

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

Dé Céadaoin, 19 Samhain 2014

Wednesday, 19 November 2014

The Joint Committee met at 2.30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Eric Byrne,	Senator Mark Daly,
Deputy Seán Crowe,	Senator Michael Mullins,
Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Senator Jim Walsh.
Deputy Olivia Mitchell,	
Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan,	

DEPUTY PAT BREEN IN THE CHAIR.

Situation in Syria and Middle East: Dr. Nader Hashemi

Chairman: I welcome Dr. Nader Hashemi from the University of Denver. We are all appalled at the ongoing situation in Syria and the rise of Islamic State, which is causing great concern throughout the world and to this committee. We are aware of the worst-affected areas, the atrocities, the killings and inhuman acts being carried out at the moment. The people most affected by this are the citizens of Syria as well as the humanitarian workers and reporters who have been caught up in it, and it affects other countries in the region such as Iraq. The United Nations and the European Union have been focusing on this but there seems to be no sign of improvement, in fact it is getting worse.

The format of today's meeting is that we will hear an opening statement from Dr. Hashemi before a question and answer session with the committee members. Dr. Hashemi's statement has been sent to all members. It is quite a long statement. In order to get the best value from the meeting Dr. Hashemi might abbreviate his presentation to ten minutes and members will ask questions.

I remind members, witnesses and those in the public gallery to make sure their mobile phones are switched off completely for the duration of the meeting because even in silent mode they interfere with the recording equipment. Today's meeting will be broadcast live on television.

I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or body outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. If they are directed by the Chairman to cease giving evidence in regard to a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: I thank the Chairman for the invitation. I am very honoured to be here today. The rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS, is a pivotal moment in international relations. I have spent most of my adult life studying the Middle East, travelling to it, researching and writing about it, teaching on the subject. I have never been more dispirited, concerned, disillusioned about the future of the Middle East than I am today and that is directly related to the rise of the ISIS crisis. Now is a moment for the international community to pause and seriously evaluate this particular crisis, which is not just a Middle Eastern crisis but a global one. The ISIS crisis is at the top of the international agenda. How did we get here and what can and should the international community do about this crisis? I encourage the members of this committee to think about what particular contribution Ireland can make toward alleviating and resolving the ISIS crisis.

The roots of the crisis are located in Syria. It does have Iraqi roots and the background to that is in the document I circulated. We would not be having an ISIS crisis had there not been a conflict in Syria. Fundamentally, the failure of the international community to deal with the

three and a half year ongoing bloodshed and carnage in Syria has led to this particular crisis moment in international relations. According to the United Nations today, Syria represents the biggest humanitarian and moral crisis of the 21st century, replete with the displacement of nearly half of Syria's population, either as refugees or internally displaced, the largest refugee crisis of the 21st century and a human rights crisis that is borderline genocidal. The words "state-sanctioned war crimes" and "crimes against humanity" litter the human rights documentation on this conflict. There is a rape crisis, a child-killing crisis, a public health crisis and a starvation crisis in Syria but Syria is much more than that; Syria is fundamentally a political crisis.

The origins of the crisis in Syria that has produced ISIS go back to March 2011 and the context of the Arab Spring when there were pro-democracy protests against authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East and north Africa which eventually spread to Syria. It is important to remember that at least for the first six months of the Syrian uprising, these protests were non-violent and non-sectarian. There was no ISIS or al-Qaeda to be found. There were pro-democracy protesters who protested in the best spirit of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi in challenging one-family rule for 41 years. It was the brutality in the crackdown by the Assad regime on peaceful protesters that led to the militarisation of the uprising and, fundamentally, its Islamisation and extreme development in a militant Islamic current known as Islamic State.

While this was happening, the international community stood on the sidelines and watched things deteriorate. The general view most people had was that the UN Security Council was deadlocked and could not do anything about it. Russia and China were on one side, with the United States and the European Union on the other. There was no agreement. Although we could pass a few resolutions, hold a bunch of meetings and travel to Geneva, fundamentally nothing was done and the position worsened. By the beginning of 2014, there was a general view that because of the deadlock, the situation in Syria had to burn itself out. Nobody wanted to take charge or speak up. There was a general view that as bad as the situation in Syria was, what had happened there could be contained. That was the view of many realists in the United States; they believed it did not really affect the world, the West or the United States. The operating assumption was that events in Syria could be "contained". We now know that the conflict in Syria could not be contained and it has spread to Iraq. ISIS is on the outskirts of Baghdad and was almost in Iraqi Kurdistan, having taken the major city of Erbil. The crisis in Syria has destabilised the entire region.

