

TERROR ATTACKS IN FRANCE AND MACRON'S PLAN TO COMBAT 'ISLAMIC SEPARATISM'

By Donnelly McClelland



French President Emmanuel Macron has said he can understand why Muslims were shocked by controversial cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. But, in an interview with broadcaster *Al Jazeera*, he said he could never accept the issue justified violence. It comes after Thursday's deadly knife attack on a church in Nice, the third suspected Islamist attack in the country in little more than a month. A row has been growing with some Muslim countries over the issue of the cartoons. Some have urged a boycott of French products as Mr Macron has defended the right to use the images in the context of freedom of speech. (*BBC News*)

Macron's comments on Islam

"Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world today," said French President Emmanuel Macron, as he unveiled a plan on 2 October to defend France's secular values against what he termed "Islamist radicalism". In his long-awaited address, Mr Macron announced that the government would present a bill in December to strengthen a 1905 law that officially separated church and state in France. He announced his intention to "free Islam in France from foreign influences". He went on to say: "The goal of training and promoting in France a generation of imams and intellectuals who defend an Islam fully compatible with the values of the Republic is a necessity." He explained that the proposed bill would end a system allowing imams to train overseas, reduce home-schooling (to prevent Muslim schools run by what Mr Macron called "religious extremists"), and take control of religious funding – associations would have to sign a contract respecting "the Republic's values" in order to obtain subsidies. Mr Macron did acknowledge some government failures when it came to its treatment of immigrant populations: "We built our own separatism. For too long, the authorities have amassed largely immigrant populations in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods with little access to jobs or public transportation."

His address drew criticism and backlash both in France and abroad. But it was his comments and defence of the freedom of expression (which includes the controversial caricatures of Muhammad), in the wake of the beheading of Samuel Paty (a middle school teacher who showed his pupils drawings of the prophet during a discussion on free speech), that has ignited outrage in many Muslim-majority nations.

Mr Macron, in an interview with *Al Jazeera* (31 October), denied attacking Islam, saying France has "no problem" with the religion which is practised by almost six million people in France who "want to live in peace". He stressed that his targets were terrorism and those who promote "radical Islam", saying: "These are violent extremists who distort the religion and commit violence within Islam." Despite Mr Macron's assertions, there are concerns among many French, and European Muslims, that the current rhetoric is causing greater societal division and stigmatisation of Muslims.

Protests and calls to boycott French products

Protests have erupted in recent days in many Muslim countries against France, Mr Macron, and the perceived animosity towards their faith. Tens of thousands of people in several Muslim-majority countries (including Kuwait, Qatar, Palestine, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Syria and Turkey) have staged anti-France protests, with many officials and demonstrators issuing calls for a boycott of French-made products. An estimated 50,000 people staged the biggest demonstration yet in Bangladesh over Mr Macron's stance on the right to publish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, as they tried to reach the French embassy in Dhaka. The rally, which started at Bangladesh's biggest mosque in the capital, was stopped from getting close to the French embassy where security had been stepped up. Protesters chanted "No defamation of the Prophet Muhammad" and burned an effigy of the French leader. This was the third major anti-France demonstration in Bangladesh in the past week and was called by Hefazat-

i-Islam, one of the biggest Muslim political groups in the country of 160 million people. Bangladesh's government has so far not commented on France or the protests.

On Monday 2 November, Indonesian Muslims also marched to the heavily guarded French Embassy in the capital, Jakarta, to protest Mr Macron. They waved white flags bearing the Islamic declaration of faith, and many of the estimated 2,000 demonstrators wore white Islamic robes. Indonesian President Joko Widodo strongly condemned the terrorist attacks in Paris and Nice as well as remarks by Mr Macron that were deemed offensive toward Islam and Muslims.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan went so far as to question his French counterpart's mental condition while criticising his attitude toward Islam and Muslims. France responded by taking the highly unusual step of recalling its ambassador to Ankara for consultations. On Saturday (31 October), foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said France would send its ambassador back to Ankara after a week's absence.

Despite their concerns over Mr Macron's approach and comments, leaders of many Muslim countries offered their condolences to France after the Nice attack and expressed their solidarity as they condemned the violence.

