

DEBATE

Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

We can take two or three questions right now and then come back to more questions later. I can already see someone who would like to ask a question. Renaud Girard is a very well-known prominent columnist in the French Daily *Le Figaro*.

Renaud GIRARD, Journalist at *Le Figaro*, Editor at *Questions Internationales*

Good morning, Minister.

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

Good morning to you.

Renaud GIRARD, Journalist at *Le Figaro*, Editor at *Questions Internationales*

I want to ask a question because I just had a conversation with our former ambassador to the UN, Alain Dejammet. If you speak with your heart and with your brain, do you really think that Sykes-Picot still holds in the Levant, in Mesopotamia and in the Middle East? Do you think that we will again have a united Syria or is it just a dream that needs hundreds of deaths without any results, or should we actually consider that there could be a state along the Mediterranean Sea with the Alawis, the Christians, the Druze, and maybe some Sunnis, those who are with the regime because Ali Mamlouk, for instance, the head of the Secret Service is a Sunni and the wife of Bashar is a Sunni?

Looking at another country, we can also say that we do not see how Iraq will be united again. The national army, equipped by America, a very strong army, was defeated very easily in Mosul. We do not see a national army trained and ready to fight for the unity of Iraq. The unity of Iraq is destroyed. It does not exist. The Kurds live by themselves, so do you think that it would be more realistic to think of another map or should we continue with these current borders?

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

Being at the World Policy Conference, you are asked to be very transparent, but with all these cameras around us, I will take you to the limit of diplomacy. You have touched the wound, actually. It is not up to us to decide whether these countries have to have a new Sykes-Picot or not, and this is what I said in my opening remarks. Unfortunately, we are not listening to the people and we think that we can meet some 1 000 miles away and decide for them and then come and implement what we think is appropriate for them. Those days are over. I think being the guardian and being the custodian of the people is behind us and it has been proven.

A united Syria is what every Syrian today fighting the regime wants to see. It is responsibility of the international community to take this element into account when we put forward a political solution. Syria lived for 1 000 years with this mosaic. For example, you touched on the Druze. The Druze were heroes that liberated Syria, if you recall. Al-Atrash was one of the heroes of liberating Syria and a united Syria.

If we talk about the Christians in Syria, we have been urging our friends and allies not to touch this element in Syria and not to encourage them to flee Syria or emigrate because we consider the Christians of the Middle East a pillar of the Middle East. In no circumstances should they be encouraged to leave the Middle East because they are a cornerstone of that mosaic picture of how we see Syria. If you know Syria before, you know the people, you can go to Harra. You can go to the Jewish district in Damascus. Next to it is a Muslim district and a Christian district and



Turkmen. You cannot differentiate. Unfortunately, this regime tried for the past 40 years to give this impression of sectarian division in Syria.

Iraq is a different issue altogether. Iraq must be united. Unity of Syria and unity of Iraq gives stability to the whole world for so many reasons, but in the case of Iraq, we believe that we have to give more support to the government of Prime Minister Abadi, encourage him to implement the reform steps or the 14 points, if you know them, for the reform and only then I am sure we can get rid of 70% of this terrorist group in Iraq just by doing these reforms, i.e. de-Baathification law, the national guard law, releasing of political prisoners. Unfortunately, we are stuck in this box that we want to fight terrorism only from the air. This will not work, ladies and gentleman.

If we have to fight terrorists together, we have to have a parallel line. We have to have the military option and at the same time, we have to go and treat the roots. Treating the roots is by giving the people the minimum rights that they are calling for. This is what we believe could be a solution, but I can assure you that Syria and Iraq will not be a new Sykes-Picot.

Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

Itamar Rabinovich.

Itamar RABINOVICH, President of the Israel Institute, Distinguished Global Professor at New York University (NYU) and Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution

Mr Minister, you began by mentioning the meeting in Vienna in an effort to resolve the conflict. Your country Qatar is an important player in the Syrian crisis. It seems that the issue of the personal faith of President Bashar Assad is one of the major stumbling blocks to a settlement. There are those who want him to leave and make it an indispensable condition and there are those who want him to stay. Does Qatar have a position or a policy with regard to the personal future of Bashar Assad as the president of Syria?

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIYAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

Thank you. I can claim today that Qatar was among the first countries to reach out to Bashar Assad after the Deraa uprising in November. We have engaged the president. We have engaged Bashar Assad at a high level three times. We called them so many times. We tried to encourage them to do little reforms, which at that time, if he had done these reforms, I think he could have solved the issue. People went to the streets calling for some justice and some freedom when he faced them with the whole brutality machine. At that time, they did not want Bashar out. Then he escalated this.

