

## Shooting the messenger

Some observations about the reception of Geert Wilders' short film Fitna

By Anna Schönberger

*" If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear. "*  
George Orwell

Much has already been written and published about Geert Wilders' short movie "Fitna" and the Muslim as well as non-Muslim reactions to it. E.g. [Robert Spencer](#), [Bruce Bawer](#), [Paul Belien](#), [Caroline Glick](#) and [Sam Harris](#), among others, have offered such brilliant analysis about the case that there is not much to add. Here, however, are some remaining reflections about some implications of the reactions to Fitna by specifically non-Muslim authorities and the West, from an European and particularly Scandinavian perspective.

Looking at the conflict between Islam and freedom of speech evolving during the last couple of decades, from the case of Salman Rushdie through that of Theo van Gogh to the Danish cartoon controversy and on to Fitna, one can observe a certain development in the reactions of the non-Muslim elites in Europe and the world – a quite worrisome development for those of us who care to preserve that precious freedom.

In Rushdie's case the West unconditionally stood for the freedom of speech, condemned the mullahs who gave Rushdie the death fatwa and did everything to protect Rushdie's personal safety. At that time, it was rightly considered outrageous that some foreign tyrants could try to interfere with the speech rights not only of their own subjects, but also of Western citizens and residents. But that attitude, alas, did not last very long.

After the murder of Theo van Gogh and during the Danish cartoon crisis, freedom of speech was still generally defended, and the murder as well as murderous threats were condemned – but now it was done with a certain reservation, in a "yes, but"-mode: yes, we do have the freedom of speech, but you should not use it to offend someone's faith; yes we do condemn the murder (or threats), but he (they) did everything to provoke the murderers. In Scandinavia and especially in the left leaning academic environments, there was a strongly articulated assumption that van Gogh "got what he begged for". But at the same time, people still remembered to add that murder, in any case, is wrong.

In contrast, the Fitna controversy proved that we now have reached a stage in which the defense of free speech and the condemnation of death threats and other threats of violence is no longer forthcoming when offended Muslim feelings are at stake, not even with a "but" added to it. The overwhelming majority of politicians, media and other representatives of the elites in the West and the world just condemned Wilders and his film, with no reference whatsoever to death threats, threats of violence or the hate speech by the Muslim preachers depicted in the film. Wilders alone was the villain now, and Muslims the victims of unjustified and intentionally evil hate speech. Ironically, there was an awareness of the threats and potential of violence involved, but somehow, the makers of those threats have been, by now, released from all responsibility for their words and deeds. The only thing about them that still matters is their offended feelings.

What can explain this shift of attitude in the Western world from an unconditional protection of our freedom of speech two decades ago, toward this total surrender? Is it just

about giving in to threats and terror, a policy of appeasement based on the hope that the violence will stop if we just follow the bully's orders? Or have our attitudes genuinely changed without us even noticing it in the process? How much does the world actually care for the freedom of speech any more? Could it be useful for the elites that we get used to its being limited – in accordance with the mantra “freedom is not a freedom to offend”?

Those who stand for our right to criticize religions including Islam have been talking about a “tolerance induction treatment”, the need to criticize and even ridicule Islam more and more so that Muslims are forced to get used to the idea that their religion, along with all other doctrines and belief systems, can indeed be criticized in the free world. Now, however, it looks like the tolerance induction treatment has been more effective on Westerners themselves: we are no longer allergic to freedom of speech being suffocated by violence and threats of violence. We have got used to the threats, and appallingly, they have become considered as normal, they are even not noticed any more. We are no longer shocked by the threats that follow certain actions with a nearly mechanical certainty, we are now shocked just when someone still dares to challenge those who have made it perfectly clear that they really are prepared to kill anyone who offends their religion.

Some features that were particularly characteristic of the Fitna debate were the unconditional condemnation of the film *in advance*; the ubiquitous refusal to pay any attention to the actual contents of the film; the amazing similarity of the reactions to Fitna by jihadists and hard line islamists on the one hand, and mainstream Western media and politicians on the other; and finally, one can observe a shift of moral responsibility: defying the most basic fundamentals of Western morality, the responsibility for any actual violence occurring in connection with Muslims taking offence is shifted from the Muslims themselves to the one who is perceived to have offended them at any given moment.