After a very significant western - American-led - troop deployment in Iraq and the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the region as a whole, the United States and the world has had to reinvest and re-engage in the Middle East because of the broad failure of the international community to take the crisis in Syria seriously from the start. It is interesting to ask if the international community had responded much more effectively and earlier, if we would have an ISIS crisis today. It is useful for us to litigate what could or should have been done, but we must deal with what can be done at this time. In this context, it is important to emphasise the centrality of Syria to the ISIS crisis cannot be ignored or denied. The five western hostages beheaded by ISIS were killed in Syria where ISIS was reborn and reconstituted. According to US intelligence estimates, two thirds of ISIS military forces are located in Syria. There is no solution to the ISIS crisis without debating a political solution on the future of Syria, as the issues are deeply interlinked.

The question is what role Ireland can play in tackling this crisis. I am here to encourage it to use its soft power in the global community and specifically the Middle East to help to push the conflict in the right direction. Ireland has a very good reputation in the Middle East because of

its political history in struggling for self-determination, dignity and human rights. There is also the very principled stand it has taken on the core identity issue in the Middle East - the Palestine-Israel crisis. Support for Palestinian self-determination has given Ireland much goodwill and if it could speak up and start to put the situation in Syria back on the agenda, specifically how to reach a political solution, the world would start to take notice.

There are some actions that Ireland could and should take to help to push this conflict in the right direction towards a resolution. It could support the struggle for self-determination, dignity and democracy for the people of Syria that began three and half years ago with a peaceful uprising against the Assad family. In keeping with this, there is a Friends of Syria group made up of several countries that have supported the struggle in Syria and Ireland could join that group. It could also join the 112 countries which have designated the Syrian National Council as “the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people” in contrast to the Assad regime. Ireland could also support the moderate Syria rebels who have been abandoned by the world by supporting the creation of a no-fly zone and a buffer zone where the people in question could reconstitute. There is no solution to the Syrian crisis unless moderate political forces can start fighting against ISIS and the Assad regime which are basically two sides of the same coin. We need the types of group supported by the international community, including Ireland.

Ireland could get behind the newly released document entitled Syrian Freedom Charter, which has been circulated from Syrian civil society and is basically a blueprint for the future of a democratic Syria. It is based on the 1955 South African freedom charter - a great blueprint - and countries such as Ireland, with a good reputation and commitment to human rights and democracy, in supporting the voice of that document could help to push events forward in a political fashion.

Ireland could also support the recent French proposal which advocates that we learn the lessons of recent events in Kobani on the Syrian-Turkish border. We can use that model to try to save Aleppo, the second largest city in Syria which is almost under complete siege by the Assad regime. There is a small element of moderate rebels still there and 300,000 people are about to be besieged. France has articulated a proposal to come to the rescue of these citizens in the moderate Syrian rebel forces. It is a plan that Ireland should support in trying to advance a resolution of the conflict.

As indicated in my document, former President Jimmy Carter has brought forward a three point peace proposal to resolve the Syrian crisis and Ireland could lend support to it. There are also a number of UN resolutions that remain unenforced that relate to humanitarian aid, including UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014) and 2165 (2014). Ireland could give a voice to them.

We need a threefold strategy to push the issue forward by supporting moderate Syrian rebel forces to defeat militarily; removing the root causes of political extremism in the Syrian regime, specifically the Assad regime; and putting in place a moderate government that would ensure there could be no rise of religious extremism, and ensuring Syria can begin to build a future that is inclusive, representative and truly democratic.

Chairman: If members wish to ask questions, our guest may answer them and I will allow them to make a follow-up comment. That would be in preference to making lengthy speeches which are of no real use. We are honoured to have Dr. Hashemi appear before us and he has indicated that he wants Ireland to play a role. Deputy Seán Crowe must leave to go to the Dáil at 3 p.m.

Deputy Seán Crowe: On the origins of ISIS, I believed it emerged in Iraq in 2003 under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi before officially joining al-Qaeda in 2004. There was also the difficulty between Sunni tribes and the Iraqi Government. There is a dispute about the number of combatants ISIS has. The estimates range from 20,000 to 200,000, but how many are there? How much of ISIS comprises genuinely dissatisfied Sunnis from Iraq and Syria and how many are foreign jihadi?

Watching the conflict, people are struck by the number of modern weapons used. It has been argued that these were acquired following the collapse of the Iraqi army. There is the technical knowledge to use these weapons, which suggests many of those involved may have fought under the previous regime. Could Dr. Hashemi comment on that? Is the key to defeating ISIS, not only about defeating it militarily but responding to the debate on the disaffected Sunnis in Iraq and Syria?

