We are not Charlie: Muslims' differentiated reactions to the Paris Attacks, and the dangers of indiscriminate finger-pointing

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#We Are Not Charlie

Muslims' Differentiated Reactions to the Paris Attacks, and the Dangers of Indiscriminate Finger-pointing

Jannis Grimm

After the January 2015 attacks in Paris, Muslims from all over the world showed impressive solidarity with the victims. This was the more surprising given that the victims included cartoonists working for the satirical magazine "Charlie Hebdo", whose caricatures of Mohammed had previously caused mass protests in predominantly Muslim states. However, European media took more notice of the protests against the new edition of the satirical magazine than of the declarations of solidarity. This selective perception can partly be explained by the fact that European societies constantly expect Muslims to distance themselves from violent acts committed in the name of Islam. These demands reinforce negative associations of Islam with terrorism and violence, and nourish threat perceptions and anti-Islamic prejudices, which in turn contribute to Muslims feeling increasingly excluded in Europe. Extremists can take advantage of this alienation for recruiting purposes. To counter this danger, politicians and the media must act decisively against negative portrayals of Islam and reduce the pressure put on Muslims to justify themselves, a pressure that deepens the division of European societies.

Rarely has an Islamist terror attack been met with such an unequivocal and quick response from Muslims both within Europe and outside of it. The attacks in Paris were condemned in the strongest possible terms by critics ranging from the Arab League and Arabic journalist associations to the most influential religious authorities and Islamic organizations. Those voicing criticism of the attacks included Egypt's Al-Azhar University, the International Union of Muslim Scholars under the chairmanship of Sheyk Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah, and the supreme councils of Muslim scholars of the Arabian Peninsula, South East Asia, Pakistan, and the Balkans. The heads of state or foreign ministers of a great number of predominantly Muslim countries (Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Qatar, Mali, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates) took part in the unity march of 11 January in Paris. Other states condemned the act of terror in official statements or messages of condolence, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia and Pakistan.

When key Western media interpreted the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* as an assault on

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press freedom, and thus on one of the cornerstones of democracy, the media of the above countries largely agreed. The two most influential pan-Arabic daily newspapers, *Asharq al-Awsat* and *Al Hayat* (both financed by Saudi Arabia), classified the attacks as massacres and any attempts at justifying them, as terrorism. *Al-Hayat* referred to an attack on the very heart of Paris. Many newspapers published caricatures which declared the moral victory of satire over jihadist terrorism or challenged the attackers' religious legitimacy. Some national newspapers, including the Egyptian *Al-Masry al-Youm* and *Masr al-Arabiya*, discussed the attacks in the context of the international campaign against the Islamic State (IS) jihadists. In this context, the Iranian *Doulat-e Bahar* even printed a *Charlie Hebdo* caricature of the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The solidarity campaign "Je suis Charlie", which had been started by French journalists' associations after the attacks, struck a chord in Muslim countries as well. This was especially true of states with close connections to France, such as Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco as well as in Turkey. The Lebanese daily *Al-Mustaqbal* promoted the slogan to its front page, as did Turkey's four biggest satirical newspapers, *Girgir*, *Penguen*, *LeMan* and *Uykusuz*. In Istanbul, demonstrators expressed their solidarity by parading "Je suis Charlie" placards in front of the French cultural institute.

Critical nuances

However, the online campaign of the same name (#JeSuisCharlie), which in the first three weeks after the attacks mobilized users of Facebook and Twitter in particular, remained largely limited to Europe and the Anglo-American world. Contributions from states with majority Muslim populations using these hashtags on social media made up less than one percent of the total tweet volume, which by the end of January comprised almost eight million comments. Over three-quarters of the contributions came from France, its neighbouring countries and the US. The number of Arab or Turkish-language contributions remained extremely low at a little over 100,000 tweets.

This can in part be explained by the fact that the Paris attacks were displaced in Arab media coverage by jihadist violence closer to home, such as a devastating car bomb that was detonated in the Yemeni capital Sanaa at almost exactly the same time. The same is true for sub-Saharan Africa. Under the slogan "I am Charlie, but I am Baga, too", African bloggers and journalist tried to draw attention to the Boko Haram massacres in northern Nigeria, which between 3 and 7 January cost hundreds of lives. Many of them also lamented that in general Western victims of terrorist attacks received noticeably more media attention – independently of whether the attacks took place in European or non-European countries.

