

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Media Making Terrorist Yamagami, Murderer of Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, into a Hero

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September 9, 2024



Japanese media rapidly making terrorist Yamagami into protagonist in their narrative



Tokyo, 9th September 2024
- Published as the 27th article in a series in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#)

Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 4: Media Crossing the Line

Making Yamagami into a Protagonist Before His Trial

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

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The immediate aftermath of the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in the vicinity of Kintetsu Yamato-Saidaiji station northern entrance on 8th July 2022

It has been two years since the incident that occurred at the north exit roundabout of Yamato-Saidaiji

Station in Nara Prefecture at 11:36 AM on 8th July 2022. During the Obon holiday on 13th August this year, Nippon TV aired a dramatization of the "Shinzo Abe Shooting Incident" in a two-hour special titled "The World's Astonishing News".

The narration began as follows:

"When did the man begin preparing for the attack? Why was former Prime Minister Abe targeted? We will recreate the events based on the police report, statements that have come to light, and interviews with those involved."



Tetsuya Yamagami, the man who killed Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan

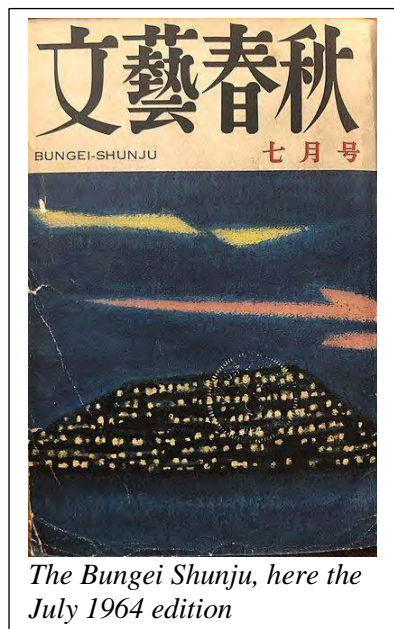
The main character in this dramatization is "the man" - namely, the suspect Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也), who was arrested at the scene. An actor who closely resembles him plays the role, including scenes of interrogation by the police.

The narration mentions "statements that have come to light", but there is nothing new. The suspect stated,

"My mother became deeply involved with a religious organization and donated large sums of money. That ruined our family life. I initially thought about targeting members of the religious organization, but that seemed difficult, so I targeted former Prime Minister Abe instead."

The main character speaks this way during police interrogation, and the drama unfolds with the narrator revealing,

"It later became known that this religious organization is the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), commonly known as the [Unification Church](#)."



The Bungei Shunju, here the July 1964 edition

Amid the intense media coverage following the incident, print media such as the monthly general magazine Bungei Shunju (文藝春秋), extensively covered the defendant's life story. While adapting this into a television drama may seem like a new experiment, it poses a significant problem.

This is because, as mentioned at the end of the drama,

"Yamagami has been indicted on charges including murder, and while the details of the incident and the core motive behind the crime will be clarified in court, there is currently no prospect of when the trial will begin."

Since the details have not yet been made clear, the drama risks manipulating public perception before the trial has even taken place.

Based on a court case where former members won a lawsuit against the [religious organization](#), the program also dramatized the case of a woman who had become a member at the age of 17. The drama

depicted her experiences: attending retreats to study the teachings, participating in "spiritual sales", being matched with a Korean partner for a [mass wedding](#), and eventually leaving the [organization](#) because of being "persuaded by her family". Through the experiences of this former member, the program criticized the [religious organization](#).

Meanwhile, the reenactment of the incident reaches a climax with dramatic sound effects reminiscent of a morality tale of good triumphing over evil, interpreting the defendant's words posted on the bulletin board of a reporter's blog, "I will risk my life to become the liberator of all those associated with the [Unification Church](#)," and "Strangely enough, I too want a gun so badly I would give anything for it." These words were interpreted as a declaration of his resolve to carry out the shooting.

In the drama, Abe's cause of death was explained by the Nara Prefectural Police as "a fatal injury caused by damage to an artery under his left collarbone from a bullet that entered through his left shoulder." However, the content of a press conference held by Nara Medical University Hospital, where Abe received emergency treatment, was ignored. The hospital had stated that "a bullet that entered from the right front side of the neck damaged the heart and major blood vessels, leading to death from blood loss."



Shinzo Abe delivering a video message on 12th September 2021

Regarding the question why former Prime Minister Abe was targeted, the drama portrayed a scene where the main character watches on his computer a video message from Abe. This message was sent to an event held by the Universal Peace Federation, a group related to the [religious organization](#). The drama also suggested that the crime was committed because the suspect believed Abe's grandfather, former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (岸信介), had invited the [religious organization](#) to Japan, and that Abe himself was also connected to it.

The program also showed a photo of [Unification Church](#) founder [Sun Myung Moon](#) meeting with Kishi and touched on the "ties" between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the [religious organization](#). As criticism of the [religious organization](#) and the LDP grew, the government requested a court order to dissolve the [organization](#).