I presume this was the strategy of the American Government when it reached an agreement with the al-Maliki regime. With the lack of resources, that added to the tinder box.

Chairman: I will stop the Deputy now but I will allow him in again. He has asked a great many questions.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: The Deputy is correct. The problem that has produced ISIS is that the Governments in the two existing states of Iraq and Syria suffer from a deep crisis of illegitimacy. In the case of Iraq, about 20% of the population, the Sunni population, do not trust the Government and feel they have been marginalised and excluded by the Baghdad Government. The strategy that President Obama has laid out is I think a strategy that will work in Iraq if we can stick to that strategy. One has to give the central Government in Baghdad political legitimacy and push it to be more inclusive, to bring in the Sunnis and to get them to turn away from al-Qaeda as their political representation and a voice to air their set of grievances and come back and work with them in the context of an Iraqi political union in a country that actually works. That is the correct strategy.

The same strategy also needs to be applied to the case of Syria. In Syria, the conflict is much more complicated. Some 70% of the population in Syria are Sunnis and they view the existing Government in Baghdad as completely illegitimate and representative of a minority set of interests rooted in the Ba'ath Party and the Alawite sect. Those basic principles of political legitimacy as a way of dealing with the ISIS crisis and draining the Sunni population away from ISIS towards the central Governments that are democratic and inclusive is the right strategy to pursue. It will take a long time because there is a lot of disillusionment, anger and marginalisation. Broadly speaking that is the way forward and that is a role the international community can and should play.

With respect to questions on troops, most of the reports state there are about 30,000 to 40,000 ISIS fighters. I have never heard a figure of 200,000, but of the 30,000 to 40,000, about half of them are foreign fighters. The vast majority are disgruntled Sunni young men from Iraq and Syria. Many of the foreign fighters are from neighbouring Arab countries, from Morocco to as far as Indonesia. The vast majority come from Iraq and Syria. As I just stated these young Sunni men from Iraq and Syria feel their existing political systems are non-representative, unaccountable and irredeemable. They joined ISIS as a way of finding some hope for a better future.

The challenge of draining away and convincing young Sunni disgruntled men that their

future lies with their own Governments and not with this Islamic State is a long-term solution but one that must be rooted in trying to increase the political legitimacy, inclusiveness and democratic nature of the existing political systems. That will not happen overnight. It will take a long time.

I think that the plan that President Obama laid out with respect to Iraq is the right plan. The problem is that President Obama has not said anything about a political solution for Syria, except the usual general talking points. As I said before there is no solution to the ISIS crisis unless there is a solution for Syria's political future. That is the major question that hangs over our heads and needs to be dealt with.

Chairman: Does Deputy Crowe have some short questions?

Deputy Seán Crowe: I have a question on the Kurds and the difficulties they are experiencing in their city of Kobani? Has Dr. Hashemi a position on Turkey's position on ISIS and the PKK? Mr. Patrick Cockburn has reported on the rhetoric between the Turks and the Kurds, which has got worse. What impact will this have on the ceasefire that is in operation?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: I am glad Deputy Crowe mentioned Kobani because we often hear there is no military solution to the crisis in Syria, only a political solution. I am of a different view. In my view there needs to be a political solution but a political solution can only be arrived at if we have a military component to it. Kobani is a perfect test case for that. To say that there is no military solution to Syria is basically to abandon the people of Kobani to the ISIS fighters. Kobani has been effectively saved in the past few weeks because of the significant support that has been given to it as a result of US air strikes, sending in Kurdish fighters and drops of armaments. That has shifted the tide.

When we started looking at this particular city, it looked as if it was about to fall but because of significant military support, the tide of the war has shifted and things look much better for the people of Kobani. I think that particular model needs to be applied in other parts of Syria as a way of pressuring the Assad regime to come to the negotiating table. President Assad is not going to come to the negotiating table and negotiate anything unless he is forced to do so. I think that is the broader model. That is what the French proposal was all about. It is not something I am coming up with, the French Foreign Minister has a military-political plan for Kobani on the table right now.

