

# Provoked? Four rules to guide Muslim response

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MUSLIM response to the publication of cartoons in a Danish newspaper, depicting Prophet Muhammad in offensive ways, has been varied. In various countries, there were riots, incidents of arson, death threats, petitions and economic boycotts.

At the local level, Singapore Muslims responded with commendable restraint. Five Muslim organisations issued a joint statement criticising the caricatures as an uncivilised act while rejecting the violent response by some Muslims in other countries.

Another group of Muslim organisations issued a statement expressing the same message.

A dialogue was also held between Muslim organisations and the Danish ambassador in Singapore to enable both sides to listen to each other's perspectives.

Finally, a forum was organised not only for Muslims to express their feelings but also for the ulama (religious teachers) to guide the community.

How should Muslims around the world respond to such provocations? What are the guiding rules that can be discerned from Islamic teachings that can help Muslim civil societies respond to future provocations?

There are four guiding rules.

▶▶ The first is the rule of peaceful or non-violent response. Muslims believe that Islam means peace and tranquillity. The best way for Muslims to manifest their belief is through deed and action. Hence any act of aggression and violence would be not only inconsistent with their own belief but also a disservice to the religion.

▶▶ The second is to uphold the rule of law. Islam emphasises orderliness. This can be seen from how various rituals in Islam would be nullified should Muslims fail to observe them in their correct order.

Also, Islam prohibits the transgression of any rule (The Quran, 2:229). Although this verse specifically prohibits transgression of the syariah, its application in the context of a coun-

try's legal system is just as relevant if the laws do not contradict the teachings and principles of Islam. Admittedly, some legal systems do not share the philosophy of Islam.

This, however, cannot be a justification for rejecting all laws, for disobedience of laws will cause only lawlessness, which brings greater harm to and invites negative perceptions towards Muslims.

▶▶ The third rule is the rule of discrimination. This means that any response should be directed only to the protagonist, not others. The Quran says: "And whatever (wrong) any human being commits rests upon himself alone; no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden." (6:164) Targeting non-protagonists is unjust and contradicts the fundamental pillar of justice in Islam. Even in jihad, Muslims are commanded to discriminate between combatant and non-combatant, and only the former is a legitimate target.

▶▶ The fourth rule is that of proportionality. The Quran says: "The recompense for an injury is an injury, equal thereto (in degree): But if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah." (42:40) Islam allows Muslims to repel evil doing, but the religion does not allow them to do it in a way that will cause an equal or greater evil or injustice.

In the light of these rules of response, where the Danish cartoons are concerned, Muslims may question the appropriateness of punishing a dairy or biscuit company for an act committed by a privately owned newspaper company.

The economic boycott is a legitimate course of action. But in the context of the caricature incident, Muslims may ask: How does such an act promote Islam as a religion of "mercy for the universe" (21:107), if such an act results in the loss of income for thousands of unrelated individuals who have families and children to support and feed?

Simply being Danish does not make a company a legitimate target for retaliation.

And being non-violent in itself

does not make an action right. A non-violent response can still be regarded as illegitimate in Islam if it is not in accordance with the law of the land, or is discriminatory and disproportionate.

Must it be "an eye for an eye"? Islam allows a range of responses to provocation and insult depending on its gravity. However, "an eye for an eye" is never the one and only available option. Islam enjoins Muslims "to repel (evil) with what is better" (41:34, 23:96). It also calls to "forgive them, and overlook (their misdeeds)" (5:13).

Sometimes a response can be to "turn away from the ignorant" (7:199) — to ignore the act.

Lastly, of course, is to "retaliate with the like of that with which you were afflicted" (16:126).

The above four options are not in any order of priority. Each should be chosen based on the context and other considerations. But the point is that Muslims should not see they have only one response open to them.

They should have a strategic view by considering various options or a combination of these options which will provide greater benefit to them.

The recent debates relating to the Danish caricatures do show up the gap in understanding between the Muslim world and Europe. Closing this gap cannot be achieved simply by asking Europe to understand Muslims and Islam. Muslims also need to understand Europe and the changing international environment.

To ensure that the responses of Singaporean Muslims remain commendable in the future, efforts should be made by Muslim leaders here to have local Muslims internalise these responses so they become part of the culture of Muslim civil society groups.

Finally, although the rules and options are deduced from the teachings of Islam, they are equally useful for non-Muslim civil society groups to consider.

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