A number of Palestinian newspapers, such as *Felesteen*, which is close to Hamas, and the national *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, had a similar attitude. Both analysed the attacks exclusively within the context of the many acts of revenge against Muslim institutions in France. The messages of condolences were also put into perspective by the headlines of a few big Arabic and Iranian newspapers, which made the editors of *Charlie Hebdo* and Western policies vis-à-vis the Muslim world partially responsible for the attacks. The front page of the Egyptian *Al-Shorouk* claimed that the satirical magazine's series of insults to the Prophet had "ended in fire". Oman's *Al-Watan* argued in the same vein, "They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind".

Surprisingly, firm critics of the attacks included a number of groups and parties that had in the past been denounced – not least by *Charlie Hebdo* – for their alleged extremism or ideological proximity to jihadist networks, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, its Palestinian sister organization Hamas, or Lebanon's Hezbollah (however, these organizations did

not explicitly refer to the victims in the Jewish supermarket, or else made their comments before the hostage-taking there). Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah emphasized that the acts of the Paris assassins were even more of an insult to Islam than the satirical attacks on its messenger. The messages of condolence also included a communiqué from the President of Tunisia's Ennahda party. Its victory in the country's first free elections in October 2011 had given rise to the controversial *Charia Hebdo* special issue, whose front page showed a drawing by the cartoonist Luz of the Prophet Mohammed issuing the warning, "100 lashes of the whip if you don't die of laughter." An arson attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* offices and personal death threats followed that issue. Since then, the editors had been under police protection. At Friday prayers in Tehran, the January 2015 attack was roundly condemned – although it was also pointed out that the rise of jihadism had been made possible among other things by European and American arms deliveries.

However, as a whole, the messages of condolences were in sharp contrast to previous statements. For instance, in 2012 the Freedom and Justice Party of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had still been demanding that the French government prosecute the Mohammed caricaturists. Years earlier, Hezbollah had even indirectly called for the assassination of caricaturists who insulted the Prophet.

The Paris attacks were approved only by the Nigerian group Boko Haram, whose leader Abubakar Shekau declared himself "happy" with the events; by Islamic State; by Al-Qaeda offshoots in the Maghreb and by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (which assumed responsibility for the attack). On the Internet, too, congratulatory messages remained in the minority. The attacks were, however, glorified in many print and online media that are popular with Islamists and jihadists, including *Inspire* (Al-Qaeda), *Dhabiq* (IS), *Al-Sumud* (Taliban) or *Manba al-Jihad* (Haqqani network). Nonetheless, the hashtag #JeSuisKouachi, referring to the two *Charlie Hebdo* attackers, had only been retweeted about 78,000 times by the end of January 2015 – as compared to the more than 7.5 million re-tweets of the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie.

Selective perceptions

However, the declarations of solidarity made by Muslims across the world quickly retreated into the background of European media reports. This echoed the aftermath of previous attacks, for example those of 11 September 2001 or the assassination of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004. After these events, demands for Muslims to distance themselves publicly from terrorism did not diminish even when the largest Islamic institutions denounced the attackers or when tens of thousands of Muslims in Europe demonstrated against violence. After the Paris attacks, once more, the worldwide condemnations by Muslims were quickly overshadowed in European media coverage by new and partly violent protests in a number of Muslim majority states (Algeria, Yemen, Jordan, Mali, Niger, Pakistan, Chechnya and the Palestinian territories, among others).

These Protests flared up following the new issue of *Charlie Hebdo*, which appeared the week after the massacre with a total print run of eight million copies (as compared to the usual 60,000) – the highest total circulation ever of a French magazine. Its provocative cover, showing a grieving Prophet Mohammed with a "Je suis Charlie" sign in his hands, caused outrage, although that outrage did not reach the intensity of the 2006 wave of protests against the caricatures published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. Yet, once again there were riots against Christian or French institutions that left several people dead, this time in Niger and the Gaza Strip. With great media impact, a member of parliament in Pakistan put a private bounty on the owner of *Charlie Hebdo*. There were violent reactions to the publication even in the civil war areas of Syria. Jihadi militias burnt down

the offices of the rebel newspaper *Souriyatna*, which had devoted a whole page to the "Je Suis Charlie" campaign.

