

Q & A

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL, président et fondateur de la WPC

I should have said at the beginning that your responsibility as a Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs is Arab-African affairs, which is quite important, and you personally play a key role in the Vienna process. I will ask the first question. It seems to many of us that the most difficult point if we want to proceed positively is, if I may say so, the lack of trust in all directions, certainly the lack of trust between Iran and many Western countries, but also, in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia. It is fascinating for outside observers to see that Saudi Arabia is absolutely mesmerized as though their survival until tomorrow were at stake.

I think it was two years ago in this World Policy Conference that we saw a fascinating meeting between an Israeli ambassador and a Saudi prince who is well known, which a few years before would have been unthinkable. You have the technicalities of the negotiations, and in the process which has started there are a number of principles which can be discussed. How can we restore trust in the region and in a more widespread sense?

Hossein AMIRABDOLLAHIAN, vice-ministre des Affaires étrangères chargé du département arabo-africain, Iran

You raise a very important question. We have made efforts during the past 30 years, following the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, to ensure stable security and a very positive and constructive role for Iran in the region. Looking at what has happened in the Middle East in the past, particularly the measures have been taken given the development of Daesh and terrorism in the region, you will see that Iran had the most positive approach to this phenomenon. We are saying explicitly that Iran has a major and very important role in fighting terrorism in the Middle East.

Upon the request of the Government of Iraq, we sent our military advisors into Iraq to advise on fighting terrorism, and on the request of the Syrian Government we sent our military advisors to Syria, at a time when the US and some Western countries were in doubt as to how they should fight against ISIL. However, we used all our potential to fight against terrorism in Syria and in Baghdad. Unfortunately, some of our neighbours and friends, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, have not taken any measures to fight against Daesh, and some of the intelligence services in the region and beyond had links to ISIL, and provided them with information and helped them. Therefore, we believe that it is time for those who support ISIL and terrorists to make efforts to show their goodwill and good intentions. Those countries are responsible for answering to the people of Syria, to the people of France, and to the people of Mali.

Why is this? They have taken measures which have been very helpful to ISIL and other terrorist groups. The logic for their support of terrorists was the toppling of al-Assad, and the logic for their support of terrorists and Daesh was protecting the rights of the Sunnis in Iran. We do believe that the role of Iran has been very successful in the past and will continue to be successful in the past. We have a very positive and constructive role in fighting against terrorism and in helping with peace and security in our region. The negative role played by the Israeli regime is their lack of commitment to fundamental human rights, and unfortunately, some of our friends in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, instead of seeking a political solution, are seeking to use force as a solution.

We have mentioned in our friendly dialogue with our good neighbour, Saudi Arabia, that we can work together to fight terrorism and help to ensure the security and stability of the region, and to help the people, but we should accept the fact that the policy of some players was to allow the phenomenon of terrorism to increase in our region, using terrorism to topple Bashar al-Assad. They used military measures beyond the framework of the UN to create the situation in Libya. There have been seven months of aggression against the Yemeni people, with silence by the international community, leading to the growth of Daesh and terrorism in some parts of Yemen. The problems that we see today in Iraq are the result, not of lack of trust in Iran, but of the strategic mistakes of some of the international and regional players.

We should take some distance from this environment and think collectively of a constructive role in the region. There is no distinction between good terrorism and bad terrorism, and there is no difference in that sense between Paris, New York, Afghanistan, Iran or anywhere else in the world. There is no difference for them, and if they are able, they will target all of us in order to reach their anarchistic objectives and to establish a terrorist state, changing the international order by any kind of order they think necessary. Therefore, we make every effort we can to make the world understand that Iran has a very interactive and constructive role. One example is the success of the nuclear deal and our very active presence at the Vienna Conference to help find a political solution in Syria.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL, président et fondateur de la WPC

Is there a purely political solution to the so-called Islamic State or Daesh issue? In other words, is it not indispensable to resort to armed force and possible ground operations? Who would do that, in that case?

