



The Responsibilities of the Cartoonist

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The Responsibilities of the Cartoonist

Khalid Albaih is a political cartoonist “from the two countries of Sudan,” in his words, who is now based in Qatar. His drawings appear at his Facebook page, entitled Khartoon! in a play on the name of the Sudanese capital. Katy Kalemkerian and Khalid Medani spoke with him in Montreal on November 9, 2014, and conducted a follow-up interview by Skype after the January 2015 attack on the offices of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, notorious for its regular caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in degrading or humiliating poses. A longer version of this interview appears at merip.org.

You’ve been represented as an “Arab spring” cartoonist, though you were doing political art before the uprisings began. What are the advantages and disadvantages of that branding for your art?

In terms of art and politics, there are always fashions that come along. The “Arab spring” was something the whole world could relate to, because it was in the news so much, and a lot of people just wanted to jump on the bandwagon. I was part of that marketing, which was good for me and my art and good for the cause, as well.

I’m trying to bridge the gap between East and West. Even if I feel I’m taken advantage of sometimes, or if I’m taking advantage of the system—in either case it’s good because people actually get to see something from the region by an artist who was affected by what happened. People need a story.

It’s good to get attention for “Arab spring” work, because later there will be attention to my other work, about Sudan. If somebody likes my page or follows me in social media, they’ll see the things on my page about “Arab spring” countries, but at the same time they’ll learn something about Sudan. I’m trying to get as much as possible from the media bonanza, and at least to get the young generation who are following my work to understand things from our point of view, not the point of view that gets channeled through their media outlets.

What themes are particularly important in your work?

I try to talk about the things that are new and alien to Sudanese society, things we didn’t grow up with but are happening

now because of what happened since 1989 when Bashir came to power. A lot of things changed in the social grid, such as women’s dress—women used to wear the thobe (a full-body wrap) and now they wear *hijab*. It’s hard for me to talk about local subjects in Sudan because I’m outside the country. But I try to talk about things that I know about generally, things like women’s dress, racism between the tribes, the whole Afro-Arab situation. They’re huge issues but I try to tackle them with a little bit of humor. That’s why in my Sudan cartoons I always use two Sudanese characters, to show something we’re talking about, like me talking to a friend of mine.

For example: “Are we Arab or are we African?” This question has been asked a billion times. In my original cartoon, one of the characters says, “We’re both Arab and African,” which is like saying, “I don’t want to hear about this any longer.” And that’s what I want—to move on with our lives. A Sudanese person will get it, but an Arab might think, “Yeah, they don’t know if they’re Arab or African.” Others might think, “They’re African. Why is he asking this question?” There’s a lot of conversation that follows that cartoon. [*In a second version of the drawing, Albaih rendered the response as gibberish with a note saying “answer removed out of sensitivity to readers’ feelings,” his way of saying that few have “moved on” from the question. –Eds.*]

In terms of international issues, what I always want to talk about is Palestine. This issue is not the root of our problems, but certainly it’s one of the biggest problems that we have. If we resolve the Palestine-Israel situation, a lot of other things will get resolved because of this feeling of injustice that we have. The anger doubles every time you watch the