### **Judging in advance**

Unlike Salman Rushdie's book “The Satanic Verses”, van Gogh's and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's film *Submission* or even the Danish cartoons, *Fitna* was widely condemned before anyone had actually seen it. The TV-channels in Holland refused to show it, politicians took distance from it and some refused to see it (including the prime minister of Denmark Anders Fogh Rasmussen who bravely defended the freedom of speech in connection with the Danish cartoon crisis); many people wanted it banned before it even was finished. That was probably due partly to the fact that Wilders is known as an Islam-critical and anti-immigration politician and that he himself advertised the film as strongly critical of the Koran; partly obviously to the violence that followed the earlier cases when Islam was “offended”. Fear was widely masked as tolerance: everyone seemed to shout: “look, *I* condemn the movie, *I* do respect Islam (thus, please don't hurt *me!*).

As a characteristic example of the European elite's preliminary condemnation of *Fitna*, the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Maud de-Boer Buquicchio, announced at a conference in London, arranged by the British Council, on March 12<sup>th</sup> 2008, that Wilders' film must be absolutely and unconditionally condemned. She declared at the conference that that was the position of the Council of Europe, the unelected government of the EU; as well as the British Council, the government-sponsored UK organization whose role, otherwise, has been to advocate British values in the world.

The Council of Europe quotes de-Boer Buquicchio's words as follows:

Strasbourg, 12.03.2008 – Speaking at the British Council's “Living Together” summit in

London this afternoon, the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Maud de-Boer Buquicchio, warned against the expected release of a controversial film on Islam by Dutch politician Geerd Wilders.

“The European Court of Human Rights has, in the past, endorsed restrictions to the freedom of expression in order to protect religious beliefs against gratuitous insult. The religion in question was a Christian faith. I am not taking a position on whether the film by Mr Wilders should be banned, but I believe that people should be entitled to the same respect of their religious beliefs, regardless of whether they are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or belong to any other faith,” she said.

“Furthermore, freedom of expression should not be considered a licence to offend. Apart from the debate about whether a film gratuitously offending and humiliating our citizens of Muslim religion should be banned or not, we can certainly discuss political and moral personal responsibility for such an act. When it involves someone holding a public office, this responsibility is of course even bigger,” added the Deputy Secretary General.<sup>i</sup>

These statements contain a couple of points that should alert anyone who actually cares for freedom of speech as such. First, although she stops short for demanding an outright ban, de-Boer Buquicchio’s refers approvingly to interventions against the freedom of speech in the name of religion (quoting the Christian religion while ignoring the fact that in general, Christianity can be, and has been, criticized freely for decades), implying that it is completely acceptable to do so in order to protect Islam. Second, she is willing to restrict freedom of speech by offence as a criterion – that, of course, would spell the end of freedom of speech as we know it, as in principle, anyone can declare anything to be offensive to him or her. As a position of the CoE, coming from its high-standing official, that is scary enough. But there was more to the speech, and the event itself, in question.

The Living Together Summit was a conference on minority policies for people all over Europe and beyond, from Israel to Norway. Very few of the attendees, a total of up to 200 people, were Muslims; many came from Eastern European countries with no significant Muslim minorities of their own. However, de-Boer Bucucchio chose the condemnation of *Fitna*, the film she had not even seen, as a central issue of her opening address.

In addition to the words quoted above, she emphasized, addressing the audience, that “we” must say an unconditional “no” to hatemongers like Wilders; that we all – meaning also the audience whose opinion on the issue was not consulted – must *use our freedom of speech to say an unconditional no* to such spreading of hatred. Thus, it was not enough for de-Boer Bucucchio to condemn a film she had never seen in a public forum and in the name of European leadership, she also asked the audience to join her in her condemnation of the film that none of them had seen – and even more grotesquely, to *use their freedom of speech* to condemn the freedom of such speech that might possibly offend Muslims.

