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Arab Regimes Rush to Gain Mileage from the Charlie Hebdo Attack

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Maghreb: Security and Economic Concerns	1
Egypt: Our Enemy is One and the Same	3
Jordan: Accentuating External Commitment and Confronting Internal Criticism	5
The Palestinian Authority: Re-Stating and Reiterating	7
The Syrian Regime: The Absentee in Attendance	8
Conclusion	11

Introduction

The “republican march” held in Paris on January 11, following the attack on the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, was rich in symbolism. It also provided some participating Arab leaders with the opportunity to proclaim their stance, send strong policy messages on their role in combatting terrorism, enhance their international standing and confront their domestic opponents.

Among the more than 40 leaders attending the march from across the globe, the number and rank of Arab leaders was significant, particularly when considering the current predicament facing the Arab world, with the growing role of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other jihadist movements in the region, along with renewed US and western military intervention in Iraq and Syria to combat these groups. The eagerness of several Arab heads of state to take part in the Paris march, notwithstanding widespread popular disapproval in a number of Arab countries, bared their intention to capitalize on a major world event to achieve a number of political aims examined in this paper.

The Maghreb: Security and Economic Concerns

Leaders of the Maghreb states unanimously condemned the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, calling it a terrorist act that threatened the social order and regional stability. Tunisian President Beji Kaid Essebsi and President of the Tunisian People's Congress Mohamed Nasser, sent condolence messages to their French counterparts expressing their solidarity with France, and their commitment to cooperate in the fight against terrorism. Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika described the attack on the French weekly as a “barbaric act” and emphasized his country's engagement in the global campaign against terrorism. Morocco's King Mohammed VI also condemned the attack, expressing his condolences to the French president and his solidarity with the French people.

Not unified, however, was the North African leadership's attendance in the republican march in Paris. Tunisia was represented by outgoing Prime Minister Mehdi Juma; Algeria sent representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whilst Morocco sufficed with its offer of condolences to the Élysée Palace, while boycotting the attendance at the Paris rally on the grounds that a number of the participants carried banners abusive of the Prophet (PBUH). In so doing, Morocco asserted its partnership with France in the fight against terrorism, whilst simultaneously casting itself as defender of Muslims and

champion of respect for their beliefs – all the more so given that the King of Morocco is himself considered to be a descendant of the Prophet (PBUH). In its response to the attacks, Moroccan royalty accommodated several important considerations stemming from the current Moroccan domestic scene, namely the coalition government led by the Islamist Justice and Development Party, and the eruption of protests condemning Charlie Hebdo's intended publication of abusive caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).¹

Algeria's position on the events, on the other hand, reasserted its tough stance on jihadist groups. Same goes for Tunisia, which only 'found' that it was up against extremist groups after the revolution, leading it to place terrorism high on its list of priority concerns in its democratic transition.

Explaining the wave of sympathy with France in the Maghreb are also other historical and economic considerations. Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco are former French colonies, constituting a geographically and strategically vital area for French investment and a French window into Africa. Relations between France and the Maghreb countries are solid from the standpoints of history, economy, and security. Successive generations of North African immigrants contributed to the rebuilding of France after World War II, and recent statistics indicate that immigrants with roots in the Arab Maghreb make up a large proportion of the total immigrant community living in France: the estimated number of Algerian immigrants in France in 2011 was 737 077, with Moroccan immigrants numbering 983 679, and 246 274 Tunisians.² North African immigrants contribute financial remittances to their home countries, and their migration to France lightens the unemployment burden in the Maghreb.

Not surprisingly, the attack on French interests in France by French citizens with Algerian roots (Said Kouachi, Sharif Kouachi, Hayat Boumediene) sparked fears among governments in the Maghreb that the attack would have dire consequences, such as the

¹ "Against cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him", *Arabic 21*, January 17, 2015, <http://t.arabi21.com/Story/803549>

² "Distribution of immigrants by country of birth in 2011," INSEE, http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=immigrespaysnais

likelihood of an adverse impact in relations between France and its North African partners, prompting withdrawals of French investment in the region; reductions in the numbers of French tourists, particularly important to Tunisia and Morocco; an escalation of hate crimes against immigrants of North African origin in France; and increased tightened entry procedures for North Africans coming to France – all of which would impact the fragile economies of Maghreb countries, Tunisia and Morocco in particular.

