

Twelve dead in terrorist shooting at Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo

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Twelve people are dead and eight wounded, including four who are fighting for their lives, after a massacre yesterday morning by masked men armed with assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and bulletproof vests at the offices of the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. The cartoonists Charb, Cabu, Tignous, and Wolinski were among the dead.

Protests were held against the killings in Paris, Toulouse, Strasbourg, and other French cities, as well as in cities across Europe, including London, Berlin, and Rome.

Paris police Wednesday night announced that they had identified three suspects in the attack. The suspects were named as Said Kouachi and Cherif Kouachi, two brothers, both French and in their early 30s, and 18-year-old Hamyd Mourad. Mourad subsequently walked into a police station about 145 kilometres from Paris and is now in custody.

The identification of the alleged attackers raises more questions than it answers. Cherif Kouachi, in particular, is well-known to the French and American intelligence and police agencies. In 2005, the *New York Times* reported that he was arrested in France on charges of intending to travel to Iraq to join the insurgency against the US occupation. In 2008, he was convicted by French courts of terrorism charges and sentenced to three years in prison for allegedly attempting to send French Muslims to Iraq. At the time, he told the Associated Press that he had been driven to act by the images of torture from the US prison at Abu Ghraib.

Kouachi served 18 months of his sentence and remained under close surveillance by the French secret services. The French government will have to explain how such an individual—if police claims that he was the gunman are true—was able to obtain a rocket-propelled grenade launcher and automatic weapons and organize a highly professional and deadly attack in the middle of Paris without being prevented or detected.

Moreover, the site of the attack was itself well known to French authorities as a target. The magazine's headquarters had been placed under police guard when it was fire-bombed in 2011 after publishing caricatures of the Prophet Mohamed. Charb was under police protection, as he was reportedly on a death list drawn up by Al Qaeda. Nonetheless, the gunmen succeeding in gaining access to the building shortly before 11

a.m., by threatening one of its employees at gunpoint.

The Paris atrocity conforms to the pattern of virtually every major case of terrorism internationally, stretching from the September 11, 2001 attacks to the present. They have not been carried out by people off the security services' radar, but by individuals who were well-known and purportedly under scrutiny. Invariably, the authorities asserted that the atrocities were not prevented due to "intelligence failures."

Long experience shows that the political forces that set such operations into motion are inevitably more complex and more sinister than they first appear. Nonetheless, the political purposes to which this latest atrocity will be put were readily apparent well before anyone had claimed to identify its authors. It was seized upon as an act that would strengthen the most reactionary political forces in Europe and internationally.

This was the immediate reaction, for example, of the *New York Times*, which affirmed that the mass killing was "sure to accelerate the growth of anti-Islamic sentiment in Europe, feeding far-right nationalist parties like France's National Front."

The attack in Paris unfolded in the context of growing right-wing, xenophobic, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agitation across the continent, from the mass rallies organized in Germany under the banner of "Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West" to the growth of right-wing nationalist parties like UKIP in Britain. As the media reaction makes clear, the carnage in Paris will be exploited to strengthen these reactionary tendencies.

Marine Le Pen, the leader of the neo-fascist National Front, exploited the attack as a means of legitimizing her party's poisonous chauvinist politics. "It's my responsibility to say that fear must be overcome and we must say that this attack should on the contrary free us in how we talk about Islamic fundamentalism," she declared. In other words, the gloves were off in terms of whipping up anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim hysteria.

Whoever carried out this massacre, such terrorist actions can only play into the hands of the most reactionary forces in the state, and the growing constituency in the ruling elite for stepped-up military intervention abroad and police-state measures at home. As the aftermath of 9/11 conclusively

demonstrated, these actions horrify and disorient the public, and provide an opportunity for the state to implement policies for which—except for the terrorist actions—there is no broad-based popular support.

