

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Issues > Faith, religious authorities, secularism > Political Islam, Islamism (Religion, churches, secularism) > **Fundamentalist Terror - The truth about Charlie: one year after the 7 (...)**

“I am still Charlie”

Fundamentalist Terror - The truth about Charlie: one year after the 7 January attacks

Friday 8 January 2016, by [BENNOUNE Karima](#) (Date first published: 7 January 2016).

The *Charlie Hebdo* attack one year ago was part of a long tradition of fundamentalist assaults on artists. Understanding this tragic event is critical to defeating Islamist terror today.

Two French Islamist gunmen of Algerian descent entered a newspaper office in Paris a year ago today and gunned down a generation of Europe’s greatest political cartoonists – many from an anarchist, anti-racist tradition – along with their co-workers and those protecting them, who also included people of Algerian descent. In case anyone is confused about the politics of this – it was a far right attack on the left.

At first the world reacted with justified horror and a solidarity which is not always forthcoming for the frequently anonymous victims of Islamist slaughter, and which was not often experienced by the *Charlie Hebdo* staff in previous years when they endured threats and firebombs. However, the backlash began quickly. The truth about *Charlie* was that many were shockingly equivocal in their reaction to these events.

There was the “I am not Charlie” campaign, promoted by Tariq Ramadan, grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. The meaning of that was clear enough. Those whose ideology helped pave the way for such killings were publicly admitting their lack of solidarity with the victims.

There were outright vilification campaigns suggesting that the cartoonists (or perhaps French people generally) were racists, “Islamophobic” or otherwise had it coming. In California – which by year’s end became the site of another Islamist bloodbath – a number of people expressed such views to me, thinking that because I have a Muslim name I would agree. Not long after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, I spoke at a U.S. university event on freedom of expression along with a self-appointed young American spokesperson for “the Muslim community” from the Council on American Islamic Relations – whom I must say I never elected to speak for me. She reviled the 7 January victims to the point where I felt compelled to ask if she understood that they were actually dead. She did not know as I did that just before their murders, the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists were in a heated discussion about terrible socio-economic conditions in the Paris suburbs where much of the Muslim population lives – an injustice which mattered a great deal to them.

Another response was the more sophisticated “I am Ahmed” campaign named for the stalwart French policeman Ahmed Merabet also of Algerian descent who was killed by the Kouachi brothers as they fled the newspaper’s offices. Sadly, this was sometimes meant as a rebuttal rather than an amplification of “Je suis Charlie,” when in fact people like the murderous Kouachis have been killing Ahmeds around the world for years. Very few have been paying attention to that body count. When

they depicted their version of the Prophet Mohamed crying over terrorism, the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists had the courage to take on those carrying out that slaughter while others looked away or were silent.

That is committed anti-racism and solidarity, even if it comes in the shape of a merciless, sometimes disturbing French satirical tradition not always well understood elsewhere – like *Mad Magazine* with politics.

On this anniversary, we must remember that those who killed *Charlie* also killed Ahmed and that saying “I am Charlie” is also a way of saying “I am Ahmed,” and vice versa. Indeed, opposing the Kouachis of the world is essential to saving those countless people of Muslim heritage and their fellow citizens in the Global South who have been dying in the tens of thousands at the hands of Muslim fundamentalist killers in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq, Nigeria, Libya and beyond. Ahmed is a synonym for Charlie, not an antonym. That was why so many people of North African descent stood with the 7 January victims [1].

For example, Ali Dilem, one of Algeria’s best political cartoonists joined the *Charlie Hebdo* team in February out of solidarity. His bold cartoons have lampooned political figures and fundamentalist terrorists for years, earning him jail sentences and countless fatwas. On 7 January 2015, Dilem’s cartoon bore the heading: “God is Humour” (in French: “Dieu est humour,” a play on words derived from “Dieu est amour” – “God is Love”). Another of Dilem’s cartoons after the 7 January attacks shows a dying figure writing in his own blood on a wall: “the idiots killed me.”

I saw a copy of this Dilem heartbreaker hanging atop piles of flowers when I went to pay my respects at the Bataclan theatre in Paris in December.. I stood in the street where a pregnant woman had hung from a windowsill trying to escape the “Islamic State” offensive, and in front of the small club where 89 mainly young people lost their lives at the hands of another group of young Islamist assassins of North African descent. I found my visit doubly poignant because I went with Samia Benkherroubi a former Algerian TV presenter whose own producer, the legendary Aziz Smati, had been shot in 1994 by the Armed Islamic Group, the forerunners of “Islamic State,” and is today a paraplegic, but continues his work from his wheelchair. Smati’s crime, like Charlie’s, was creativity. He produced Algeria’s groundbreaking youth music TV show, Bled Music, showing the first Rai music videos on TV, which were also controversial at the time.