In addition, there are also fears that France may draw political benefit from the bloodbath at Charlie Hebdo so as to justify a security-driven intervention in Libya to combat militant groups in the country, or to justify French diplomatic intervention in the internal affairs of countries of the Arab Maghreb.

Egypt: Our Enemy is One and the Same

The admonishment "we told and warned you" sums up the Egyptian official position, and conveys the pragmatic bent of an Egyptian decision-maker intent on gaining political mileage from the attack. Egypt's response sought to drive Western nations to overlook any reservations they may have harbored regarding the Egyptian "regime" and its penchant for violent transgression against activists and political opponents, and at the same time to advocate western adoption of Egypt's approach to the fight against terrorism. This view is reflected in the recent January 22 speech by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Davos, in which President Sisi proclaimed that the millions who thronged in the republican march in Paris constituted an extension of the millions of Egyptians who rallied to wrest legitimacy from "those who sought to corrupt the Egyptian character", in a reference to the Muslim Brotherhood. The "terrorism" which hit France, he suggested, is no different from the terrorism that threatens Egypt and the whole region. Sisi thus called upon the world to join forces with his administration, because the battle is "one and the same"³. Note, Egypt wasted no time in capitalizing upon the Paris attacks, with a statement of solidarity issued immediately afterwards by the office of the Egyptian presidency, and with Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry taking part in the republican march.

³ "Sisi in Davos: the battle of terrorism will not deter Egypt from the other challenges," *the Middle East*, January 23, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1uxVnKC>

This rhetoric is not new, and is based on foundations the regime began to lay well before the Charlie Hebdo attack.

From the start of his tenure, Sisi has presented himself as an advocate of religious reform, as exemplified in his address to a group of its Sunni scholars celebrating the Prophet's birthday (PBUH), from the pulpit of the venerable institution of the al-Azhar, where he urged not only for a "renewal" of religious discourse but for "religious revolution", and to dispense with ideas and texts that have been sanctified for centuries and that have come - in his words - to be a matter of concern to the whole world. From his remarks in al-Azhar, the Western right-wing press echoed his controversial question "are 1.6 billion going to kill 7 billion so that they can live?"⁴

Egypt's stance in combating terrorism, and in coordinating with France toward this goal, has been established before the attacks in Paris, as seen in the pledge by French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian while visiting Cairo on September 16, 2014, to increase coordination between the two countries in Libya, where they would work together to "maintain stability and uphold the legitimacy of the House of Representatives" and fight against the "terrorist groups" that are locked in a struggle with the forces of retired Major General Khalifa Haftar.⁵

There was also the call for Europe to expand its concept of terrorism, along with Egypt and other Arab countries, after the military coup on July 3, 2013, putting pressure on European governments to broaden the concept of terrorism and undertake legal amendments to allow the designation of organizations and movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood as 'terrorist'. Britain was among the first countries that responded to that call, forming a parliamentary committee to conduct a broad review of the Muslim Brotherhood and its associations on British territory.

Bartering revenue and economic benefits for a regional security role, Cairo has effectively tied playing a role in the fight against terrorism claim to receipt of

⁴ "Sisi demanding Azhar religious revolution", YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgB52PwOVhM>

⁵ "Experts: Egypt regains international prestige by visiting French Minister of Defense," *Egyptian Today*, July 15, 2014, <http://m.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/523841>

packages of aid and loans to cope with its worsening economic problems. Its rhetoric stresses that stemming the growth of terrorism and narrowing the circles of its advocates must be based on two fundamentals: action on the security front, which it already undertakes, and meeting the developmental needs of countries affected by the "scourge of terrorism", a theme which figured clearly in Sisi's speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Jordan Accentuating External Commitment and Confronting Internal Criticism

The participation of Jordanian King Abdullah II in the republican march served to highlight the security-enhancing role of the Kingdom in the international war on terrorism since its launch after the events of September 11, 2001⁶, and also to spotlight the contribution Jordan is making to the fight in Iraq against al-Qaeda and, latterly, ISIL. As one would expect, the Obama administration applauded the "central role" of Jordan in the effort.⁷