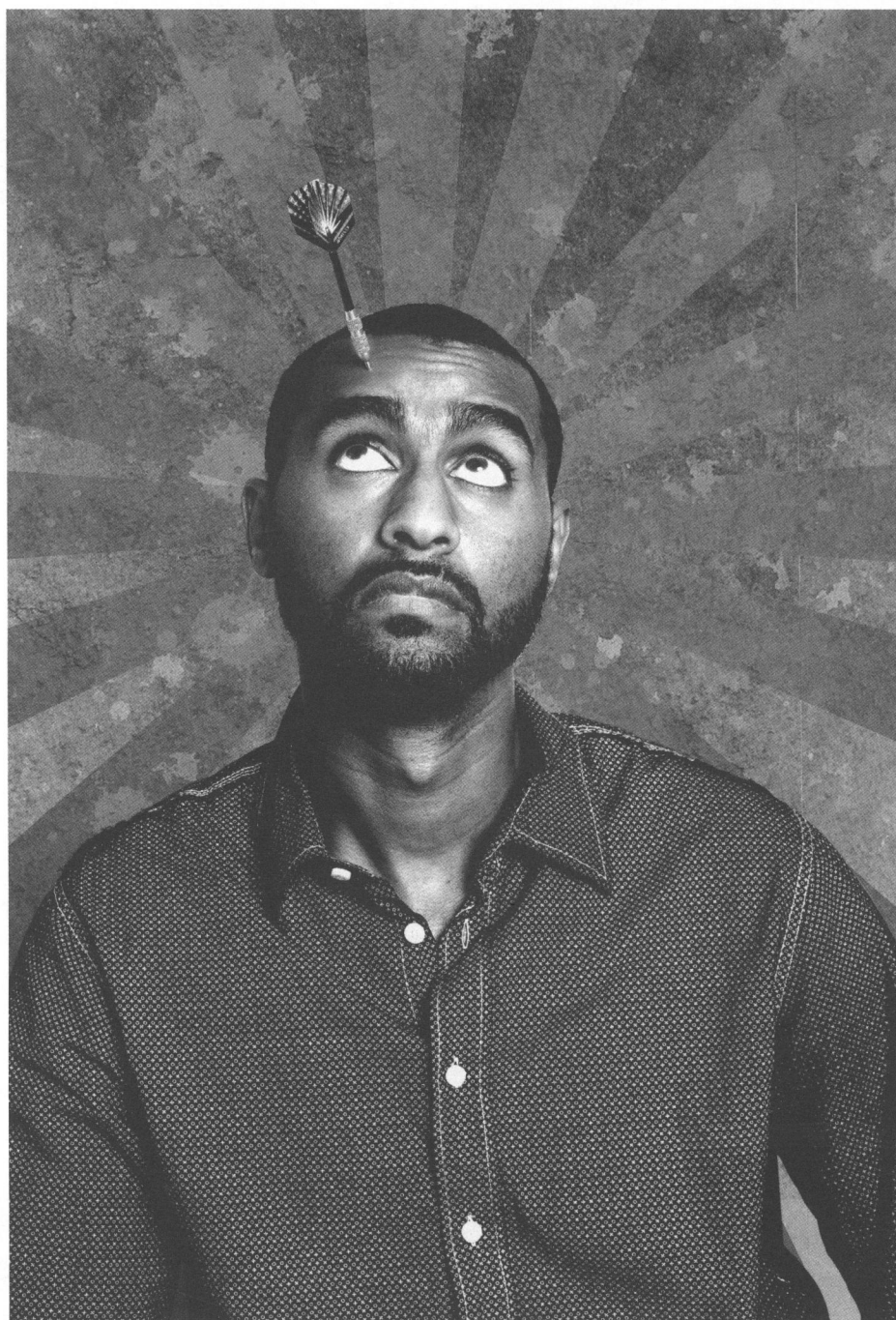
news. "The Israeli government did this to Palestinians, a 10-year old was arrested..." These things fuel something inside you. And it really hurts me that a lot of people take it for granted, like it's a closed case: Israel will keep doing this, and they'll never be questioned. As if it's a boring subject, so let's move on.

Some of your cartoons are not about the Arab world at all. Can you tell us about the international dialogue that your cartoons bring about?

I don't like it when people say I'm based in Qatar because people automatically attach me to that country. Not that there's anything wrong with Qatar, but I think I belong online. My work is online. And online, it's a village. You read about everything.

So I work on everything that's trending, and I try to do cartoons on things that don't relate to the Arab world in any way, because I will get views from other countries, and maybe I'll get them to change their minds about a certain situation, whether it's Palestine and Israel or Sudan. When I say, "We are one. We are like you. I share your thoughts," maybe they will do the same. For example, I did a cartoon about Chavez when he died, and a lot of Venezuelans were talking to me about it online. It's good to have that diversity. I'm trying to connect everyone because everyone needs to know, not necessarily in detail what the problems are, but to know that there's a problem here, and it should be solved. We're all one, trying to fight the man, basically, the corrupt politicians.

