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## Who is responsible for the French terrorist attacks?

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Last week's terrorist attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris is being cynically exploited not only by France, but also by the United States and its allies, to advance an utterly reactionary agenda. Attacks on basic democratic rights, already evident in the mass deployment of French police and now troops, go hand in hand with the preparations to escalate war abroad, in the first instance in the Middle East and North Africa.

The essential accomplice in this orchestrated campaign to manipulate public shock and fear over the shootings and suppress any critical questioning is the servile establishment media in France and around the world. From the crude attempts to incite anti-Muslim sentiment to the cynical efforts to paint the perpetrators as enemies of "Western freedoms" (see: "Free Speech" hypocrisy in the aftermath of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*), the outpouring is above all designed to block any examination of who bears the main political responsibility for the shootings.

Many of the chief culprits were to be found among the "world leaders" who headed the official march in France on Sunday, having participated in the US-led "war on terror" and the atrocities in largely Muslim countries that have alienated and enraged a generation of youth in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Within France itself, the policies of President François Hollande and his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, have generated extreme levels of unemployment and poverty in immigrant communities, which, combined with Islamophobic measures including bans on the burqa and Muslim headscarves, have created a fertile ground for recruitment by right-wing Islamist organisations.

However, there is a more immediate sense in which the state apparatus in France is culpable for last week's attacks. No one should accept the explanations offered by the police and intelligence agencies that the perpetrators of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* and the connected shootout at a kosher grocery simply slipped through the net.

The two brothers who attacked the *Charlie Hebdo* offices, Cherif and Said Kouachi, had been known to French authorities for more than a decade. They had also been tracked by the United States and Britain.

French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve last week admitted that the two were “probably followed” prior to the shooting, but claimed that there had been no signs of an impending attack. Cherif was arrested in 2005 and convicted on charges of conspiracy to travel to Iraq to join an Islamic fundamentalist group. According to unnamed US officials, Said had travelled to Yemen in 2011 and received weapons training from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Ahmed Coulibaly, who seized control of the kosher grocery, was convicted of armed robbery and was known to have joined extreme Islamist circles in Paris. In 2009, he was arrested and charged with conspiring to free convicted subway bomber Smain Ait Ali Belkacem, a member of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group. Cherif Kouachi was also questioned over the case, but not prosecuted. Coulibaly was released from prison only in March 2014.

Last week's shootings in Paris follow a recurring pattern in the “war on terror.” Virtually all of those involved in or linked to terrorist attacks in major imperialist centres—from the 9/11 attacks and Boston Marathon bombings to the London subway and Madrid train station bombings and the café siege last month in Sydney—have had unexplained and suspicious relations with the security agencies in those countries.

A *Euronews* article entitled “Key questions around the *Charlie Hebdo* killings go unanswered” asks why French security did not keep closer tabs on the perpetrators. “That may be because,” it suggests, “as often in the past, the French like to ‘turn’ terrorists to do their bidding. The Kouachis may have been candidates for such treatment, but no one in Paris is ever likely to admit that, even if it is a legitimate form of counter-espionage. Not now.”

It is simply not credible that the three men were able to hatch and carry out an elaborate plan involving automatic weapons and explosives without the passive complicity, if not active involvement, of elements of the state apparatus. Even stranger is the apparent escape of Coulibaly's girlfriend, Hayat Boumeddiene, who is also wanted for questioning over the attacks. While the details remain unclear, she supposedly evaded all detection as she fled from France to Spain, where she caught a flight to Turkey, then crossed the border into Syria.

The open and covert collaboration of intelligence and security agencies with Islamic extremist organisations has a long history, most notoriously in the massive CIA operation in the 1980s to finance, arm and train jihadists, including Osama bin Laden and the precursors of Al Qaeda, against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. The circumstances in which known Al Qaeda operatives were able to enter, train and carry out the 9/11 attacks remain completely unexplained to this day.

In pursuit of its colonialist ambitions in North Africa and the Middle East, French imperialism has been in the forefront of the US-led regime-change operations since 2011 in Libya and then Syria. Islamist militias aligned with Al Qaeda were the core of ground forces that, backed by NATO air power, ousted and butchered Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and are now vying for supremacy in the ensuing chaos.

In Syria, France has been actively involved in the US-led campaign to finance, arm and train the so-called “rebels” fighting to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the overwhelming majority of whom are affiliated with Islamist organisations. The target in the latest chapter in the “war on terror”—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—is a creation of the proxy war in Syria.

The French operations in Libya and Syria stand in the long, criminal tradition of French imperialism in recruiting the most dubious and violent elements into the Foreign Legion to carry out its dirty work in the colonies. To what extent and why the state apparatus was responsible, either actively or passively, in last week’s shootings will certainly be covered up. There will be no serious investigation of the attacks, as that would expose only too clearly how they are being exploited to scrap democratic rights, build up the military-intelligence apparatus and prepare for new wars.