

Extremism, Terrorism Ultimate Winners of Charlie Hebdo Episode

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This month's horrific twin attacks on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and a kosher supermarket in Paris claimed the lives of 17 people. The shootings were prompted by Charlie Hebdo's previous publication of cartoons caricaturing Prophet Mohammad (S) - an act considered blasphemous by Muslims worldwide.

The attacks sparked international outrage with heads of state across the world converging in Paris in a show of solidarity to march alongside an estimated one million people in what was described as an anti-terrorism rally. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon told reporters at the UN headquarters that the attacks were 'horrendous, unjustifiable and cold-blooded crime. It was also a direct assault on a cornerstone of democracy, on the media and on freedom of expression.'

Back in Paris, the largest demonstration in French history had an interesting mix of dignitaries, including many who head states with a dismal track record of safeguarding rights and freedoms. One such individual was the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had the audacity to take the front row in the rally, while Israel has targeted and killed many journalists in its latest carnage on Gaza in the summer of 2014.

The tremendous show of solidarity was in stark contrast with the deafening silence of the Western leaders in the face of multiple terrorist attacks taking place in the Islamic world. While the world mourned the killings in France, another terrorist group, Boko Haram, had slaughtered as many as 2000 civilians in northern Nigeria. In Yemen, Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for twin bomb attacks, killing 16 schoolgirls. The Taliban in Pakistan butchered 150 people, most of them school children. Yet, there was no single Western leader to march in support of the victims nor was there any international outcry.

As a pretext of defending freedom of expression at any cost, Charlie Hebdo on the front page of their latest edition once again caricatured Prophet Mohammad (S) which again raised the wrath of Muslims, with dozens killed and injured in demonstrations in Muslim countries such as Niger, Pakistan, Jordan, Algeria, Iran and Turkey. This view is in line with the Islamic teaching that considers it blasphemous to illustrate Prophet Mohammad (S) or any other prophet including Jesus, Abraham or Moses.

The crux of the matter is not upholding free speech but to mitigate against intentional slurs and insults to religious beliefs, which in this case have antagonized 1.7 billion Muslims all over the world. There are limits to freedom of expression, even in France and specifically in the present champion of the cause, Charlie Hebdo which fired one of its own cartoonists (Maurice Sinet, known as Siné) for comments deemed anti-Semitic. As long as the West does not differentiate

between freedom of speech and insulting religious beliefs and traditions -acts of extremism will continue.

Extremism breeds on antagonism, which serves to alienate a segment of society who will then be easily manipulated into radicalism. Instead, the Western powers should place certain limits on freedom of expression, which they have done before in legislation against anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. In the same vein, they should legislate anti-blasphemy laws to protect all religious beliefs.

Adding his weight to this debate, the head of the Catholic Church Pope Francis stated that one should not abuse freedom of expression to “provoke” or “offend” others deliberately, and not be surprised when they react to such taunts.

Even in the case of a dear friend, Francis said, “If he says a swear word against my mother, he’s going to get a punch in the nose. That’s normal.” “People who make fun of, who toy with other people’s religions, risk running into “what would happen to [that friend] if he said something against my mother.”

Extremism is the ultimate winner in the controversy over Charlie Hebdo’s publication of the latest cartoon with the support of the French government and other Western powers. Regrettably, the latest provocation and blatant hypocrisy of the West on the issue of freedom of expression will further the cause of the terrorists and lend support to their claim that Western powers have waged an all-out war against Islam. Furthermore, terrorist groups such as ISIS, who regard themselves the vanguard of Muslims, Islamic values and Quranic teachings would certainly celebrate new recruitments in thousands.

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