Beyond these extreme cases, a majority of Germany's Muslim umbrella organizations as well as prominent religious institutions across the world condemned the publication, including, for instance, the Egyptian fatwa authority Dar al-Ifta and the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Governments whose representatives had participated in the unity march in Paris only days before (for instance the Egyptian and Turkish governments) now blocked the distribution of copies of *Charlie Hebdo* in their countries. On 21 January Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared in an open letter to the Muslim youth of Europe that the "derogatory and offensive" images were part of a concerted campaign by Western nations against Islam, aiming to depict it as the new enemy. Al-Azhar University in Cairo, on the other hand, tried to restrain believers and called on them to ignore the new "provocation".

Even though the Qur'an – unlike, say, the Bible – does not in fact explicitly prohibit blasphemy or imagery, Muslims perceived the re-printing of a caricature of Mohammed as a further deliberate show of disrespect for their religious sensibilities. Moreover, many Muslims disapproved of the cartoon's caption, "Tout est pardonné" (All is forgiven), because it seemed to be interpreting Muslims' worldwide expressions of solidarity as a collective apology for the crimes of individual jihadis. For them, this linked the whole of Islam with terrorism, just as the caricature published in *Jyllands-Posten* had done by showing the Prophet with a bomb under his turban.

Identifying with the victims, not the contents

For the past few years, Muslims in Europe, as in many Arab countries, have already felt under constant pressure to justify themselves. They are regularly expected to take a "clear stand" against terror and violence – an expectation that, for many, is incomprehensible given that people of Muslim faith make up the majority of the victims of jihadism across the world.

The pressure on Muslims to justify themselves, which re-appears after every Islamist terrorist attack, makes it more difficult for them to integrate into European societies. Many Muslims feel uneasy with being called upon to take a stand as Muslims, rather than as citizens, because it implies a latent complicity on their part. It also exposes an exclusive understanding of citizenship, which, in Germany, is mirrored in the controversies over such expressions as "the occidental Christian tradition" or "the German Leitkultur", and in the debates over whether Islam is a part of Germany or not. When European Muslims are expected to take a stance against terrorism, they are not being treated as equal citizens of Europe's polities, but as potentially extremist foreign bodies. They can only shake off such insinuations through their public profession of loyalty, a profession which they often find problematic.

Thus the campaign of solidarity with the heroized victims on the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial staff was a tightrope walk for many Muslims, who did not want to identify with the magazine's contents. The spread of #JeSuisCharlie hashtags on social media confirms this. The 25 countries with the most contributions include only three majority-Muslim countries: Lebanon, Turkey and Indonesia. A much more prominent hashtag in the Muslim world was #WhoIsMuhammad, which allowed hundreds of thousands to emphasize the peaceful nature of their faith. However, most tweets by European Muslims came under the alternative hashtag #JeSuisAhmed (retweeted over 290,000 times), drawing attention to the French Muslim Ahmed Merabet, one of the two policemen murdered by the *Charlie Hebdo* attackers.

By contrast, pleas such as the *New Yorker* magazine's "We must all try to be Charlie, not just today but everyday" disconcerted many Muslims; so did the fact that a num-

ber of leading international media wanting to show solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo* uncritically reprinted caricatures mocking Islam. In the opinion of many Muslims, *Charlie Hebdo*, while waving the flag of press freedom and freedom of expression, primarily nourished racist prejudice and violated the personal dignity of Muslims. In an open letter in 2013, Olivier Cyran, who had worked for *Charlie Hebdo* until 2001, similarly accused the satirical magazine of racism and an obsessive desire to offend Muslims.

Many devout Muslims – represented in public discourse by religious committees such as the Council of Senior Scholars at Al-Azhar University, or by European scholars of Islam such as the Swiss intellectual Tariq Ramadan – assert that Western media apply double standards when discussing freedom of expression. For notwithstanding the solemn declarations that may have been made after the Paris attacks, the right to free expression is not unlimited, not even in Europe. Most European countries, including France, have laws against hate speech or other legal restrictions, such as Germany's law making holocaust denial a punishable offence. In addition, several European states (Denmark, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Poland) have laws against blasphemy, just as many Muslim countries do. The legal reality differs widely in terms of both the sentences passed down and the frequency with which it is applied. Nonetheless, several of the *Charlie Hebdo* caricatures could be legally contested in Germany as well, since insulting communities of faith and conviction continues to be punishable under §166 StGB, provided that it threatens to disturb the public peace. Muslim associations point out, however, that in Europe anti-Islamic racism has so far been taken noticeably less seriously than, say, anti-Semitism. They frequently cite the case of the former *Charlie Hebdo* columnist Siné as proof for what they consider the double standards of Western newsrooms when dealing with the requirement of free speech. Siné was fired in 2008 for making anti-Semitic statements; his colleagues, meanwhile, were allowed to continue mocking devout Muslims.

