

EUROPE ➞

France Finds 14 Guilty In Brutal Charlie Hebdo Attacks

EXTREMISM

The verdict comes after a spate of new terror attacks this fall, including the beheading of a schoolteacher.



Nadette De Visser

Updated Dec. 16, 2020 6:08PM ET / Published Dec. 16, 2020 4:01PM ET



FREDERICK FLORIN/AFP via Getty Images

A Paris tribunal on Wednesday delivered guilty verdicts to all 14 suspects on trial for aiding the Islamic extremists who murdered journalists at the French satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo* and who launched a bloody assault on a kosher supermarket in January 2015.

The verdicts were the culmination of a 55-day trial that has gripped France even as

the country suffered a new wave of terror attacks – including the beheading of a schoolteacher and a killing spree at a cathedral – that have shaken the nation to its core.

The suspects were found guilty of crimes ranging from providing and trading weapons to logistical support to **Saïd and Chérif Kouachi**, two brothers who attacked *Charlie Hebdo* for publishing mocking images of the prophet Mohammed, and to **Amedy Coulibaly**, an associate of the Kouachis who killed a policewoman and took bystanders hostage at a Hyper-Cacher supermarket shortly after the shootings at the newsroom. Coulibaly killed four Jewish hostages before being gunned down by police. Together, the terrorists' brutal rampage left 17 people dead and several injured. (The Kouachi brothers were cornered by police and killed after being on the run for two days after the attack.)

With the main culprits of the attack dead or missing, judges passed down nuanced sentences to the 14 on trial – including 11 who were in court in person and three absentees. The sentences ranged from four years for the lightest to up to life for the most serious (for one suspect in absentia who is presumed dead). One of the absentee suspects, **Hayat Boumeddiene**, was Coulibaly's partner ; she was found guilty of being a member of a terrorist organization and she is believed to be hiding in Syria in ISIS-controlled territory.

During sentencing, the tension in the courtroom was so sharp, it could have cut the air. Survivors and family members of the victims breathed an almost audible sigh of relief as some of the suspects shook their heads.

Two days ago, the suspects were allowed their final words before the court. One of the main suspects, 35-year-old **Ali Riza Polat** – accused of being a close accomplice of the attackers – didn't have much to say, other than that he was clueless about why he was there at all: « *I don't get it* » he said repeatedly, and, « *they stitched me up.* » Others proclaimed their innocence as well: « *I have never been so scared of the ministry of justice in my country as I am now* », **Nezar Mickaël Pastor Alwatik** said. Alwatik's DNA was allegedly found on the pistol and revolver that Coulibaly used in the supermarket siege. After declaring his sympathy for the family of the victims, he added, his voice trembling, « *I have never been so scared* » and proclaimed his innocence: « *I had nothing to do with this.* » **Amar Ramdani**, another accused pal of Coulibaly's, didn't manage to utter a single word.

The trial has ended, but the suspects could challenge the verdict, and Riza Polat's lawyer has already announced she is planning an appeal. And the alleged mastermind behind the attacks – 38-year-old Peter Cherif, or Abu Hamza – has not yet stood trial for his role in the murders. He made a brief appearance during this trial via a video link from prison. In it he declined to respond to any of the questions put to him, holding his Quran and saying God would judge him.

The verdicts come at a time of heightened tensions in France after a series of horrific terror attacks this fall, and after the trial was marred by turbulence from the start. A week into the trial, in early September, the satirical magazine decided to republish the reviled Mohammed cartoons, to dismay and outcry from Islamic communities in France and abroad. Shortly thereafter, on September 25, two people were injured in a knife attack outside the former *Charlie Hebdo* editorial offices. Then, on October 16, history teacher **Samuel Paty** was decapitated in the Parisian suburbs by a young Chechen refugee who was agitated that Paty had shown the Mohammed cartoons in his classroom in an effort to debate freedom of speech. Less than two weeks later, on October 29, a Tunisian man launched a vicious knife attack at a cathedral in Nice, killing three, including one woman who was virtually decapitated.

As the recent attacks show, even as the curtain falls on the court proceedings, some fundamental issues underlying the *Charlie Hebdo* case are back at the forefront in France.

Before schoolteacher Paty showed his pupils the Mohammed cartoons, he said they were free to leave the classroom if the subject was too sensitive to them. His decision to show the images proved fatal. **Abdoulakh Anzorov**, an 18-year-old from Chechnya with temporary status in France, decided to become Paty's judge, jury, and executioner. Anzorov posted a photo with a confession on Twitter after the beheading, saying he had murdered one of **Emmanuel Macron's** « *hellhounds who dared to*

belittle Mohammed... » Shortly after, ISIS supporters started circulating pictures of Paty's body that Anzorov had uploaded to the internet.

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The pointlessness of Anzorov's brutal attack became even more obvious after the French government decided to project the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons on government buildings throughout the country in solidarity with Paty. It was an oddly inflammatory step.

In contrast, in 2006 when the cartoons were first published, public opinion was highly divided, with some supporting the publication and others highly criticizing it. Now, public opinion and political support in France for the cartoonists have been overwhelming. Years of terror attacks have left France with scars and shifted the public and political terrain.

Still, while trials and punishment are attempts at restoration for the survivors and society as a whole, they don't tackle the causes of extremism and the intense anger and hatred at the root of extremist violence. This subject did come up at the trial, if glancingly. Suspect Mickaël Alwatik's defense lawyer, **Marie Dosé**, touched on it while mentioning radicalization in the prison system. « *I don't know if we are partaking in a historical trial here* », she argued. « *We are feeding the crocodiles – like in Guantanamo Bay, Islam in prison is a catastrophe. Why has religion become the opium of prisons ?* » Dosé explained that prisoners held in anti-terror detention in France are not allowed access to the library. « *Someone held as 'antis' (in Anti-Terrorism detention) is not even allowed to read the biography of Mohammed Ali.* » Religious books become their only literature, she noted, and the already radicalized are the only company they can keep. It is the fundamentalists' perfect way in. « *Religion has been taking the place we have given it* », Dosé said.

As Dosé put it, « *There is a second trial taking place here, that of our values. After the beheading of Paty, I wonder how we should respond.* » In parts of French society, a scary vindictiveness has crept up, and it is something a court should be wary of, she warned: « *We should stop feeding the discontent. Don't become a legal system in which punishment is more important than prevention. I am not scared of them* », she said, referencing Islamic extremists, « *I am scared of us. That the worst part of us, little by little, wins. It is not just they that are lost, we are all lost if we forget the nuances.* » It seems the judges in this case thought the same. ■