

France Under the Influence

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The Charlie Hebdo terrorist assassinations struck France at a moment when it has an unpopular government and a weak President, when factories are closing and jobs are being lost, when French economic policy is determined by Germany via the European Union and its foreign policy is determined by the United States via NATO. Except for the therapeutic moment of togetherness on January 11, the country feels buffeted by winds of conflict it cannot resist.

There is a certain terrible symmetry playing out in France. Israel is deliberately and consistently doing all it can to excite fears among French Jews, in order to lure this desirable population into moving to Israel. Tsahal holds annual support drives in Paris, and a number of French Jews do military service in Israel.

At the same time, the so-called “Islamic State”, as well as “al Qaeda in Yemen” and associated fanatic Islamic groups are working hard to recruit fighters out of the Muslim communities in France and other European countries. Some 1,400 jihadists have traveled to Syria from France to join the Holy War. They are lured by the heroic prospect of helping to “build the Caliphate”, a sort of Israel for Muslims, a holy land restored.

Netanyahu’s recruitment drive enjoys the support of Western media such as Fox News that spread wild tales suggesting that Jews are not safe in France. This in turn threatens France with boycott by American Jews, a potential economic and public relations disaster which no doubt creates panic in French government circles. French leaders are not only closely attached personally to the Jewish community, they also fear the opprobrium of seeing their country slandered as “anti-Semitic”.

Netanyahu forced his way into the front line of the VIPs who came to Paris for the big January 11 tribute to the victims of Charlie Hebdo. Hollande was furious that Netanyahu used the occasion to play Pied Piper, telling French Jews that their only “home” was Israel. Obama certainly shares this anger when he sees Netanyahu getting standing ovations in Congress. But like Obama, Hollande dared not object openly to the intrusion.

For that matter, he dares not object to obscure interference in France by that great oil supplier and arms purchaser, Saudi Arabia, or by that great investor, Qatar, both of them supporters of Islamic extremism.

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu came to tell Hollande that he must treat Muslims kindly and protect their mosques. But Turkey also supports the Islamic extremists in Syria that are recruiting Frenchmen to become terrorists, and is scarcely a model of freedom and tolerance. The presence of Petro Poroshenko, who got to be President of Ukraine only because of the disorder created by neo-Nazi snipers in Kiev, was a signal that France must

stick to U.S.-imposed anti-Russian sanctions that are contributing to France's economic meltdown.

Outside pressures are now pushing France into a war in the Middle East that it can neither afford nor win.

The atmosphere of distrust is so thick these days that "false flag" theories are proliferating on the internet, fed by oddities in the official narrative. The report that one of the Kouachi brothers left his ID in the escape car, facilitating rapid identification of the killers, belongs in the "you couldn't make this up" category, and you would think that any false flagger would have invented something more credible.

On that subject one can observe first, that human incompetence is infinite, and second, that when those in power rush to take advantage of a black swan, that is not proof that they launched it. Those who dictate the narrative have the means to profit from events. As with 9/11, the official story is that the terrorists "want to destroy our freedoms", as if decades of destruction in the Middle East had nothing to do with it. That is the line that prepares the population to support war.

One of the Kouachi brothers, who shot up Charlie Hebdo, and Amedy Coulibaly, who shot up a Kosher grocery store, gave telephone interviews to BFMTV just hours before being killed by police raids. Kouachi stressed that he was motivated by United States aggression in the Middle East. His conversion to Jihad began watching the U.S. destruction of Iraq and photos of Iraqis being tortured by Americans in Abu Ghraib.

The Kouachi brothers claimed to be acting on behalf of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Coulibaly said he was following orders from al Qaeda in Yemen - site of multiple U.S. drone raids that have killed countless innocent bystanders. Coulibaly said that after serving a term in prison for robbery, he had hung around mosques trying to convert people to Jihad.

It is perfectly conceivable that the basic motive for the attack on Charlie Hebdo was not even to "avenge the Prophet" but to impress, inspire and recruit Muslims to go join the great Jihad to restore the Caliphate in the Middle East. Charlie Hebdo was a soft target with symbolic value. Insofar as the disaster serves to heighten the sense of alienation of young Muslims, the recruitment objective risks being advanced.

France is obliged to take measures to stem the round trip traffic between Holy War in Syria and France. There is much talk of restoring authority and "republican values" to the schoolroom. But French leaders need to take a hard look at their own totally incoherent foreign policy, and there is no sign as yet of that happening. By taking the symbolic lead in the regime change war in Libya, France turned that country into a black hole of Islamic extremists. France collaborated in the murder of Gaddafi, whose "Green Book" philosophy was the laughing stock of the West, but which was an attempt to provide a modernizing and moderate version of Muslim principles to combat the Islamic fanaticism that had always been his main domestic enemy and which profited from his demise. The NATO destruction of Gaddafi's Libya brought France into war in Mali, in pursuit of an elusive enemy that Gaddafi had managed to control.

France like the United States designates Islamic terrorism as its great enemy, while doing everything possible to favor its growth and extension. Constant support for Israel, even during murderous bombings of helpless Gaza, even when Mossad assassinates scientists in

Iraq or Iran, or even when Israeli warplanes deliberately sink a U.S. Navy ship, the USS Liberty, makes the United States appear to be manipulated by Israel, while France appears to be manipulated by both Israel and the United States.