De-Boer Bucucchio did not say a word about the death threats to Wilders, also issued in advance to revealing the film, as those obviously did not disturb the harmonious multicultural “living together” the way that Wilders’ assumed “hate speech” did. She said that as a Dutchwoman, she was saddened and ashamed of the existence of hatemongers like Wilders in Holland – but she was apparently not disturbed, as a Dutchwoman, by the murder of Theo van Gogh, by the death threats and a subsequent chasing out of Holland of the Dutch human rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, by the beating by Islamic bigots of young Dutch politician Ehsan Jami for speaking up for freedom of conscience and for gay rights, or by the terrorist plots to blow up the Schiphol airport or the Parliament building.

Apparently, the responsibility for harmonious “living together” in Holland – and by extension, in Europe and perhaps the world, is put solely on the shoulders of non-Muslims, who have an obligation to not offend the easily offended Muslims. At the London conference, this point was underlined by finishing the opening session with a video propagating Islam as the religion of peace, harmony and human rights.

### **World leaders and jihadists – hand in hand**

Once the much feared and strongly pre-judged movie was out, it became obvious that most of the fears were unsubstantiated: there was no direct offence toward Islam. No defamation of the Koran (the call to rip out the pages with violence was obviously symbolic rather than literal); no incitement of hatred against Muslims, no hate speech except for that by the Islamic preachers shown in the movie. That, however, did not make any of those who condemned *Fitna* in advance, withdraw their critique. Rather, they claimed they had been right all along, and repeated in choir, joined now by others who had waited with their reactions until the movie was out, that it was an evil and hatemongering movie that should have been banned. Now, as there was no degradation of the Koran in the movie, the main reason to condemn it was that it “linked Islam to violence”. By most of the critics, no attention at all was paid to the fact that it was the jihadists and radical imams in the movie who made the connection. No attention was paid to the actual contents of the movie at all. It was enough that the movie was unapologetically critical of Islam and that it *showed* how the connection of doctrine with violence was emphasized by the extremist Muslims themselves.

Who were those who most loudly condemned the linking of Islam with violence in *Fitna*?

Al Qaeda predictably, called Wilders “the enemy of Allah” and demanded that the blasphemer be killed. Somewhat more mildly, the Council of American-Islamic Relations, CAIR, announced that the movie was “a direct attempt to incite violence from Muslims and help fan the flames of Islamophobia. Any reasonable person can see this is meant to spit in the face of Muslims and insult our religion.”<sup>ii</sup> The British Muslim hardliner Anjem Choudary told the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* that the movie expressed the “apartheid of the West” and “discrimination against Muslims”.<sup>iii</sup> *Jyllands-Posten* also reported that the extremist Islamic movement Hizb-ut-Tahrir condemned the film as “an attack against Islam” and arranged a meeting in Copenhagen in response, titled “the Koran challenges the decadent Western Culture”, where the need to “defend the Koran’s position in Holland” (and the West in general) was high on the agenda.<sup>iv</sup>

These, and many more, were the statements and reactions coming from more and less violent radical Islamic groups and movements. At the same time, also predictably, the mainstream leadership of OIC condemned the movie as an attack against Islam and “offensive”. The president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who was shown in *Fitna* declaring a worldwide Islamic revolution, called the film “racist” and “anti-Islamic”.

But what is amazing is how close to the reactions quoted above were the reactions by Western authorities and media. In a similar tune with the above mentioned Council of Europe official, the leading politicians of Holland and even Denmark condemned *Fitna* as an intentional offense to Islam and Muslims. The Dutch prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende, speaking in the name of the Dutch government, accused Wilders of the intention to offend, and took distance from the link between Islam and violence made in *Fitna*. The Danish prime minister Rasmussen refused to see the film, denouncing it as just an unnecessary provocation. The president of Slovenia declared in the name of the EU that

Fitna “served no other purpose than to inflame hatred”. Again, the main accusation was that the film linked Islam with violence. Likewise, the UN Secretary-General, and UNESCO, and many other European politicians joined the choir of unconditional condemnation of Fitna, with not a word uttered about the death threats from anyone. So did the Foreign Ministry of Russia. And Australia. And so on.

Similarly many European major newspapers condemned Fitna as a provocation or even an “incitement to hatred”. For example, the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat called the film an “incitement against a people” (a statement that it later removed from its website).

