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Summary: The killings at Charlie Hebdo and the kosher supermarket in the context of global jihadism and imperialism, which feed on each other, and of free speech/ethnic oppression and their contradictions, especially in France - Editors

The Paris Assassinations in Global Context

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Two hundred years ago, the German philosopher Hegel wrote of the dehumanization that occurred during the Great Terror that followed the French Revolution of 1789 as a form of “death that achieves nothing, embraces nothing within its grasp; it is thus the most cold-blooded and meaningless death of all, with no more significance than cleaving a head of cabbage or swallowing a draught of water.”

The Great Terror, which impersonally executed thousands even suspected of opposition to the newly constituted liberal order, destroyed the French Revolution from inside, paving the way for a turn to the right under Napoleon. In lopping off the heads of the aristocracy and secularizing the state, it also created space for the impersonal form of domination that is modern capitalism. However, as Hegel also acknowledged, this form of Terror, which emerged out of revolution, did not erase all of the gains of 1789 in terms of human rights, for France or the world.

The attacks on Charlie Hebdo and on the kosher supermarket in Paris, while equally dehumanized, come from another direction, from an utterly reactionary ideology and movement with global reach, radical Islamist jihadism. The two gunmen who assassinated the 12 people at the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* affirmed openly their allegiance to Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula, while the one who murdered 4 French Jews at the supermarket spoke of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These violent and vile fanatics, whose ideology has a lot in common with fascism, insist that their authoritarian and intolerant form of Islam be imposed upon the world, by force if necessary.

In the same days, their counterparts in the Boko Haram movement in Nigeria used a ten-year-old girl as suicide bomber in a marketplace, killing nearly twenty people. The Nigerian events underscored two other facts relevant to the Paris attacks. First, the vast

majority of the victims of these movements are other Muslims deemed not Muslim enough, or collateral damage. Second, the lack of discussion of the Nigerian deaths, even by the Nigerian government, showed that when the victims are African, Middle Eastern, or South Asian Muslims, the world holds a double standard in terms of acknowledgment of the humanity of the victims.

It would be wrong, however, to limit our outrage to the most extreme forms of Islamism, like those of the Paris attackers, ISIS, or Boko Haram. For more than four decades, a close ally of the U.S. and Western European powers, Saudi Arabia, has used its vast financial power to spread across the globe its reactionary, virulently sexist form of Islam, Wahhabism, an ideology that lies at the root of most modern forms of Sunni fundamentalism. (On this point see the [interview with Gilbert Achcar](#) on “Democracy Now.”) Those forms of Sunni extremism that are too unpalatable for the Saudi state itself to fund, like Al Qaeda or ISIS, have often found support from individual wealthy patrons from Saudi Arabia or the Gulf monarchies.

Western capitalism and imperialism have given these movements plenty of fertile ground for their development and growth, not to speak of outright aid to them, as in Afghanistan in the 1980s. For example, U.S. intelligence agencies helped to wipe out the left in places like Iran, Iraq, and Indonesia, creating a vacuum that could be filled by radical Islamism, a newer, reactionary form of anti-imperialism. This was most spectacularly the case in Iran in 1979. In the last decade, the U.S. occupation of Iraq opened the door to several forms of radical Islamism, a Shia faction of which, supposedly moderated now, is currently in power. The other examples are too numerous to mention here.

But the French domestic context is equally important. There, as in the rest of Western Europe, immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries and their descendants are relegated to ghettos in the suburbs (banlieus) of Paris and elsewhere, where they suffer economic and racial oppression, as well as police brutality and mass incarceration. With six million members, France has the largest Muslim population in Europe, and one of the most alienated and oppressed among them. At 9% of the population, this community has little representation in the state or civil society, and its youth are constantly harassed and criminalized by the police. It should also be noted that these communities originate in French colonial rule in North Africa, where the French murdered people on a vast scale in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not only is the racist and destructive heritage of that colonialism not fully recognized, but in recent years a law was passed to enjoin teaching the “positive” elements of colonialism in French public schools.

Moreover, in part as the heritage of the Enlightenment tradition, French society, including some parts of the Left, remain “colorblind” in a way that shows, at best, an extreme insensitivity to cultural difference. This, as well as outright racist Islamophobia, was behind the headscarf ban in French schools, a practice that in my view should neither be prohibited (as in France) nor required (as in Iran). Thus, a magazine like *Charlie Hebdo*, whose cartoonists traced their worldview to the 1960s, prided itself on its secularism and opposition to all religion. These talented and creative artists failed to recognize that the

world had changed since 1968, and that ridiculing and profaning Islam constituted the humiliation of a largely voiceless oppressed minority within their own country.

It is one thing to defend those like Salman Rushdie or Malala Yousafzai, critics of the dominant forms of Islam who have emerged from within such communities. It is another matter when relatively privileged outsiders like *Charlie Hebdo*, drawn from what is perceived, and rightly so, as the dominant cultural institutions of a racist society like France (or the USA, or the UK, or Germany) criticize or ridicule Islam, in societies where Muslims form oppressed minorities. Of course they have the legal right to do so, but what about the moral right? For this reason, [our 2006 article on the Danish cartoons](#) saw them as an example of Islamophobic racism, while also opposing their instrumentalization by reactionary Islamists and opportunistic politicians in the Muslim world.

For the above reasons, the massive demonstrations in France of solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo* need to be seen as contradictory in character. On the one hand, they represent a humanist revulsion at a brutal political assassination – and a racist murder of Jews -- that sought to suppress free speech and secularism. But they also show the hypocrisy of modern Western liberalism, especially when one sees people like Netanyahu, the butcher of Gaza, in the front row of the photo-op before the march among the respectable “world leaders.”

Those who carried out these brutal attacks in Paris, seeking martyrdom for themselves at the same time, would no doubt like to spark a civil war in Europe against Muslims, in hope of radicalizing the community in their alien and retrogressive direction. Rightwing anti-immigrant groups like the French National Front are after the same thing. (On this point, see [Juan Cole’s article](#).)

Do the Paris attacks represent a new wave of radical Islamism, or its twilight? It is too early to tell. One can hope, however, that the worldwide revulsion, including among the vast majority of Muslims, will help to dry up the pockets of support that exist for Al Qaeda and ISIS. That will depend a lot upon how France and other societies where Muslims form minorities react to the Paris events. And that will depend in turn upon whether progressives and leftists can carve out more space there and globally for an agenda that opposes class domination in such a way as to allow more space for the variety of human experiences and cultures, and to take greater account of forms of oppression based upon race and ethnicity, religious identity (or not), gender, and sexuality.