



# CALL TO EUROPE V “ISLAM IN EUROPE”: Brussels, 24<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> June 2015

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Let me begin by thanking Massimo D'Alema for organising this conference and for inviting me. As I told him while entering this room, this conference shows we are finally approaching the question of Islam and Europe from the right perspective, after years – or decades – of misunderstandings.

I will start with an anecdote. I graduated two years before 9/11 and it was hard at that time to find a professor who would accept that political Islam could be the subject for a dissertation in political science. Italy has a great university system, but I had to go to France with the Erasmus programme to find someone who would consider Islam as a topic not for history, or literature, or cultural studies thesis, but for political science.

A lot has changed since then. In the following years the idea of a clash between Islam and “the West” – a word in which everything is put together and confused – has misled our policies and our narratives. Islam holds a place in our Western societies. Islam belongs in Europe. It holds a place in Europe's history, in our culture, in our food and – what matters most – in Europe's present and future. Like it or not, this is the reality.

As Europeans, we should be proud of our diversity. The fear of diversity comes from weakness, not from a strong culture.

I shall be even more clear on that: the very idea of a clash of civilisations is at odds with the most basic values of our European Union – let alone with reality. Throughout our European history, many have tried to unify our continent by imposing their own power, their own ideology, their own identity against the identity of someone else. With the European project, after World War II, not only we accepted diversity: we expressed a desire for diversity to be a core feature of our Union. We defined our civilisation through openness and plurality: a mind-set based on blocs does not belong to us.

Some people are now trying to convince us that a Muslim cannot be a good European citizen, that more Muslims in Europe will be the end of Europe. These people are not just mistaken about Muslims: these people are mistaken about Europe – that is my core message – they have no clue what Europe and the European identity are.

This is our common fight: to make this concept accepted both in Europe and beyond Europe.

For Europe and Islam face some common challenges in today's world. The so-called Islamic State is putting forward an unprecedented attempt to pervert Islam for justifying a wicked political and strategic project.

Talking about Da'esh, the king of Jordan told the European Parliament a few months ago said: “The motive is not faith, it is power; power pursued by ripping countries and communities apart in sectarian conflicts, and inflicting suffering across the world”.

Western media like to refer to Da'esh with the word "medieval". This does not help much to understand the real nature of the threat we are facing. Da'esh is something completely new. This is a modern movement, reinterpreting religion in an innovative and radical way.

It is a movement that, rather than preserving Islam, wants us to trash centuries of Islamic culture in the name of their atrocities. Da'esh is not a State, and it is not a State for Islam. The Grand Imam of al Azhar, Ahmed el Tayeb, argued:

“There is no Islamic State, but a number of Islamic countries that the terrorists are trying to destroy”. This is the reality we face and we don't say this often, but we should do so to dismantle their narrative. Sometimes, by describing the atrocities of Da'esh, we do them a favour: atrocities are part of their propaganda. The more we describe them as evil, the happier they are.

Da'esh is Islam's worst enemy in today's world. Its victims are first and foremost Muslim people. Islam is a victim itself.

This is not to say that we should overlook the ideology of Da'esh. If we want to fight it, we need first of all to know it and to understand it. We need to know where it comes from, and how it got to be what it is.

First of all, I believe the Da'esh propaganda fills a void, a vacuum. The terrorists are recruiting people who feel they do not hold a place in their own communities, that they do not belong in their own societies.

I was very much impressed, when I was visiting Tunis... Tunisia is a modern country and still is one of the countries with the highest number of foreign fighters in Da'esh. I asked a young girl, very engaged with civil society, why she believed so many people her age were joining Da'esh. She told me something I will never forget: you know, people my age in Tunisia feel they have no place in the organigram. They are looking for their own box, for a role, for defining who they are. They ask: where is my place? What is my role? This is the real challenge not only in the Arab world, but here in Europe.

