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"THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EU, MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA IN COMBATING THE GROWING THREAT OF TERRORISM, RADICALISM AND FOREIGN FIGHTERS"

by Elmar Brok, MEP

Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the European Parliament

Today, the European Union is facing a radically changed security environment, especially in its Eastern and Southern neighborhood. With the current crisis in the Ukraine, a deteriorating international order, piracy around the Horn of Africa and the threat of terrorism and radicalism in the Middle East and North African countries, it is high time for a new European Security Strategy. The relations between the EU and the countries in the MENA region play a vital role in securing peace not only in the states directly afflicted by the grueling crises, but also in the European Union itself. Thus, they must be an integral element of said European Security Strategy.

Sofia is an appropriate location to hold this conference, as we remember with great grief the terrorist attack on a group of Israeli tourists at Burgas airport three years ago. Recently, the terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen reminded Europe again of the dangerous link between instability in the neighborhood and its own security. Additionally, it is clear that the European Union needs to continue to play an important role in the MENA region, if it is to reaffirm its unflinching attachment to the freedom of expression, to fundamental rights, to pluralism, to democracy, to tolerance and to the rule of law. These are the foundation of our democracies and the heart of the European Union.

Learn from our mistakes

In an increasingly interconnected world as ours, it is impossible to ignore the influence that crises in one part have on the situation and peace in other regions. Even more so, this logic holds true in the case of international terrorism and the radicalization of ever-larger parts of religious groups. There can be no world peace in the absence of religious peace. And to work towards religious peace, we have to combine our efforts and work together efficiently. Terrorism is a global threat that needs to be tackled in a coordinated effort by national governments and regional and international organizations. As the EU Foreign Affairs Council expressed in its conclusions of February 2015, terrorism poses a direct threat to all countries and all people regardless of their ethnic background, religion or belief.

The rise of the *Islamic State (IS)*, now with branches in Libya, Somalia, Nigeria and Yemen, is today's most prominent example of widespread radicalization and the subsequent violent outcome in the form of regional and international terrorism. It poses a long-term threat to the stability of the Middle East. The experiences of the past years can serve as important

implications on how we can improve the relations between the EU and the MENA region with the goal of successfully countering terrorism and combating radicalization.

The degree of strength and influence of IS in Iraq and Syria was long underrated and seemed to have come as a surprise to the U.S. and many governments in Europe. After conquering territory after territory in a series of lightning campaigns in the summer of 2014, IS is now in control of about one third of the Syrian territory and large parts of Iraq and has absolutely no interest in negotiating to find a peaceful solution. The inadequate response to the crisis in Syria, originally with little relation to IS itself, turned out to lay the groundwork for the organization's success and shows the interrelated nature of crises in the region. Without doubt, a better communication as equal partners and more effective early-warning systems between the Middle East and Europe could have played its part in preventing such a sudden rise to power of the Islamic State.

Improved coordinated cooperation: emergency relief, military support and prevention

There is a number of areas in which better cooperation between the EU and the governments of the countries in the MENA region are highly necessary to follow a well-rounded plural approach in the fight against terrorism. This should combine diplomatic, socio-economic, development, conflict prevention, peacebuilding and crisis management tools.

The most pressing issue continues to be the humanitarian situation of the oppressed and oftentimes displaced population in and around the territory captured by the Islamic State. In August 2014, tens of thousands Yazidis were trapped by IS fighters in the *Sinjar Mountains*. The national, regional and international response was available and well-intended, but lacked a timely, efficient and coordinated approach. In the end, individual countries and regional powers played their part: The Iraqi military, the U.S. and the U.K. organized food and water drops from the air, while Kurdish fighters cleared a path to the mountains to evacuate the trapped Yazidis and the U.S. flew supporting air strikes.

The subsequent supply of arms to Kurdish fighters by European countries like Germany – while undoubtedly bearing risks – together with the military training missions in northern Iraq are integral in the fight against IS. There needs to be a good balance between humanitarian and military cooperation.