Outside the bullet-riddled Bataclan, Samia and I laid flowers and mourned together, lamenting that the fundamentalists we have been battling for years are still so much stronger than their civil society opponents. She had written to me after the 13 November attacks to say how deeply saddened she was to see the fundamentalist violence she fled in 1990s Algeria reproducing itself elsewhere. What was especially mystifying to her, was the way in which some on the left tried to use the history of French colonialism as the excuse (or so-called “explanation”) for these attacks [2]. The same thing happened after 7 January. Samia wrote that “looking for explanations in colonial history is an injury to all victims of blind terrorism.” It also entirely overlooks that Algeria itself lost as many as 200,000 – including many veterans of the liberation struggle – to extremist terrorism in the 1990s, a fact often conveniently forgotten.

The same night that Samia and I paid our respects at the Bataclan, we visited the plaque by the Seine to the victims of the massacre of 17 October 1961 when several hundred Algerian nationalists were slain and thrown into the river by police during a peaceful protest.

We vowed by that memorial not to let their brave memory be misused to justify fundamentalist atrocities, even while keeping their memory alive like those of other victims. For me, this is very personal. My Algerian grandfather Lakhdar Bennoune died defeating French colonialism. His death

is part of an historic injustice which still demands real accounting - but is no justification whatsoever for the lamentable Kouachis who would have said he was not a true martyr because he died fighting for a republic rather than an "Islamic State".

All of this complexity seems to have been lost on the authors and signatories of the petition against the granting of the PEN Freedom of Expression Courage award to the *Charlie Hebdo* staff signed by a group of mainly Western intellectuals in the name of anti-racism. [3] They wanted to make clear that they were not *Charlie*. They claimed solidarity with Ahmed. They presumed to know what the Ahmeds of the world think (and that they think alike) while overlooking the contemporary politics of the Muslim majority regions of the world [4]. They regretted the killing, but clearly didn't understand it.

The petition's authors presumed a) that French Muslims were mostly devout, and b) that this meant they could not stomach satirical drawings - two huge and highly inaccurate presumptions. This was a recurring theme after 7 January - that all Muslims and all people of Muslim heritage were offended by the publication of cartoons (whether they liked the cartoons or not). It is not at all clear how assuming that 1.5 billion people have no sense of humor (and no politics) is anything other than patronizing.

Meanwhile, the campaign to support the presentation of the PEN award to Charlie Hebdo was led by Salman Rushdie [5], who is of Muslim heritage, and whose name is derived from a great 12th century Andalusian Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd [6] who likely would not have been terribly troubled by provocative cartoons, and whose own books on philosophy and theology were burned by Muslim fundamentalists while his Christian followers were slain by the Inquisition.

So, we must remember that January 7, 2015 was one in a long line of far right attacks on creativity, and part of a history of fundamentalist assaults against artists and intellectuals who have defied them. [7] And, sadly, it was only one of the first armed Islamist salvos of 2015 which will be remembered as the year of endless, expanding jihad. Charlies and Ahmeds, Ceciles and Samiras died in many regions of the world at the hands of those seeking a free ticket to paradise.

In 2015, Muslim fundamentalists would go on to target Pakistani arts promoters, Iraqi women lawyers and teachers and most of the country's minorities, Syrian archaeologists, a Kosher grocery store in France, an event about freedom of expression in Denmark, Afghan airports, Tunisia's national museum, countless Shiite mosques everywhere, minarets, a Beirut shopping district, a Sousse beach, Nigerian markets, a Kenyan University, and a Russian airplane carrying families home from vacation. Grave crimes, crimes against humanity, war crimes, even genocide, in some cases. Afterwards we were all assaulted verbally both by some on the left who tried to excuse the perpetrators or minimize their crimes in defiance of the facts, and some on the right who sought to lump all Muslims in with those perpetrators notwithstanding how many Muslims have died at their hands and how many have opposed them [8].

With all of this bloodletting and intolerance, why is it important to remember the *Charlie Hebdo* attack and its victims? Algerians I have interviewed about the country's "dark decade" of 1990s fundamentalist violence have often told me about the debates regarding the motives behind fundamentalist killings. In the beginning, people tried to explain away the targeting - "oh, he was a policeman, he we was an atheist, she was a communist," until the terrorists began killing Every(woman) and it seemed inexplicable. Grassroots solidarity with less popular or controversial victims was crucial but sometimes harder to come by, something which their assassins knew only too well. A muted response to what happened to the cops and the communists only emboldened the so-called Warriors of God to attack others.

So, a year later, remembering the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, and paying tribute to its victims, are critical aspects of the ongoing struggle against Muslim fundamentalist terrorism. Likewise, remembering that many Muslims and people of Muslim heritage have spoken up in defense of *Charlie Hebdo* and against fundamentalist violence (and have died in that violence) is a key way of fighting the racism and discrimination against Muslims which also burgeoned in 2015. The truth about *Charlie* is that in the year since the attacks we have often forgotten all of these things.

