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The murderous cost of free speech

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January has gotten off to a terrible start. Almost every day since the new year, the news has delivered terror, murder and mayhem front and center. In addition to the bomb blast near the police academy in Yemen's capital of Sana'a, which left at least 37 dead, there was the shooting murder of a doctor at a VA clinic in El Paso, Texas.

Tuesday, in an area of central Istanbul heavily frequented by tourists in the historical section of Sultanhamet, a woman speaking English went into a police station, told two officers that her wallet had been stolen and then promptly pulled the pin of one of three live grenades she had on her. She died instantly, as did a policeman. In Afghanistan, soldiers fired mortar, apparently inadvertently, into a wedding party that killed 17 women and children in Kandahar.

All shocking, tragic, heinous deaths. All utterly senseless wastes of human life. Killing for the sake of killing. As horrible as all of those deaths were, the most stunning was the mass murder Wednesday of 11 journalists and a police officer in Paris at the right bank offices of Charlie Hebdo, a French weekly news magazine, well known for its satirical articles and cartoons.

For those of us who have lived in Paris, or those who have spent considerable time there during the last two decades, sadly, the question was not *if* something like this would happen, but rather when.

France, long the bastion of secular democracy and unfettered free speech, is also home to the largest Muslim population in all of Western Europe. As of 2010, approximately 5 million Muslims live in France. Because of France's colonial past, especially in North Africa - Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco - it has been far more welcoming to Muslim immigrants than other nations in Western Europe. This has, over the years, resulted in far right, extreme nationalist politics of some, like Jean Le Pen and his daughter Marine Le Pen, who often touts the ultra homogeneous/racist - and offensive to many - slogan "France for the French."

In keeping with its principles of secularism however, and the French constitutional requirement of *laicite* - separation of church and state - in 2004 France passed the widely controversial legislation which prohibits the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in French public schools. While the law applies to everyone across the board - to Christians and Muslims and their respective veils, to Sikhs and their turbans and to Jews and their kippahs - most people believe the law was aimed specifically at banning hijabs - the Muslim head covering scarves worn by women and girls. This naturally outraged the Muslims of France and their pious brethren around the Islamic world.

One could certainly argue that one of the underlying reasons that resulted in the massacre at Charlie Hebdo came about because of the non-assimilation and ultimate marginalization of the Muslim immigrant experience in France. While the U.S. and other Western countries like Britain are better known as "melting pots" where legal immigrants are concerned, given the nature of the French *identite*, and the social, cultural, economic and political aspects that define it, that is not the case in France. One only need go to the *banlieue*, the poor and crime-infested suburbs that surround Paris, that tourists never see, where many of these disenfranchised live, to see the recipe ripe for the tragedy which unveiled itself. But being a second-class citizen would be only part of the reason. If you add to the marginalized mix, France's interventionist foreign policy, especially where it concerns other Muslim nations - Iraq, Mali, Somalia - the long arm reach of ISIS, the freedom of human movement amongst the nations comprising the European Union, the willingness of many French nationals - nearly 400

- to fight alongside jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria, one should only be surprised that the murderous attack at Charlie Hebdo didn't happen sooner.

Charlie Hebdo, established in 1970, has long been famous in France for its controversial and erudite, though often flippant content. However, what made Charlie Hebdo revered and respected is that no one person, religion or political entity was spared from its satire. It poked fun at all religions across the board, and all politicians, especially the political far right. No one person or institution was safe from its lampoons and cartoons.

In 2011, the offices of Charlie Hebdo was firebombed and burned on the day it was to release a controversial cover that displayed a bearded and turbaned cartoon depiction of Mohammed saying "100 lashes if you're not dying of laughter." There were no deaths in that attack.

Charlie Hebdo's long time editor, Stephane Charbonnier, who died along with 10 of his colleagues during this current terrorist rampage, said back in 2011 that "We can't make everyone happy and we know that ... [But] it wasn't the point [with that cover] simply to make provocation." Later, in 2012, when asked about his decision to run the controversial 2011 cover, he said, "It's been 20 years since we've been publishing provocat[ive news] and its being noticed only when we talk about Islam or this part of Islam and which raises problems and which is a minority."

Freedom of speech and its identical twin, freedom of the press, is the backbone and hallmark of any true democratic society. France's long history of great thinkers, philosophers, poets, talented writers and press freedoms have long attracted those willing to engage in public and political discourse, whether of populist view or not. However, while the weapon of a pen may be mightier than a sword in theory, a pen, at least this past Wednesday, will never stand a chance against a barrage of terrorists' bullets discharged under the guise of religious freedom. And besides, there is no religion in the world that advocates cold, blooded murder in its name.

As France takes its place at the sad table of terrorist tragedies, it will be sorely tested and it will be painful and it will difficult. But despite the bloodshed and the carnage, freedom of the press in France will survive and ultimately thrive, regardless of the suffered battle scars. Those who believe otherwise neither fully understand the political will of the French nor their long-standing, central to its core, secular mandate.

Since the murderous rampage, French citizens have been gathering all over the country holding up pens in protest and some are carrying placards written in English stating "Not afraid." The signs and hashtags *Je suis Charlie Hebdo* (I am Charlie Hebdo) and *Nous sommes Charlie Hebdo* (We are Charlie Hebdo) are everywhere and reflect a level of solidarity with the press far stronger than anything seen in the past. The French have been joined by thousands of protesters in unity with them in several other European cities.

There are eight national daily newspapers in France, including left, right, center and Catholic. There are 14 weekly, including Charlie Hebdo, and two monthlies. No doubt, every writer, editor and cartoonist, in France, and around the world, regardless of their politics or their religion, will not sleep well for some time to come. Perhaps not from fear, but from unadulterated sadness and a loss forever of journalistic innocence. May rational thinkers everywhere prevail. In'shalah.

And at the exact same time, *Vive la France*.

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