The Jordanian king and his consort Queen Rania joined in the republican march boosting the image Jordan has long sought to promote of itself in the West, of a "moderate" Sunni Islam, rooted in historical and symbolic legitimacy, through its Hashemite lineage. Over the years the Hashemite throne has launched numerous personal initiatives such as the Amman Message of November 2004⁸; the hosting of the International Islamic Conference in 2005; and, its promotion of interfaith dialogue,

⁶ See interview conducted with Jordan's King Abdullah II by Charlie Rose for CBS, PBS, and *Bloomberg News*, December 5, 2014, <http://www.charlierose.com/watch/60485904>

⁷ "The Mouse That Roars", *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2014, www.foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/12/the-mouse-that-roars/

⁸ The "Amman Message" is the November 9, 2004 declaration by Jordan of its intention to hold an International Islamic Conference in Amman in 2005, in an effort to raise awareness of what it called "the essence of the Islamic religion and reality". See: "Initiatives, the Amman Message," site King Abdullah II, http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/ar_JO/initiatives/view/id/31.html

tolerance, moderation, the acceptance of others, and the rejection of bigotry and narrow-mindedness.⁹

But the economic dimension of Jordan's security role speaks volumes in explaining the Jordanian investment in response to the attack: Jordan receives hefty economic and military aid annually from the United States, Arab, and European countries. In 2003, Jordan reportedly received more than \$ 1.5 billion in aid from the United States alone, a figure that is more than five times the annual regular assistance (estimated at 353.6 million US dollars). Sources in Congress estimate that the value of the regular annual US aid will rise to reach one billion dollars during the next five years.¹⁰

In addition to sending messages to the Western public and its governments, Jordanian participation in the republican march also sent a message to ISIL, signaling that their capture of the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh would in no way prevent Jordan from pursuing its fight against terrorism – without, however, implying a Jordanian reluctance to make concessions and reach a deal for his release¹¹. The ISIL response was not late in coming. After its execution of Japanese hostage Haruna Yukawa, it made release of Kenji Goto, the second Japanese hostage, dependent upon Jordanian release of Sajida al-Rishawi, arrested for plotting the 2005 bombings in Amman, and whose name was suggested in Jordan for a possible exchange deal with ISIL, for the release of al-Kasasbeh.¹²

Jordan's domestic messages were varied. The Paris attacks and the ensuing cascade of security and military meetings provided Jordan's political establishment with an opportunity to respond to critics on its decision to join in the international coalition against ISIL, who deemed it not to be Jordan's war but that of "others", and who expressed fear of consequences for the country's security that could result from participation in coalition (pointedly referencing the 2005 Amman bombings). Jordanian

⁹ "King Abdullah calls to end extremism", *The Jerusalem Post*, June 24, 2006, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/King-Abdullah-calls-to-end-extremism>

¹⁰ Jeremy M. Sharp, "Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations", *Congressional Research Service*, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/234976.pdf>

¹¹ This paper went to print in Arabic before news of Muath al-Kasasbeh's execution by ISIL.

¹² "ISIS executes one Japanese and sets conditions for release of the second," *Al Jazeera Net*, January 24 2015, <http://bit.ly/1ursAHy>

media was careful to spin the event to convince the public that ISIL and conditions in the region pose much more than a security threat to Jordan, and constitute, rather, a real existential threat. Jordan's joining of the coalition can thus be seen as a pre-emptive step to protect the country from attack from this organization. By the same token, however, civil society associations and opposition figures claimed that the government took advantage of the West's shifting orientation from support for peoples' revolutions to exclusive focus on the fight against terrorism, in order to itself reverse from the course of opening up to political parties and civil society, and to reassert an iron grip, in the name of security. The evident resumption of political arrests, albeit something denied by the Jordanian government, was cited as additional evidence of underlying intentions, by those making this claim.¹³

The Palestinian Authority: Re-Stating and Reiterating

The Palestinian Authority (PA) was quick to condemn the Charlie Hebdo attack and called for people to stand in solidarity with "our friend France, against terrorism". It organized vigils and demonstrations of solidarity, and directed preachers of Friday sermons in the mosques of the West Bank to condemn terrorism in their sermons, a move that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was keen to amplify and convey to his French counterpart Francois Hollande.

