

The violence in France is symptomatic of a much wider problem

By [Ciarán Morrissey](#), Comment Editor (2015/16)

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Image: Rob Watling

On 7th January 2015, 12 people – most of them journalists – were shot dead by Islamist gunmen in an attack on the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo. Over the next few days, a further six people were killed in related incidents. The attacks were largely motivated by Charlie Hebdo's cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Its take-no-prisoners editorial style has caused controversy in the past, and the paper itself was firebombed in 2011, after running an issue featuring Muhammad as a guest editor. The issue in question had a front cover consisting of him with the caption "100 lashes of the whip if you don't die laughing". In a show of solidarity with the newspaper, hundreds of news agencies have reprinted Charlie's allegedly bigoted cartoons. One such publication, the Hamburger Morgenpost, was firebombed on Sunday morning.

We must now accept that any European newspaper that is brazen enough to publish such material must accept there is a very real threat of violent and deadly retaliation. This is completely antithetical to the principle of freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and liberal society as a whole.

The issue here is that the retaliation by Islamists has been extreme, disproportional, and fundamentally unlike the retaliation of other groups that have been mocked by the magazine.

It is not the first time such extreme violence has rocked Europe. As mentioned, Charlie Hebdo was bombed in 2011. Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered for his films critical of Islam in 2005. 7 French paratroopers were shot dead by a lone Islamist gunman in 2012. And of course, a British soldier was beheaded by Islamic extremists in 2013, and in 2004, 52 people were murdered by suicide bombers in London.

Whether such men are true Muslims is neither here nor there; it may be the case that Abu Bakr al-

Baghdadi is the most consistent and observant Muslim to ever live, and it may be the case that he's a warlord masquerading as a religious leader. The truthfulness of his interpretation of Islam is an in-house dispute for Islamic theologians to solve, not for Western governments or journalists to decide. What is true, however, is that he and his followers are wreaking havoc on an industrial scale, both in Syria and in Europe.

The two brothers responsible for the Charlie Hebdo shootings had recently returned from Yemen, where one had been imprisoned for aiding insurgents in Iraq. Denmark has offered safe return to any of its nationals currently partaking in the violence in Syria, so long as they undergo rehabilitation. Other European governments are still in the process of deciding their stance towards their citizens who have joined ISIS. What is unavoidable is that the radicalisation of European nationals will continue.

What we must understand and accept is the painful truth that, to many young, European-born men, following a violent interpretation of fundamentalist Islam is more appealing than living a normal life in the West. Unless we thoroughly investigate why this is, regardless of what the wider implications may be and regardless of whether such investigation makes us uncomfortable, this is only going to continue. We need to understand how radicalisation happens, who is most susceptible to it, and how we can stop it. Without this, we risk adding fuel to the fire that has spawned groups like PEGIDA, the EDL and the French National Front. If this problem isn't addressed soon, it's going to reach a point where there is no peaceful resolution available, and it is the ordinary people of Europe - Muslims and non-Muslims alike - who are going to suffer the consequences.



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