This is a funny story: I went with my teenage sister-in-law, Aya, to pick up an American girl at the Doha airport. They'd never met before. The girl was a guest on an exchange program who was staying in Qatar for a week. In the car, she and Aya started talking about television shows, the



Khalid Albaih.

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trending subjects on Twitter, who they follow on Instagram, as if they'd known each other for years. This is globalization. Before, Aya and this girl would not have had anything at all in common. Now with the Internet, they have everything in common. They watch the same shows; they're on the same social media. That's why I use a lot of pop culture. We take it for granted because it seems normal; everyone is on the Internet. But it's beautiful that there's no wall any longer.

Many now say that the uprisings failed, that the role of social media was overblown, and that in the aftermath we've gone back to even



Khalid Albaih

R: "Are we Arabs or Africans?" L: "\$#@*&" ** Answer removed out of sensitivity to readers' feelings.

تم حذف الجواب حفاظاً على رقة مشاعر القراء ...

stronger authoritarianism in some Arab countries, and all of this violence in others. What do you say to them?

Well, I don't think it's an aftermath, because I think we're still going. It's too early to pass judgment. The youth movements are still there; the political parties newly formed by young Egyptians are still working. I don't think we can neglect 200 years of authoritarianism. What we're going through right now is another step of the revolution. Yes, a lot of people are in jail now for trying, but they'll continue.

In this day and age, citizen journalism has become one of the most important things for any current event, because you get it from the person on the ground. Of course a lot of people started using it for certain political agendas, but there are honest ones out there. The Internet is good, but it's also full of junk. You have to do research to find out what you should read and what you shouldn't.

If you type in, "Aliens exist," you'll get 100 million articles saying aliens exist, and if you substitute, "Aliens don't exist," you'll get 100 million more saying they don't! So it's about what you want, really. If you're looking for people saying it's the start of the revolution, you can follow that path. If you want to say, "No, it's all a game, it's all a

conspiracy. We're going to go back to how we were, and there is no hope," you can do that as well. But my personal preference is to follow the optimistic path.

Do you feel a personal responsibility to keep the momentum going?

Yes, and it's a lot of pressure. People take what I say personally. Sometimes when I do a cartoon, people say, "No, I don't agree. This is wrong. You shouldn't say this." OK, we can discuss it. I'm not saying I'm right and you're wrong because I know better. I definitely don't know better. I'm not a professional. I'm a person who draws cartoons and happens to have a following. So I'm open to discussion. But that feeling of social responsibility is what wakes me up in the morning.

What does your art say about race and racism? And is it fair to say that you don't focus on issues of gender in Sudan as much as you could?

I work a lot on racism because it's a real problem. It's why we are two countries right now, divided.

I have a cartoon with two Sudanese guys who look exactly alike. Each one is calling the other 'ab (slave). I have another cartoon where one character is labeled "Arab tribes in Darfur"

and the other “non-Arab tribes in Darfur.” They look exactly the same.

Gender is something about Sudan that I was proud of. Women were educated, part of the conversation in the family, not neglected or weak. Of course, I don’t know what it was like in the job market, but in society, I think women were very empowered. Many activists were women, strong women who had been to jail.

I did a cartoon called “‘Azza of Yesterday, ‘Azza of Today” (*‘Azza zaman wa ‘Azza hassi*). People used to call Sudan ‘Azza, likening the country to a proud woman. And that’s what I always saw: Women were proud of who they were, very ambitious, with no limitations, at least in the capital where I grew up. So that’s *‘Azza zaman*, and *‘Azza hassi* is a beaten-down woman with a shaved head sitting behind bars, because what they do to women activists these days—lock them up, shave their heads, rape them and throw them in the street. Sudan has gender equality when it comes to violence, I guess!

I love the pictures of Sudanese women walking at the front of the protests against ‘Abboud in the 1960s or Numayri in the 1980s, wearing the white thobe and carrying signs. Those are images that make you think, “Wow, I wish these days would come back.” Streets were clean, women were wearing the thobe and protesting, and nobody touched them. ‘Abboud gave up power after the killing of two students.

Now many more people die in a week and nobody cares. Some of them are women. One was an engineer and she got shot. So that situation is terrible, but I think our biggest problem is racism.

