IGO Reaction to Controversial Cartoons

IRIS 2006-3:1/1

Tarlach McGonagle
Institute for Information Law (IViR), University of Amsterdam

Over the past month, news bulletins have been dominated by coverage of the dramatic fallout from the controversial publication - initially by a Danish newspaper - of 12 cartoons, including caricatures of Prophet Mohammad.

The circumstances surrounding the publication and successive re-publications of the cartoons, as well as the ensuing wave of protests, threats, violence and diplomatic manoeuvring, have been widely reported and will not be rehearsed again here. The focus will instead be on the international reaction to events, as exemplified by a selection of formal statements issued by a number of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs). The statements considered here were issued by (in chronological order): European Commission Vice-President Frattini (Eur. Cssn. VP); the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (OSCE RFOM); the Secretary General of the Council of Europe (CoE SG); the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE President); the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; on freedom of religion or belief, and for the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (UN SRs) (joint statement).

These responses were largely consistent with one another and coalesced around four essential points:

(i) recognition of the offence caused to the religious sensibilities of Muslims by the publication of the cartoons. This was formulated most vigorously by the three UN SRs, who declared that they “strongly deplore the depictions of the Prophet Muhammad and are distressed by the grave offence they have caused to members of the Muslim community”.

(ii) strong condemnation of the “violence, destruction and hate which marred some of the protests” (CoE SG); the “violence, intimidation, and the calls for boycotts” (Eur. Cssn. VP), and the “death threats against journalists and intimidation of the media as well as the loss of lives, threats and other forms of violence [...] often directed at people with no responsibility for, or control over, the publications” (UN SRs).

(iii) a plea for “tolerance and dialogue” (UN SRs) and for multilateral action “on the basis of dialogue and mutual respect” (CoE SG) in order to defuse rampant

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

tensions. The exchange of experiences and information, continuous dialogue and learning “to appreciate the diverse cultures and religions around us” were identified by the PACE President as key ways of fostering democratic pluralism and tolerance on a more long-term basis. Similarly, the UN SRs stressed the importance of “large editorial freedom” for the press “to promote a free flow of news and information”, but without “the use of stereotypes and labelling that insult deep-rooted religious feelings”, in order to facilitate “constructive and peaceful dialogue among different communities” and “to nurture mutual understanding”.

(iv) a reiteration that the exercise of the right to freedom of expression (as guaranteed by international instruments) carries with it special duties and responsibilities (UN SRs, CoE SG), and should be exercised in a way that is respectful of freedom of religion and belief (UN SRs, Eur. Cssn. VP). The right to freedom of expression - as interpreted *inter alia* by the European Court of Human Rights - includes protection for the expression of offensive views (CoE SG). Nevertheless, as the CoE SG insisted: “having the right to cause offence does not make it right to do so. It is the responsibility of editors and journalists to use good judgement in deciding what should or should not be published. The publication of caricatures may not have transgressed any legal boundaries, but it certainly violated ethical norms based on mutual respect and acceptance of other people's religious beliefs.” The Eur. Cssn. VP pointed out that the freedom to criticise - including by satire - is also covered by the right to freedom of expression.

For his part, the OSCE RFOM stated that “the right to question all beliefs is itself a cherished tradition in democratic countries”. He also stated that while the OSCE favours responsible journalism, it does not accept that governments should play a role in that regard, arguing that “State interference into the work of the media” would “contradict the core commitments of the 55 OSCE participating States”. Instead, he recommended that: “Publications that are offensive to certain sections of society should be dealt with through self-regulatory ethics bodies of the quality press, for example, press councils”.

European Commission: “Statement by Vice-President Franco Frattini on cartoons published by a Danish newspaper”, Press Release IP/06/114, 2 February 2006

http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/06/114&format=HTML&aged=1&language=EN&guiLanguage=en

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, “OSCE Media Freedom Representative defends papers' right to publish controversial cartoons, asks for mutual respect for traditions”, Press Release, 3 February 2006

http://www.osce.org/fom/47076

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

Council of Europe, "Council of Europe Secretary General on controversy regarding the caricatures of Prophet Mohammad", Press Release, 6 February 2006

https://wcd.coe.int/wcd/ViewDoc.jsp?id=963613&Site=COE

United Nations, "Human rights experts call for tolerance and dialogue in wake of controversy over representations of Prophet Muhammad", Press Release, 8 February 2006

http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=7646&LangID=E

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, "PACE President on controversy over caricatures: `Rights come with responsibilities - but violence is never ever justified'", Press Release, 9 February 2006

https://wcd.coe.int/wcd/ViewDoc.jsp?id=964637&BackColorInternet=F5CA75&BackColorIntranet=F5CA75&BackColorLogged=A9BACE&ShowBanner=no&Target=_self

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026