So today, in memory of Charb, Cabu, Wolinski, Tignous, Bernard Maris, Honoré, Elsa Cayat, Mustapha Ourad, Frédéric Boisseau, Michel Renaud, and the police officers Franck Brinsolaro and Ahmed Merabet who were killed exactly a year ago, and all those who died at the hands of Islamist terrorists in 2015, I say simply, "I am still Charlie." It is a battle cry in the ongoing campaign against fundamentalist violence and the ideas that motivate it, which is one of the defining human rights struggles of 2016. That is perhaps the most important truth about Charlie.

Karima Bennoune

* openDemocracy. 7 January 2016:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/karima-bennoune/one-year-after-7-january-attacks-truth-about-charlie>

* This article is written by Professor Bennoune in her personal capacity.

***Charlie Hebdo*: "There is no way they will make us put down our pens."**

8 January 2015

Pen against Kalashnikov: courage against atrocity. People of Muslim heritage call for combatting Islamist ideology by political means and mass mobilisation.

We are all Charlie!

To those who attacked *Charlie Hebdo* yesterday shouting "Allahu Akbar," I would like to say that your kind of God - a God of Hate and Murder - is not Great. Nor is that God the God of most Muslims, but rather of your own Islamist cult - which so many people of Muslim heritage oppose. You are incapable of understanding satire; you openly revile the beliefs of others but brook no criticism of the medieval notions you believe. You claim to defend Islam while bringing only shame upon it. You are offended by cartoons but not by killing. You claim to have avenged the Prophet Mohamed but have instead defamed him with your cowardly attack on unarmed journalists in his name.

As a Tunisian woman wrote to me afterwards, "It is so horrible, claiming the name of God while killing these poor people. But, about which God are they speaking?" With an ironic outrage, worthy of *Charlie Hebdo* itself, she insisted the deity would be "gratified" that they are "making him a God of intolerance and blood." In the name of tolerance and peace, and in memory of the tragically murdered victims in Paris, and of so many others - even more numerous - in places like Peshawar, let us commit after this bleak January day to make 2015 the year we finally put an end to this ghastly jihad.

While first information suggests the authors of the Paris attack may have claimed affiliation with Al Qaeda in Yemen, others suspect an “Islamic State” link. In any case, their indisputable connection is with the pernicious ideology of international Islamism and its myriad armed manifestations. These are, to quote Algerian sociologist Marieme Helie-Lucas, “political movements of the extreme right that... manipulate religion to achieve their political aims.” We must collectively denounce that ideology and do all we can to defeat these movements. As Helie-Lucas and Maryam Namazie wrote in an online petition in denunciation of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, a statement rapidly signed by activists from Iran to Sudan, “What is needed is straight-forward analysis of the political nature of armed Islamists: they are an extreme-right political force, working under the guise of religion and they aim at political power. They should be combated by political means and mass mobilization....”

This latest horror is but one in a long line of Muslim fundamentalist assaults on thought. “Those who combat us with the pen will die by the sword,” decreed the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria in the 1990s while slaughtering intellectuals. Just this December, an Algerian Salafist called for the public execution, possibly by crucifixion, of prominent writer Kamel Daoud, a free-thinker who recently made waves with his rewriting of Camus’s “The Stranger” from an Algerian perspective, and who dared to say in a television appearance that Arabs must reflect on the role of religion in their societies to move forward.

While I am first and foremost outraged by the Islamist ideologues who make such threats, and the terrorists like those who perpetrated yesterday’s massacre, I also blame some liberals and left-wingers - and even human rights advocates - in the West who have for years apologized for Islamism and Islamist ideas, painted Islamists mainly as victims with legitimate grievances standing up to the West, or defenders of Muslim culture, rather than extreme right wingers with guns determined on squashing human rights. These Western apologists have justified everything from the burqa to theocracy in the name of cultural relativism - appalling many intellectuals of Muslim heritage who are determined instead to buck extremism. Some of these voices were heard again in the U.S. media yesterday emphasizing the “offensiveness” of *Charlie Hebdo*’s content. In Western academia, this apologia has often been a politically correct stance, what Mahnaz Afkhami decries as “Islamic exceptionalism.” So, one way to commemorate this terrible event and memorialize its victims is to unequivocally defend universal human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, and to make clear that they apply to all. We must dare to defend even the right to blaspheme, the right that the *Charlie Hebdo* staff paid with their lives for asserting.