Predictably, the widely-despised French President, François Hollande, appeared at the site of the shooting at 12:30 p.m. to announce a large-scale police operation and appeal for national unity. With his government’s involvement in Middle East wars growing, despite the overwhelming hostility of the French public, Hollande—France’s most unpopular president of the post-World War II period—seized upon the attack for its political utility.

All accounts of Wednesday’s attack indicate it was carried out in a highly organised and ruthless fashion.

Corinne Rey, a cartoonist at the paper, told *L’Humanité*: “I had gone to pick up my daughter in child care and, when we arrived in front of the paper’s headquarters, masked and armed men brutally threatened us. They wanted to get in and go upstairs. I entered the code. They shot Wolinski, Cabu ... It lasted five minutes. I had hidden myself under a desk...They spoke perfect French, they said they were with Al Qaeda.”

Significantly, the attackers appeared to have detailed intelligence as to the operations of *Charlie Hebdo*. “The attackers were well informed and knew the weekly editorial board meeting was Wednesday at 10 a.m. Otherwise, the rest of the week, people aren’t around so much,” another *Charlie Hebdo* journalist told *Le Monde*.

Witnesses said that the gunmen moved calmly and methodically. They shouted “Allah Akbar” while beginning to shoot. They identified the journalists as they shot them and apparently also said they would not kill women. As they left the building, they engaged in a running gun battle with police. By then, ten people were dead inside the building and two outside, including two policemen.

They attacked several police cars during their escape, shouting “Allah Akbar.” They stopped to execute one wounded policeman with a shot to the head. They then exploited traffic to evade police and abandoned their car near the Porte de Pantin. They commandeered a new vehicle, holding the driver at gunpoint, and escaped into the northern suburbs of Paris.

Anchors on BFM-TV compared the shooting to the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City and speculated that the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) was responsible. Predicting a major change between “a period before and a period after” the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, they added: “January 7 will unfortunately mark France in this beginning of the 21st century.”

During the day, over 3,000 policemen were mobilized for a manhunt in the north Paris suburbs into which the gunmen had disappeared. Heavily armed police were also deployed to train stations, public buildings and monuments in Paris and throughout France.

Alain Chouet, a former security director for France’s General

Directorate of Exterior Security (DGSE), told *Atlantico*: “These are professionals, dressed in black with ski masks so as not to be recognized. They acted in the style of highly-trained criminals.”

Asked whether this meant that Islamist groups like IS were now working with French organized crime, he replied: “It remains to be seen whether the attackers have any foreign ties...They could be one of two types of professionals of violence: criminals who carried out this action for one reason or another, or professionals trained abroad and sent to France for this purpose. However, if the Islamic State had controlled the operation from beginning to end, it seems likely they would have chosen a more symbolic target, more directly representing the French state.”

At this stage, no claims by media or the French state about the attack and who carried it out can be accepted uncritically.

It is possible that the attack was carried out by deeply disoriented and socially alienated French-Muslims, who are embittered by the combination of deplorable conditions in France, anti-Muslim discrimination, their own treatment by the authorities and the bloody consequences of years of US and European military operations in the Middle East. However, this scenario does not exclude the possibility that their actions were facilitated, and even instigated, by agencies and interests of which the actual perpetrators were not aware.

Whatever the case, the political intention and effect of the attack is clear: to polarize society along national, ethnic and religious lines, dividing the working class and strengthening the drive to war, social reaction and repression.

The main danger arising from this horrible attack is the political purpose to which it will be put. In that sense, the media’s initial comparisons of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting with the September 11 attacks are a sharp warning to the working class. That tragedy was exploited to embroil the American people in unpopular wars across the Middle East, above all in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to build up US intelligence agencies as a massive domestic spying apparatus, combined with paramilitary forces operating an unaccountable global network of torture and drone murder.

Class-conscious workers will oppose any attempt by the state to exploit the *Charlie Hebdo* murders to justify stepped-up wars in Iraq, Syria, and the Middle East, and further attacks on democratic rights.



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