The PA missed no opportunity to make its position clear, in the aftermath of the support the Authority received from France for the PA's draft Security Council resolution to end Israeli occupation, and thereby confirming the recent trend of strengthening diplomatic coordination. The PA's steps and positions do signal a special relationship with France at present, but also take place in a broader context that is in harmony with the international discourse against terrorism, and which was incorporated in the latest draft Security Council resolution.

The participation of President Mahmoud Abbas in the republican march and French President Hollande's reception for him in the Élysée Palace should also be seen in light of Israel's response to the attack. The prominent participation of Israeli prime and

¹³ "Political arrests return to Jordan again," *Al Jazeera Net*, January 21, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LeYy4j>

foreign ministers in the republican march also came with statements claiming that Israel is in the forefront of the world's war on terrorism, and that its aggressive campaigns against the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) are part and parcel of this war.

Hamas, in turn, issued in French a statement condemning the attacks; the statement was intent in showing that Hamas is innocent of the charge of terrorism, countering Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's claim that Israel "faces Hamas' terrorism just as France faces terrorism".¹⁴ Netanyahu, after the Paris attacks, called on Jews in France and Europe to immigrate to Israel to protect themselves from the growing risk of Islamic terrorism in Europe, but his call failed to resonate in official circles in France.

By participating, the Palestinian Authority took a stand against terrorism, one they have long been at pains to proclaim. It also constituted a political investment in an international media event despite a faltering internal situation in Palestine. Palestinian leaderships went out of their way to shake themselves free of the label of terrorism, and to stifle any form or expression of sympathy with terrorism in Palestine.

The Syrian Regime: The Absentee in Attendance

The Syrian regime's reaction came as no surprise. It sought to take advantage of the attack on the satirical French weekly, shoring up its rhetorical line claiming that the war it is waging on the opposition and the Syrian revolution is a war on radical Islam and extremist groups – and that, as such, it is in line with the goals and interests of the West. These countries, France especially, were invited by the regime to change their policies and enter into cooperation with it.

Beginning in late 2013, with the rise of jihadist movements and their increasing influence in Syria, France's stance was one of "combatting terrorism" – a departure from more considered assessments and diplomatic language characterizing its approach to conflict in other arenas, particularly in Africa. France was among the first Western countries to sharpen its diplomatic and political rhetoric against the Syrian regime, with its Foreign Ministry stating, in May 2011, that the regime had lost legitimacy, and that the optimal solution to the Syrian crisis would be for Assad to step down. The French

¹⁴ "Hamas condemns and denounces Paris attacks instigated Netanyahu", *Al Jazeera Net*, January 11, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1BktTdl>

position toward the Syrian regime has not changed during the transition of power in France from the center-right (Union for a Popular Movement) to the left (Socialist Party), following the victory of President Francois Hollande against former President Nicolas Sarkozy, in the 2012 presidential election.¹⁵ France's attitude toward the Syrian revolution helped to promote strengthened military, security, and economic relations with Arab and regional powers (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and, to some extent, Turkey) and to restore vitality and activism to French foreign policy in the Arab Mashreq, filling a void left in an era of American retreat under the Obama administration, an era which also gave rise to conflicting interests, attitudes, and priorities, among the aforementioned countries and the United States.

Like other Arab regimes, the Syrian regime used the attack on Charlie Hebdo to vindicate its own position and to criticize the approaches of the West, of France in particular, and their stance on the crisis in Syria. In an interview with al-Assad conducted by the Czech paper *Eterarna Novina* (January 16, 2015) al-Assad claimed "We told them", elaborating as follows: "We talked about these repercussions from the very beginning of the crisis in Syria (...) when we told them "you should not support terrorism, or give it any political cover, because it will rebound on your country and your people".. but they did not listen to us." Assad's views resonate the racist, right-wing and anti-Islamic view that is gaining prevalence in France and the West generally (and that attest to fundamental ignorance), namely that the central problem is one of Islamic culture. Assad makes no secret in this interview of his willingness and indeed his enthusiasm to cooperate with "any country that wishes to fight terrorism".¹⁶

On the opposing side, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces condemned the attack on the French weekly, and called upon the "leaders of the world" gathered in the republican march to denounce and address the root causes of terrorism – and to get rid of the principle source of terrorism, namely the Assad regime. In contrast to the regime, the opposition coalition took a general position against the

