

## R. Cutajar MP Malta: How Is Europe to Deal With Violent Religious Extremism?

Robin Marsh  
April 13, 2016



Robert Cutajar MP Malta:

Recent terrorist attacks across the world have shown that terrorism is a global issue that spares no nationality or religion, but we know only too well that throughout history, people have perpetrated extreme violent acts in the name of religion, and of course such behaviour is triggered by multi-faceted factors including psychological, political, historical and theological elements.

Sadly, the recent Brussels attacks were preceded and followed by several others around the world. In the case of last month's attack in Lahore, Pakistan, for instance, a faction of the Pakistani Taliban, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, claimed responsibility for the explosion, saying it was targeted at Christians celebrating Easter. A spokesman for the group, Ehsanullah Ehsan, was quoted as saying that the attack was carried out to target Christians who were celebrating Easter. He added that it was also a message to the Pakistani prime minister that the group has arrived in Punjab, the ruling party's home province. However, the Punjab government denied the claim that the bombing was aimed exclusively at Christians, as those in the park were from all backgrounds.

All religions can be misused by extremists who are seeking to find arguments for persecution or a holy war. History has shown it again and again. The type of propaganda spread by extremist groups such as the faction of the Pakistani Taliban strengthens this so-called holy war, even if it doesn't necessarily portray the truth. This in turn actually reinforces many people's perceptions that Islam and violent extremism are one and the same thing. The name 'Islamic State' itself bears testimony to this.

As the leader of Muslims in Malta, Imam Mohammed El Sadi, wrote recently, and I quote, "those who exercise hatred and violence against peaceful Muslims because of Islamic State terror are doing themselves and the innocent Muslims an injustice. They are playing into the hands of the terrorists and contribute to achieving their wicked goals to cause hatred and conflicts among religions to justify their crimes and recruit more people to join them. Those who do injustice to innocent Muslims are the companions of Islamic State in terrorism, irrespective of their faith."

Imam El Sadi is right, we must do our utmost to ensure we don't fall into the trap; we must not propagate the idea of a holy war, but rather promote peace between religions. Pope Francis had something to say on these lines during his Africa tour last November; in fact he called on representatives of different religions to cooperate and act as "peacemakers," stressing that the name of God "must never be used to justify hatred and violence." The Pope admitted that the relationship between religions is "challenging" and said that all too often, young people are being radicalised in the name of religion to sow discord and fear.

Now in order to identify young people susceptible to terrorism, I would say one of the important aspects we need to work on is intelligence gathering, especially in areas where vulnerable young people are known to be living – young people without a job and with little hope for a future. Another important element we need to keep in mind is the need to boost our efforts to monitor the way the internet and social networks might be used for the fuelling of radicalisation and fundamentalism.

A report approved by the European Parliament last November highlighted the need to prevent radicalisation through education and social inclusion. The European Parliament recalled the crucial role that schools play in helping to promote integration within society and develop critical thinking, and to promote non-discrimination. It called on the Member States to encourage educational establishments

to provide courses and academic programmes aimed at strengthening understanding and tolerance, especially with regard to different religions, the history of religions, philosophies and ideologies. It stressed the need to teach fundamental values and democratic principles of the Union such as human rights.



The report urged Member States are urged to ensure that educational programmes on internet use exist in every school. Furthermore, teachers should be empowered to take an active stand against all forms of discrimination and racism.

Parliament recommended:

- combining de-radicalisation programmes with measures such as establishing partnerships with community representatives, investment in social and neighbourhood projects aimed at disrupting economic and geographical marginalisation;
- engaging in an intercultural dialogue with the various communities, with a view to helping achieve better understanding and prevention of radicalisation;
- drawing attention to the issue of the training of religious leaders – which should take place in Europe where possible - with regard to preventing incitement to hatred and violent extremism in places of worship in Europe, and ensuring that those leaders share European values;
- setting up an alert system for assistance and guidance in every Member State which would allow families and community members to obtain support or to easily and swiftly flag the development of sudden behavioural change that might signal a process of terrorist radicalisation or an individual's departure to join a terrorist organisation.

Education, youth action and strengthening social cohesion are undoubtedly among the main factors we should consider and focus on, in order to strengthen European values and prevent radicalisation.

Politicians, journalists, religious leaders and other influential figures in our communities have a very important role to play in ensuring that our views are as balanced and truthful as possible. It is only by being balanced that we can make a difference in this unbalanced world. We cannot afford to live in a culture of denial; this is, in fact, what happened in Brussels, where people who spoke about the high incidence of crime among Moroccan youths was dismissed as being a propagandist of the extreme-right.

Inter-religious dialogue becomes more and more important in the present situation we're currently living in. Differences in religion must be stressed and celebrated. We need to establish a well-educated and open minded generation of young leaders who use personal faith to tackle the challenges they face. Moreover, and this ties up to the element of 'youth action' I mentioned earlier, these young leaders need to be involved in a community that shares similar values.

Any differences between us, like differences in religion, need to be celebrated, rather than be the cause for conflict. The motto of the European Union, 'United in Diversity' signifies how Europeans have come together, in the form of the EU, to work for peace and prosperity, while at the same time being enriched by the continent's many different cultures, traditions and languages. We must ensure that we use this motto in all our policy-making and decision-making processes; we need to truly believe in it and ultimately live up to it and by it.

Thank you.