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Charlie Hebdo's Caricatures and Macron's Statements in the Eyes of Francophone Muslim Preachers

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In September 2020, a number of groups in the Muslim world promoted a boycott against France's President Emanuel Macron and French products, popularized online through the famous hashtag #Boycottfrance.¹ The trigger to those events were the republishing of the caricatures featuring the Prophet Muhammad by the weekly outlet "Charlie Hebdo," and, later on, the caricatures depicting Turkey's President Erdoğan in a degrading manner.² Turkey's virulent condemnation led President Macron to declare that Islam is a religion "in crisis," referring to the battle against Islamic radicalism in France. For that, Macron declared that he plans to promote secular values in France by unveiling a law originally proposed in 1905

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¹ [#BoycottFrance](#), Facebook. Last accessed 7 January 2021.

² Michael Safi, Redwan Ahmed, Akhtar Mohammed Makoi, and Shah Mehr Baloch, "[Anger towards Emmanuel Macron Grows in Muslim World](#)," *The Guardian*, 28 October 2020. Last accessed 9 January 2021.

that guarantees the separation of church and state, in order to fight “Islamist separatism.”³

The chain of reaction continued after Samuel Paty, a high school teacher in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, located near Paris, distributed the Prophet’s caricatures among his pupils during a class on the subject of freedom of expression. Paty was then beheaded by Abdoullakh Abouyedovich Anzorov, a young Chechen Muslim refugee. The attack on Macron further escalated after he defended the decision of the regional councils of Toulouse and Montpellier to project the caricatures on the walls of municipal buildings, stating that “France will not give up its caricatures.”⁴

The Islamic reaction to those incidents also included prominent Francophone Muslim Preachers in Europe. Their popularity is mainly derived from the September 11th attacks and the rise of new media, which boosted *da‘wa* (spreading Islam activity) and increased their popularity, then used for countering Islamophobia⁵ and strengthening French Muslims’ fragile identity. As native French speakers, they can market Islam on YouTube and Facebook, aiming at the French audience. In that context, Islam was portrayed as a religion that has the cure to modern challenges and current calamities, especially among young viewers, who could see an upgraded form of religious expression, more relevant to their daily lives and apt to the modern challenges that Muslim minorities face in the West.⁶

The analysis of the preachers’ discourse first exposed a unanimous condemnation against the murder of Paty. Famous Preachers such as Nader Abou Anas,⁷ who has more than 40 million subscribers to his YouTube channel,⁸ and Eric Younous, a

³ “[Macron outlines plan to fight ‘Islamist separatism’ in France](#),” *France24*, 2 October 2020. Last accessed 17 January 2021.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Dina Lisnyansky, “Islamic Da‘wa in Europe: France and Italy as Case Studies,” Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2014), p. 182 [In Hebrew].

⁶ This is an implication of a global phenomenon; see, Shaima El Naggari, “The Impact of Digitization on the Religious Sphere: Televangelism as an Example,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 4:2 (2014), 205-207.

⁷ [@ww.dourous.net](#), *Facebook*. Last accessed 25 December 2020.

⁸ [NaderAbouAnas](#), *YouTube*. Last accessed 7 January 2021.

Muslim convert followed by more than 60 thousand people on Facebook,⁹ publicly posted the condemnation of the association “LES Musulmans” about the murder.¹⁰

Other preachers chose to directly address those incidents, such as Imam Abdelmonaim Boussenna,¹¹ the Imam of the “Arrahma Mosque” in Roubaix,¹² who reached more than 700 thousand subscribers to his YouTube channel.¹³ Besides denouncing the terror attack against Paty, Boussenna urged to stop ignoring the radical Muslim minority that promotes the “deadly ideology” (*idéologie mortifère*), which does not represent most Muslims in France, mentioning the famous Quranic verse that opposes killing innocent people.¹⁴ In contrast to the dichotomic Islamic discourse regarding President Macron, Boussenna also sided with parts of his statements, like the recognition of the differences between extreme and moderate Muslims.¹⁵ However, Boussenna emphasized that existing “wrong” interpretations of Islamic texts by some Muslims do not imply that Islam is in “crisis.”¹⁶

Another prominent French preacher of Moroccan origin is Rachid Eljay,¹⁷ an ex-Salafist known as Rachid Abou Houdaifa.¹⁸ Eljay is considered one of the most popular Muslim figures in France, with more than 140 million viewers on his YouTube channel.¹⁹ In a sermon, he emphasized the importance of freedom of speech for both sides (Islamic and secular) and called for a “serene dialogue” (*dialogue serein*) with French society. To back his argument, Eljay also reminded the “restrained and tolerant” Meccan character of the Prophet Muhammad, who

⁹ [@methodemedineplus](#), Facebook. Last accessed 25 December 2020.

