



Algiers conference promotes civil society's role in fight against terrorism

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International experts, government officials and journalists gathered in Algiers last weekend for a conference on how to organise civil society's support for the global effort to end terrorism. Attendees called for people to speak out against the scourge of terrorism with "one voice".

By Nazim Fethi for Magharebia in Algiers –
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Having long been confined to a marginal role consisting of occasional demonstrations and demands that victims of terrorism receive proper care, associations are now making an active contribution to the fight against terrorism.

For the first time since the emergence of terrorism in Algeria, one of the country's many non-governmental organisations sponsored an international gathering aimed at better understanding the phenomenon and boosting civil society's participation in the global anti-terror effort.

The Algerian National Organisation of Terror Victims (ONVT) held the country's first international symposium on terrorism March 22nd in Algiers. Experts and journalists from the Maghreb, Egypt, France, Italy and several African countries attended the two-day event to address topics related to the psychological care of victims, the involvement of civil society in the fight against terrorism and the impact of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation in Algeria.

"It is now recognised that unified action by civil societies across the world is more necessary than ever before to contain and eliminate the terrorist threat," Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika said in an opening message read to the participants, noting that the international fight against terrorism can succeed if citizens "can turn themselves into a force which will exhort the international community to redouble its efforts to have the global convention on terrorism adopted, to reach a consensus on the definition of terrorism and, in the end, to look after the victims of terrorism."

Bouteflika said the "fight against this trans-national menace will only be truly effective when it deals with a clearly defined enemy upon whom everyone can concentrate their efforts." He emphasized that "terrorist victims have shown by voting, with courage and self-sacrifice, for the national reconciliation charter, to bar the way to blind extremism which turns to terrorist violence, supposedly in the name of Islam".



[Getty Images] Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrana, kidnapped by terrorists in Iraq, told a civil society symposium in Algiers about changes in news production following the events of September 11th, 2001.

"Today, we face terrorism of a new kind," ONVT Secretary-General Fatima-Zohra Flici noted, adding that it was "high time" to set up an international network to co-ordinate the actions of civil societies around the world in fighting terrorism. People need to speak out with "one voice".

Civil society, she said, has "taken the initiative of opposing terrorism and contributed to bringing about the international consensus which is needed to combat this menace".

She announced that for the first time, the next UN General Assembly will discuss a file of international victims of terrorism. The ONVT has already compiled a list of 150,000 victims—just in Algeria.

Among the many international journalists attending the symposium was Italy's **Gianni Cipriani**. The director of the Centre for International Strategic Studies and Intelligence Review stressed the mass media's "decisive" role in countering the threat of terrorism. Information and communication, he said, are "effective weapons" in fighting the phenomenon of terrorism, because they can spur society's collective conscience into action.

Pointing to the resources available to terrorist groups, from money and weapons to communications, Cipriani said that to combat terrorist propaganda and disinformation, civil society and the media must work together.

Educating the younger generation and raising awareness of principles founded on patriotism and democracy is also a key component of any plan to prevent terrorism, noted Mohamed Benhammou, chairman of the Moroccan Centre for Strategic Studies (CMES).

Kasmi Aïssa, a social action officer with the Algerian police, shared his own experiences with the horrors of terrorism in Algeria between 1993-1994. He spoke of the need to incorporate the precepts of Islam, which preaches tolerance, respect, leniency and peace between human beings, in preventing terrorism.

Non-violence and fundamental liberties should be promoted in education programmes for society in general and youth in particular, said Mehdi Kenani, deputy programme administrator at the anti-terrorism unit of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Kenani argued that the long-term elimination of terrorism depends upon changing people on a social level and addressing economic problems.

Any effective counter-terrorism campaign must consider the forces which motivate terrorist cells, journalist Nacéra Rech said. Stressing the role that poverty can play in the emergence of terrorism, she suggested that the response must come from politicians. "This menace is nothing new and is not confined to Algeria," she said.

Asma Guenifi, a psychologist specialised in caring for the victims of terrorism, told forum participants that traumatic experiences can cause nightmares. Victims also report difficulty sleeping, deep anxiety and excessively using sedatives. She said that Algeria's rising suicide rate due in part to the terrorism the country suffered during the dark decade.