

From the editor's desk

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Far right plays Jihadis' game

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France's worst terrorist attack for half a century, which cost the lives of a dozen people, has rightly been condemned as a frontal attack on freedom of speech. The satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo, had just published a cartoon of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the jihadist group, Islamic State. The terrorists, who announced themselves as being from al-Qaeda in Yemen, were clearly intent on retribution but they were also making a political statement: that their version of Islam is prepared to impose its will by force on all who defy it – sharia by Kalashnikov.

This plays into the politics of the far Right, which has been spreading across Europe with an increasingly anti-Islamic message. These new right-wing factions maintain that Western values, such as freedom of speech, and Islamic values, such as respecting the honour of the prophet Muhammad, cannot co-exist. But the facts do not bear this out. Around the time of the attack a group of French imams was present at a papal audience in Rome. They denounced the targeting of the French magazine by terrorists as “a vile attack, criminal and unpardonable”. Other representative Muslim institutions, including some in Britain, have made similarly forthright statements of condemnation.

This is becoming an increasingly fraught area of confrontation. A swathe of moderate opinion has been mobilized across Germany to resist the rise of the populist anti-Islamic movement, Pegida. A statement signed by 50 German leaders, ranging from former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to the Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki, was published this week in a major newspaper. Chancellor Angela Merkel made a similar appeal on television.

The main focus has been on Dresden, where thousands have joined weekly demonstrations against the alleged “Islamisation” of Germany. The 18,000 who marched in Dresden on Monday were more than matched by anti-Pegida demonstrations in other German cities. Nevertheless opinion polls show that a significant minority of Germans support Pegida's claim that Muslims are a threat to German cultural identity. Indeed even Cardinal Reinhard Marx, President of the German Bishops' Conference, seemed to give credence to that view when he referred to the prevalence of “Islamic conquest rhetoric” on the internet. “Both sides spur each other on,” he remarked.

Far-Right movements are on the rise across Europe, from Ukraine and Hungary to Greece and Denmark. They have various grievances – against Jews, Roma, homosexuals, asylum seekers in general and Muslims in particular. It is not enough for institutions representing the best of European civilization, the Churches especially, to keep their distance from these

poisonous influences. Those who flirt with Pegida-like ideas must be made to feel they are transgressing basic human values – of which religious tolerance, respect for human life and freedom of speech are central. The same applies to those who have any sympathy for jihadi terrorists. Moderate opinion will win, but only if it engages with the fight.