You haven’t given up on linking northern and southern Sudan even after the 2011 referendum created the new state of South Sudan. Why is that?

I was very proud as well that Sudan was known as the biggest country in Africa. I have two uncles who are married to southerners, which doesn’t happen a lot. It’s very strange in Sudan to have southerners living with northerners normally. But that was my family. They were my cousins. We grew up with them, and there was no racism. And a lot of my family as well used to be merchants in the south, and they speak Dinka.

I see the frustration, I see the racism and I put myself in their place, thinking, “Why would I want to be a part of this nation? I want to be a first-class citizen in my own country, rather than fight for my rights as a second-class citizen in someone else’s country.” So I understand why the southerners left.

But for me, it’s a dream to have some sort of unity—federal or something—because we’re one country in the end. Not just because of the geographical borders, but also because of the ties that we have. It was a beautiful culture for both of us. Reuniting would help us get rid of the racism problem, and

help all of us economically. That’s why I work a lot on South Sudan as well, because I don’t see it as a separate country. I still see it as my country. When I write something, I say I am “from the two countries of Sudan.” I am from the two countries of Sudan, and I want it to become that way again.

Could you say more about how your upbringing influenced your work?

As I said, I have South Sudanese cousins, and that’s very rare. In the same family, I also have Islamists and communists. We all lived together. My Islamist uncle was ‘Abd al-Rahman Suwar al-Dhahab. He was president for one year in 1986. He is considered the most decent Arab president, because he actually gave up power willingly to a democratically elected government. My other uncle is Babiker al-Nour, who was leader of the Sudanese Communist Party and led their coup in 1972.

My dad always said, “Family is family. We all have their own views, when it comes to politics, and so be it.” That was amazing to me, because that is how it should be. Here are southerners and northerners, communists and Islamists, in the same family. Nobody talks about it, but I do because I want to make a point: They all lived together and they were happy. What happened? It could be a normal thing, but it’s not, so what happened? Why aren’t we like that now?

These are the things that influenced me. Politics was not a cause of violence. Politics did not cause these people not to be a family anymore. Race did not cause these people not to be a family anymore. A big part of what I do is searching for that home that had this harmony. I want that home back.

What do you think happened to that model of ideological and sectarian, even ethnic and racial, coexistence?

First of all, it’s a problem of neglecting the other. As soon as you say, “I am the only person in the right here,” things will fall apart. And especially when you say, “I know more than you because I’m closer to God,” that’s really a problem. It’s the selfishness of this new regime. It’s selfish to say, “We are right, and everyone else is wrong.”