¹⁵ "Francois Hollande, President of France," *BBC Arabic*, May 26, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/worldnews/2012/05/12006_france_holland.shtml

¹⁶ "President Assad tells the Czech newspaper *Eterarna Novina*: "Syria stands against the killing of innocent people. Western politicians are short-sighted and narrow-minded, and what happened in France recently proves the truth of what we have said," *SANA*, January 16, 2015, <http://bit.ly/18sIg91>

attack so as to remain in line with the reservation of many of the armed opposition factions within the coalition on explicitly condemning the attacks, and their prohibition of revolutionary publications and newspapers from dissemination of published material in solidarity – with "Je suis Charlie", with France, and with the attacked weekly newspaper.¹⁷ But after an attack by the Jabhat al-Nusra Front on media offices of the Syrian revolution, an official spokesman for the coalition, Salem al-Maslat, issued a statement condemning the action and asserting the Coalition's commitment to freedom of expression without restriction.¹⁸

Ultimately, there has been no fundamental change in French official discourse on terrorism following the Paris attacks: both the Prime Minister and the President affirmed, once again, that France's war on terrorism is not aimed at Islam, or any civilization or culture, but rather at religious extremism, of which ISIL is at the forefront. However, anyone surveying the European and French political and media landscape (Le Figaro, and Le Monde, and Independent) can discern a right-wards shift of European public opinion¹⁹, and the emergence of voices calling for reopening intelligence channels with the Syrian regime in order to counter the threat of European jihadists in Syria and Iraq, especially now that Interpol statistics speak of five thousand European fighters in Syria.²⁰

This trend weighed heavily on the European Union's institutions, as seen in the security meetings on anti-terrorism agencies held on January 17, and the EU foreign ministers'

¹⁷ "Denouncing the outcome does not address the causes of terrorism," *Coalition*, January 17, 2015, <http://bit.ly/15N1pk2>

¹⁸ "Terrorism against the freedom of expression of the actions of the Assad regime," *Coalition*, January 19, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1HahAta>

¹⁹ For more on the transformations of media discourse in France and Europe after the Charlie Hebdo incident, see: Bashir al-Bakr, "'The French January 7'", *al-Araby- al-Jadeed*, January 16, 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/734dcd61-efa0-45ae-a616-b59af49367e5>

²⁰ "5000 European fighters in Syria pose a threat to their countries", *al-Araby- al-Jadeed*, January 13, 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/0b225aad-6375-4554-b48d-fd30a787eb31#sthash.evOAKWPL.dpuf>

meeting of January 19, which adopted a new strategy to fight terrorism based upon strengthening intelligence cooperation with Turkey, Egypt, and other Arab countries that were left unnamed by European foreign minister Federica Mogherini. This is the context of Syrian opposition fears of renewed European inclination to revive communications and intelligence cooperation with the Assad regime, particularly given the disparate positions of different European countries in this matter, ranging between dismissive and willing. In his last interview Assad spoke of continuing diplomatic relations and security cooperation with European countries including Romania, the Czech Republic, and other countries he did not identify.

It would seem the Syrian regime may be the one that stands to benefit the most from the Paris attacks, both in the immediate and in the long term. There can be no doubt that these attacks will affect the overall strategies priorities of European countries. This may help explain the recent positions of the United States and the European Union welcoming the Russian initiative – despite prior reservations – to establish a partnership between the regime and the opposition to fight jihadist groups, thereby ignoring and by-passing the stipulations of the Geneva 1 declaration, which provides for the establishment of a transitional governing body with full powers, to lead the process of political change in Syria.

Conclusion

By and large, Arab regimes tend to be quick in capitalizing on political violence targeting the West. The attacks that targeted the French weekly *Charlie Hebdo* after it published insulting caricatures of the Prophet (PBUH) were no exception, as some Arab regimes rushed to use the attacks to defend their sanctioning of the use of violence against Islamist movements. Other Arab regimes tried to jump on the bandwagon, portraying themselves as sharing the same trench with Western nations in confronting terrorism. In any case, almost everyone concerned seems more comfortable dealing with the phenomenon of political violence with scant reference to the context which gave rise to it, no doubt to avoid answering questions that – were they even asked – might pose a serious challenge to all the policies that are being followed in the West and the Arab region.