


More than a Million March in Paris



January 11, 2015

Nidra Poller

The latest estimate is 1.5 million marching in Paris today.  We have never seen anything like it. It's 5:20 PM as I start to write and the Place de la République is still filled with an overflow crowd that will probably never get to follow the route to the official destination at Place de la Nation, but that's not what matters.

So far there have been no reports of incidents. I didn't expect the punk jihadis to turn up and face what looks like the entire population united against them. This is probably the safest day since September 30, 2000 when a different crowd massed in Place de la République with posters of Mohamed al Dura and shouted "Death to the Jews." But I was concerned about crowd control. The French are notoriously undisciplined, they mill around, don't queue up, park on the sidewalk and cross against the light.

But today is different. The crowd applauds the police, applauds each other and itself. There is no rush or crush. The police control the flow, there is no pushing from behind. I've never seen anything like it since I settled here in 1972. And I have seen hundreds of demonstrations of every sort. This is not a demonstration, it is an affirmation. *Je suis Charlie* could translate into the long awaited awakening of the democracies. Or it might be one more ocean of illusion to drown in.



I walked around for hours in the Marais, up and down the side streets, up and down the boulevards, between la République and la Bastille. People were pouring in from all directions, walking north, south, east and west. Nothing else seemed to matter. The winter sales, a national sport, began on the fateful Wednesday January 7th. By noon that day the fervor for bargains was replaced with the horror of the Charlie Hebdo massacre. Sunday, always a big shopping day in the Marais, is double triple during the sales. Hardly anyone in the shops today. No line at l'As du Falafel where fans wait patiently for an hour or more to get a table on Sunday. Every street was filled with I am Charlies on their way to Place de la République. The mood was calm, respectful, quietly determined. Like people at work, not like rowdy demonstrators defending special interests.



There was hardly an in or out of the march. Everyone was in and it was everywhere. As if a leader had finally stood up and convoked the population to stand up and defend itself. Is François Hollande that leader? I doubt it, but he stood in the leader's stead today. Were the heads of state—about 60 in all—that flowed into Paris like the Parisians flowed into the Place de la République—the united front of democracies that will truly face up to and defeat jihad conquest? Hardly, but they stood in their place today.

✖ The immense spillover crowd that could not march down the designated routes on Boulevard Voltaire and Avenue de la République, filled the boulevard Temple / Filles de Calvaire / Beaumarchais wall to wall. Night is falling. What light will dawn?

Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas marched a few meters away from each other to the right and left of François Hollande. That doesn't bring anyone closer to peace, it blurs distinctions, but the idea was to have open house in Paris

today. With all its contradictions. The sinister ex-comic Dieudonné tweeted his intention to join the march. Reporters without Borders did not appreciate the presence of certain heads of state that are notorious for suppressing press freedom. True, but unless I am mistaken, neither Erdogan nor Rohani was present. Much is made of the shining diversity of the crowd—"an authentic cross section of French society," according to enthusiastic journalists on the ground. I don't think that was the demographic today. It's not a question of ethnic nitpicking but a necessary search for the truth. What I saw today, as I deliberately walked against the flow of the crowd, the better to see its composition, was something more like the silent majority.

I have repeatedly ended my reports on the distressing situation in France in particular and the free world in general with words of hope. Democracies, I wrote, don't commit suicide. Even if today's "we are all Charlie" message was rather primary, it can mature. Democracy is not the happily ever after of societies composed of all the same, it is the non-violent way of negotiating differences.



At least we can say that a million and a half people in Paris and hundreds of thousands all over the world offered a rousing show of hands...and feet to the aspiring caliphators in our midst. It won't be enough to send them slinking away like cowed dogs, but it is a start.



Ceremonies for all the victims are scheduled tonight at the Central Synagogue, rue des Victoires, and in front of the kosher grocery store at Porte de Vincennes this evening. I will be on Voice of Israel radio at 7 PM Paris time this evening and on the Lisa Benson show at 9.

The four victims savagely assassinated by Amedy Coulibaly in

the Hyper Cacher market at Porte de Vincennes will all be buried this Tuesday in Israel.

Pictures by Jiro Mochizuki.