Muslims call for French goods boycott to protest caricatures

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By AP

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[Muslims](https://www.foxnews.com/category/us/religion/islam) in the Middle East and beyond on Monday broadened their calls for boycotts of French products and protests, as a clash over depictions of the Prophet Muhammad and the limits of free speech intensified.

Kuwaiti stores pulled French yogurts and bottles of sparkling water from their shelves, Qatar University canceled a French culture week, and calls to stay away from the Carrefour grocery store chain were trending on social media in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Protests have been held in Iraq, Turkey and the Gaza Strip, and Pakistan’s parliament passed a resolution condemning the publication of cartoons of the prophet.

The beheading earlier this month of a French teacher who had shown caricatures of the prophet in class has once again ignited a debate over such depictions — which Muslims consider blasphemous. The growing confrontation is raising political tensions between France and some Muslim-majority nations, especially Turkey, and could put pressure on French companies. Other European countries have also [entered the fray](https://apnews.com/article/turkey-emmanuel-macron-recep-tayyip-erdogan-france-europe-6b12b46b33a77094c5c91a544f2a017f) in support of France.

The teacher, who was killed by an 18-year-old Chechen refugee, has been heralded at home as a national symbol of France’s dearly held secular ideals and its rejection of any whiff of religious intrusion in public spheres.

French President Emmanuel Macron has vigorously defended such depictions as protected by the right to free speech. [At a memorial for the teacher](https://apnews.com/article/paris-europe-militant-groups-06ac84c373a1ad54c0bcfe3e668adde3) last week, Macron said: “We won’t renounce the caricatures.”

On Sunday, he appeared to double down. In tweets published in both Arabic and English, he wrote: “We will not give in, ever.” He added, however, that France does not accept hate speech and respects all differences.

His government plans a bill aimed at rooting out what Macron calls “Islamist separatism,” which he contends has created a parallel culture in France, one that rejects French laws and norms. While he blamed some of this separatism on France’s brutal colonial past in North Africa, he was quoted as saying Islam is “a religion that is in crisis all over the world.”

Macron’s stance has drawn anger from both everyday people and some political leaders in the Muslim world.

Qatar University postponed its French cultural week indefinitely, saying its administration views insults to Islam and its symbols as unacceptable. In Kuwait, a number of stores had removed French products like Kiri cheese, Perrier sparkling water and Activia yogurt from their shelves.

The owner of Carrefour stores in the Middle East issued a statement saying that, in the region, the brand is a fully owned and operated by United Arab Emirates-based Majid Al Futtaim. The company noted that it employs 37,000 people and is “proud to be from the region and for the region.”

On Twitter, some criticized what they said is France’s hypocrisy and bias against Muslims. One cartoon widely shared put forth the argument that caricatures of Muslims are defended in “The West” as fair game under freedom of speech protections, while caricatures of Jews are labeled hate speech.

Egypt’s top cleric, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, who is also the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam’s highest seat of learning, also accused those who “justify insulting the prophet of Islam” of hypocrisy.

In France, a law aimed at addressing the country’s role during Nazi occupation specifically mentions that anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial are crimes, but it can also be used to prosecute anti-Muslim discrimination — or hate speech, in general.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been the most vociferous in his criticism among political leaders, saying Macron needed his head examined and had lost his way. France responded by recalling its ambassador to Turkey.

Both Jordan and Pakistan have summoned the French ambassador in their countries to express their displeasure. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan accused the French leader chose to encourage anti-Muslim sentiment.

Amid the political barbs, neither Erdogan nor Khan has publicly condemned the killing of the French teacher.

While many Muslims lament the expectation that they must condemn terrorist attacks they see as having nothing to do with Islam or its values, the general secretariat of the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation was among several bodies and groups that have denounced the killing.

The dispute is also creating debate within the Muslim world. Diana Moukalled, a Lebanese writer and co-editor of the independent Daraj news site, criticized how some people appear to be more offended by the cartoons than by the beheading of the French teacher.

Muslim scholars have condemned the caricatures, but some also sought to curb swelling anger.

Saudi Arabia’s senior council of clerics issued a statement saying that defamation of the Prophet Muhammad only serves extremists who want to spread hatred. While denouncing insults against Islam, the clerics also cited the prophet’s “mercy, justice, tolerance” in their statement.

The head of the Saudi-based Muslim World League, Sheikh Mohammed al-Issa, told a Saudi news channel that while the caricatures are insulting, the prophet’s influence and status are greater than any impact from such drawings. He said Muslims should not overreact.

It’s certainly not the first time France has grappled with terrorism — or with questions about free speech. Five years ago, French-born al-Qaida extremists killed 12 employees of the satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo in response to its publication of caricatures depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Those cartoons also sparked mass protests in Muslim-majority countries, with some turning deadly.

On Monday, dozens of protesters gathered in front of the French embassy in central Baghdad. One held up a caricature of the French president with footprints stamped over his face.

A small rally was also held in the Gaza Strip outside the French cultural center with people carrying banners showing photos of Macron with an “X” on his face.

In Pakistan, protesters burned a representation of the French flag, and the leader of a radical Islamic party for a rally against France on Friday to mark the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Protests are also planned in Bangladesh this week.