

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF TERRORIST ATTACKS IN EUROPE

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The first requirement to overcome differences and achieve mutual understanding is to know the ideas and feelings of the other. That is why I believe this conference can be extremely useful for jointly studying the terrorist phenomenon in the Mediterranean basin. Although terrorist attacks in Europe are only a small part of those in the world, mostly in Arab or Muslim countries, it is clear that they have a significant impact on the perception of European citizens towards the Muslim world and on relations among countries bordering the Mediterranean. So let me briefly review some of the causes and consequences of the terrorist attacks on the European continent, hoping that these reflections will be useful for the debate.

The main consequence of the terrorist attacks, in addition to the victims, is the increase of the fear in the population. Fear prevents people from making their normal lives and makes them distrust of democratic institutions, including security services. National governments, and in our case also the European Union, take measures to prevent further attacks. Measures can include communications intervention, internet control, searches, passenger lists on air travel, and others. Some of them may affect the right to privacy and even jeopardize individual freedoms. In France, for example, they have been in a state of emergency for 565 days, which has not prevented attacks like that in Nice, but it has complicated the lives of citizens who see soldiers on their streets and have a permanent sense of alarm. The terrorist attacks have again brought into question the balance between security and freedom, and this is a major problem that is not yet solved in our societies. How much freedom of action are we willing to give to the police and the intelligence services in exchange for ensuring our safety? Can citizens ensure that this freedom of action is always under control in accordance with democratic laws?

On the other hand, fear is being exploited by far-right political parties to support their demagogic ideas and their xenophobia. These parties have grown considerably in many European countries because of the economic crisis and represent a real danger for coexistence and democracy. The terrorist attacks serve these parties to spread hostility towards the Muslims, thus creating an action-reaction spiral that favors the false arguments of both sides, making good the expression: the worse, the better. The worst expression of this spurious use of the attacks is the alleged identification between immigration and terrorism. Of course, this is a false link, since most of the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in Europe were born on our continent or had been living in it for many years. But it is a message that calls on certain sectors of the population to increase distrust and hatred towards foreigners, and particularly towards immigrants, which in turn serves some governments to oppose the reception of refugees from war zones.

In the European Union there are 19 million Muslims. The vast majority of them are well integrated, work and live happily with their families. But there are some sectors that live in a serious economic marginalization, close to social exclusion, and with no prospects for the future. They are mostly second or third generation youths who live in deprived neighborhoods, known in France as the banlieue, and who have abandoned their education and find themselves with nothing to do, with no other way out than delinquency or religious radicalization. Some feel humiliated, out of the society in which they live, and this is a breeding ground for the growth of hatred and violence. The terrorist attacks have only increased the isolation of these groups, and thereby favor the emergence of more young people ready to take revenge against a society they consider hostile. Some of the perpetrators of the attacks had no religious background, but rather of petty delinquency. But their marginalization has been exploited by others who manipulate them, offering them a false ideal that gives their life some transcendence. The marginalization of some young Muslims in our societies is a cause and also a consequence of terrorist attacks. If we are not able to end this situation, integrate them and offer them a future, some individuals will continue to be willing to kill even if they die in the attempt.

Finally, we must refer to the armed interventions of some European countries in Arab countries like Iraq, Syria and Libya and to analyze to what extent these interventions can be cause of the terrorist attacks or at least justification of them for their authors and inductors. The direct relationship does not exist, as shown by the fact that some attacks have taken place in countries that do not participate in these actions. However, it is a further element of propaganda for terrorist networks that portray executioners as victims and perpetrators of attacks as avengers, despite the fact that most of its victims are civilians, including children, as we have seen recently in Manchester.

Do European countries have a right to engage in attacks on the bases of movements like ISIS or the Al Nusra Front which are at the origin, if not organic at least ideological, of the terrorist attacks? When it comes to helping legitimate governments, as is the case in Iraq, the answer is clearly affirmative. In other cases, as in Syria, the question is more dubious from the point of view of international legality. But if the intervention has a purely defensive objective, and can prevent the proliferation of attacks, then it would be legitimate. The question is whether these interventions can effectively end the terrorist phenomenon, because in reality the confrontation has deeper roots, farther back in time that cannot be fought with military means alone.

The problem will only get in the way of a solution if we change our mentality. We must fight against the idea that the enemy is the different, the Muslim or the Christian, the white or the black, the rich or the poor. Our true enemy is hatred, which undermines coexistence and leads to violence. Hatred is the worst, most harmful bomb that terrorists can put in our hearts.