

A dastardly act of terror

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It is not surprising that Muslim governments, organisations and individuals right across the globe have condemned the heinous murder of 12 persons – 10 journalists and two policemen – at the headquarters of the satirical weekly, Charlie Hebdo, in Paris in the late morning of Jan 7. This dastardly act of terror, allegedly carried out by three Muslims, violates every norm in the Islamic faith.

If it is true that the killers were trying to avenge the sanctified memory of the Prophet Muhammad, who has been the subject of continuous ridicule and contempt in the weekly, murdering its cartoonists and editors is clearly an abomination.

One should respond to satirical cartoons with cartoons and other works of art that expose the prejudice and bigotry of the cartoonists and editors of Charlie Hebdo.

One should use the Charlie Hebdo cartoons as a platform to educate and raise the awareness of the French public about what the Quran actually teaches and who the Prophet really was, and the sort of noble values that distinguished his life and struggle.

To assassinate those who mock the Prophet in such a barbaric manner shows that the terrorists have no understanding at all of how the Prophet himself responded to those who poured their venom and hatred upon him when he was conveying the message of justice and compassion that is the kernel of Islam to the people of Mecca and Medina in the early seventh century.

Of course, provoking the six million Muslims in France and the larger 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide through constant insults and indignities directed at the Prophet and the religion – albeit through the medium of cartoons – is not only utterly reprehensible but also an affront to inter-religious harmony and social stability. It is an example of the reckless abuse of the freedom of expression which brings much grief to everyone.

Freedom of expression is not the freedom to denigrate and desecrate a Prophet who is so deeply cherished by millions and millions of Muslims.

If the advocates of human rights regard the freedom of a handful of cartoonists as crucial for human civilisation, they should also show some appreciation of the honour and dignity of an entire people.

Surely, the right to protect one's dignity – the dignity of a collectivity – is also a fundamental human right.

The Charlie Hebdo episode has underscored yet again the importance of exercising freedom with a deep sense of responsibility. Restraints are part and parcel of rights. It is by balancing rights with restraints that one ensures the well-being of the whole.

This balance is especially critical at a time like this in Europe. Negative feelings towards non-European migrants are getting stronger in various parts of the continent.

Islamophobia is part of this, though as a phenomenon it is centuries old. If attitudes towards Muslims and migrants in general have hardened in recent years, it is partly because of rising unemployment and stagnating economies. As often happens in such situations, the “outsider” becomes the scapegoat.

If in the midst of all this, elements from the majority, established community in Europe continue to provoke a minority which by and large views religion from a different perspective than the majority, and if some individuals from that minority react to the provocations through mindless violence, tension and conflict will become the order of the day. This is why both sides should be responsible and restrained.

Indeed, both the majority and the minority should realise that acts of terror can also be manipulated to serve the agenda of some political actor or other.

In the context of Charlie Hebdo, shouldn't we ask if the killing spree on Jan 7 was also a message of sorts to the French ruling elite?

Was some group sending a warning to the elite that it should not have supported Palestine's recent failed bid in the United Nations Security Council to obtain endorsement for its goal of establishing an independent, sovereign state within a short time frame? Was that group the mastermind behind Jan 7?

Questions of this sort strengthen the case for an independent investigation, preferably under the aegis of the UN Secretary-General, into the Paris massacre. The truth behind the massacre may tell us a great deal about terrorism itself in our time.

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