Upon visiting the region in February of this year, I was able to hold talks with the heads of states as well as regional and religious authorities in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan. This was a way to find out first-hand about the most pressing challenges and how we could best cooperate to help the population – large parts of which are still living in refugee camps. Visits and delegations like these provide the European Parliament and its Members with a powerful tool of influence on EU-MENA relations in the fight against terrorism.

A second important area of coordinated cooperation between the EU and MENA governments is prevention. Counteracting radicalization and recruitment are key aspects to stymie terrorism from the outset by establishing an early-warning system. The mixture of

fanatic belief and strategic calculation allowed the Islamic State to systematically capture city after city by way of carefully recruiting supporters and introducing an extensive surveillance apparatus – seemingly unnoticed by large parts of the world.

The EU can play its part in establishing a culture of inclusion and tolerance in the affected regions, for example by providing financial assistance and the sharing of best practices when it comes to education. The European Union needs to better promote good governance, democracy and economic prosperity through assistance programs in the afflicted countries.

It will continue to be important to share intelligence when it comes to recruitment. Identifying relevant radical Islamic missionary centers and other key recruiting environments, preventing the foreign fighters from the surrounding countries – but also the thousands of recruited Europeans – from crossing borders, and laying bare the communication networks of IS are relying on the intelligence information by key players. Transit countries like Turkey and Bulgaria play an important part in these efforts.

Throughout all cooperation with the governments in the MENA region, the EU needs to ensure that the counter-terrorism measures are not abused. We condemn any form of torture, as well as the death penalty and strongly urge all countries to uphold and respect human rights. The balance between security and freedom is vital.

The EU as a mediator

The EU and the countries directly affected by the terrorism of the Islamic State or other organizations must improve their cooperation. Turkey should be an active key player in this, as it shares large parts of its borders with Syria and Iraq. While the Turkish government already is a partner in the fight against Islamic State, a closer cooperation with its neighboring countries is desirable. In this regard, Turkey should realign its goals with NATO to more effectively counter IS. We need a stronger effort to hinder Foreign Fighters from crossing the border and greater humanitarian aid for the thousands of refugees on Turkish territory.

It is upon the countries in the region themselves to combine their efforts. The neighbors from Qatar to Riyadh and from Teheran to Ankara have direct responsibility to stop this extermination war carried out by IS. We have to remind many Islamic states that finally they have to be united to defend their region. While recent advancements of IS fighters on Ramadi and the ancient city of Palmyra show that the Islamic State continues to be the most pressing challenge in the region, the potentially much larger danger of an approaching inner-Islamic war between Sunnites and Shiites can only be addressed, if all governments work together and include the representatives of the religious groups and civil society in the process.

Recently, I chaired the *Interreligious Dialogue in the European Parliament*, with leading representatives of different churches. After fruitful discussions about religious radicalism, fundamentalism and the role of tolerance, there was no doubt whatsoever that everybody agreed on future cooperation in the fight against violence in the name of religion. Using its

soft power by bringing the individual stakeholders together at one table through diplomatic efforts, the European Union commands a key element in combatting the instabilities in its neighborhood.

Improve the lives of the people

The European Union together with the governments of the countries in the MENA region should focus its efforts on improving the lives of the citizens in the crises-ridden countries. The recent surge in refugees that try to make their way from the MENA region to Europe either via the Mediterranean Sea or over land to Bulgaria is a direct result of the instability. When it comes to the humanitarian catastrophe in the Mediterranean Sea, it has to be our immediate goal to save lives. There can be no discussion about this.

The next step, however, needs to focus on the root causes and motives to the situation itself. People that are willing to start the dangerous journey through the Sahel and put their lives in the hands of gangs of human traffickers who put them on hazardous boats to cross the sea with the hopes for a better future must be thoroughly desperate. The EU has to support the countries of origin, so that the people do not have to leave their homes because of hopelessness and fear of violence and hunger.

The dangers that terrorist organizations like IS and Al-Qaeda pose to all countries and all people directly and indirectly demand from us a coordinated common response. Well-functioning relations between the EU, Middle East and North Africa are vital to our success and thus to helping our people and to preserving our common values.