

# Paris March for Unity was a Great Occasion, But it was Only a Beginning

The Paris March for Unity on Sunday was one of the epochal occasions of this still-young century. There was absolutely none of the mealy-mouthed waffling that echoed hollowly around this country, following the murder of eight members of a rather scurrilous and tasteless French magazine, along with four others, about respecting Islam and remembering that “everyone has hot buttons.” François Hollande, an extremely unprepossessing occupant of the presidency of France, rose magnificently to the occasion. He said that France was, above all other things, a democracy, and that there could be “no democracy without freedom and no freedom without freedom of the press.” That meant that irresponsible and even malicious media, such as the targeted magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, must be tolerated and protected. He referred to the attack on a kosher market the next day, a related incident in which four more people were murdered, as vile anti-Semitism, an attempted pogrom. (The Paris special police, very experienced at dealing with terrorists, deftly rescued 15 hostages while killing the perpetrator, and killed the previous day’s attackers and took their accomplice into custody.)

Hollande called for a march in Paris two days later. There was no bravura, no shrill and mawkish posturing and faux patriotism. The spirit of the appeal and of the occasion was of the utmost spontaneity and dignity; a silent march, no speeches or additional flourishes. Millions of Parisians joined the mighty, proud, shuffling concourse from the *Place de la Republique* to the *Place de la Nation*, two miles through an adequately prosperous and ethnically varied area. The terminal points have witnessed many dramatic moments in 225 years, as France has had two monarchies, two empires, three

restorations, a directory, a consulate, three foreign occupations (including the tender mercies of the Gestapo for four years), a government in exile, several provisional governments, and five republics. The leader of France's imams, prominent figures in Paris' Jewish community and many thousands of Muslims and Jews joined the great movement, along with the official representatives of 50 countries, including the leaders or foreign ministers of Algeria, the European Union, Egypt, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Russia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Arab Emirates. The bells of Notre Dame pealed for half an hour, for only the fourth time in 200 years, (the others were the ends of the World Wars and the Liberation of Paris on Aug. 26, 1944, the last occasion when Parisians massed in such numbers, to acclaim General de Gaulle when he walked down the Champs-Elysees).

No one suggested that all the countries represented are pillars of respect for human rights, but all purported to acknowledge that terrorism was unacceptable. The presence of Arafat's successor as head of the PLO does not mean that that venerable terrorist organization has had a Damascene change of heart, any more than the Turkish prime minister's presence assured that his country would cease its support of Syria's embattled President Assad. But this march, which concluded with President Hollande accompanying Israeli prime minister Netanyahu to the Great Synagogue of Paris, and visiting a French Muslim injured in the shooting in hospital, was the first step in a co-ordinated international response to Islamist terrorism. There was an implicit consensus that the response to intolerable terrorist atrocities was not conciliation, but a requirement that Middle Eastern Muslim nations (Morocco, Malaysia, and Indonesia are unexceptionable in these matters), stop trying to suck and blow at the same time, and cease to utter bland criticism of terrorist outrages while doing nothing to stop them.

There is in place the consensus which can become an effective policy toward failed states. Until the international community, led necessarily by the traditional Great Powers, concert criteria for identifying failed states and assuring that they do not degenerate into breeding grounds and sanctuaries for terrorist organizations – as Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Iraq and some others have – these extreme organizations will continue to attract, train and deploy the authors of these monstrous crimes. This is the time and place to strangle this hideous beast in its itinerant lairs. The Russians and Chinese, especially, have to stop playing footsie with sponsors of terrorism such as Iran and Syria, and the presence in Paris of the foreign minister of Russia, which has had its own problems with Islamist terrorism, is encouraging.

Of course, the great obstacle is Saudi Arabia, which for decades has been the principal paymaster of the Wahhabi establishment that has been the chief propagator in the world of Islamist extremism (though it seems to have reduced its support for these programs in recent years). This is no time for the West to be too shirty with the Saudis, who have given Western Europe, the Americas, Japan, and Australasia a \$1 trillion Christmas gift in the reduced world oil price, and turned the threadbare pockets of the Kremlin inside-out, fortuitously forcing Vladimir Putin to lay off Ukraine.

As has been discussed in this place before, this is the last non-military means to cool Iran's nuclear ambitions, given the ineffectuality of the seven-power talks (U.S., U.K., China, France, Germany, Russia and Iran) and their likely acceptance of Iran as a nuclear military threshold state. Ideally, Ukraine could be shored up and strengthened and Iran could be pushed by the oil squeeze into a satisfactory nuclear agreement, and the West, without lacking in gratitude for the services of the House of Saud, could subtly persuade the desert kingdom of the wisdom of continuing to disassociate

itself from Islamist violence. This seems to have been generally the technique the major countries have employed in inducing China to restrain the outrages of the North Korean regime: discreet, subtle applications of influence with no public recriminations or anything offensive to China's sense of public dignity – whatever works.

The Sunday of the Paris march was a great day, but it was only a beginning. Conspicuous by their absence were serious representatives of the Obama administration or Harper government. Canada was represented by the minister of Public Security, who was at a conference in Paris of ministers of justice and the interior, all of whose 12 national delegation-heads participated in the march except U.S attorney-general Eric Holder. The U.S. was represented by its ambassador, a grossly insufficient gesture of solidarity to America's oldest ally in a cause as dear to the United States as to France. Americans routinely expected the world to rally after the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the world did. This cavalier snub was noted unappreciatively in the French media, and not assuaged by the White House's feeble excuses about security. Scores of other countries managed those problems and there were no incidents on the day.

Given Harper's penchant for tough histrionics about international lawlessness, his absence made no sense. In straight political terms, the front row in the Paris march was the greatest photo opportunity for a Canadian leader in an election year since Pierre Trudeau faced down the rioters on St. Jean-Baptiste night in 1968. Trudeau had to show great spontaneous courage – all Harper had to do was show up at a parade. He might even have been stirred to buy one of the French aircraft carriers Russia ordered from France, but which Hollande has withheld because of Putin's antics in Ukraine – it would add some depth to his voice when he shouts threats at foreign leaders. At the least, he could have sent John

Baird or David Johnston.

Of course it was the bicentenary of the birth of John A. Macdonald, but Harper could have addressed the group in Kingston from Paris, or rescheduled it. He might then have spared us the groaning cliché that Macdonald was “an ordinary man of whom not much was expected.” He became a lawyer in his teens, two years before he was called to the bar, was one of English Canada’s most successful lawyers in his twenties, was elected to the legislature at 29, and when elevated to the cabinet at 32, the governor general (Elgin) told the colonial secretary (the third Earl Grey), it was a very promising event for Canada. So it was. From early days, John A. Macdonald was no ordinary man and Harper could have said, no doubt correctly, that if he were here, his illustrious predecessor would have gone to Paris.

First published in the