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**THE MIDDLE EASTERN MEDIA
AND THE CHARLIE HEBDO EVENTS**

When two brothers Said and Cherif Kouachi attacked editorial staff of satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and killed 12 people, including three very famous cartoonist and a policeman, who, like they, was a Muslim, the whole Europe, USA, and Australia united to honor the memory of the victims of the assassination. However, not everyone has condemned the behavior of the terrorists. The Islamic State group's radio pronounced the killers "heroes" and Somalia's Shebab militants, Al-Qaeda's main affiliate in Africa, hailed the massacre as a "heroic" act.¹

That does not mean that all Arabs agree with this statement but angry protesters in Pakistan and Niger staged demonstrations to condemn *Charlie Hebdo* for the most recent publication of a blasphemous cartoon of the Prophet of Islam. Somalia university students poured into the streets in the capital, Mogadishu, to join global Muslim rallies against a sacrilegious cartoon published by the French weekly. They were chanting slogans and holding placards that read, "Je suis Muslim et j'aime mon Prophète." They also denounced the recent spate of terrorist attacks in France that killed 17 people, stressing that the Takfiri-fueled violence has nothing to do with Islam.² In Arabic countries at the same time there have been many protests against the newspaper. The demonstrators in the streets of big

¹ K.A. Beydoun, "Muslims in the News Only when They're Behind the Gun", *Al Jazeera*, 09.01.2015, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/01/muslims-france-charlie-hebdo-me-201518121649556792.html [19.01.2015].

² "Somalis Slam *Charlie Hebdo* Cartoon", *Iran Daily*, 18 January 2015, www.iran-daily.com/News/109651.html?catid=3&title=Somalis-slam-Charlie-Hebdo-cartoon [21.01.2015].

cities, in Chechnya, Nigeria, showed their indignation towards French satyrs and were willing to die in the name of their religion. Protestants were repeating: “They offended our Prophet Muhammad. That’s what we didn’t like.”³

“Takfiri terrorism” is a reference to the radical Sunni Islamism of groups like al Qaeda and Islamic State, now the most powerful insurgent group in Syria after seizing occupied areas of Syria and Iraq. The Syrian authorities in Damascus condemned the terrorist attacks and even warned that countries supporting terrorism will pay a high price. The official Syrian State News Agency published the statement against the terrorists: “This terrorist act makes it clear without doubt the dangers posed by the spread of the phenomenon of Takfiri terrorism, which poses a threat to stability and security across the world.”⁴

The similar position was taken by the Iranian authorities. They condemned the terrorists and the French magazine. The case was discussed by the Iranian Parliament. One of the deputies, Yunaten Bet Kelia, who represents the Assyrian and Chaldean communities in the Iranian parliament, condemned the insult in *Charlie Hebdo* and said the self-proclaimed advocates of human rights and those who claim to follow the teachings of the Jesus Christ are now revealing their true evil faces. He added that terrorists, who are committing heinous crimes by killing both Muslims and Christians, can never talk of supporting human rights. The deputy also said the publication of the sacrilegious cartoon is aimed at sowing discord among Muslims and Christians. “The Assyrian community has expressed its hatred and disgust of such inhumane act and announced that the true Christianity will always support Muslim brothers and will never fall into the sinister traps of enemies,” he added.⁵

The roots of the conflict dates back to 2006, when the weekly *Charlie Hebdo* published a cartoon of the prophet Muhammad with a bomb instead of a turban on his head. It was a beginning of a great commotion that broke out among Muslims worldwide. The opinions of the Middle Eastern magazines were very divided until the release of the new issue of *Charlie Hebdo*, which showed a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad, holding a sign with the famous slogan “Je suis Charlie”, and over his head there was a sentence “all is forgiven”. When it comes to this all Muslims, and a large number of people of other religions, were unanimous. It was a forcible provocation for them, which in no way can be explained. They constantly repeat “*Charlie Hebdo* has again insulted the Prophet”. Major media in many Arabic, and some African and Asian countries, did not show the front page because many devout Muslims view any depiction of their prophet as forbidden.⁶

³ “‘Muslims’ anger grows over *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon”, *Iran Daily*, 17.01.2015, www.iran-daily.com/News/109600.html [21.01.2015].

⁴ “Syria says Paris attack underline threat of radical Islamism”, *Ahram Online*, 08.01.2015, www.english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/119799/World/Region/Syria-says-Paris-attack-underlines-threat-of-radical.aspx [21.01.2015].

⁵ “Publishers of Insulting Cartoon are Enemies of All Religious”, *Tehran Times*, 18.01.2015, www.tehrantimes.com/politics/121109-publishers-of-insulting-cartoon-are-enemiof-all-religions [21.01.2015].

⁶ “Iran Bans Newspaper Over Article on *Charlie Hebdo*”, *Arab News*, 18.01.2015, www.arabnews.com/middle-east/news/691166 [19.01.2015].

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan commented not only on behalf of the offended Muslims, but also on the others whose newspaper has ever insulted: “This magazine (is) notorious for its provocative publications about Muslims, about Christians, about everyone,” he said. He also adds, that for him (and what other Arabic medias stressed) “*Charlie Hebdo* doesn’t acts according to law, moreover the satyrs which were designed are racist towards people who are believers.”⁷

But the French Council of the Muslim Religion and the Union of French Islamic Organisations released a joint statement calling for Muslims to “stay calm and avoid emotional reactions” to the new issue, which was about to be published on Wednesday. The head of a big mosque in central eastern Paris, Hammad Hammami, was also against Muslims reactions. He said: “We don’t want to throw oil on the fire. We consider these caricatures to be acceptable. They are not degrading for the Prophet,” unlike previous *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons. This statement, however, seems not to be common in other Arabic countries. They were unanimous, that the caricature of the Prophet was offensive for them⁸.

