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Paris attacks: Let's talk about the 'War on Terror'

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How can one pretend to fight against terrorism while continuing to hold strong ties with nations that sponsor different Jihadist groups, and that export a reactionary and obscurantist ideology? Different fundamentalist groups have been backed, trained and financed by the West (including France) for decades.

The terrorist atrocities that happened in Paris last week are heinous crimes and horrific massacres that left French society terribly shaken and it goes without saying that these violent acts need to be strongly denounced without any reserve.

Like any marking moment in history, especially shocking episodes, the attacks on the weekly French magazine Charlie Hebdo and the Kosher supermarket have been (and will be) instrumentalised in different ways to pursue insidious agendas. Attempts to occult the context and to evacuate the underlying systemic causes that lead to such violence are underway. We urgently need to understand why this violence is happening and keeps recurring and to do so is neither a justification for any crime nor an apology of violence.

"CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS" AND ATTACK ON "FREE SPEECH", REALLY?

For instance, some pundits and politicians have caricatured what happened along the lines of "Clash of Civilisations" between enlightened and freedom-loving Westerners on one hand and

Violent and Evil Muslims in the other hand, as if there is something inherently violent in Islam that pushes Muslims to commit these atrocities. This shameless essentialisation of Islam and misguided culturalist interpretations of events deceitfully shift the discussion from the political to the cultural sphere and dismisses any serious exploration of the "Why" of such acts. The result is a racist backlash against Muslims and humiliating exhortations towards them to denounce and distance themselves from the terrorists. Did it occur to anyone to ask "Christians" in Norway to distance themselves from Anders Breivik who killed 77 people in the name of Islamophobia and White supremacy?

Similarly, we saw a clear pattern in the mainstream media that tried to reduce what happened to simply an attack on freedom of expression, a "sacred" and "absolute" value in the Western liberal democracies, something we must strive to preserve against those fundamentalists who cannot bear their religion be mocked. There is a certain dishonesty with this framing. What of "free speech" when multinational conglomerates and rich men control the majority of media outlets in the world (including in France), thus limiting alternative voices from emerging?

Free speech is not intrinsically good or noble. It is its use that defines if it is progressive and just or reactionary and hateful. In that respect, freedom of expression is not beyond criticism. Recognising this is by no means a call to limit this freedom as it has been shown throughout history that criticism of religion is a key historical condition for the advancement of knowledge, political emancipation and women's liberation, and condemning free speech or putting a limitation on it (caricaturing it as swearing or blasphemy) just because some use it in reactionary way is not justified.

WE ARE ALL CHARLIE! WHO IS CHARLIE?

That brings us to the slogan "We are all Charlie" that is being insensitively deployed all over the place in the last few days. We must not confuse between defending freedom of expression and identifying with a racist and Islamophobic institution. Denouncing the violence against Charlie Hebdo does not mean ignoring their contribution to the Islamophobic climate in France (and Europe) today. There has been a lot of rationalisation around this role played by the magazine advancing the argument that it targeted all religions without discrimination. But we must not forget that criticism of religion is racialised and differential in a context of an existing extreme Islamophobia and an imperialist assault on Muslim-majority countries.

The magazine subscribed to the "War on Terror" and with its satire added to the oppression of already stigmatised and persecuted Muslim communities. Satire should target the oppressor, the powerful not the oppressed and the weak. "Freedom of Expression" therefore comes with a responsibility and the latest depiction of the prophet Mohamed in the first cover since the attacks demonstrates how this context of Islamophobia is completely brushed aside. We cannot appreciate the situation fully without considering this climate of growing state Islamophobia (the law of the veil in 2004, the discourse around the urban revolt in 2005, law on Niqab, debate on national identity, exclusion on veiled mothers from school trips, banning of protests in solidarity with Palestinians...) that has been normalising Muslim bashing in the last few decades as well as the massive inequalities in the society that produce socio-economic marginalisation. We were not Charlie yesterday and we are not today!

The biggest and criminal instrumentalisation of all is the "republican march" where more than a million people marched in the streets of Paris to denounce the atrocities. They marched behind world leaders whose imperialist management of the world caused the chaos and devastation, the majority of the planet lives in. In denouncing Islamist extremism and defending "freedom of expression", they marched alongside war criminals, racists, Islamophobes, fascists, Zionists and dictators. The march was hijacked by hypocritical transnational political elites in order to score points, potentially signalling stormy days to come, additional curtailment of civil liberties, more discrimination, more Islamophobia and a further legitimisation of the "War on Terror". This ludicrous show of "unity" between the world leaders is reminiscent of the Manichean motto "You are either with us or against us" proclaimed by President Bush after the 9/11.

Beyond the political hijacking of the emotion and the strong display of solidarity, one cannot help but notice the telling absence of indignation and/or the unequal outrage at the destruction and millions of deaths caused by the Western imperialist wars in the last few years: Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, Central African Republic and Yemen.etc. It only suffices to point the scant coverage of the massacre of an estimated 2,000 people by Boko Haram in Nigeria that happened in the same week as the Paris shootings to illustrate the hierarchies of the global (dis)-order we live in, an order of selective outrage and sheer indifference. Those victims from the global south are the voiceless, the silenced majority and the un-people of our time.

WHAT ABOUT THE "WAR ON TERROR"?

If we are really serious about attempting to understand such violence, we need to explore the link it has with the disastrous Western foreign policies that fuel more violence and give rise to terrorism in the first place. Islamist terrorism wouldn't have reached the proportions we see today without Western support. How can one pretend to fight this terrorism while continuing to hold strong ties with Saudi Arabia, a state-sponsor of different Jihadist groups, the most fundamentalist state on earth and the prime exporter of a reactionary and obscurantist Wahhabi ideology that preaches violence and nurtures extremism?

Different fundamentalist groups have been backed, trained and financed by the West (including France) for decades against Arab nationalism and against "godless" communism. This support took dramatic proportions after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda, the global terrorist organisation that was created by Bin Laden in Afghanistan emerged out of this war.

The Western imperial interventions in Muslim-majority countries created immense suffering, destruction and mayhem (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Iraq); and exacerbated the threat from international terrorism. Libya has become an exporter of terrorism to the Sahel region after the NATO intervention. Foreign meddling in Syria (which France championed) and Iraq by colluding with terrorist group, created the Islamic State (IS) that is recruiting Jihadists from Europe. It appears that the partner of Coulibaly (the gunman who murdered four hostages in the supermarket and who declared his allegiance to IS) travelled to a part of Syria that is controlled by IS.

Moreover, indefectible backing to apartheid Israel, drone attacks on innocent civilians and the massive rendition/torture program only create discontent and provide a fertile ground to recruit Jihadists that will go and fight the new "crusaders". What these interventions end up doing is unifying the diverse Jihadist groups under the Umbrella of Al Qaeda or IS.

The global war on terror is clearly no such war at all; it is [\[ur=http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/9/gilbert_achcar_on_the_clash_of\]](http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/9/gilbert_achcar_on_the_clash_of) a war between barbarisms[/url], a conflict with enemies designated by the West. It is about justifying interventionism and maintaining Western hegemony, which enforces the brutal neoliberal global order, the plunder of natural resources and the support to repressive regimes.

It is this context of imperialist violence and cruelty, the belligerent foreign policy and attempts to maintain the West's global power that gives rise to Islamist terrorism. If not addressed, the infernal cycle of violence will continue and will cause more suffering all over the world.