¹⁰ [@L.E.S.Musulmansofficiel](#), Facebook. Last accessed 26 December 2020. About this association, see, Pierre Sautreuil, “Islam: l’association «Les Musulmans» lance une Union des imams,” *Le Figaro*, 1 October 2019. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

¹¹ [@imamboussenna](#), Facebook. Last accessed 26 December 2020.

¹² [Mosquee Arrahma](#), Facebook. Last accessed 7 January 2021.

¹³ [Imam Abdelmonaim Boussenna](#), YouTube. Last accessed 7 January 2021.

¹⁴ The Qur’an, 5:32.

¹⁵ See: “[Lutte contre les séparatismes : le verbatim intégral du discours d’Emmanuel Macron](#),” *Le Figaro*, 2 October 2020. Last accessed 8 January 2021.

¹⁶ Abdelmonaim Boussenna, [Un imam réagit au discours du président](#), YouTube, 8 October 2020. Last accessed 26 December, 2020.

¹⁷ [@Rachid.Eljay.official](#), Facebook. Last accessed December 26 2020. In 2019, Eljay himself was a victim of terror, when he was shot in his mosque in Brest in France by a non-Muslim attacker. See, “[Imam Hurt in Shooting Outside Mosque in Northwest France](#),” *France24*, 27 June 2019. Last accessed 8 January 2021.

¹⁸ Over the last years, Eljay left the Salafist movement and moderated his views.

¹⁹ [Pr. Rachid Eljay chaine officielle 1](#), YouTube. Last accessed 7 January 2021.

reacted peacefully against people who mocked him,²⁰ and admonished that the response to blasphemy cannot be violence.²¹



*Popular French preachers on YouTube - condemning terrorism and calling for social action.*²²

One of the senior voices was the famous intellectual Tariq Ramadan,²³ whose media popularity,²⁴ status, and influence among many Muslims in France remained unchanged despite the charges of sexual offenses.²⁵ In a podcast interview with Dr. Salman Butt,²⁶ Ramadan addressed the issue from a broader perspective and claimed that Macron’s statements illustrate the impact of far-right movements on France’s political discourse. Moreover, Ramadan claimed that the “normalization” of the anti-Islamic discourse in the name of secularism (*laïcité*), is one of Macron’s political tactics for winning the next elections. Also, as one of the leading advocates of the integration between Islamic and European values, Ramadan called on the French Muslim community to be more involved in society. He pointed out this can be accomplished if French Muslims start to highlight their positive presence by

²⁰ The Qur’an, 15:97.

²¹ Rachid Eljay, “[Samuel Paty, que font les Imams et Musulmans ?](#)” *YouTube*, 25 October 2020.

²² [Manjah al-Islah](#), “Boussenna, Ismail Mounir, Eljay, Ayman Tr, Bajrafil, Iquioussen, Nader, Tariq Ramadan, Timera et Co.,” *YouTube*, 16 June 2020. Last accessed 20 January 2021.

²³ [@TariqRamadan](#), *Twitter*. Last accessed 7 January 2021.

²⁴ Tariq Ramadan is followed by 2.2 million people on Facebook; see, [@official.tariqramadan](#), *Facebook*. Last accessed 26 December 2020.

²⁵ See, “[Islamic Scholar Tariq Ramadan Admits to ‘Consensual’ Sex with Accusers](#),” *France24*, 22 October 2018. Last accessed 8 January 2021.

²⁶ [@DrSalmanButt](#), *Facebook*. Last accessed 11 January 2021.

becoming a “gift” to the society, instead of abiding by the “victimization” narrative that stresses their negative conception.²⁷

The murder of Paty, combined with the French government’s statements and actions, has exposed the lack of trust and the divisions between Muslims in France and the rest of the society. Although French Muslims are the largest Muslim minority in the West,²⁸ tensions between religious identity and France’s secularism cause a sense of segregation among French Muslims, which adds to their feeling of ‘strangeness’ in their own country.²⁹ The preachers’ discourse reflects these elements, emphasizing the will to play a more significant role in French society while pointing out, at the same time, the continuous “anti-Islam” discourse as the cause of Muslims’ alienation in France.

It seems that the fragile Islamic-secular balance in France is going toward another “explosion,” which might affect more Muslim communities in Europe in the future.

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²⁷ Dr. Salman Butt, “[Is Secularism in Crisis? Shaykh Dr. Yasir Qadhi & Prof Tariq Ramadan.](#)” *YouTube*, interview with prof. Tariq Ramadan and Shaykh Yasir Qadhi, 26 October 2020. Last accessed 7 January, 2021.

²⁸ There are 5,700,000 million Muslim in France and 4,950,000 in Germany; see, Conrad Hackett, “[5 facts about the Muslim population in Europe.](#)” Pew Research Center, 29 November 2017. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

²⁹ Lisnyansky, “Islamic Da‘wa in Europe: France and Italy as Case Studies,” p. 31.