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Moral Atomic Bomb

By Bernard-Henri Lévy

One can find these cartoons mediocre. One can perceive in them, as I do, a certain similarity with the anti-Semitic and racist caricatures of the 1930s or '50s.

One can—and it would still be true—decide that depicting the prophet in this way, particularly with such dumb and obnoxious features, wasn't the brightest idea in the present context and amounted to tossing a lit match onto a powder keg.

Still, it is one thing to publish ludicrous cartoons in a newspaper that no one has heard of outside Denmark, but it is quite another to see these cartoons travel around the globe four months later, igniting a form of planetary intifada with enormous demonstrations, embassies and consulates set on fire, a priest shot dead in Turkey, four protesters killed in Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan, not to mention the turning of Westerners living on Islamic soil into targets, mortal enemies threatened with death—explosive victims offered to the white-hot, crazed and radicalized crowd.

So what made this demented scene, this planetary upheaval, possible? However you might look at the problem, it is hard not to see that insidious forces have brought these drawings to the attention of the Muslim masses. And it is hard not to link this provocation, the deliberate circulation of these cartoons, the quasi-home-delivery of a Danish paper that no one could have guessed had so many readers in the Muslim world, it is hard not to link this self-inflicted blasphemy, this calculated offense (calculated, mind you, by the organizers of the distribution of the cartoons), it is hard not to link this blasphemy to a new planetary configuration, itself determined by three recent and major events.

The diversionary tactic of a Syria which we never saw so concerned over religious matters, but which now turns out to be capable of any-

thing—including infiltrating agents into Lebanon and sponsoring demonstrations in Damascus, where it is well known that nothing of the sort can happen without the explicit assent of the government—in order to reclaim its role as a great regional agitator and make everyone forget the involvement of its secret services in the murder of Rafik Hariri.

In the midst of a planetary intifada, let us stand by the moderate Muslims.

The hardening of Iran's Islamic Republic, ready to make all kinds of theological concessions (including a grand historic alliance of Shiites and Sunnis, which experts have been telling us for decades would be against nature) with the goal of heading up in the Muslim and Arab world the grand anti-Christian, anti-Semitic and anti-democratic crusade.

And then this tragedy in the Palestinian territories of the victory of an ideology whose themes (the call, based on the denial of the Holocaust, of the Jews) had up to now been in power only in the openly dictatorial, sometimes even crypto-fascist, states. This ideology has triumphed for the first time in a long while through democratic decision and the sacred path of the ballot. Would we be witnessing, without this electoral sacrament of Hamas, Hebron crowds so sure of their right to hold any Westerner in the West Bank accountable for the offense? Would we be witnessing all these Fatah militants—were it not for the will to defy Hamas on the very terrain where it won—actually trying to outbid everyone else in the grotesque denunciation of the "French position," as manifested by the reprinting of the cartoons in an obscure Parisian newspaper?

These three events are linked as a triangle.

There is between these three poles a veritable triangle of death, which is in the process of locking into place thanks to the cartoons affair—and which, if it is successfully welded together, will produce not just symbolic heat, but, with an Iranian bomb, a fissile heat unlike anything we saw in the good old axis of evil.

And, faced with this triangulation in progress, faced with this formidable hate-and-death machine, faced with this "moral atomic bomb," we have no other solution than to counter with another triangle—a triangle of life and reason, which more than ever must unite the United States, Europe and Israel in a rejection of any clash of civilizations of the kind desired by the extremists of the Arab-Muslim world and by them alone.

The heart of this second triangle? First, the affirmation of principles. The affirmation of the press's right to the expression of idiocies of its choosing—rather than the acts of repentance that too many leaders have resorted to, and which merely encourages in the Arab street the false and counterproductive illusion that a democratic state may exert power over its press.

And second, in the same breath, the reaffirmation of our support for those enlightened moderate Muslims who know that the honor of Islam is far more insulted, and trampled under foot, when Iraqi terrorists bomb a mosque in Baghdad, when Pakistani jihadists decapitate Daniel Pearl in the name of God and film their crime, or when an Algerian fundamentalist emir disembowels, while reciting the Quran, an Algerian woman whose only crime was to have dared show her beautiful face. Moderate Muslims are alone these days, and in their solitude they more than ever need to be acknowledged and hailed.

Mr. Lévy is the author of "American Vertigo," published recently by Random House, and of "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" (Melville House, 2003). This piece was translated from the original French by Hélène Brenkman.