The Molenbeek Problem

We were awaiting our flight to Paris when the cancellation of the next flight to Brussels was announced. Rumors flew, but the reality turned out to be worse than anyone suspected. A couple of hours later, we were in the taxi from Charles De Gaulle Airport. One radio station said there were about 20 dead; another said 34. One of the stations announced that tonight the Eiffel Tower would be lit in the colors of the Belgian flag. Presumably, there will also be an informal moratorium for a time on Belgian jokes in France. The feeling of solidarity is real: it is only five months since the atrocities in Paris.

Our driver was Muslim of North African origin. He was obviously a decent man, obliging and honest. He was furious at Uber, which had halved the value of his costly taxi licence. Whatever the abstract economic arguments of the case, it was difficult not to sympathize with him as a man. But it was the terrorists who exercised him more. "They are all criminals," he said. "They've all been to prison." He spoke with real feeling. "They're traffickers, robbers." I wanted to add that they all liked rap music, too, but I didn't, even though, between news bulletins, the driver played Baroque music on his radio. "It has nothing to do with religion," he said. "They go straight from crime to terrorism."

I thought it best, in order not to upset a man whom I liked, to say that this was a partial truth only: that Islam was not the whole explanation, certainly, but neither could it be entirely excluded from it. After all, impoverished and unemployed Christian Congolese, of whom there are many in Belgium, are not blowing themselves up in the airport and the metro. "We are reaping what we have sown," he continued, "with all our interference in Libya and Mali." Again, I thought the connection a tenuous one and, if it existed at all, not at all flattering to Muslim immigrants. "And how can they have let

Molenbeek develop where extremism could so obviously flourish?"

How indeed? But what to do about it now that it existed? On my visit to that quarter of Brussels a few years ago, I could see the dangers clearly enough. People like Salah Abdeslam, the terrorist arrested there a few days ago, would swim like a fish in the sea there, to use a Maoist metaphor. Between the sympathetic locals, and the rest of the population—whom they could intimidate into silence—it would be easy for them to hide. This social world is impenetrable to the forces of the state. My informant told me that the Belgian government is unable to collect taxes from businesses there—though it is, apparently, able to distribute social security.

How do you stop ghettos like Molenbeek from forming, and what do you do about them once they have formed? The driver had no doubts: you force the residents to live elsewhere. Conceptually easy. In practice, difficult. The European Court of Human Rights recently ruled against Germany, which sought to do exactly that. Having accepted a million Syrian refugees and immigrants, the Germans wanted to prevent the development of Muslim ghettos by dispersing these immigrants throughout the country. The Court ruled that this was against their fundamental human rights, among which is the right to form several—or many—Molenbeeks.

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