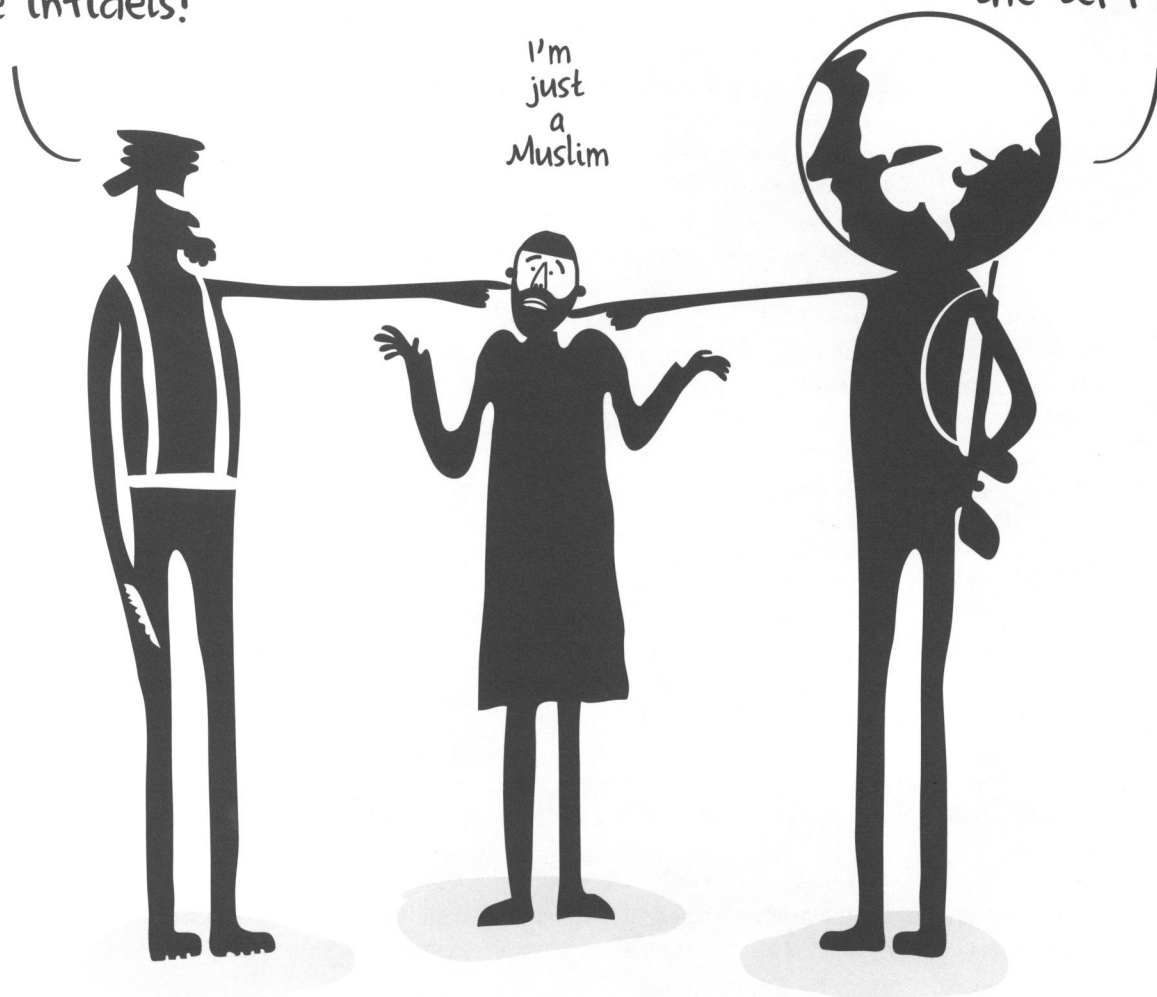
It dismantled my dream and many others’ dreams. I could be optimistic because I saw and heard all those things as a child, but you know, even if all these things were in my head, I want them to be true, and I think they can be.

That’s why these people have been in power for 25 years, by doing everything that harmony is not, fighting harmony as much as they can. Not on purpose, of course—they think they are doing the right thing, but they’re neglecting everybody else. They think they are doing what God asks of them. It’s just like communism in Russia. They thought were giving power to the people, but in the end they ended up killing the people. They had concentration camps filled with people who had opinions different from theirs. And this is what’s happening now in the Arab world. If you’re

you're with
the infidels!

you're with
the terrorists!

I'm
just
a
Muslim



Khalid Albaih

a Muslim Brother, they don't want to hear you. Two years ago, if you were with the other regime, they didn't want to hear you. "I'm right. You're wrong. Get out of here, or I'll be violent"—that's what creates the problem. That's what creates ISIS, fundamentalism, racism, all of these things.

Based on your interactions with youth movements, do they want democracy, in the grand sense, or are they driven by local grievances?

I think they just wanted change. Some of them didn't even know what they wanted after that. They would've settled for the easiest thing, for these people to leave. Some of these kids were 21 years old, so they were born (and some died)

under the same president. Most of them were not involved in a political party or any sort of traditional opposition formation.

In Syria they were singing! I remember in the first videos that came out of Syria, they were singing that they wanted change. Look now. Nobody can sing, because these presidents are selfish and neglect other people. So I don't blame the protesters totally. I blame the Western world for supporting the uprisings at times when it was convenient and not supporting them when it was not in their interest. It's everybody's fault, really.

