

Charlie Hebdo: The Latest Cartoon Controversy



by Gary Fouse

The French satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, is back in the news again. On January 7, 2015, al-Qaeda-linked terrorists attacked the Paris office of *Charlie Hebdo* and murdered 12 people in retaliation for the cartoons mocking the Prophet Mohammad that *Charlie* had published. The incident led to worldwide outrage and an international defense of freedom of expression. To mark the 8th anniversary of the attack and to show solidarity for women's rights in Iran, *Charlie* held a [competition](#) for cartoons to mock the mullahs who rule Iran and who have clamped down so brutally on demonstrators protesting the recent death of a young woman who had "improperly" worn her head scarf at the hands of Iran's "morality police". To be blunt, a couple of the submissions exhibited by *Charlie* are beyond tasteless and should be prefaced with a viewer warning. That said, the question arises of whether they should have

been censored, especially by French standards. They do not directly attack Islam, but they do definitely insult the mullahs, which in itself, is hardly a bad thing.

At any rate, there is outrage in Teheran, and the Iranian government has made it clear they are not amused. More ominously, Iran's foreign minister has made it clear that there will be a response, and we all know what that means coming from the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism. Along more traditional diplomatic lines, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has summoned the French ambassador in Teheran for a formal dressing down, and the Iranian Embassy in Paris has issued a formal [letter](#) demanding that the French government take action. Just what action was not specified, but it can be assumed that Iran wants *Charlie Hebdo* to be punished, shut down, prosecuted, or maybe even have its staff stoned to death on the Place de la Concord. As I write, it is not known what the French response will be.

What I would like to see is for the French government to tell the mullahs that there will be no punishment for *Charlie Hebdo*, and that France will not accept moral lectures from Iran. It would be nice if France reminded Teheran they (the French) resent seeing so many French churches being attacked physically by disaffected Muslim migrants. It would be even nicer to see France-to say nothing about the rest of the civilized world- break relations with Teheran altogether, but I don't expect that to happen.

The question also arises as to what France would do if they are hit with a terrorist attack-not just another attack, of which they have had many, but one clearly traced back to Teheran. That would be an act of war and should be treated accordingly. But then again, this is France we are talking about here. However, the West cannot allow itself to be threatened into taking away our freedom of expression. We allow our own majority religion, Christianity, to be criticized or even insulted. Why should we make an exception

for Islam or in this case, mullahs in Iran? The obvious comeback is that Christians don't respond with violence, but some Muslims do. In addition, as long as the West has to deal with jihadi terrorism, and as long as barbaric 7th century practices continue to be carried out in many Islamic countries, Islam will be subjected to criticism. As it is, many Europeans, who don't enjoy the same First Amendment rights that we Americans enjoy, are reluctant to speak out on these issues, not just fearing a violent Muslim response, but punitive action by their own governments.

Of course, writing as an American, I should not forget the shameful action in 2012 by the Obama Justice Department in jailing the producer of a film ("The Innocence of Muslims") in the US mocking the Prophet Mohammad after riots broke out in the Middle East in protest.

This situation, as it stands, could calm down, blow over, or quickly develop into something much more serious. It is likely that a lone wolf jihadi or group will decide to act on their own. It is all too easy to say that security in France must be heightened. The security and intelligence forces are already stretched to the maximum. Many will say this is a time for skillful diplomacy on the part of the French. I say it is a time for firmness. They don't have to say they agree with the latest cartoons, but they should not allow a government like Iran's to dictate a change in their laws protecting freedom of expression.