

# The Charlie Hebdo Paris Terrorist Attacks and the “Clash of Civilizations”

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Global Research, January 16, 2015

Region: [Europe](#)  
Theme: [Religion](#)

*Despite all the reporting and commentary on the terrorist attacks on the Paris offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, political pundits and mainstream media have failed to shed any light on some of the submerged factors that might have provoked those heinous attacks. Indeed, the simplistic and politically expedient explanations such as “incompatibility” of Islam with the modern world or “good vs. evil” have shed more heat than light on the issue [1].*

Such crude explanations of terrorism are essentially popularized versions of the theory of “the clash of civilizations,” which implies that Islam is inherently irreconcilable with modernization and Western values. The theory, initially expounded by Samuel Huntington in the early 1990s, sets out to identify “new sources” of international conflicts in the post-Cold War world. During the Cold War years, major international conflicts were explained by the “threat of communism” and the rivalry between the two competing world systems.

In the post-Cold War era, however, argue Huntington and his co-thinkers, the sources of international rivalries and collisions have shifted to competing and incompatible civilizations, which have their primary roots in religion and/or culture. It is on the basis of these dubious projections that champions of the theory of “the class of civilizations” can argue that international conflicts erupt not because of imperialistic pursuits of economic, territorial, or geopolitical advantages but because of non-Western civilizations’ reactions to Western power and values [2].

Huntington’s theory of “the clash of civilizations” is essentially a subtle version of Richard Perle’s strategy of “de-contextualization.” Perle, a leading neoconservative militarist (and a prominent advisor of the Likud party of Israel), coined the term “de-contextualization” as a way to explain both the desperate acts of terrorism in general and the violent tactics of the Palestinian resistance to occupation in particular. He argued that in order to blunt the widespread global criticism of the Israeli treatment of Palestinians, their resistance to occupation must be de-contextualized; that is, we must stop trying to understand the territorial, geopolitical and historical reasons that some groups turn to terrorism. Instead, he suggested, the reasons for the violent reactions of such groups must be sought in the arenas of culture and/or religion—in the Islamic way of thinking. Like the “clash of civilizations” theory, de-contextualization strategy has been part of a well-orchestrated effort to divert attention from the root causes of terrorism, and attribute it to “pathological problems of the Muslim mind.”

Beneficiaries of war dividends, that is, big banks and military-industrial-security-intelligence complexes in major capitalist countries, have found this sinister strategy of obfuscating the root causes of terrorism quite useful for the purposes of justifying their military adventures

in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world. Ever since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 beneficiaries of war and militarism

in major Western countries have been searching for substitutes for the “communist threat” of the Cold War era in order to maintain and justify their lion’s share of their respective countries’ national budgets or public finance. The view that Western civilization is threatened by militant Islam has provided these beneficiaries with a “perfect” substitute for the communist threat of the Cold War era.

Aside from their poisonous implications for international relations, such obfuscating explanations simply fail the test of history. The history of the relationship between the modern Western world and the Muslim world shows that, contrary to popular perceptions in the West, from the time of their initial contacts with the capitalist West more than two centuries ago until almost the final third of the twentieth century, the Muslim people were quite receptive of the economic and political models of the modern world. Many people in the Muslim world, including the majority of their political leaders, were eager to transform and restructure the socioeconomic and political structures of their societies after the model of the capitalist West. As Karen Armstrong, author of a number of books on religious fundamentalism, points out:

“About a hundred years ago, almost every leading Muslim intellectual was in love with the West, which at that time meant Europe. America was still an unknown quantity. Politicians and journalists in India, Egypt, and Iran wanted their countries to be just like Britain or France; philosophers, poets, and even some of the ulama (religious scholars) tried to find ways of reforming Islam according to the democratic model of the West. They called for a nation state, for representational government, for the disestablishment of religion, and for constitutional rights” [3].

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Armstrong then asks: “So what happened in the intervening years to transform all of that admiration and respect into the hatred that incited the acts of terror that we witnessed on September 11?”

While profound questions of this type could go some way to help a healthy debate over some of the more deep-seated factors that contribute to heinous crimes of terrorism, political and media manufacturers of public opinion have so far effectively kept such questions off the national/international debate.

A moment of contemplation over questions of this nature reveals a number of critically important but rarely mentioned issues.

To begin with, the essential roots of the madness of cold-blooded terrorist killings lie not in the Islamic teachings but in the politics of demonization, discrimination and occupation. The causal relationship between politics/geopolitics and religion tend to run from the former to the later, not the other way around, as it is often portrayed by the states and the media in major Western countries. Islam is often used as a means to justify terrorist actions in pursuit of disgraceful ends—just as Christianity was used by the Crusaders for material and/or territorial gains.

The biased characterization of Islam fails to consider the fact that the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity far surpass those committed in the name of Islam. The brutal wars of the Crusades, fought in the name of Christianity, continued sporadically over hundreds of years. Written in blood and terror, they were often prompted by a desire to usurp the wealth and treasures of other nations through looting and spoils of war in order to ease the domestic economic and political difficulties of the papacy and major princes of Europe.

