

RIBAL AL-ASSAD

Founder and Director of the Organisation for Democracy and Freedom in Syria and Chairman of the Iman Foundation

I am very critical of Qatar, as I am of many other countries, including the situation that has been going on in my own country – Syria –, the Middle East and North Africa. Again, I am not the only one who has said so. As you heard, last year, Vice President Biden was addressing students at Harvard University. He said very clearly that our problem in the region and in Syria is our allies, who have started a Sunni-Shia War to bring down the regime, deliberately cultivating groups such as ISIS, Al-Nusra, the Muslim Brotherhood and others. He is not the only one. You also have for example the former Head of Counter-Espionage and Counter-Terrorism in France, Mr Bernard Squarcini, who said that Qatar and Saudi Arabia were behind all extremist groups from Afghanistan to Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Africa. He specified Qatar when he said that Qatar was backing those Islamist groups who were fighting the French troops in Mali. You also have the former Head of Interior Intelligence, Mr Yves Bonnet, who also came out and said that Saudi and Qatar are backing Islamist groups in France. Regarding the last point, I do not know if you heard Sir Malcolm Rifkind last year. He is the former Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, and he came out and said that Qatar was behind those terrorists groups and that Qatar had to choose their friends carefully or live with the consequences, and I would like to ask where those consequences are. This is very important for us today, because it brings me to the terrible terrorist attacks that happened in Paris just last week. As I have been saying for many years now, we have to come together to tackle Islamic extremism. I said this at the World Policy Conference in Seoul last year. I warned that the international community should come together to fight Islamic extremism. A day before the terrorist attack in Paris, I was speaking at the World Affairs Councils of America. I said that we cannot sit by and watch those terrorists do whatever they want. The terrorist attack that happened on the Russian plane was not the only one or the last one. It saddens me that we have to wait for an incident as terrible as Paris for the international community to come together. They decided that they should work together to fight ISIS. However, we should not be focusing on the brand name. ISIS is only a brand. We should go after the underlying, poisonous ideology and all groups who share it. That includes Al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, the Muslim Brotherhood and others. Unfortunately, this has been ignored, and we have heard lately that some of our allies, including Qatar, have been trying to promote Al-Nusra. They have proposed that we should back Al-Nusra to fight ISIS. Mr Charles Lister from the Brookings Institution in Doha, and Ms Lina Khatib from the Carnegie Endowment backed this view. Only a couple of months ago, General Petraeus said so too. But this is insane. We should not forget that ISIS was not behind the 9/11 attack, the 7/7 bombing in London or the Madrid train bombing. It was Al-Qaeda, which is now Al-Nusra. Their branch in Syria. We should not disregard this, and we should also remember what Michael Morell, the former head of the CIA, said in August 2013. Just before he left, he talked about these extremist groups in Syria, but he did not give a name or brand. He said they have become the greatest threat to our national security, and as geography suggests, we should have understood that this threat was exponentially higher here in Europe. Theresa May, Home Secretary of the UK, said last year that they had actually stopped no less than 40 attacks on the UK. But it only takes one terror plot to slip through the net for innocent lives to be lost, and again, we have not listened. I am sure you heard last week that Ayman Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda, came out with a statement, a recorded statement on the Internet. He was very clear and he said that the Americans, the Russians, the Iranians, the Alawites and Hezbollah are coordinating their war against us. He encouraged his people to stop fighting amongst themselves and direct their attacks against that alliance. Unfortunately, nothing was done. We have to understand that in their ideology, those people believe in killing all those who do not share their perverted ideology. They believe in establishing an Islamic caliphate state under sharia law, not only in the Middle East, but from Xinjiang, China, to Andalusia, Spain. That is a reality of how poisonous their ideology is and why we have to come together to stop them. Lately, I have heard some people criticising Russia's intervention in Syria, and saying they were attacking groups which are supposedly our allies. I do not understand exactly who our allies are. Over three years ago, the US Attorney General Eric Holder, came out and said that most of the groups in the Free Syrian Army follow the Al-Qaeda ideology. Again, you have the former US Ambassador to Syria, Ambassador Ford, who was working closely with the Syrian rebels, came out a few months ago and said that 'Our problem in the US is that we have been backing armed groups in Syria who have been fighting alongside Al-Nusra all along, and that was a terrible thing.' I welcome the drastic measures that the UK has taken



lately, and Europe should follow their measures. They are going after all those who incite hatred and violence, and closing down all the premises they use to promote extremism and their TV stations and websites. We should do the same all over Europe, but it is not enough to do that, or to go after them, to have a coalition going after them in Iraq and Syria. We also have to know that as long as they continue to have the backing and support of some countries, they will continue to do the same. We have to know that these Islamic extremists are worse than the Nazis and a lot more dangerous, because they do not recognise international borders. They have no nation state or borders we could invade. There is no single army to fight or ambassador to threaten with sanctions. Their 'nation' is amorphous. They exist in all of our countries and their threat will continue to grow until pluralism, economic development and respect for the law prevail across the world.