

Islam between Tolerance and Terrorism / L'Islam entre la tolerance et la violence

Conference at the IEA-Nantes, 16 June 2015

CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

The massacre at the offices of Charlie Hebdo on 7 January 2015 (and subsequent events such as in Paris and Copenhagen) brought the issue of Islamic terrorism again to the forefront. Like in many similar incidents before, analysts did not miss the opportunity to speculate about the terrorists' motives. Yet, since the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington, there has been no serious conversation around the religious factors that contribute to the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism. If religion is invoked, it is invariably either in the context of polemics (Islam is a religion of violence), or apologetics (Islam is a religion of peace and condemns such acts of violence). A conversation about the role of religion is one that must be made.

Combating violence in the name of Islam is not simply a political decision or simply an economic one, and cannot achieve widespread success by only pursuing political or economic policies. No doubt, there are serious political, economic and social factors that contribute to the preaching and carrying out of acts of terror in the name of Islam (e.g., the legacy of colonialism, lack of democracy and rule of law in Muslim countries, problems of assimilation in western societies, etc.). But the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism has religious and historical roots and factors as well, which contribute to its formation and bestow legitimacy and potency on the Muslims who commit acts of religious violence. Unless these roots and factors are also acknowledged and examined alongside the political, social and economic factors, there are little chances we can fully understand it, let alone solve it. Islam in this respect is not different from any other religion or ideology that has the potential to accommodate for violence, and many did or still do.

But it is not sufficient to admit the existence of an Islamic discourse on violence. There is as well a rich legacy of religious and ideological diversity and tolerance among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims throughout Islamic history that needs to be resurrected. So the challenge is not to say whether Islam is for or against violence. Rather, the challenge is in identifying the religious and historical roots that have allowed the discourse of tolerance to flourish, and seriously promote it in the context of modern Islam as one of the means to combat Islamic violence and undermine its religious legitimacy.

Therefore, a conference on the topic of *Islam between Tolerance and Terrorism* is not only important but also very timely. The conference will bring together scholars and specialists to share and present their respective perspectives on the topic. It will address themes relating to the religious and historical roots and precedence for tolerance and for violence in Islamic history and thought, and for freedom of speech (What religious and historical examples stimulate ideas of tolerance and what examples encourage and sanction violence? Is there a thing as freedom of speech and ideas in Islam?) The conference will also address factors that must be taken into consideration regarding the radicalization of some Muslims in France and Europe, and the challenges of combating terrorism while, at the same time, protecting the rights of Muslims as part of the broader civil rights and freedoms that French and European societies cherish and consider fundamental to their laws and political systems (What factors contribute to the radicalization of Muslims in Europe? Are there current policies for de-radicalization and are they effective? Are French and European laws currently adequate to address the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism? Do certain laws need to be rewritten or revised? How can we think as a free society of legal ways to eliminate the threat of Islamic terrorism without compromising the rights of people?)