But the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity did not cease with the end of the Middle Ages and the Crusades. Transition to capitalism and the dawn of the modern era brought forth its own share of aggression and horrific wars that were also often fought in the name of Christianity and civilization. These included the Holy Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, the Thirty Years' War, the English Civil War, the St. Bartholomew Massacre, Cromwell's slaughter in Ireland, the enslavement and widespread extermination of native peoples in Africa and the Americas, the Eighty Years' War in Holland, the expulsion of the Huguenots from France, the pogroms, the burning of witches, and many other horrific events right down to The Holocaust itself, which was largely the work of people who considered themselves, as did the slave drivers of America's South, to be Christians [4].

Close scrutiny of the Muslim world's early responses to the challenges of the modern West reveals that, as mentioned earlier, the overall policy was moving in the direction of reform and adaptation. That policy of adaptation and openness continued from the time of the Muslim world's initial contacts with the modern world in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries until approximately the last third of the twentieth century.

It was only after more than a century and a half of imperialistic pursuits and a series of humiliating policies of intervention, occupation and regime change in the region that the popular masses of the Muslim world turned to religion and the conservative religious leaders as sources of defiance, mobilization, and self-respect. In other words, for many Muslims the recent turn to religion often represents not so much a rejection of Western values and achievements as it is a way to resist and/or defy the humiliating imperialistic policies of Western powers.

This explains why many of the frustrated youth in the Muslim world (as well as in the belly of the beast, in the core capitalist countries) are flocking into the ranks of militant anti-imperialist forces and employing religion as a weapon of mobilization and defiance.

"The circumstances that attract young men and women to these groups are creations of the Western world that they inhabit – which is itself a result of long years of colonial rule in the countries of their forebears. We know that the Parisian brothers Chérif and Saïd Kouachi were long-haired inhalers of marijuana and other substances until . . . they saw footage of the Iraq war and, in particular, of the torture taking place in Abu Ghraib and the cold-blooded killings of Iraqi citizens in Fallujah" [5].

Calling the tragically reckless terrorist reactions to US international involvements "blowbacks from imperialistic US foreign policies," the late Chalmers Johnson in his illuminating book, *Blowback*, lists many instances of US interventions in the domestic affairs of other countries, as well as some of the violent responses to such interventions:

“What the daily press reports as the malign acts of ‘terrorists’ or ‘drug lords’ or ‘rogue states’ or ‘illegal arms merchants’ often turn out to be blowbacks from earlier American operations. . . . If drug blowback is hard to trace to its source, bomb attacks, whether on US embassies in Africa, the World Trade Center in New York, or an apartment complex in Saudi Arabia that housed US servicemen, are another matter” [6].

This is, of course, not to condone or justify, in any way, the destructive terrorist reactions to imperialistic foreign interventions—legitimate grievances do not justify illegitimate responses. Nor is it meant to disrespect the innocent victims of such atrocious reactions, or to disparage the pain and agony of the loss of the loved ones. The point is, rather, to place such reactions in a context, and to suggest an explanation.

As the late Gore Vidal put it, “It is a law of physics . . . that in nature there is no action without reaction. The same appears to be true in human nature—that is, history.” The “actions” Vidal refers to here are, of course, interventionist military or covert operations abroad, which are sometimes called state or wholesale terrorism. “Reactions,” on the other hand, refer to desperate individual or group terrorism, which are also called retail terrorism [7].

Aside from the fact that wild terrorist acts of desperation often take innocent lives, such misguided actions are also counterproductive in terms of achieving whatever objectives the perpetrators may be pursuing.

To the US, French and other Western powers who are anxious to justify their imperial policies of regime change in the Muslim world, the mindless Paris attacks must feel like manna from heaven, crocodile tears for the victims of the assault notwithstanding. The attacks are expediently utilized to justify not only the imperialist aggressions abroad but also escalate the police/security/intelligence operations at home.

In light of the chronic economic recession and the resulting social tensions in Europe, major European capitalist powers must also be pleased with the timing of the terrorist actions as such actions tend to be quite useful to the goal of diverting attention from economic problems. Conditions of economic distress tend to provide fertile grounds for the rise of fascism. Not surprisingly, fascistic sentiments against Muslims and other immigrants seem to be on the rise in Europe, just as such sentiments targeted the Jews and other minorities during the 1930s economic depression and gave birth to fascism in Europe.

There are clear signs of hypocrisy on the part of Western powers and their media messengers in blaming the attacks on Charlie Hebdo as an indication of Muslims’ intolerance of free press. As historian David North points out, “In the midst of this orgy of democratic hypocrisy, no reference is made to the fact that the American military, in the course of its wars in the Middle East, is responsible for the deaths of at least 15 journalists” [8]. These were the journalists who could not be tolerated by imperialist powers as they were exposing the atrocities committed by the occupying forces in Iraq and elsewhere in the region.