That is why I believe the best way to prevent radicalisation in Europe and in our region is not only education, but also employment. We have so many well educated and frustrated young people, with a lot of energy, a lot of willingness to find their place in their society and their community. And they have lost hope that they will be able to do so.

This does not justify the choice to turn to terrorism. People are responsible for their own actions and their own crimes. Still, if we look at ways to prevent radicalisation we need jobs and good jobs. Not just a place in the “organigram”, but a good place.

Da'esh longs for people who have lost their place in society, their role, their sense of belonging and hope. We need inclusive societies. So many times we have heard a narrative opposing security and open societies. It is a false dilemma. We should start saying more clearly that a society can be stable and safe only when it is democratic.

Of course I know each country has a specific history, and needs to follow its own path towards democracy. Not so long ago, and still today, there are people in "the West" arguing democracy can be exported militarily. We have all realised – in this room for sure – how bad this idea was. This does not mean we are not ready to support democracy

and democratic processes: quite the contrary. But we need to consider the specificity of each process.

We need to show some humble respect for diversity. Diversity is the core feature of our European history, and it is our strength. But we should also show respect for diversity when we look outside our borders. We need to understand diversity, understand complexity. This is difficult, but maybe a bit less difficult for us Europeans. We know diversity and complexity – especially here in Brussels – from our own experience.

For this reason I am not afraid to say that political Islam should be part of the picture. Religion plays a role in politics – not always for good, not always for bad. Religion can be part of the process. What makes the difference is whether the process is democratic or not. That is what matters to us, the key point.

We need to work for regional frameworks, in the Middle East and the Arab world, in which every one has a responsibility and a chance to contribute – Muslim, Christian, Jew or non-believer, Sunni or Shia, Arab, Kurd, whatever. One of the weaknesses of our policies so far has been to focus on dividing lines, as if everyone can fit in a box. People do not live in boxes. People live in communities and societies. The more open the communities and the societies are, the better it is for the democratic process. All communities should be granted with their own rights and their own responsibilities, with an opportunity to do their part for the stability and the security of their own country.

This is the path we are finally trying to follow in some key Arab countries, like Iraq: we are finally understanding we need to put people together, not to tear them apart. Inclusiveness can be the key to our success – both when we talk foreign policy and when we deal with our home affairs. Sometimes we go out of our borders and preach, but then we look at ourselves and we falter.

Enlargement processes involve us and our partners for years, but maybe we should also take time to brush up on the “acquis” with some Member States. We have a problem of internal coherence – when it comes to rights, to democracy, to the respect of diversity, when it comes to some of the difficult choices we make, including on migration policies.

The battle for hearts and minds is not only a battle we need to fight in the Middle East, but also here inside our European Union.

It is a difficult battle: this is not a popular argument, not an easy issue. After years of economic and political weakness, our societies are naturally afraid. When you are weak, the reaction is closing the door and pretending to solve issues with isolation. On the contrary, the only chance we have as Europeans is to be proud and strong of our basics: and our basics are respect and diversity.

Let me say something more about migration. We have supported the “bring back our girls” campaign for Nigerian girls kidnapped by Boko Haram. There is such a contradiction between our solidarity when these girls are far away, and our lack of solidarity when they are at our door. This is impossible to sustain. In the coming days and months we need to find solutions not only for the girls in Nigeria, but for their sisters and mothers and daughters who are forced to flee by the very same radicalised movements.



If we do not realise this, our whole message risks to sound empty. We need to pass a cultural message, to lay the basis for our political message: any attempt to divide the peoples of Europe into "us" and "them" brings us in the wrong direction. The migrants and us. The Muslims and us. The Jews and us, as anti-Semitism has not been defeated at all. The "other" and us. We learnt from our history that we all are someone else's "other". The fear of the other can only lead us to new conflicts.

I hope we can work together to increase our self confidence. When we say we are European, we should also remember what is the root of our European culture: our diversity. That is our strength, and we should learn to be proud of it.