Many people of Muslim heritage - from Saudi Arabia to Sudan, from Afghanistan to Algeria, have been in the frontlines of the fight against terror and extremism . But so many more of us in the diasporas need to find the courage to speak out in support of them. After the Sydney attack and on the same day as the Peshawar massacre, CNN featured a Muslim American blogger whining about the fact that Muslims are expected to condemn jihadist attacks. I no longer have any patience for this sort of view. Those of us who are proud of our heritage, who have diverse and complex relationships with the Islam of our forebears, can make a difference by speaking out against every single one of these crimes whose miserable perpetrators wrongfully claim to act as agents of the religious heritage we value. (This is akin to suggesting that Jews can advance the cause of human rights by criticizing the Israeli government’s violations since it claims to represent them, even while they are in no way collectively responsible for such abuses.) We should have a Million Muslim March, or the virtual equivalent, every single time an event like this happens.

Our community organizations should move from reactive condemnations of terrorism post hoc, to proactive, systematic efforts to root out Islamist ideology through awareness-raising, and humanist education. We must also do more to support those doing this work back home in our countries of origin. As difficult as it can be to speak out in our highly charged contemporary environment in which the Western far right campaigns against Islam - akin to “walking on a tightrope” as one young

Arab-American activist recently described it - it takes just a fraction of the moral courage shown by those most at risk. Pakistani lawyer Asma Jahangir, who has to have armed guards in her Lahore office, implored the diaspora community to speak out about the slaughter in countries like hers when I interviewed her.

It is especially critical not to blame the victims for the Paris attack, however challenging some of their drawings and writings may have been for some. That is what satirists do - push boundaries. That is their right, and indeed modern society needs those who dare to claim that none of our emperors have any clothes. *Charlie Hebdo* are equal opportunity offenders, lampooning the Pope, Jewish orthodoxy and the Mullahs. Many people of Muslim heritage appreciate satire. The late great Pakistani arts promoter Faizan Peerzada told me of the Danish cartoons that *Charlie Hebdo* reprinted, "if this cartoon was seen by Mohamed, he would have had a laugh. As simple as that."

Meanwhile, the extreme right wing and other anti-Muslim forces in the West cannot be allowed to overlook such defiance among people of Muslim heritage, or to smear all of Islam or its adherents - or immigrants writ large - because of attacks like the one in Paris. As Caroline Fourest, an expert on fundamentalisms and former member of the editorial staff of *Charlie Hebdo* told me yesterday, the magazine is itself both anti-fundamentalist and secularist - and resolutely anti-racist. "Racism must not be an excuse for fundamentalism. And fundamentalism must not be an excuse for racism," she insisted. "We have to fight both at the same time." She is absolutely correct, and these will both be long struggles.

After twenty years of writing about Muslim fundamentalist violence, I am running out of synonyms for atrocity. And for courage. During my recent research about opposition to fundamentalism among people of Muslim heritage, I was given a copy of the newspapers published at Press House in Algiers on the very next day after a 1996 Armed Islamic Group bombing there that killed 18 press workers and their neighbors. I have thought about this story a great deal in the last 24 hours.

Somehow the Algerian journalists rallied back in 1996 and got their editions out, working to do so in the rubble of their offices before the smoke had even cleared. One of them, a woman named Ghania Oukazi, posed the following question in that day's heroic papers, a question just as relevant now. "Pen against Kalashnikov. Is there a more unequal struggle?" She answered it herself with this commitment. "What is certain is that the pen will not stop." Yesterday's terror attack in Paris is a stark reminder that to defeat all forms of fundamentalism and terror we must always honor Ghania's pledge. As Caroline Fourest exclaimed when telling me her surviving former colleagues were determined to rally and get an issue of *Charlie Hebdo* next week: "there is no way they will make us put down our pens."

Karima Bennoune

* Opon Democracy. 8 January 2015:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/karima-bennoune/charlie-hebdo-there-is-no-way-they-will-make-us-put-down-our-pens>

P.S.

* Open Democracy. These articles are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 licence.

Footnotes

- [1] See on ESSF (article 36893), [Fundamentalist Terror - The truth about Charlie: one year after the 7 January attacks](#).
- [2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/charlie-hebdo-paris-attack-brothers-campaign-of-terror-can-be-traced-back-to-algeria-in-1954-9969184.html>
- [3] http://www.salon.com/2015/04/29/charlie_hebdo_and_the_pen_award_petition_sent_to_authors_urging_them_to_disassociate_ourselves_from_honoring_the_magazine/
- [4] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/karima-bennoune-mbarka-brahmi/opposing-political-islam-mohamed-brahmis-widow-speaks-out>
- [5] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/27/salman-rushdie-pen-charlie-hebdo-peter-carey>
- [6] <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ibnrushd/>
- [7] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/mahfoud-bennoune/from-1990s-algeria-to-911-and-isis-understanding-history-of-homo-islamius-fun>
- [8] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35151967>