

RIBAL AL-ASSAD

Chairman, Iman Foundation

Dominique Moïsi, Special Advisor, Ifri

The second speaker will be Ribal Al-Assad, who is, among many other things, the chairman of the Iman Foundation.

Ribal Al-Assad, Chairman, Iman Foundation

It is a great pleasure to be here among so many distinguished guests. Let me first start by saying that the situation we are in today, the problem we are facing around the world, in Europe, Russia, China, the US, of having the greatest menace and the greatest threat to our national security, is nothing new, and I actually found it a bit astonishing that some people said that it took us by surprise. It has not taken us by surprise; our organisation has said for the past three and a half years that if we continue allowing our allies in the region to promote sectarian hatred and sectarian divide, this is what will happen.

Let us start with Syria, which led to this whole mess that we are in today. We went on backing an opposition in Syria that was mainly Islamist in nature without taking into account that they are a minority in Syria. Everybody wanted a democratic change in Syria, and everybody wanted to live as we are living in Europe and the West. They did not want to go backwards to Sharia law and the Islamist rhetoric we have heard lately.

It is the same in Iraq as in Syria. We saw the rise of the Islamic State as ISIS in 2006, but it came to Syria because there was a certain atmosphere that allowed it to prosper, that allowed it to grow. There was money coming in from certain countries, there was support; television channels were set up purposely to incite and encourage sectarian hatred, violence and killing, and we have been telling them they have to shut them down if they want to see people all around the Middle East live in harmony, if they want to see genuine democracy taken up in the Middle East and beyond. Unfortunately, some of Syria's neighbours and other regional powers, who are our allies - including Turkey - have not listened to that, and instead have incited further violence, and have allowed foreign fighters to enter Syria.

Our biggest problem in the region, as Vice-President Biden said recently, was our allies. Our allies did not want to listen to the US when they said to stop supporting those extremist factions in the Middle East. This is exactly what has led to where we are today. Today there is a coalition; they are running around trying to find a solution to ISIS, and it will be very difficult because, first of all, we are not after a brand name. The Islamic State is just a brand. We are after the underlying ideology, which is the ideology of those Islamist extremists who believe in killing all those who do not share their perverted ideology. This is not genuine Islam, and His Majesty King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has said lately, this is not the true Islam, that we have to promote the true Islam and to be against fitna, because fitna is the biggest sin in Islam. Unfortunately no one has listened to him.

Let me give the example of Kuwait, where the US said that the Minister of Justice was backing Al-Nusra; he was allowed to resign and was not brought to justice, and this will not make the situation better. We have to stand firmly and strongly for our values, and we have to support the values of human rights and democracy everywhere if we want people to believe in the West's values, which are not actually Western values but universal values.

We cannot lie or be hypocritical about it, because there is satellite television, there are alternative media, and people are able to see what is going on. They are able to see that on one side we are promoting democracy and freedom in one country, and on the other side we are forgetting about other countries who are supposed to be our allies. How could that happen? We have to fight for democracy and freedom everywhere if we are in favour of it.



Regarding the question of Turkey, I heard His Royal Highness speaking about it yesterday and saying that Turkey could have a solution to the crisis in Syria. I do not think Turkey could have a solution, and let me first speak as a Syrian and then as an Arab. Turkey, as much as Israel or Iran, is an occupier. We learned that in our schoolbooks as Syrians, that Turkey occupies a great part of Syrian territory, which is actually much larger than the Golan Heights. Iran occupies Ahvaz, and Israel, as you know, the Golan Heights, so there cannot be a difference between one occupier and another, not because an occupier is from one religion or another; each occupier is the same, and we have to treat them in the same way.

Turkey under President Erdogan has had a creeping policy of Islamisation: as we have seen, they have backed the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and in Syria, and they have backed other factions such as Al-Nusra. We saw lately that they found themselves in a very difficult situation in the town of Kobani. It was either defend the Kurds and find themselves in a conflict with the Islamic State, Al-Nusra or other similar groups which they have helped and supported in infiltrating Syria, or alternatively fight the Kurds - or allow the Islamic State to attack the Kurds - and have a problem with over 20 million Kurds in Turkey.

We have seen that there was an attack on the Kurds in Kobani from inside Turkey by the Islamic State, which again shows that Turkey has been strongly backing those Islamic groups, and Turkey needs to change. They have to understand that the world has changed, and if they are our allies they have to support our values. They cannot be sponsoring terrorism if they are our allies. This is the most important thing. How could you differentiate between countries which sponsor terrorism? Many people, including Vice-President Biden and others, have pointed the finger at countries who are our allies in the region and have been supporting terrorism, and as the former deputy head of the CIA, Michael Morell, said a year ago, that Islamist groups in Syria have become the greatest threat to our national security, greater than the threat of Iran and North Korea. People in the region should have understood that this means we should start talking to Iran, because if the Islamists are our greatest threat, it is not only those groups on the ground but who is behind them, who is backing them, who is supporting them, who is funding them, who is inciting this sectarian divide.

Unfortunately, we had someone like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who last year called on all Sunnis to kill Shias and Alawites in the Middle East, and all Sunnis who could carry arms should go and do that. This is not exactly calling for democratic change in Syria or Iraq, or any other county, and unfortunately we have the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, who came out and welcomed Mr al Qaradawi's speech.