Today, it is not up to Qatar or not up to any of the Syrian core group or Syrian friends to decide whether Bashar stays or not. It is the people of Syria who have been suffering for five years that are demanding that Bashar should leave. If we are saying that we have to listen to the Syrian people, the Syrian people are speaking. Who do we think the Syrian people have been fighting over the past five years? If the Syrian people who want Bashar Assad to depart are not standing firm in Syria, then who is fighting? Is there a ghost fighting the regime and the regime core today in Syria? There are people inside Syria who are fighting against five fronts for the last four years and have said they do not want Bashar Assad.

We can have a political transition period, according to Geneva I. Everybody agreed on the six Geneva principles. It was very clear. Let us have a political body where we can transfer all the political power to it, with the police and the military authority, and they can run the country for the coming two years, preparing for a new constitution and election without Bashar Assad. One man killed 36 000 and we are still fighting to keep him on board? It makes no sense. Thank you.

Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

Jim Hoagland and then Mr Foucher.



Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

Mr Minister, thank you for your remarks. I wanted to follow up on Ambassador Rabinovich's question to you. I understood your answer to say basically that Qatar supports putting the priority on Bashar Assad's departure, whereas the United States and France now put the priority on fighting ISIS, so there is this division. How do we resolve that division and did I understand you correctly?

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIYAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

No. It is not exactly what you said about my remarks. Fighting terrorists and the departure of Bashar goes in parallel for the simple reason that they are both terrorists. Killing your people by dropping barrel bombs on them, killing wives, children, pregnant women, burying them underground using barrel bombs is a terrorist act. What ISIL and the terrorist group are doing is a terrorist act. We should fight them in parallel.

Now, tactically speaking, Bashar's survival is an ISIL survival and vice versa, so you have to fight both or we have to find a solution for both, and I think we have the same vision as our friends, the United States and France, but the question is not the divergence of opinion, but are we serious about fighting terrorists? This is the question we should address altogether.

Michel FOUCHER, Chair of applied Geopolitics at College of World Studies; Former French Ambassador to Latvia; Former Director of the policy planning staff of the French Foreign Ministry

Mr Minister, you just referred to the Vienna process, where global powers and some regional powers are starting to talk together. In your view, which are the main powers today that are able to address the Syrian and the Iraqi crisis? Are they the members of the UN Security Council or are they the real regional powers? By that, I mean Iran and Saudi Arabia. In that case, a kind of Yalta between Tehran and Riyadh is possible. If so, we will go back a century, not between London and Paris, but between Tehran and Riyadh to draw some new lines of areas of influence. If it can bring some stability, why not?

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIYAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

First of all, let us set the record straight here. Syria is a member of the Arab League, so Syria is an Arab country and I think the priority to solve Syrian issues should be on the Arab house. That is my first point. Secondly, we should not be naïve or hypocritical, excuse my words, in the international arena. There is interest. Everybody knows that there is interest for others in Syria, but the interest can be achieved by talking to the people who will work with you in the future. You cannot bet on a losing horse. If you want to protect your interests in Syria, then fine, go and protect your interests, but do it through the people. The people understand. They do not live in a box. They live in an open world. They have to deal with the West, with the East, with everyone, so who do I not form a friendship with the people rather than betting on a losing horse and making all these people hate you and refusing to deal with you in the future?

A participant

If I may intervene at this stage, when you say the people in Syria, should you not say the peoples with an 's'? That takes us precisely back to the question on Sykes-Picot and all that. What is it that makes Syria a country? That is question number one.

Question number two is to challenge my friend, Michel Foucher. It seems to me, and maybe you would like to react to that, that you cannot put Iran and Saudi Arabia on the same footing. Iran is a very, very old nation, with an important population. Saudi Arabia is a recent construct in a much more fundamentally fragile situation. Perhaps you would also like to react to that.



Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIYAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

To answer the first question, we have to know something. Combatting or resisting Bashar Assad is not only done by the Muslim Syrians. No. The Druze are fighting, Christians are fighting, Turkmen are fighting – all the elements and they are fighting on so many fronts today in Syria. It is not only the battlefield. It is the political field too. The Syrian National Coalition is composed of all Syrians, so we cannot say that this is a Sykes-Picot type division. Okay, 80% of Syrians are Muslim Sunnis. Fine, but they have learned to live with others for 1,000 years. I cannot go beyond 1,500 years, by the way. In fact, they cannot live without each other, so this is one part of your question.

The second part - no, I do not agree totally. Saudi Arabia is a pillar of the Islamic world. I just opened my statement talking about the moral power we have on the GCC, namely in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, we have the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. If there was not the moderate language going out from Saudi Arabia today, we have 1.5 billion Muslims around the world, so we have to give Saudi Arabia credit for keeping the train on the right track on the moderate standpoint, no matter how we hear here and there about passion against them. Try to look closely with a microscope and see the benefit of having the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques for Muslims around the world and keeping them moderate. We have Indonesia, going through Europe to Morocco, and Saudi plays a very big role in keeping this moderate.

Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

Riad Tabet from Lebanon.

