

## IAPP Conference at European Parliament: Radicalization and Violent Extremism

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Brussels, Belgium -- A series of IAPP inaugural meetings in Europe in 2017 culminated in a conference in the European Parliament.

"Radicalization and Violent Extremism; Focus on Prevention" was the title of the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace conference that was held on December 5 by UPF together with an affiliated organization, the Women's Federation for World Peace (WFP), and Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF).

Flavio Zanonato, an Italian member of the European Parliament and a member of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, was the host of the conference.

In a year plagued by repeated acts of terrorism, the conference theme represented a concern widely shared among Europeans.

Reflecting the belief that joint efforts from both parliamentarians and spiritual leaders are necessary to prevent radicalization, the conference's two sessions focused first on the role of parliamentarians and second on religious factors.



### Session I: Pro-Active Policies for the Prevention of Radicalization: The Role of Parliamentarians

The first session was held at the European Parliament, in a prestigious room of the Altiero Spinelli Building. As the 120-seat room filled with participants from all over Europe, HRWF Deputy Director Lea Perekrests introduced Member of the European Parliament Flavio Zanonato, the conference host, who spoke about the work of the European Parliament's Committee on Terrorism and the role of school education in preventing radicalization.

Jean-Marie Bockel, a French senator and former government minister, reviewed conclusions of a recent French Senate report, which he had supervised, on the prevention of radicalization. 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 communautarisme -- a French

sociological term that describes the tendency of minority communities to dissociate themselves from the wider society. He then described various prevention initiatives by local governments in France.

Dr. Afzal Ashraf, a specialist on counterterrorism at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, gave a broad description of international factors leading to the current wave of terrorism throughout the world. Dr. Ashraf, who has a military background and experience in the Iraq War, warned that focusing exclusively on Islamic communities 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, the director of the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World (CISMOC) of Louvain Catholic University, reflected on the fact that Europe faces a long-term meeting of civilizations regarding Islam. This requires a new mindset, adequate education and a respectful assessment of our differences, she said.

Seyran Ateş, 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 is the basis for genuine religious education. She recommended that schools teach religion with a focus on ethics.

Karl-Christian Hausmann, a leader of the Christian Democratic Union in the city of Stuttgart and the chair of UPF-Germany, concluded the panel with an introduction to the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP). A project of the Universal Peace Federation, IAPP has been launched throughout the world starting in 2016. Promoting dialogue and cooperation beyond national, religious or party affiliations, IAPP encourages cooperation between political leaders and spiritual leaders to foster sustainable solutions to current issues.

## **Session II: Roots and Prevention of Radicalization: Religious Factors**

The second session was held in the Renaissance Brussels Hotel, located a five-minute walk away from the Parliament. Participants enjoyed a light meal and friendly interaction before listening to a short, enchanting harp performance by 13-year-old Solange Dellens.

Robin Marsh, the secretary general of UPF in the United Kingdom, moderated the session. Three of the panelists from the first session -- Lea Perekrests, Brigitte Maréchal and Seyran Ateş -- were again on the panel and developed their presentations further. A fourth panelist was Camel Bechikh, a conservative Muslim activist from France, founder of Association Fils de France.

Lea Perekrests explained about the current focus of Human Rights Without Frontiers: the crossing lines of religious freedom and security issues. She described her organization's involvement in recent legal cases in which extremist Muslim religious leaders were expelled from Europe because of political decisions.

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 in which religion was declining in Europe while religious sentiment was rising in the Islamic world. A genuine dialogue with Islam is needed, she said, whose outcome will depend on the choice of interlocutors.

Seyran Ateş 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, in which "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. A "caricature" of Islam, he warned, 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. A similar amalgam between Islam and extremist violence, he said, 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 comments or questions -- sometimes provocative -- on religious extremism, the fate of Christian minorities in the Islamic world, and 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.