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FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA:
PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION
THE (CARTOON CRISES) BETWEEN FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Session II
Introductory Statement

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Dear colleagues
Ladies and Gentlemen

Nearly five months have passed since the (Cartoon's Crises) disturbed our lives during which we have faced serious threat as open minded Muslim journalists who decided to enter a taboo area using the mild freedom of expression.

At the beginning the Cartoon issue was a Media issue rather than a political or social issue. However, for different reasons the cartoons were then used in several ways in different Countries`to gain political points without thinking about the dangerous Circumstances and threats which our civilization would then face in the next five months.

In my opinion the initial publishing of the controversial caricatures was an attempt to challenge freedom of expression in a wrong direction. This was a waste of our efforts as civilized people to get a message across, because things got worst when Europe had to support the Danish Jylands Posten newspaper. In principle, I believe the cartoon publication was a violation of the freedom of the press and expression and an attack on others' rights. This is why we didn't agree with this kind of freedom, and for this reason we should stand against any offensive expression in written or in draw or in any way against any religion or faith.

But why did we publish these cartoons if we knew the serious danger from the beginning ?

For me personally, as a Muslim journalist, the cartoon's publication became an issue in January 2006 after three months from the first publication in Denmark. After the over reactions in the Muslim world we as a professional journalists faced a different challenge when we found ourselves in front of two choices: being a part of the protesters burning the Danish flag and boycotting Danish goods or be a

journalist and act professionally. I chose to act as a journalist who also has his own political thoughts on the issue, but had a story to cover. So, when the protests put us all on the edge I asked one of the journalists in Shihan newspaper where I used to be the chief editor to prepare a report about the reactions in the Islamic world on the cartoons. In this report we republished three of the controversial cartoons for the purpose of showing people the reality. Simply, people went to the streets without any information about the cartoons or how they looked like.

Personally, as I described them in an interview with News Week, these were silly caricatures and I called to ignore them. I said we should not accept that a cartoon of a fanatic with a bomb shaped as a turban on his head represent an illustration of Prophet Mohammad who had always called for peace and harmony and cooperation between nations. I condemned these cartoons from the beginning because by publishing them the radicalists will have their chance to attack the principal of the freedom of expression and give the Radical Islamists the chance to lead the masses and manipulate public opinion. Moreover, the uprising against Denmark as a country was a mistake which extremely harmed our efforts as Liberal thinkers. Now, the response in the Muslim world gave these silly caricatures value and political meaning which they did not deserve. Another big mistake was when a few European newspapers republished the cartoons to support the Danish Jylands Posten, whereby again the silly caricatures gained another added value by signaling to Muslims that the West is demeaning them .

After more than four months of my personal plight since I published the cartoons I claimed not guilty in three courts in front of three judges, but I will not claim not guilty in this hall in front of people who have gathered here to defend the freedom of expression. Indeed, I am guilty ladies and Gentlemen-- guilty of being so optimistic and thinking we were in the 21st Century. I thought we had a different understanding of each other, but unfortunately I was wrong. We are still were we used to be when it comes to this Taboo.

The Western media did not dare to be different than the Media in any third world country. In the United States, England, China, Japan and other countries journalists were not smarter than us. Just because they did not republish the cartoons does not mean they cared about the feelings of Muslims but because they thought about their own interests. They put the freedom of expression second and the interests of their countries first. They led us to believe that what we did was a big mistake and that we should be sorry. This is how I realized my guilt when I decided to deal with the cartoons issue as a journalist. So, what do you think, were we wrong or right to tell our readers the truth and show them the controversial cartoons which made them protest and caused that much of pain and suffering? am I

wrong when I called in my article the Muslims of the world to be reasonable and think who brings more prejudice to Islam these silly cartoons or a video of a hostage taker slash the throat of his victim and shouting Allah Akbar ...,I believe that this murderer dose not belong to Islam and his crime offended us as human beings more than any illustrations or statements and I will not change my believes or what I said in my article ...those murderers who killed our colleague Atwar Bahjat from Al Arabia TV that savage way are not Muslims even if they claim so by shouting Allah Akbar in front the camera ...they are animals, that video of Atwar's torch and murder offended all of us not just Muslims but also people all over the world more than these silly cartoons . Nevertheless the Jordanian Association of Journalists included my article with the accusations which they raised against me and used my thoughts as evidences , my call (Muslims of the world be reasonable) became a crime for which I was taken to the discipline committee ,I refused to attend any hearing session so the committee decided to dismiss me from the association, which means I cannot work in Jordanian media.

This is the second punishment which was taken against me by the Jordanian Association of Journalists ,the first one was in 1997 when I visited Israel as a part of my job and entered another Taboo ,at that time the conservative wing in the association accused me of (normalization) with the enemy which is similar to betrayal .

I won that battle with my colleagues because we were right by serving the case of peace and preserving the freedom of expression .Today I'm facing more serious threats than 10 years ago but I'm also surrounded of friends, supporters who fight against radicalism inside the Journalists association and I am sure that we will win this battle too.

In many articles I have been called a brave journalist, but why am I so brave if I'm doing my job? Probably because we are working in a different environment, and facing extremely serious challenges such as the religious and cultural sensitivities. The cartoon crises is an example from what we should draw lesson. Unfortunately in our societies we cannot preserve freedom of press simultaneously with the religious and cultural sensitivities of people. The standards are different than anywhere else in the world. The relationship between the freedom and responsibility is an odd one and directly affects the independence of the media. Our journalistic responsibility is always first but the freedom of the press comes tenth in between taboos and untouchable topics. In Jordan the awareness about the religious and cultural sensitivities became very high, because of the political tensions in the region, especially after the declaration of war on terror three years ago, and the formation of beliefs throughout Muslim world that the west is targeting Islam and

Muslims under the slogan of defeating terror. This theory increased the hate speech in the media not just against the countries involved in the war but also against those who support the war on terror such as us that's how Jordan became a target for terrorism . This made further sanctions taken against me as acceptable and gave the radicalists the motive to attack the freedom of the press. This is how the newspaper Shihan and I became victims of a contest between the government or the state in general and the political Islamists. Each side wanted to prove its loyalty to Islam more than the other. The government chose the legislative measures and went far in its punishments: I was taken to three different courts for the same crime, but the prosecutor divided the crime into three different accusations. So far I have been convicted in one and found guilty of violating the sensitivities of the religious feelings of Muslims. The penalty is two months in jail, and I am waiting on the decisions of the other two accusations, but the most dangerous accusation which was raised in the Sharia court by two fanatics is the accusation of blasphemy. The punishment if convicted is a death penalty by the Sharia law. However, in the five cases in Jordanian history brought before this law, no one was convicted. Nevertheless, the danger of this kind of accusation reflects the reality of our environment in which we work and struggle for our freedom of expression.

Until today courage costed many brave colleagues their lives ,my courage costed me every thing but my life ,I lost my job ,my reputation but the greatest loss is losing the hope of changing the thoughts of our people about the others , this will never happen unless others start changing their thoughts about us and our states stop following instead of educating and lead the masses ,until that day we Liberal journalists thinkers of Muslim world will keep sacrificing to preserve the freedom of expression as the first step of any changes or reforms .

Dear colleagues

In our battle we need your help and support not just your sympathy Thank you for inviting me to hear my story that applies on many journalists in our world , and thank you indeed for giving me the chance to feel free journalist again .