An advance copy obtained by AFP contained cartoons mocking the two Islamists who carried out the attack. One has them arriving in paradise and asking, “Where are the 70 virgins?” The Arabs’ answer also was forcible and fast. They said: “With the Charlie team, losers.”⁹ The common argumentation has been that French people defend newspaper saying that it is an example of “freedom of speech”, and people who killed these 17 people were not real Muslims, were nothing more but the ordinary terrorists, who had nothing in common with Islam. On the one hand we can agree with them, but on the other hand, we must ask ourselves: Do we really express „freedom of speech” by offending another religion, culture or different customs? I’m sure that a lot of people would say „no”, one of the members of Saudi Arabia’s top clerical council said in an interview with the newspaper *Al Ahram*. He added: „It is the duty of the world to create mutual respect and constructive co-existence and that would not be by insulting religious sanctities and symbol. However, we cannot ignore the fact that how these men reacted, should be condemned.”¹⁰ This cleric continued: “As I have already mentioned, France is spreading the motto of »freedom of speech« but they themselves do not apply to this. Muslims are forbidden from praying on the street, wearing veils covering face, and

⁷ “Erdogan Accuses West of Hypocrisy Over Paris Attacks”, *Iran Daily*, 13.01.2015, www.iran-daily.com/News/109339.html [19.01.2015].

⁸ “Prophet Muhammad on New *Charlie Hebdo* Cover”, *Al Jazeera*, 13.01.2015, www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2015/01/prophet-muhammad-new-charlie-hebdo-cover-20151132415225374.html [20.01.2015].

⁹ “*Charlie Hebdo* Mohammed Cover Goes Global but Draws Muslim Ire”, *Ahram Online*, 13.01.2015, www.english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/9/120246/World/International/Charlie-Hebdo-Mohammed-cover-goes-global-but-draws-asp.aspx [20.01.2015].

¹⁰ S. Nashashibi, “Islam and Free Speech: What’s so Funny?”, *Al Jazeera*, 13.01.2015, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/01/islam-free-speech-what-so-funny-201511345039925211.html [20.01.2015].

religious signs on their clothes are not allowed, for instance, in schools. Muslims in this situation are stressing, how much they are discriminated in the countries that are supposedly far away from that. To uphold the right to gratuitously offend, without any sense of responsibility that should accompany freedom of expression, is childish, even dangerous. What point is proven by doing so? A foundation of journalism is awareness that with power comes responsibility, but many journalists in democracies forget how influential their profession is to the public opinion and politicians. We need to remember, that freedom of speech, like any other privilege, comes with an obligation to use it wisely and in a responsible way” – he concluded¹¹.

Many politicians and magazines warned against the new waves of Islamophobia. Iran’s President, Hasan Rouhani, condemned the terror attacks in France and called them “barbaric.” He said in a statement likely referring to the attack at the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine: “Those who murder in the name of Islam, cause Islamophobia throughout the world, whether this is their desired effect or not.” He stressed that, “so-called »Islamophobia« has been significantly exacerbated after the recent attacks. People of other beliefs began to perceive Muslims as one big terrorist group.”¹²

It was expressed that the possibility of perceiving every Muslim as a terrorist was very high. We read in the statement of International Islamic News Agency: “Let us consider even the case of the Parisian police officer Merabet Ahmed who was Muslim and still was shot by one of the brothers. Yet he defended Paris against terrorists and was killed on duty. Like his brother later said, »Islam is a religion of love«, so you cannot perceive every Muslim as a villain.”¹³

The broader context of the *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy was commonly stressed. Some Arab magazines referred to the participation of French soldiers in the US armies actions against Muslims, where thousands of them were killed. They asked the question whether the killing of such a huge amount of people is not more serious, and bigger punishment, than being satirized?¹⁴ Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister added that he hoped that the Western countries thoroughly understand the roots of this violence, terrorism, which has no boundaries and is able to do anything. He said that Iranian authorities believe that the French Government was to blame for the incident, by unnecessarily interfering in Syria politics, giving support to terrorists and supplying arms to them, so the conflict itself is not rotted only in religion.¹⁵

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² “Rouhani: Those Who Kill for Islam Cause Islamophobia”, www.israelnationalnews.com, 01.13.2015, www.israelnationalnews.com/News/Flash.aspx/314541 [22.01.2015].

¹³ “Paris Police Officer’s Brother: Islam is a Religion of Peace and Love”, International Islamic News Agency, 11.01.2015, www.islamicnews.org.sa/page/public/news_details.aspx?id=74509#VMWgCy4Xhtml [20.01.2015].

¹⁴ A. Gresh, “It’s Going to Get Worst for French Muslims”, *Al Jazeera*, 08.01.2015, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/01/it-going-get-worse-french-muslims-2015187810909683.html [21.01.2015].

¹⁵ “France Must Shoulder Responsibility for the Paris Attack: Iranian MP”, *Tehran Times*, 13.01.2015, www.tehrantimes.com/politics/120990--france-must-shoulder-responsibility-for-the-paris-attack-iranian-mp [21.01.2015].