

EP debate what role can women play in the fight against terrorism

First line against radicalization

Madrid / Brussels, 26.04.2016, 23:09 Time

USPA NEWS - How should European Muslims deal with radicalization and what role can women play in countering it and promoting de-radicalization? These questions were discussed during a conference at the European Parliament on April 26.

Following the opening of the conference by Vice-President Antonio Tajani, the phenomenon of radicalization and how to counter it at national and EU level was assessed with experts and community leaders in attendance. Speaking ahead of the conference EP President Martin Schulz said: "Terrorism and radicalization must be fought through prevention, monitoring, intelligence-gathering and updated rules and sanctions. There is one tool however which beats radicalization before it even takes place: dialogue. We are increasingly witnessing the phenomenon not just of segregated societies, but of more and more segregated and alienated lives. Dialogue helps cure this sad reality."

Vice-President Antonio Tajani also highlighted the efforts of Muslims in Europe to end radicalization: "Many victims of extremist violence and Islamic extremist terrorism are Muslims themselves: we must unite our forces and denounce all forms of violence claiming a religious justification. I am convinced that Muslim communities in Europe and the world share this view. The goal of this conference is to give them a chance to show their opposition to radicalism and hatred," he said.

In his opening remarks, Tajani said it is important to conduct work in difficult neighbourhoods of large cities "where social discontent can be exploited by terrorist organizations who wish to proselytize." He added: "Many of these terrorists were born and grew up here in Europe. De-radicalization is not about cutting roots but rather going back to those roots. Europe needs to build on inter-religious dialogue. We have to fight against preachers who preach hate."

"Being a Muslim is about belonging to a religion which asks followers to respect one another, to respect others. The ISIS criminals are hijacking the religion. De-radicalization will help stop the suffering of Muslim mothers," Tajani said. "Europe and its social values must build on inter-religious dialogue, on coexistence, living together, on common progress to see the flourishing of values. The key word is dialogue," added and remarks: "Whether we are Christians, Jews or Muslims we need to look in each other's eyes. Unfortunately the ones who kill in the name of God do not look other men and women in the eyes."

The role of women

The first panel of the debate was opened by French EPP member Tokia Saïfi. She noted that "radicalization is a complex phenomenon that can be difficult to understand from the outside." She added that "it is very important to take note of the role of women when it comes to de-radicalization" and that "the first combat against radicalization should be within the immediate family." In this sense: "Mothers are often the first witnesses and the first impacted by radicalization. They could serve at the forefront in combatting this phenomenon."

Malika Hamidi, director-general of the European Muslim Network said: "Muslim women are finally being considered today as vital actors in the process of de-radicalization. It is important to involve them as they are generally the first to notice signs of radicalization." She added that "80-90% of young people leaving to Syria only found an interest in religion in the months immediately prior to their departure." She noted also the importance of working in prisons to combat radicalization.

"Women should be utilized fully to make their voice heard and combat extremist violence. We must develop spaces for dialogue, in which Muslim women are involved in the development of a counter-argument. The challenge lies not only in the security aspects," she said. "There is a risk with rejecting the role of the father in families. We need to bring together all the forces in the family if we are to fight radicalization."

Latifa Ibn Ziaten, founder of the Imad Ibn Ziaten Youth Association for Peace, said: "Education plays an important role, it has been neglected. Parents are the mainstays. With children playing in the streets, it's important to be vigilant with them. We need to give

importance to children, they need to be listened to." She repeated the importance of working with mothers: "Education is the basis. It happens around the dinner table. [...] Some young people have nothing to dream for. It's a very serious issue when one has no hope. Our duty as adults is to give hope and dreams to young people."

"Young people are very resourceful if you give them opportunities. If we help them, they can achieve great things," added. She also mentioned the need to tackle radicalization in prison: "We need to wake up, we can't leave prisoners shut up in their cells. They will be full of hatred once they leave." Ending the first panel on the role of women the chair of Parliament's gender equality committee Iratxe Garcia Perez said: "The work of de-radicalization is done in silence but is very precious."

Garcia Perez added: "It is vital to use exactly the same tools as Islamic State in creating counter-arguments. The best weapon to use is exactly the same weapon that DAESH uses to recruit young people: these tools are Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. It is essential that security services use the same channels to try to convince hopeless young people not to give up their life in Europe to join IS."

"Thanks to studies and experts we know that the role of women with respect to DAESH is twofold: First of all they are the guarantors of families, and as a consequence of the rise of DAESH they have become sexual slaves and are exposed to terrible things. On the other hand they become like officers in the Inquisition. In fact there is a brigade just for women for defending sharia," Garcia Perez said. "Women who were born in Europe, who were educated in our neighborhoods, how can they become radicalized? It is estimated that about 500 young women from Europe have already gone to DAESH via Turkey. Police recognize that there is a clear campaign from IS to include women in its ranks."

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-7805/ep-debate-what-role-can-women-play-in-the-fight-against-terrorism.html>

Editorial office and responsibility:

V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Jose A. Martin

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