Sun Myung Moon and Nobusuke Kishi, Prime Minister of Japan 1957-1960, shaking hands in Tokyo

This drama does not evoke strong anger toward the suspect who killed former Prime Minister Abe. When the defendant is made the protagonist, his background, circumstances, and feelings are expressed in a way that evokes sympathy for him as a person.

In contrast, the followers of the [religious organization](#) were depicted in a dehumanized way - portrayed as being brainwashed with doctrines during retreats and being pushed to split with their boyfriend or girlfriend. The defendant is portrayed more humanely. The way the media has created the "Yamagami Story" and portrayed the suspect and the followers differently may have led to a case of misrepresentation of some kind.

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Media Generating Sympathy For Terrorists

September 6, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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Sympathy for terrorists created by media's generous coverage of motive and background of assassins and would-be assassins



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Classic impression manipulation without remorse

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of Sekai Nippo

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On 15th April 2023, an explosive device was thrown near Prime Minister Fumio Kishida as he was giving a campaign speech for a House of Representatives by-election. This led to an unexpected debate regarding **reporting about terrorism**.

As previously reported, international political scientist Yuichi Hosoya (細谷雄一) pointed out on Twitter (now X) that the “general understanding in terrorism research” is that **“the very attitude of trying to understand the background of terrorist crimes aids and abets terrorists in achieving their goals.”** However, this understanding is not common in Japan.

After the incident, Goshi Hosono (細野豪志), a member of the *House of Representatives* from the *Liberal Democratic Party*, stated,

“Once someone commits terrorism, I don't give any consideration to their claims or background. From such things we can deduce no general way to deal with terror.”

As the content of the perpetrator's tweets and other details began to be reported, Hosono argued,

“The media has begun a race to report on the man who attacked Prime Minister Kishida and his motives for the terror. I see **no value in this reporting other than that they ‘sell’.**”



Goshi Hosono. Photo: 内閣官房内閣広報室 / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 4.0 Int. Cropped

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Logo of Tokyo Shimbun. Author: Chunichi Shimbun Co., Ltd. [Public domain image](#)

Similar opinions also spread online. In response, the *Tokyo Shimbun's* special report section published an article titled “What's the Logic Behind ‘Don't Report the Perpetrator's Motive?’” (posted online on 22nd April), where

journalist Satoru Aoki (青木理) countered, saying,

“When politicians, regardless of party affiliation, start telling the media ‘not to report on this’, the very foundation of democracy collapses.”

The Asahi Shimbun

Asahi Shimbun Digital also addressed the issue in an article titled “*The Debate on Restricting Reporting in Terror Incidents and the ‘View of the Ignorant Public’*” (published on 16th May), where former Hosei University professor Gen Inuzuka (犬塚元) argued, “Such discussions are based on a ‘view of the ignorant public’ and could lead to the collapse of liberal democracy.” Many other rebuttals were posted online.

Of course, in reporting on terrorist crimes, the motives and background are key themes. However, **if this reporting is not handled with the utmost care, it could end up aiding the perpetrator's objectives**. What is being called into question is how the media handled reporting on the bomb terrorist attack targeting a sitting prime minister, which could lead to the serious situation of inspiring copycat crimes. It is the media's responsibility to verify the reporting related to the assassin of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三).



Logo of Yomiuri TV

On 18th July 2022, during the broadcast of Yomiuri TV's



Logo of Miyane-ya

program “Information Live Miyane-ya”, they **not only displayed the full text of a letter sent by suspect Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也) – now a defendant – to journalist Kazuhiro Yonemoto (米本和弘) just before the crime, but also had a female announcer read it aloud without omitting a single word.**

The letter contained **self-defense statements** such as,

“Since my mother joined [the **Unification Church**], my teenage years passed amid the waste of more than a billion yen, the collapse of my family, and bankruptcy. These experiences have distorted my entire life [...]”

It also included clear expressions of his grudge against the family of the founder of the **Unification Church** and Yamagami's clear intention to commit murder.

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Seiji Miyane (宮根誠司), the host of the show, followed up on this letter, saying, "Of course, there are believers who suffer, but there are also many second-generation believers who endure great pain." The discussion progressed on the assumption that many followers of the [religious organization](#) and second-generation believers suffer, and that this leads to the breakdown of their families.

In the process, three times Miyane showed excerpts from postings believed to be Yamagami's on Yonemoto's blog (from December 2020), and also four times excerpts from Yamagami's tweets and other postings (from May 2021, October 2019, August 2020, and June 2022). Each time the text was projected on the screen and read out by a female announcer.



Tetsuya Yamagami, the man who killed Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan. Photo: Andrew2592009 / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 4.0 Int. Cropped

This is a classic method of manipulation that simultaneously stimulates both the visual and the auditory senses. **Reporting the perpetrator's claims so thoroughly on public airwaves just ten days after former Prime Minister Abe was shot and killed, cannot be considered proper journalism.** The **motives and background behind Yamagami's act of terror were reported over and over again. This is reminiscent of some forms of indoctrination.**

Despite this, to date there has been no proper investigation, reflection, or disciplinary action related to the coverage.

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Featured image above: Reporting of sensational news. Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 6th September 2024.

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