



IAPP Conference on “Radicalization and Violent Extremism; Focus on Prevention” at the European Parliament

Brussels, Belgium, December 5, 2017

By Jacques Marion

Concluding a series of inaugural meetings of the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace in Europe in 2017, a conference was organized by the Universal Peace Federation at the European Parliament in Brussels on December 5th 2017.



Hosted by Italian Eurodeputy Flavio Zanonato, a member of the Group of

the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the EU Parliament, the conference was co-sponsored by the Women’s Federation for World Peace (WFWP) and by Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF). In a year plagued by repeated acts of terrorism, the theme “Radicalization and Violent Extremism: Focus on Prevention” represented a concern widely shared by all Europeans.

With the perspective that sustainable prevention of radicalization requires joint efforts from both parliamentarians and spiritual leaders, the conference was divided in two sessions: the first one dealing with the role of parliamentarians, the second one addressing religious factors in prevention policies.

The first session was held at the European Parliament, in a prestigious

room of the Altiero Spinelli Building, under the theme “Pro-active policies of prevention for the prevention of radicalization: the role of parliamentarians”.



As the 120-seat room began filling up with participants coming from all over Europe, HRWF Deputy Director Lea Perekrests introduced Flavio Zanonato, the conference host, who spoke about

the work of the EU Parliament's Committee on Terrorism and about the role of school education for preventing radicalization.



French Senator and former government minister Jean-Marie Bockel reviewed conclusions of a recent French Senate report on the prevention of radicalization which he supervised. Emphasizing its ideological dimension, particularly in the case of Islamic radicalization, he said that prevention policies should focus both on countering violent extremism and curtailing excessive communalism. He then went on to describe various prevention initiatives by local governments in France.



Dr Afzal Ashraf, a British specialist on counter-terrorism from the University of Nottingham, with a military background and experience in the Iraq war, gave a broad description of international factors leading to the current wave of terrorism throughout the world. An exclusive focus on Islamic communities, he said, would be misleading and ineffective in dealing with the cause of the problem, which has much to do with various government policies.



Belgian Scholar Brigitte Maréchal, Director of the Centre Interdisciplinaire d'Etudes de l'Islam dans le Monde Contemporain (CISMOC) of Louvain Catholic University, reflected on the fact that Europe is facing a long-term meeting of civilizations in regard to Islam, which requires new mindset, adequate education and a respectful assessment of our differences.



Seyran Ates, a German lawyer and women's rights activist among Muslim women, who recently founded the first liberal mosque in Berlin, called for a focus on action to ensure that respect for human rights and democratic values be the basis for genuine religious education, recommending that religion be taught in schools with a focus on ethics.



Mr Karl-Christian Hausmann, a Stuttgart CDU Committee member and the UPF Chair in Germany, concluded the panel by introducing the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP), a project of UPF launched throughout

the world since 2016. Promoting dialogue and cooperation among parliamentarians beyond national, religious or party affiliation, the IAPP encourages cooperation between political leaders and spiritual leaders to foster sustainable solutions to current issues.

The second session was held in the Renaissance Brussels hotel, located a five-minute walk away from the Parliament, where participants enjoyed a light meal and friendly interaction. The session began with a short, enchanting musical harp performance by 13-year old Solange Dellens, the daughter of a musician family.



Robin Marsh, the UPF Secretary General in the United Kingdom, moderated the session on the theme: "Roots and Prevention of Radicalization: Religious Factors". Three of the first session panellists: Lea Perekrests, Brigitte Maréchal and Seyran Ates, were again on the panel and had the opportunity to develop further their presentations. A fourth



panelist was Camel Bechikh, a conservative Muslim activist from France, founder of the association “Fils de France”.

Lea Perekrests explained about the current focus of Human Rights Without Frontiers on the crossing lines of religious freedom and security issues. She described her organization’s involvement in recent legal cases where political decisions were made to expel from Europe extremist Muslim religious leaders.

Brigitte Maréchal emphasized the need for a deeper study and understanding of religion in Europe, adding that one should not confuse intercultural and interreligious dialogue. This new meeting of civilizations, she pointed out, comes after a long period of decrease of religion in Europe, while in parallel religious sentiment was rising in the Islamic world. A genuine dialogue with Islam is needed, whose outcome will depend on the choice of interlocutors.

Seyran Ates called for a reformation in Islam which, in her opinion, needs to begin with a focus on gender equality. She explained about her new “Stop Extremism” campaign in Europe, saying that genuine political action is needed to confront religious fundamentalist assaults against human rights and democratic values, where “freedom and democracy are being



used to destroy freedom and democracy”.



The last speaker, Camel Bechikh, began by affirming his attachment to Islam and patriotic feelings toward his country of France. He warned that a “caricature” of Islam would lead to a wrong assessment of the problem and counterproductive solutions. He described how the amalgam between genuine Catholicism and abuses by a Catholic monarchy in France eventually led to a rise of atheism that undermined French society, and partly

caused the current confusion regarding marriage and family values. He concluded that a similar amalgam between Islam and extremist violence would open the way for so-called “progressive ideologies” to undermine the core values promoted by all religions, and eventually undermine democracy itself.

The audience responded to this discussion on very current issues with sometimes provocative comments or questions on religious extremism, the fate of Christian minorities in the Islamic world, or controversial family policies in Europe.

From the prestigious location of the European Parliament, with prominent experts dealing with pressing current issues, the conference opened new horizons for UPF activities in the coming years.

[View more pictures from session 1](#)

[View more pictures from session 2](#)