Islamophobia in Europe

Against the backdrop of a noticeable rise in xenophobic protests in Germany since October 2014, many Muslims – both in and outside of Europe – increasingly feel that the authorities and political sphere proceed very selectively when it comes to protecting religious or cultural minorities. With reference to the Islamophobic theories of the PEGIDA movement (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) and its imitators, the president of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, Aiman Mazyek, has criticized the fact that anti-Muslim racism is becoming socially acceptable in Germany. For him, this racism has been relativized by policy-makers, or even explicitly tolerated as being a case in point of free speech. Such conduct creates the impression that freedom of expression is considered particularly worth protecting whenever it serves as a cover for manipulating public opinion against Islam. Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier's trip to North Africa in January 2015 showed that outside Europe there is also a perception that Muslims are being increasingly stigmatized. His hosts in the Maghreb declared not only their intention of standing shoulder to shoulder with the German authorities in the fight against Islamist terror, but also voiced their concerns over the rise in xenophobic and anti-Islamic protests in Germany.

The accusation of double standards is also informed by the fear felt by many European Muslims that, regardless of how much they might distance themselves from violence and extremism, they will end up becoming a victim of the increasing hostility to foreigners, especially to those of Islamic creed. Given the reports of a noticeable rise in vandalism and arson attacks on mosques, Muslim community centres and private individuals, this fear does not seem unreasonable. The Observatoire National

Contre l'Islamophobie recorded almost 153 targeted intimidation attempts and assaults on Muslims in France in the month following the Paris attacks – more than in the whole of 2014. Recently, the Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France has confirmed this tendency, stating that Islamophobic assaults had risen by 70 percent since the attacks compared to the previous year.

Moreover, populist movements on the political right have been instrumentalizing the Paris attacks to mobilize support. The leader of France's far-right Front National party, Marine Le Pen, declared that the country was now at war with Islamic fundamentalism, calling for the re-introduction of the death penalty for terrorists. In Germany, the president of the AfD party, Alexander Gauland, saw the attacks as confirmation that PEGIDA was right to warn of an Islamist threat.

Ultimately, however, PEGIDA is only the most visible indication that anti-Islamic prejudice and xenophobia are now far from marginal phenomena. This is confirmed both by the sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer's studies on "group-focused enmity" and by the Bertelsmann Foundation's *Religionsmonitor*. According to these publications, the vast majority of Germany's around four million Muslims are fundamentally tolerant, liberal-democratic and strongly attached to both state and society. However, they are faced with an increasingly disapproving majority society. A special analysis of the *Religionsmonitor*, published the day after the Paris attacks, shows that more than half of all Germans perceive Islam as a threat, and almost one in two feels "like a stranger in his own country" because of Muslims. A quarter of the population even wants a legal ban on the immigration of Muslims. At the same time, Germans barely make a distinction between Islam and Islamism. For the editors of the *Religionsmonitor*, this shows that the public image of Islam in Germany is largely shaped by the violent acts of a radicalized minority.

That is so not least because the press increasingly discusses Islam in the context of security risks for the Federal Republic. In the past few months, the strong media presence of IS and the intense domestic debate about German returnees from the war in Syria presenting a threat to national security have encouraged the association of Islam with threat scenarios. Such scenarios are reinforced by the intelligence services' regular warnings of an abstract terror threat. Fears of a "foreign infiltration" of German society are also encouraged by the eye-catching actions of Salafist groups – such as violent clashes with the police or Kurdish counter-demonstrators, distributing copies of the Qu'ran in pedestrian zones or sending the "sharia police" to lecture passers-by – and the growing numbers of refugees from Muslim countries in crisis.

Moreover, well-known media scientists such as University Professor Kai Hafez from Erfurt or the head of the Media Responsibility Institute Erlangen Sabine Schiffer, as well as the German Islam Conference (DIK), lament the tendentious reporting in the German press, which conditions people to associate Muslims with threat scenarios. Among other things, they point the finger at the imagery used by various leading media outlets, which has long been dominated by perceptions of danger. Thus, as long ago as March 2007, the magazine *Der Spiegel* anticipated the concerns about a foreign infiltration that currently boost movements such as PEGIDA under the title, "Mecca Germany: the silent Islamization". The cover of a recent issue of *Focus* magazine provocatively showed an image of an assault rifle – to illustrate its opposition to the German home secretary's comments that the Paris attacks had nothing to do with Islam.