Hossein AMIRABDOLLAHIAN, vice-ministre des Affaires étrangères chargé du département arabo-africain, Iran

Some measures should also be taken in fighting ISIL. Firstly, there should be political cooperation at the international level. Secondly, the deep-rooted causes of how Daesh was established need to be studied. The third measure is to implement all the UN resolutions against terrorism and Daesh. Let me tell you very frankly and explicitly that today in Europe you only know about Daesh, but last Saturday in Vienna we gathered about 20 countries together, such as Russia and the US, to find a political solution for the future of Syria. Before that meeting, as you know, the tragic incident happened in Paris, and I talked to the Foreign Minister of Switzerland in that meeting and said that in order to fight against terrorism it should be done in a real fashion which requires reaching a common understanding together. This was the main question of the Vienna talks before the distinguished foreign ministers.

If we were to prepare a list of the terrorist organisations in the Middle East and Africa and publish it, and specifically, if we were to name active terrorist groups in Syria, what names would we refer to? You know that we have military advisers in Syria, and you also know that Hezbollah are providing security at the Lebanese border and prevent the transit of these terrorists under the coordination of the central Government of Lebanon. Therefore, we know and understand the names of the terrorist groups involved in Syria, and at the moment there are more than 40. Some of these groups have entered Syria from Europe, and are also going to Iraq and coming back. Recently, they have also been transiting to southern Yemen. Today Aden is under the control of al-Qaida and ISIL groups, and in the customs department of Yemen they have also hoisted the ISIL flag.

When we talked about these terrorist groups, we could not reach a common compromise and understanding together. You in Europe know ISIL as a major terrorist group in Iraq and in Syria, but this one part of the reality. Al-Nusra, with its al-Qaida ideology, is another active terrorist group, along with Ahrar ash-Sham and Daesh al-Islam, and these groups have some similarities with al-Qaida, which is their main parent. ISIL is a new current of al-Qaida's ideology in the region, so to reach a real understanding, we need to have a real understanding of this.

Now I will refer to your question, Mr Chairman. Fighting ISIL requires political actions aimed at recognising and finding the real terrorist groups, and united field actions in fighting the terrorist groups would also be a good thing, because we have had more than 100 conferences at the UN level or internationally. However, if there is no real fight against ISIL on the ground, so we should expect ISIL to come to Tehran, Moscow or Europe. Fighting against ISIL needs cooperation at international level needs united cooperation at international level along with the recognition of other terrorist groups.

Let me give you one example. When the US went into Iraq in 2003, there was a power vacuum at government level, and at that time Iran, the US and Iraq held a trilateral conference in Iraq, and I think the US Ambassador Ryan Crocker participated in that meeting. We talked in those meeting about Iraq and discussed how to restore security. I participated in those meetings on behalf of the Foreign Ministry. The first debate was about restoring security in Iraq and recognising and finding the terrorist groups active in Iraq. Eight terrorist groups were active in Iraq at that time, but Mr Ryan Crocker, then Ambassador for the US, and the Deputy US Ambassador, who was also at the meetings, did

not refer to the realities. Maybe it will interest you, Mr Chairman, that General Petraeus's deputy participated as well, a very high-ranking officer, and he was very realistic as to how approach a solution to fighting against terrorism.

Therefore, we could not reach a satisfactory conclusion to these trilateral talks on Iraq or to agree on a terrorist list. The Americans said that their priority was to eradicate Jaish al-Mujahideen, but we mentioned that there were other terrorist groups on the ground and that there should be coordinated international action when we reached a conclusion, but we never reached a conclusion with them. It is very easy to see that we cannot reach a conclusion on a list of all the terrorist groups in Syria, so we believe that it is very important to reach a real understanding of the terrorist groups who are endangering the security of the region and the world as a whole. You should know that there are many terrorist groups in our region which are much more powerful than ISIL, such as ISIL in the southern part of Yemen, Jabhat al-Nusra, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, who have transferred from the Middle East and Africa to the southern part of Yemen. They are misusing the power vacuum in Yemen. Do not forget that Yemen was the place from which terrorism arose in the region, and today, in the shadow of what happened to Iraq and Syria, they have returned to Yemen.

Therefore, we believe that the West should have a real understanding of the terrorist groups and that international measures, even military action, against terrorism in the region should be increased. Different actions should be taken simultaneously alongside the implementation of the UN resolutions.

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I would like to conclude by saying that there is nothing more important than the successful conclusion of the Vienna Process, which will probably take some time, but it will be crucial for the future of the Middle East and much more broadly. Thank you for giving us the possibility to understand better some aspects of Iranian policy and policies. There are many other aspects we have not covered, and I hope that we will continue these kinds of exchanges through various channels.