Islamist terror attacks

There have been three terror attacks (possibly four, though the most recent attack in Lyon on a Greek Orthodox priest has not been confirmed a terror attack as the suspect has not been apprehended and the motive for the attack is unclear) in France in the last few weeks. In September, two people were stabbed and seriously hurt in Paris near the former offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* (a small magazine known for provocative and often offensive images and articles, which had published caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in 2012), where Islamist militants carried out a deadly attack in 2015 apparently avenging Muhammad. Since 2 September, 13 men and one woman have been standing trial in Paris, accused of aiding and abetting the terrorists behind the 15 January 2015 killings at the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine offices and the Hyper Cacher market. The magazine chose to run the same caricatures of Muhammad that had stirred such deep controversy again – in tribute to their fallen colleagues – during the trial. A *Charlie Hebdo* front page was projected onto public buildings in Toulouse and Montpellier, which both have substantial Muslim populations.

Middle school teacher Samuel Paty showed these cartoons to his class in a discussion regarding freedom of speech, which ultimately resulted in his death at the hands of a young Chechen immigrant on 16 October. The suspect, who admitted to the killing in a social media post, was subsequently shot and killed by police. Two weeks later (30 October), three people were killed in the Notre-Dame basilica in the seaside city of Nice. The suspect, a 21-year-old man from Tunisia (who had only arrived in the city the night before) is said to be in a critical condition in hospital after being shot and wounded by police.

In the wake of these attacks, France has raised its national security alert to the highest level and Mr Macron ordered that the number of soldiers being deployed to protect public places – such as churches and schools – rises from 3,000 to 7,000.

Elsewhere in Europe there have been three 'Islamist terror' attacks since June this year – on 20 June, three people were killed and another three seriously injured after a lone man attacked people in a Reading park in the UK, the man arrested was a Libyan refugee; on 4 October, two men were stabbed by a suspected Syrian asylum seeker while visiting Dresden, Germany (one of the victims died and the other was critically injured); and on 3 November, at least four people were killed and 22 others injured in a shooting in central Vienna, Austria, by a suspect connected to the Islamic State terror group.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

France is a secular country in that it claims it is officially neutral in matters of religion, supporting neither religion nor the absence of it, as well as not having a state religion. According to the French government's website: "The French state does not favour any one religion and guarantees their peaceful co-existence in respect of the laws and principles of the Republic." Yet, there has been a growing tide of animosity directed at France's Muslim minority. The results of the 2017 elections clearly showed this when 10 million French voters went with Marine Le Pen, a far-right anti-immigration candidate who claimed that France was "being attacked by radical Islam."

One of France's core values/traditions is the freedom of expression – even the right to offend – which is considered a cornerstone of French society. But, in their effort to defend this 'right' they run the risk of championing crude, provocative or hateful expressions of opinion which encourages bias against the majority of French Muslims, who are not extremists and do not support terrorism.

Depictions of the Prophet Muhammad can cause serious offence to Muslims because Islamic tradition explicitly forbids images of Muhammad and Allah (God). France is home to almost six million Muslims (the most in Western Europe), many of whom live in poorer areas and are often marginalised in politics and media. They often become victims of 'scapegoating' and stereotypes. The current uproar in France provides an opportunity for Christians to engage with Muslims on this 'viral' topic. Unfortunately, many Muslims equate all things 'Western' with Christianity, which often includes behaviour and attitudes which Christians also find offensive and insulting. A sensitive and understanding approach from believers could go a long way to building a bridge of friendship which will allow for candid discussions on true belief and understanding of faith. The satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, has actually published more offensive Christian/Church-related content than depictions of Muhammad or Islam. This too could be used as a topic of discussion.

Considering the dramatic, and far-reaching response Mr Macron's comments and actions have elicited in many Muslim-majority nations around the world, it could be a catalyst for 'courageous conversations' between believers and Muslims in many nations, not just France.

Please pray with us:

- For French believers to seek opportunities to reach out to their Muslim neighbours, or to build bridges with marginalised communities in their towns and cities
- For the larger Body of Christ around the world to engage in 'courageous conversations' with Muslims on this topic of offence, in a loving and effective manner
- For believers to have hearts of compassion towards Muslims, including the extremist minority

Image: REUTERS/Lionel Urman