Everybody's wondering why we have angry people slaughtering each other. It's because of the injustice that's

happening! When someone has grown up with nothing, all he asks for is change, and then his brother gets shot in front of him, you can't expect that person not to seek revenge. If you're in Afghanistan and drones hit a wedding, killing 33 people, and there's not a word about it on the news, of course you're going to get pissed off and fight America, whether you're a secularist or an Islamist. You only know that America took down the Taliban, and now they are killing people with no regret. It's a scream for help, from my point of view. Just like I'm screaming for help with my cartoons, these people are screaming for help with their guns.

You don't need to be into politics, or know anything about gender equality, or know anything about racism, to know that the status quo is killing you. You feel that you don't have a future. Unemployment in Sudan is unbelievable—same in Egypt and Syria.

You probably have as big a Western audience as you have in the Arab world. What is the difference between those audiences? Is there a problem with the way that some of them see your art?

I reach out to Western audiences because I think Western audiences control our fate. They have democracy, and we're asking them to help us by electing the right president, and by taking part in protests and stands against injustice in the Arab world.

But a lot of Westerners see my work as an attack, especially if I do something about Israel, as with the last Israeli attack on Gaza. I was doing a cartoon a day about that, and there were really interesting discussions in the comments section. Even Israelis who have a really different point of view, it's great to understand where they come from. Because we don't know where they come from. I personally had no idea where they come from. They believe that this is their land, but there's a lot of social structure around that belief. There were generations who lived there since 1948 and before. Now they see it as their country and they're willing to fight for it.

Sometimes the Western audience is a bit racist, or think that we blame them for everything, or want the West to help us all the time, and when the West does, like in Iraq, we blame them for what happens. I get that comment a lot. I don't have to reply many times—I'm not that good at writing—because other readers will post long paragraphs explaining the history. Imagine a conservative person, or a person who doesn't know the history of the region, and what he learns. It's amazing.

How do you reach out to an Arab audience as well as a Western one?

I try my best to simplify what I'm talking about to the fullest. I try to come up with one striking image that says something. Because I work on social media and people are mostly on their mobile phones, I really try to make it

striking. I don't use much language because I don't want people to think, "Well, this is something related to Arabs so I'm not going to understand." I try as much as I can to use images, and a lot of pop culture. Sometimes I try to be shocking, to shake people out of their comfort zone, with the intention that they will want to follow up to know more. "Why is he doing that? What does that mean?"

Political cartoons are in the limelight with the *Charlie Hebdo* incident. What are your views on the bounds, if any, on freedom of speech?

Freedom of speech is a must—and it's personal for me as a Muslim cartoonist who can only work online in order to say what I want to say. At the same time, we should mind what we say.

We have a responsibility as cartoonists to say whatever we want to say but at the same time to respect others. It's all about respect, rather than stating an opinion, at a time like this, when the world is divided and everybody is angry. Do I, as a political cartoonist, really want to widen the gaps? Or do I want to bridge the gaps, and talk about what we have in common?

I get this line all the time from Westerners: "We make jokes about Jesus all the time, and it doesn't matter." I think that's a very selfish view of things. What you think is funny, other people might not. Why are you forcing your modernism, or whatever you think it is, on other people? If you respect their opinion, you can talk about the Prophet Muhammad and Islam in ways that make people think, rather than anger them.

I talk about religion all the time in my cartoons. But there's a certain point where it can become vulgar and even hateful. A lot of cartoonists need to meet deadlines, so they do what I call lazy cartooning that feeds stereotypes: An angry man with a beard is a Muslim. A woman in *niqab* who's oppressed by her husband is a Muslim woman.

I totally condemn what happened at *Charlie Hebdo*, but I'm not a fan of *Charlie Hebdo*. Their way of doing things is very aggressive. If their point is to make 1.6 billion people angry, they really get it across.

You were invited to participate in a "Je Suis Charlie" cartoon festival, and you declined.

When I first saw the news, I was really upset and shocked. First of all, why now, after all this time? My second reaction was that it could have been me or a friend of mine who was shot. People in this region get killed for a lot less. Then I started thinking about the families in Europe who would be accused, and the whole post-September 11 attitude toward Arabs, Muslims and anybody who looks different. So I drew a cartoon and it went viral: The world

Continued on page 47.