For over half a century, the West has systematically opposed the secular nationalist states in the Middle East, starting with Nasser's Egypt, vainly demanding a Western-style democracy that lacks the appropriate social roots. Israel was always most afraid of Arab nationalism, as it would potentially embrace Palestine. Religious fanaticism has seemed safer. Arab nationalism was the positive political hope of the region, and once that hope is destroyed, Islamic extremism rushes into the vacuum. This struggle continues in Syria, with France taking the lead in opposing Bachar al Assad, which means, in effect, supporting the Islamists just as it prepares to go to war against them.

The evident madness of this situation is the reflection of a French government which no longer seems able to devise a policy in its own national interest, and is floundering in the crosscurrents of "globalization".

Blasphemy and Pornography

France is ringing with proclamations that we must continue to publish Charlie Hebdo-style cartoons attacking Muslims, or otherwise we shall have surrendered to Islamic demands. To assert our freedom we must prove that we are not afraid to commit blasphemy.

One needs to have a certain religious spirit to take blasphemy seriously. Frankly, the word means next to nothing to me.

Blasphemy means something if you dare anger your own god, who has warned that this will get you into deep trouble.

But insulting somebody else's god is not blasphemy. It does not affect your relations with god (which is the meaning of blasphemy) but with other people who believe in the god you have insulted.

The notion that it is very daring to commit "blasphemy" against a god in whom you do not believe makes no sense to me. Especially when this is not a god officially worshiped in the society where you live, but is rather the god of a somewhat unpopular minority. Certainly, in the milieu of Charlie Hebdo, insulting Islamic beliefs was the surest way to amuse one's friends. It was supposed to help sell papers.

On the other hand, drawing cartoons that will infuriate masses of people to the point of murder amounts to taking a dare, rather than "blasphemy". You are always free to take a dare. But common sense tells you to ask yourself if it is worth it.

Suppose you dislike aspects of a particular religion, and would like to combat such beliefs. Is drawing cartoons that will unite millions in indignation an effective way to combat those beliefs? If not, this is intellectually no more significant than bungee jumping. Whee, look how daring I am. So what?

There are much more effective ways to argue about religion. Take as a model the enlightenment philosophers of the 18th century. Repeated insults are more likely to unite people in defense of their faith. That is just a practical consideration, regardless of "freedom".

Or on the other hand, the insult could be a provocation intended precisely to make the believers come out in the open, so that they can be attacked. This may be a secret motive for promoting such caricatures. Provoke Muslims into defending their religion, in a way that strikes the majority of our population as totally absurd, so that you can ridicule them still more and perhaps take measures against them – war in the Middle East (alongside Israel), or even expulsion from our countries (an idea now being raised...).

In the specific case of Charlie Hebdo, the vast majority of supposedly “blasphemous” drawings had nothing to do with Muslim beliefs, but were more or less pornographic, featuring sketches of male sex organs. The presence of the phallus was “the joke”. This mixture tends to confuse the issue. Is the problem “blasphemy” or gratuitous insult? One is free to do both, of course, but is this an argument about religion or a bungee jump?

This was apparently true of the latest issue of Charlie Hebdo, published in seven million copies with a subsidy of a million euros from the French government. To this vast public, the cover drawing by the surviving artist Luz (Renald Luzier) was an image of peaceful reconciliation, showing the head of a man wearing a turban, explicitly intended to represent Mohammed, shedding a tear and holding a “Je suis Charlie” sign under the statement, “All is forgiven”. The tear was genuine. Luz was weeping as he drew. As Luz explained in some detail at the January 17 funeral of Charlie’s editor, Charb (Stéphane Charbonnier), he and Charb were lovers. But Luz also wanted to make his colleagues laugh at his cover, and they reportedly laughed. Why? According to internet comments, the drawing was an inside joke, because it included two hidden outlines of penises – [Charlie’s trademark](#). This was all good dirty fun for the Charlie kids. “We are like children”, said Luz.

As the funeral was being held for Charb in France, riots broke out in front of French embassies in Muslim countries from Pakistan to Nigeria. Mobs burned French flags and rioted in Algiers. I have been to Algiers a couple of times, seeing enough to realize the deep division that exists in that country between a modern, educated secular class of intellectuals who yearn to free their country from the bonds of irrationality, and masses of poorly educated young men faithful to simplistic interpretations of the Koran. There is a deep and dramatic conflict of ideas in Algeria. There are intellectuals with the courage to go so far as to publicly defend atheism, in the hope of influencing their compatriots.

Muslims saw the latest Charlie cartoon as a repetition of obscene insults aimed against their Prophet – not only blasphemy, but a pornographic “in your face”. Their riots represent a danger to intellectuals in Algiers who are in a position to promote rationality and secularism in their country. Their safety depends on being protected by the Army. Should Islamist rage against the West influence large numbers of ordinary soldiers, the consequences could be dramatic. The Charlie uproar has given a trump card to the Islamist extremists against the forces of enlightenment.

The Charlie Hebdo humorists were a bit like irresponsible children playing with matches who burned the house down. Or perhaps several houses.

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