

Molenbeek. Time to declare it an Islamic Republic?

On my last visit but one to Brussels, my hosts asked me what I would like to see. "Molenbeek," I replied, for I had heard that much of it was virtually a North African ghetto and I wanted to see it for myself.

My hosts were game and took me there. They told me that it was *de facto* extraterritorial to Belgium and it was advisable not to go at night. Taxes were not collected from businesses there, and the only functioning activity of the state was the payment of social security.

Practically everyone in the streets seemed of North African origin. The women in particular were not sartorially assimilated and, I suspect, would not dare to try to assimilate even if they wanted to. Life went on peacefully enough around me while I was there, but Molenbeek struck me as a walled city without the walls.

Its connection with Islamic terrorism is now indisputably strong: but how many terrorists does an area have to harbour or produce for that connection to be recognised? Quite a few, it seems, for an article on the *Guardian* newspaper's website yesterday was headlined "Is Molenbeek Europe's Jihadi Central?" It's not that simple.

Of course nothing ever is that simple concerning a human population of 90 – 100,000. There is no place in the world

where the overwhelming majority of such a population are terrorists. The article's standfirst continues:

The Belgian suburb is home to two brothers involved in the Paris attacks, but as someone who works with its community I know it's far from a hub of Isis supporters.

What the author doesn't ask himself is how many terrorists and supporters of terrorists would be necessary to make Molenbeek a true centre or hub of terrorism. Just because most of the people go about their normal business most of the time is not sufficient to prove that it isn't.

The author of the article says, *inter alia*:

Molenbeek, while it has its problems with unemployment, crime and drugs, is also a place where anyone can easily hide.

Surely it's because it's a place where people can easily hide that it has its problems with crime and drugs – and terrorism. Thought is perhaps not the author's strong point. Then again there are those who would have written an article about Munich in 1932 with the headline:

Is Munich Germany's Nazism central? It's not as simple as that. After all, the cafés were still open, people still had lunch, etc., and not everyone was a Nazi.

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