For example, when in 2003 Al Jazeera reporters provided reports from Baghdad of the operations of the US occupying forces that were at variance with the official accounts, the occupiers “taught them a lesson” when an “air-to-surface missile attack on the offices of Al Jazeera in Baghdad . . . left three journalists dead and four wounded” [9].

Another example is the murder (in July 2007) of two Reuters' journalists, Namir Noor-Eldeen and Saeed Chmagh, working in Baghdad: "Both men were deliberately targeted by US Apache gunships while on assignment in East Baghdad." The American and international public was first able to view a video of the cold-blooded murder of the two journalists as the result of WikiLeaks' release of classified material that it had obtained from an American soldier, Corporal Bradley Chelsea Manning [10].

The US and European governments' double standard approach to freedom of expression is also evident in their treatment of Julian Assange, the founder and publisher of WikiLeaks, who has been subjected to unrelenting persecution and de-facto imprisonment in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.

More blatantly, the double standard is evident in these governments' ban on hate speech (when it is directed at Jews), on the one hand, and their protection/support of Charlie Hebdo-type demonization of Muslims, on the other. As the Egyptian Islamic scholar Anjem Choudary [wrote on his Twitter](#) on the same day the terrorists attacked Charlie Hebdo, "If freedom of expression can be sacrificed for criminalizing incitement and hatred, why not for insulting the Prophet of Allah?"

The narrative created by the state and the media of Charlie Hebdo portrays the magazine as representing a glorious democratic tradition of iconoclastic journalism. But the hard-hitting satirists and cartoonists of that venerable tradition of democratic journalism directed their scorn against the elites, the parasitic/rentier classes and aristocratic privileges. By contrast, Charlie Hebdo consistently ridicules (in the most offensive manners possible) the faith, the culture and the life-style of Muslims—in effect, poking fun at the maligned, the poor and the powerless, instead of the rich, the oppressor and the powerful. Whereas the enlightened, positively stimulating and educational tradition of satire operated in the realm of politics, economics and social justice/injustice, Charlie Hebdo focuses primarily on religion, culture and life-style.

As the well-regarded author/scholar Diana Johnstone (among many others) has argued, "Charlie Hebdo was not in reality a model of freedom of speech. It has ended up, like so much of the 'human rights left,' defending U.S.-led wars against 'dictators'" [11].

Charlie Hebdo portrays itself as having a mission to defend democratic secular values against all religions. To petty bourgeois liberals and smug elites, this sounds an admirable mission. In principle, however, it is misguided and counterproductive, as changes in people's views of religion come from long-term, evolutionary changes in their life style and economic/technological circumstances, not by ridiculing their religion and insulting their intelligence.

Furthermore, Charlie Hebdo has been patently inconsistent and highly hypocritical in carrying out its purported mission "against all religions," as it has disproportionately targeted Muslims by lampooning their prophet and besmirching their religion. "It has occasionally attacked Catholicism, but it's hardly ever taken on Judaism (though Israel's numerous assaults on Palestinians have offered many opportunities) and has concentrated its mockery on Islam" [12].

It must be pointed out once again that, as David North puts it,

“To speak bluntly and honestly about the sordid, cynical and degraded character of Charlie Hebdo is not to condone the killing of its personnel. But when the slogan ‘I am Charlie’ is adopted and heavily promoted by the media as the slogan of protest demonstrations, those who have not been overwhelmed by state and media propaganda are obligated to reply: ‘We oppose the violent assault on the magazine, but we are not—and have nothing in common with—Charlie’” [13].

It is obvious, then, that Charlie Hebdo, masquerading as the representative the proud tradition of enlightened satire, abused that valuable tradition for the malicious purposes of denigrating the religion, the culture and the prophet of 1.6 billion Muslims around the world. Shame on you Charlie Hebdo!

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## Notes

[1] In writing this essay, I have used a number of excerpts from Chapter 5 of my book, *The Political Economy of US Militarism* (Palgrave-Macmillan 2007).

[2] Samuel Huntington, “The clash of civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993).

[3] Karen Armstrong, “Ghosts of Our Past.” *Modern Maturity* (January/February 2002), p. 45.

[4] John Chuckman, “Of War, Islam, and Israel,” *Yellowtimes.org* (3 April 2002): <<http://www.yellowtimes.org/article.php?sid=191>>.

[5] Tariq Ali, “Maximum Horror,” <<http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/01/09/maximum-horror/>>.

[6] Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, pp. 8-9.

[7] Gore Vidal, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got To Be So Hated* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002), p. ix.

[8] David North, “‘Free Speech’ hypocrisy in the aftermath of the attack on Charlie Hebdo,” <<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/01/09/pers-j09.html>>.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Diana Johnstone, “What to Say When You Have Nothing to Say?”: <<http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/01/07/what-to-say-when-you-have-nothing-to-say/>>.

[12] Tariq Ali, cited above.

[13] David North, cited above.

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