

An Open Letter to my Danish friends

By Stephen Zunes | February 20, 2006

Dear Friends,

This is a letter of apology from an American who has witnessed in horror the extreme anti-Danish reaction in parts of the Islamic world. While the spark may have originated in your country, the tinderbox which caused that spark to explode in such a violent conflagration is largely a result of the policies of the United States.

Comments from U.S. government officials chastising your countrymen to be more sensitive about offending religious sentiments in the Middle East may not be inappropriate in and of itself. However, the United States is the last country to preach to others about unnecessarily provoking anti-Western sentiment among the world's Muslims, particularly a nation such as yours which has had such an admirable history of supporting United Nations peacekeeping operations and providing generous financial contributions to Third World development.

Radical Islamic movements have risen to the forefront primarily in countries where there has been a dramatic dislocation of the population as a result of war or uneven economic development. The United States has often supported policies that have helped spawn such movements, including support for decades of Israeli attacks and occupation policies which have torn apart Palestinian and Lebanese society and provoked extremist movements in those countries that were unheard of as recently as a generation ago. The U.S.-led overthrow of the constitutional government in Iran in 1953 and subsequent support for the Shah's brutal dictatorship succeeded in crushing that country's democratic opposition, resulting in a 1979 revolution led by hard-line Islamic clerics. The United States directly

aided extremist Islamists in Afghanistan when they were challenging the Soviet Union in the 1980s, many of whom have gone on to serve as the core of terror cells throughout the Islamic world. To this day, the United States maintains close ties with Saudi Arabia, which adheres to an extremely rigid and repressive interpretation of Islam and spreads such intolerance through the establishment of schools preaching its extremist theology throughout the Islamic world.

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and arms sales are America's number one commercial export to the region, strengthening militarization and weakening financial support for human needs. Furthermore, while threatening war at the mere possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons, the United States maintains close strategic ties to Israel, Pakistan, and India despite their already-existing nuclear arsenals. In addition, the United States has categorically rejected calls by Iran and virtually every Arab state for the establishment of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the region and the U.S. Navy has brought its own tactical nuclear weapons into Middle Eastern waters since the late 1950s. In a part of the world which has been repeatedly conquered by outside powers over the centuries, the growing U.S. military presence has created an increasing amount of resentment. It is no accident that a region so heavily militarized would give rise to militant religious extremism.

The United States has also been at the forefront of pushing neoliberal economic models of development in Islamic countries which have resulted in cutbacks in social services, privatization of public resources, foreign takeovers of domestic enterprises, reduction of taxes for the wealthy, the elimination of subsidies for farmers and for basic foodstuffs, and ending protection for domestic industry.

Double Standards at the United Nations

Despite leading the efforts in recent years to impose debilitating sanctions against the people of

Iraq, Libya, and Sudan for their governments' violations of UN Security Council resolutions, the United States has blocked the Security Council from enforcing a series of its resolutions against such Middle East allies as Turkey, Israel, and Morocco for their ongoing occupation of neighboring countries. In addition, the United States has vetoed scores of resolutions calling on Israel to live up to its international legal obligations as an occupying power and has even attacked the International Court of Justice for its 14-1 advisory opinion citing the illegality of Israel's separation wall in the occupied West Bank. Such abuse of international legal institutions gives the Islamic world little faith in secular law-based means of addressing conflict resolution.

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millions of rural peasants into a new urban underclass populating the teeming slums of North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, providing easy recruits for Islamic activists rallying against corruption, materialism, and economic injustice.

The United States has also encouraged Islamic radicalism through its large-scale military, economic, and financial support of Israel's ongoing occupation, repression, and colonization of the Palestinian West Bank. America's failure to be an honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has allowed for the dramatic expansion of illegal Israeli settlements which have made the creation of a viable Palestinian state impossible. Despite the Palestinian Authority's willingness to accept just 22% of historic Palestine and to live in peace with the Jewish state, U.S. policy has continued to support Israeli expansionism, giving radical Islamists an opportunity to claim that such moderation will never be rewarded.

Despite rhetoric in defense of democracy, the United States remains the primary outside supporter of autocratic regimes throughout the Islamic world from Brunei to Morocco. The Mubarak regime in Egypt, the family dictatorships in the Gulf, the autocracies in the former Soviet Central Asia, and other repressive regimes are kept in power in large part as a result of American support. It is not surprising that those who suffer under such repressive and irresponsible governments will at least in part blame the West for their suffering.

In 2003, in a blatant violation of the United Nations Charter, the United States led a coalition of governments in an invasion of Iraq based upon fabricated claims that the Iraqi government had advanced chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs and maintained operational ties to al-Qaida. Since the conquest and the start of the

U.S. occupation, tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed, many hundreds of detainees have been tortured and abused, crime and unemployment have reached record levels, basic utilities are available only sporadically, and ethnic strife and religious intolerance continues to worsen. Coming after the 2001 U.S.-led attack on Afghanistan—which resulted in thousands of civilian deaths from air strikes and the countryside being taken over by war lords, ethnic militias, and opium magnates—the resentment at the West for inflicting such horrific violence on Muslim peoples has become so severe that the hypersensitivity demonstrated by so many Muslims in reaction to the Danish cartoons should not be surprising.

It is hard to imagine that the extent of the violent reaction would have been nearly as severe as it was if not for the pent up grievances in the Islamic world resulting from many years of irresponsible U.S. policies.

There has been widespread debate in your country regarding Denmark's role in provoking the reaction, ranging from the appropriateness of the cartoons themselves to the Danish government's support of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Whatever missteps may have occurred on your side of the Atlantic, however, it is hard to imagine that the extent of the violent reaction would have been nearly as severe as it was if not for the pent up

grievances in the Islamic world resulting from many years of irresponsible U.S. policies.

And for this, I can only offer my apologies, along with a promise to work along with other conscientious Americans to change U.S. Middle East policy to one which is geared toward promoting peace, justice, and security for all.

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