What was notable of all these reactions, apart from their striking similarity, was the total lack of attention paid to neither the death threats issued against Wilders himself and the staff of the LiveLeak site that hosted the film, nor the hate speech shown in the film. There were no “yes, buts” any longer. No more “we support the freedom of speech and condemn the death threats, but one should not hurt the others’ feelings” – the line familiar from the cartoon controversy and the van Gogh case. Now, the only “hatred” noticed and condemned was the hatred against Muslims allegedly expressed by Wilders himself.

The other striking feature of the judgments by the Western leaders and media was their similarity to the statements coming from the Islamic world and even the most extreme Islamic organizations. At the time of the Rushdie affair, who could have guessed that in less than two decades, Western leaders would find a perfect mutual understanding with the imams and mullahs, and even with terrorist organizations, about the undesirability of making public statements that can be experienced as offensive by Islam or Muslims?

Imagine: if anyone would make a movie citing some European neo-Nazis holding world-conquering and violence-inciting speeches, with reference to Mein Kampf or some other dogmatic book, with crowds of thousands cheering (that is, if such a nightmare indeed would be imaginable or possible again), would commentators concentrate on the offensive and generalizing tone of the movie instead of paying any attention to its contents? Would anyone rush to insist that it is more important to emphasize that most white Europeans are non-racist, law-abiding people who have nothing to do with Nazism – and would that indeed be counted as a relevant reason to ignore the speeches of those pictured in the film? Or focus on judging the maker of the movie while ignoring death threats made against him, if they were? Hardly. This is the ultimate test of the prevailing double-think today.

As the main reason for attacks against Fitna was the – supposedly unjustified – link that the film made between Islam and violence, it is interesting to add a detail not directly connected to the discussion, but definitely worth a thought in its context: when, in the midst of the Fitna controversy, the trial of the Islamic terrorists who had allegedly tried to blow up seven airplanes above the Atlantic was started in the UK and reported by British newspapers, no one paid any attention to “linking Islam with violence” by the accused terrorists. The Daily Mail and the BBC published some of the statements made on their intended “martyrdom videos”<sup>v</sup>.

There, Abdulla Ahmed Ali says: “You show more care and concern for animals than you do for the Muslim Umah. Expect floods of martyr operations against you and we will take our revenge and anger, ripping amongst your people and scattering your people’s body parts responsible for these wars and oppression decorating the streets”. His brother in arms, Umar Islam, announced: “To let you know the reasons for this action which Inshaallah I am going to undertake. This is an obligation on me as a Muslim to wage Jihad against the Kuffar. We are doing this in order to gain the pleasure of our Lord and Allah loves us to die and kill in his path. Anyone who tries to deny this, then read the Koran and

you will not be able to deny this because this is the words in the Koran and the words of our the messenger of Allah.”

Likewise, Ibrahim Savant rants: “All Muslims feel the need to dust their feet in the training camps of jihad where men are made. You will class my case as suicide. I say never think those who have been killed in the cause of Allah as dead, rather they are alive with their Lord and receiving provision. All Muslims take heed, remove yourself from the grasp of the Kuffar”... And Waheed Zaman: “The only solution to this current situation of the Muslims is by fighting Jihad for the sake of Allah until the enemy is fully subdued and expelled from our lands”. And Tanvir Hussain: “People are going to die. It’s worth the price. ... Thank God Allah has accepted my duas (prayers) yeah, and provided a means to do this. I only wish I could come back and do this again and again until people come to their senses and realize: Don’t mess with the Muslims.”

Although this material was revealed in early April 2008, shortly after Fitna was released, no public condemnation of the “linking Islam with violence” as quoted above was heard – by Muslims or non-Muslims. There were no protests whatsoever by Muslims anywhere in the world. Indeed, the jihadist statements went largely unnoticed. Many European newspapers outside Britain did not mention the beginning of the trial at all. And no one seemed to be upset about the way that Islam was connected to terrorism on those tapes. Or perhaps they had got the message: Don’t mess with the Muslims.