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIYAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

Ah, who does not like Lebanon?

Riad TABET, President of Berit International Holding SA

Thank you, Minister. President François Hollande is calling for a large and unified coalition to fight Daesh in Syria. This coalition consists of a large cohort, including Iran. Will you be a part of it?

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIYAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

If you recall, there was an ally against the terrorist group launched in September 2014 and called by the United States. We are all part of this ally against ISIL. In fact, what President Hollande did is very smart and he is not calling Iran, though he is calling Russia to join us in our campaign against ISIL and I think this is a very wise move by the president. Today, all of us have to stand firm fighting ISIL in both ways – fighting ISIL tangibly and fighting the cause, which creates ISIL as well.

A participant

If I may challenge you on this issue, what difference do you see between Putin's proposal for a large coalition against terrorism and Hollande's proposal, which came after Putin?

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIYAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

Let us talk about Russia a little bit. We consider Russia as a friend to the Arab region for the last 50 years. They stood by the Arabs and it will be sad to see Russia standing on the other side, i.e. supporting Bashar Assad. With Russia and with Russian's intention to fight terrorists, I believe it is better for everyone to see Russia on this side. First, to keep this good relation going with the Arabs, secondly, we can double our efforts to combat terrorists, and thirdly, they will have free and easy access to the future Syria because today or tomorrow, whether we like it or not, we will be dealing with the Syria that the people who started their uprising against Bashar have created. It will be for them, so we will be dealing with the Syrian people. This is how I see the picture.



Tatsuo MASUDA, Visiting professor at the NUCB Graduate School

As you rightly pointed out, the politics in the Middle East has been decided by the people thousands of miles away from home, but in future, most national borders will be set by those people, not you. In future, in a matter of several decades from now, do you think there could be a possibility of Arab people drawing their own national borders or erasing all these national borders?

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

My friend, it is happening now. The Arabs have started to draw their map since it started in Tunisia. The Arabs are drawing their map now. The only thing is we have to help them and encourage them. It is like a yo-yo game and an evolution in the world. People in France and people from Portugal know that revolution does not settle. The dust does not settle in a couple of years. It needs tens of years to settle down, so the yo-yo has started in the Arab region and they are drawing their roadmap. I am sure about this.

Pawel KOWAL, Assistant professor in the Institute of Political Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences

I have a very short question. Newly-nominated Foreign Minister of Poland presented an idea to organise an army of refugees from Syria to arm and to send to the Middle East as part of an anti-terrorist coalition. What do you think about that idea, Mr Minister?

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

Thank you very much. We have been saying for years now, since the end of 2013 when this terrorist group emerged in Syria, that the people of Syria are ready to combat terrorists and they have examples of this, but we have to give them hope that fighting terrorists is not only their objective. They are fighting the regime too. We have to give them the comfort that they can fight both and they are willing to fight both. They are willing to fight ISIL and they are willing to fight the regime.

Today, if you follow the military reports, whenever the moderate opposition is advancing, they have attacks from the back from ISIL. When the regime is advancing, ISIL disappears, so there is a connection between the regime and ISIL, and here, if you give these people hope that they can have their country free of both, I think they can do the job themselves. Yes, I agree. We do not need foreign boots on the ground. The people of Syria can do this.

Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

I think I have to stop the debate now, unless there is someone who really wants to make a point. I will give him or her a chance. If it is not the case, I would like to ask you perhaps a more historical question to end this debate. That takes us back to the role of Russia and the former Soviet Union. I remember many people who were involved in international affairs in those times. I remember 1980, the intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. At the time, we used to interpret that move as one more imperialistic move towards the so-called warm seas and so on and so forth. I think today, history has been reinterpreted and many experts today consider that in fact, it had to do with a kind of struggle with fundamentalist Islamism and political Islamism from Islamic republics of the Soviet Union.

If that interpretation is correct, we perhaps should see there the starting point of what has become a disease in the vast MENA region and that also could explain the particular sensitivity of Putin and the regime today on this question. What is your personal judgment on this relatively historical question?

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

We will not give up. We will keep talking to our colleagues in Russia. We will keep encouraging them. We are in touch with our friend Sergei because we do not want to recall a second sad picture of Afghanistan for sure. We are engaging with our friend, as I said, and I am sure they will listen to the wise voice and I am sure that at one stage, they will join the international effort against terrorists because today, everyone here is affected. Every one of us is affected.



We have to join forces. It is not just the Middle East. It will spill into the world if we do not make a joint effort in this. I am optimistic that after the call of President Hollande, as Riad mentioned, I am sure we will have Russia coming to this campaign.

Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

I want to thank you very much, especially, as I said before, that you readjusted your plans and we wish you well, Mr Minister. In the very short term, have a safe trip to the United States.

Khalid Bin Mohammed AL ATTIYAH, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar

Thank you, Thierry. Thank you very much.