This one-sided focus on Islam as threat could end up creating a situation in Europe whereby the relationship between majority society and Muslim minorities is no longer negotiated openly, but is essentially left to the authorities responsible for internal security, meaning the police, justice system and intelligence services.

Taking alienation seriously

While Europe's response cannot be to censure publications that criticize Islam, it is nonetheless worth debating whether – even in a free society – journalists should not be asked to take more responsibility for the impact of their work in a social context that is already rife with Islamophobia. Satire – traditionally a means of giving the politically marginalized a critical voice, too – runs the risk of degenerating into mere manipulation of public opinion and agitation when it takes aim at those very same marginal groups.

Yet, there is more at issue here than a lack of tact in dealing with other faith communities. What is needed in particular is an end to assigning collective identities because it polarizes societies in the West into a non-Muslim majority and a Muslim minority, and contributes to the mutual alienation of Europe from countries in the Islamic cultural area. Yet, as the solidarity shown jointly by Christians, Muslims, Jews and non-religious citizens after the Paris attacks demonstrated, there is the collective will to work against this polarization of Europe.

Political initiatives are urgently needed to reinforce this unity, not least to counteract the alienation of parts of the Muslim community in Europe from the majority society – an alienation that creates fertile breeding grounds for extremist ideologies. For if the Paris attacks have "succeeded", their "success" lies partly in the knee-jerk stigmatization of Muslims in Europe, which creates new recruitment potential for the jihadists. Given this background, academics and politicians in particular, but also key media outlets, must be urged to be more scrupulous in their use of terms, so as to guard against blaming Muslims collectively for the crimes of individual perpetrators. However, that will not be easy. A promising approach might be the one taken by Danish officials in reaction to the deadly Copenhagen shootings on 14 February 2015, which have been widely interpreted as copycat acts of the Paris attacks. While announcing new counter-terrorism measures and vowing to defend what prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt described as "a united Danish society", they strictly avoided references to religion, and did not make the connection between the attacks and Islam.

After all, previous efforts of policymakers to differentiate between Muslims and Islamists may have been well-meant, but have proven counterproductive in several ways. First, attempts by Western politicians to interpret what is the correct Islam are almost guaranteed to annoy Muslims, who rightly question the politicians' theological competence. Second, the majority of Islamist movements also reject violence. It would therefore make more sense to refer not to Islamists, but to jihadists or to Islamists prepared to use violence. Third, referring to the religion of Muslim co-citizens makes them members of a quasi-endogamous ethnic group because even non-religious Muslims are thus reduced to their identity as representatives of Islam. Instead, Muslims in Europe should be perceived and treated above all in their identity as citizens – citizens who, as such, bear no more responsibility for jihadist acts of violence than their non-religious, Jewish or Christian fellow citizens. At the same time, attempts to conceal the religious background to attacks are also wide of the mark, since the perpetrators claim that Islam confers legitimacy on their deeds.

It would be more useful to look at the socio-economic and political context in which extremist readings of Islam flourish, rather than debating whether Islam itself has a violence problem. In many parts of the Arab world, Muslims have been subjected to authoritarian repression for decades. The majority of the states concerned rank among the lowest in the world for levels of free speech and press freedom. In many countries where the upheavals of the "Arab Spring" failed to effect a regime change, state repression has only intensified. Only a few days after the Saudi and Egyptian foreign ministers marched through Paris for freedom of expression, a young woman activist was killed by shotgun

pellets during a demonstration in Egypt, and a young blogger in Saudi-Arabia received his first 50 lashes of the whip for blasphemy. To prevent renewed challenges to the status quo, autocrats especially in Egypt and the Arab States of the Gulf are taking increasingly harsh action against the opposition, rather than trying to include it in the political process. Paradoxically, this attitude creates a fertile breeding ground for extremism, which gains traction particularly where central state control is collapsing and violent conflicts abound. Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen provide striking examples of this.

Against this backdrop, it is in Germany's as well as its European partners' interest not only to take equally decisive action against racism and Islamophobia as against anti-Semitism, but also to be more resolute vis-à-vis their partners in the Arab world in speaking up for inclusiveness and respect for human rights – including those of Islamist citizens.

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