to Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood's launch of a world-wide campaign raising money to support Hamas.

If ever the Muslim world needed to rally strategic support of its brothers world-wide now is the time and continuing to provoke violent protests against the Danish cartoons is one of the means.

Dr. Gordon Smith, Director of the Centre for Global Studies, University of Victoria, would make a broader and more general link than the above, which he thinks is not a stretch.

"I think that these cartoons have been seen – with a little bit of help admittedly by people who go out and riot, not to mention the Iranian government – as confirmation that what's ahead is the clash of civilizations," Smith explained.

"Therefore, one comes back to the need for the Islamic bomb. There is one of those in Pakistan, but God only knows in the end where Pakistan comes out," he said.

"I think this ends up strengthening the sense in Iran – although they are very clear these weapons will be used in retaliation – but I think what they want, just like

Osama bin Laden does, is a clash of civilizations and they're playing this (Danish cartoon issue) to maximize that possibility," Smith says.

Dr. James Fergusson, Deputy Director of the Centre for Defence and Security Studies, University of Manitoba, thinks linking these issues in such a fashion is not developing conspiracy theory.

Rather, he says, the Prophet Muhammad cartoons were simply taken advantage of by various actors for their own ends.

In that vein, however, Fergusson thinks the Iranian nuclear issue may be dealt with by the Security Council before Denmark assumes the presidency or may be delayed until after June.

The United States is the current president. Argentina will assume the presidency in March followed by China in April and Congo in May.

"There are those who might be more cautious about how they will deal with Iran and its nuclear program in the Security Council in the wake of this mess," Fergusson said.

Fergusson says, for all he knows, the general public may well forget the international furor over the Prophet cartoons and saner heads will prevail.

On the other hand, he agrees that no one would characterize one of the main actors in all of this – Iranian President Ahmadinejad who would wipe Israel off the world's map and who has no regard for world opinion – as one of the saner heads.

The Danish cartoon issue involves far more than freedom of speech versus disrespect for the Prophet Muhammad.

Connecting the dots relating to the caricatures in this fashion may not be pretty, but people need to be thinking about the complex issues involved, their depth and how they interplay instead of viewing them in isolation.

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