Continued from page 33.

and the fundamentalists are pointing at the same person. The world is accusing him of being a fundamentalist, and the fundamentalists are accusing him of being with the infidels. The person in the middle, someone who looks like me, is saying, "I'm just a Muslim." The message is: "I'm not with you, and I'm not with you." I felt better when that was widely published, because it made me realize that a lot of people feel that way, and a lot of people understand the message, especially in the West.

As for the "Je Suis Charlie" thing, like I said, I never liked the publication. The festival happened immediately. There were publications, as well, full of anything that had to do with *Charlie Hebdo*. People started making money off of it, with T-shirts and so on. It became kind of a business in the end.

I hated that the festival and publications were called "Je Suis Charlie"—the name should have been more inclusive. Yes, *Charlie Hebdo* is part of what we're fighting for, but not all of it. We should include people who are fighting for freedom of speech but don't want to be associated with that publication. As it happened, it became the same thing that I have fought against for a long time: "You're either with us or against us." You're either *Charlie Hebdo*, or you're with the savages—all this name calling.

The commodification is quite striking.

People sold loads of shit, and donated the proceeds to *Charlie Hebdo*. Look at how many copies *Charlie Hebdo* sold as well—I don't want to be part of that! Why doesn't the money go to organizations that promote freedom of the press? Friends of mine, cartoonists in Holland, showed me a "Je Suis Charlie" book. All of our cartoons are in there, but nobody got paid for it! I sent them an e-mail, and they didn't even reply.

And what about the cover that *Charlie Hebdo* did after that? They are doing the same thing. Nothing's changed—not the fundamentalists, not the terrorist organizations, and not *Charlie Hebdo*.

They could have flipped the script, for example, by asking Muslim cartoonists to do something for the cover, or running something that says, "We are all the same, we are all angry at what is wrong." Instead, the message was: "You're angry about what we do, so fuck you and fuck the 1.6 billion Muslims who are mad!" You don't have to be a fundamentalist to be angry about those drawings—just about any Muslim is. Hardly any of us react violently,

though, which is exactly the point: Out of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, only two people carried out an actual attack.

So the *Charlie Hebdo* people are just as stubborn as the fundamentalists, blinded by one thought: "You are offending me, so I'm going to keep doing the same thing." It's never going to end.

How have you observed the Arab Muslim world reacting to these cartoons?

Respect is a big part of our lives, rituals that go back thousands of years, even some that are pre-Islamic. The Prophet was depicted in a lot of old manuscripts, so it's not the fact of visual depiction, but the way it's done. Everyone is upset—you will meet no Muslim who will laugh at this cartoon.

And think about the places where people rioted and burned tires. These are countries already in turmoil if not embroiled in war—Libya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan. In countries that are more stable—the Gulf states, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria—none of this happened.

In Sudan, I spoke to some people who look at the situation by asking who is oppressing us right now. It's the president, Omar al-Bashir, who's been president for 25 years. Who supports this president? The Western powers. What else did the Western powers do? They created Israel, they invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, where hundreds of people die every day and nobody gives a shit. Those who lack information and education, who basically have the same mindset of the Westerners who participate in anti-Islam marches, think that the West just wants to kill us all. A person I spoke to in Sudan said, "They took everything—the oil, Palestine, everything. They degraded Muslims after we had an age of enlightenment. Now we have nothing. We are ruled by dictators. We don't have proper health care or education or any of the things that we used to have—not even our dignity. And we have no heroes except the Prophet Muhammad. And now they want to do this to the only thing we have left."

Who is this man going to tell his kid to be like when he grows up? Bashir? Sisi? Nasser? They're all killers, and all corrupt. The only pure person is the person who gave them religion, the only thing that they know, because they have no access to anything else, neither to books nor to decent schools. The only information that they have is the Qur'an. The same people that took the oil, invaded countries and have the drones are making a mockery out of the only hero they have left. Of course, these people are going to be angry, and some of them are going to join crazy terrorist organizations.

I'm not condoning what happened, but these are the reasons why these things happen. The two French kids who carried out the attack did it because they were living as second-class citizens. ■

CORRECTION: The photograph on p. 19 of *Middle East Report 273* (Winter 2014) was wrongly credited. The photographer is Benjamin Wiacek. We regret the error.