Call to Europe V:
Dynamics of Radicalisation: Exploring perceptions to change the reality

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Whenever we see in the news that a young European left to the Middle East to fight with some terrorist group in the name of Islam the same question comes up: How could that happen?

During the debate on the Dynamics of Radicalisation, one of the sessions of the event : Call to Europe V, Islam in Europe, organised by FEPS, policy makers, religious leaders, civil society representatives and scholars tried to shed some light on the different factors behind radicalisation. The first step is to be aware of perceptions, interpretation and the words we use, because words frame the way of thinking and determine how we interact. Sometimes we use words which may set a frame of thought that is not in line with our Social-Democratic values. For example, we tend to portray Muslims as foreigners in Europe, thus treating them as a target group rather than citizens who have a say on all policies.

Another example is that we tend to think of Conservative religious people as extremists. However, the problem is not their faith. They can live their faith peacefully. The problem is those who use violence impose a certain view of the world to the whole society. Unfortunately too much space is given to people who promote a wrong interpretation of Islam, and there is lack of well-educated and trained imams in Europe.

Even if European democracies are not undermined by movements of religious revival, there are some risks associated to this phenomenon: The first one is that populists can take advantage of fear of fundamentalism (let's think of Le Pen in France, neo-nazis in Greece, Hungary or Germany, etc.). This fear has already created a situation by which Islamophobia seems to be socially accepted, somehow becoming the new Anti-semitism. The second danger is the potential over-reaction of democratic governments thus hindering freedoms and rights.

We also wondered if there is a link between radicalisation and the politics and policies of the EU abroad. All participants acknowledged mistakes in EU foreign policy - Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia were mentioned-, as well as a lack of coherence between the high EU values in terms of democracy and human rights and many of its actions abroad, such as supporting dictators. However, there was consensus that we should avoid any determinism between these mistakes or certain inconsistency and radicalisation.

What are then the causes of radicalisation? Are those recruited rebels with a cause? We came up with this conclusion: it is irrelevant whether there are real grounds or not. The fact is that those who are recruited by extremist groups think that they have causes. Why do they feel disenfranchised? Some of the suggestions to diminish that perception were to stop profiling people, and be more careful with the media. We need a media strategy because extremists are very effective in their communication whereas democratic media sometimes seem to advertise the violent ones.

We must also be more aware of the risk of exclusion. There the role of civil society is very important to help vulnerable people. They should be empowered to have a voice in the society. And there should also be more education about Islam, both for Muslims and for non-Muslims: for the first ones to avoid distorted interpretations and for the latter ones to avoid stereotypes and misconceptions.

Tariq Ramadan says that we live in a global village where we all ignore each other. Maybe our personal Jihad – our common effort –should be to get to know and care for each other.