### **The shift of moral responsibility**

The last significant characteristic of the Fitna debate – and other similar debates – is the gradual shift of responsibility for violence from those who issue fatwas inciting violence or who actually perform the violence, to those who allegedly offend those who are by now known, and expected, to react violently. Wilders was made responsible not only for his own safety, but also for that of Dutch (and by association, other Western) soldiers abroad, as well as embassy workers in Muslim-majority countries and even for the potential income loss by Dutch enterprises affected by an eventual Muslim boycott of their products. This shift of responsibility could be noticed already earlier, in connection with the Mohammed cartoons. Many interviewers asked Kurt Westergaard, the artist behind the most famous Mohammed cartoon, whether he felt responsible for the deaths that occurred in connection with the cartoon riots – obviously insisting that he should.

The Enlightenment moral teaching, the cornerstone of all democratic politics, is based on the conception of an autonomous individual. This individualist morality considers a person responsible for his or her own, and no one else’s words and actions. Without this concept of individual moral autonomy no freedom, no equality of all persons, no human rights or political liberties are conceivable. The whole Western justice system, based on individual human rights and each person’s equal treatment before the law, is unthinkable without it.

That underlines the significance of our elites’ sudden willingness to shift the responsibility from those who actually use threats and violence to someone who is obscurely selected as a “cause”: a perceived offender, who can also be a target of the violence, a victim. This not only indicates a willingness to give in to the bullies as has been already repeatedly argued, but also a deep insecurity about the validity of the very basic moral-political foundations of our societies, and an eventual willingness to compromise not only some of our basic legal principles, like the freedom of speech, but also some of our basic moral principles, like the principle of individual autonomy and moral responsibility.

During the Fitna controversy, the threats to other Dutchmen, embassies and soldiers were treated as a force majeure, something that should be taken for granted and at the same time not judged independently. Instead, Wilders was blamed in advance for anything that might happen to Dutchmen if he went on with his plan to offend or provoke Muslims – for anything that the angry Muslims might do. Many commentators have somehow accepted the idea that by now, knowing what we now know, whoever dares to criticize Islam in a manner judged offensive by Muslims, is responsible for the possible riots and mayhem that might follow, including possible random killings somewhere far away.

This, of course, means that not even just “offense”, but violence and a readiness to use it, would be the ultimate factor determining the limits of the freedom of speech. Not “incitement to violence” as we used to know it, but violence itself, or a potential of violence, violence by someone who does not like what someone else says. This approach gives the power to define the limits of speech to those who are ready to use violence in defense of the doctrines or beliefs they hold sacred. This can indeed be called surrender.

Given the ongoing attempts by the Islamic states and their allies at the UN to criminalize worldwide the “defamation of religion” (in practice, defamation of Islam) in blatant contradiction to § 18 and 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (the right to freedom of speech and conscience), the lazy, immoral and hypocritical unwillingness of the Western leaders and even the Western “free” media to protect Wilders’ freedom to criticize Islam even in the usual “yes, but”-mode, and to condemn the death threats issued against him and others like him, is all the more alarming. As the new Newspeak directives eliminate word after word from our daily lexicon of political commentary (with words such as “terrorist”, “jihad”, “islam”, “Muslim” etc becoming banned at least in certain contexts), political public debate increasingly resembles an Orwellian parody<sup>vi</sup>. We have gone a long way since 1989, when the fatwa to Rushdie was issued and the Berlin wall fell – unfortunately, in the wrong direction. It is a high time to turn around.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.coe.int/t/dc/press/noteredac2008/20080312\\_sga\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dc/press/noteredac2008/20080312_sga_en.asp)

<sup>ii</sup> As reported by Robert Spencer in the Human Events 03/31/2008:

<http://www.humanevents.com/article.php?id=25777>

<sup>iii</sup> Jyllands-Posten 03/28/08. <http://jp.dk/udland/europa/article1305601.ece>

<sup>iv</sup> Jyllands-Posten 03/28/08. <http://jp.dk/indland/article1305204.ece>

<sup>v</sup> The Daily Mail 04/05/08.

[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in\\_article\\_id=556996&in\\_page\\_id=1770](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=556996&in_page_id=1770) . The statements are also published at length by the BBC:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/7330367.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7330367.stm). See also

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/7328892.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7328892.stm) .

<sup>vi</sup> Like this: <http://iowahawk.typepad.com/iowahawk/2007/07/uk-warning-look.html>