With respect to Turkey's role, it has conflicting roles in the region. It has its own Kurdish minority problem. It also has a broader regional set of interests. Turkey has been trying to leverage its geographic position to get the US to commit to a much more serious long-term political plan for the future of Syria. Turkey effectively told the Obama Administration that it would come to the rescue of the people of Kobani on the condition that the US would agree to a no-fly zone and for the US to go after the Assad regime and do what should have been done some three and a half years ago. President Obama, for reasons that we can talk about, has been very reluctant to get into a deeper engagement with respect to dealing with the political solution in Syria. In my view that has to do with the negotiations that are going on with Iran. We can talk about that, should the Deputy wish to do so.

Turkey's position is that of a regional power. I am of the view that there will not be a solution to Syria unless Turkey is brought on board. We have to consider Turkey's geographical position and its relationship with Western countries. Turkey is destined to play an important role. Turkey has to be part of the broader solution in terms of how we solve this broader crisis

of ISIS. To ignore Turkey is to make the ISIS crisis much more difficult.

Chairman: Thank you, Deputy Crowe. I know that Deputy O'Sullivan has some questions.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: It is a pity that we are having this discussion because of what is going on. There is so much I would have liked to have been able to tease out. When Dr. Hashemi was talking about the Kobani model, he meant the military aspect of it. I have a question about the Kurdish people because they have lost out in so many other conflicts. They have been to the fore in contributing and when the conflict is over, they are left with less land than they had when they started out. I would be interested to hear his comments on that.

Dr. Hashemi referred to removing President Assad, but in my view he is not moving anywhere. Is there any possibility of negotiating with him? Dr. Hashemi mentioned the Syrian National Council and I wonder where it is at this particular stage. When Dr. Hashemi spoke about moderate government, I thought of Libya and the overthrow of Gadaffi. I think people would agree that Libya is in a worse state now than it was under Colonel Gadaffi. Libya is in an appalling state now after all of their attempts at moderate government. I think because of the situation in Syria and ISIS it is not getting the attention that it should get. He mentioned Iran, which is a major player, but because they were excluded from the talks initially, they no longer are involved. I think was a mistake.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: The Kurds have been treated very badly in the modern history of the Middle East. Their sad fate is that they are divided between four countries. Any solution to a stable Middle East must include recognition of Kurdish national and cultural rights. There is no support in the international community for an independent Kurdistan, despite what we hear about the withering away of the First World War borders. However, there is a lot of support for federal political systems in the region in Iraq and in a future Syria that grants groups such as the Kurds full cultural autonomous and even national recognition but within the existing framework of Iraq and Syria and in Turkey. That is what has been happening in the case of Iraq. The Kurds in Iraq basically are autonomous. That is what needs to happen in a future Syria. That is what is beginning to happen in the case of Turkey. There has been some movement in terms of Turkey's relationship with the Kurds, a de-escalation of that particular conflict. That is something that the international community should be pushing.

In terms of President Assad's future, the Deputy is correct that he is not going anywhere. Let us be clear why he is not going anywhere. President Assad is not going because he has strong support from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, and the international community has stood on the sidelines for the past three and a half years and abandoned the moderate Syrian rebels. President Assad is not going to go anywhere until he is pushed. He will not give up 44 years of one family rule because of some pro-democracy protests that happened three and a half years ago. President Assad will be forced to concede some of what he holds right now if he is pressed to do so. The Russian position could be challenged in the Security Council. Iran's position in the region could be challenged by the global community. There is no stability in Syria or the broader Middle East as long as Assad stays in power. I was very happy to hear the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Flanagan, make that exact same point at this committee last week. That is the correct policy. Ireland seems to be on that track and it needs to stay on that track.

With respect to Libya and Syria, Deputy O'Sullivan is correct, Libya is a disaster. The international community came to the aid of the Libyan people to overthrow Gadaffi, however, afterwards they basically abandoned them. There are lessons to be learned from that. We talk

about a future stable Syria, the lesson from Libya is that it is not simply good enough to topple the dictator, there has to be a plan for stabilisation, reconstruction and peacekeeping in which Ireland can play a role in the aftermath. Otherwise, one is prone to get the dissolution of the state, war, anarchy, breakdown and the possibility of a repeat scenario along the Libyan model in Syria. That is not what we want to see so that a central element of a peace plan must have built into it a post-conflict reconstruction and stabilisation plan.

Chairman: Thank you. I call Senator Walsh.

Senator Jim Walsh: I thank Dr. Hashemi for his very interesting and insightful paper. I have a number of questions. What is the mindset of a significant minority of Islamists or Muslims that leads them to such barbaric atrocities being committed? I remember reading a book many years ago about Mohammed. Not only was he a prophet but he was a military leader of the day. Is there an undercurrent within that which is being abused?

Chairman: I will ask Dr. Hashemi to answer that question and I will call on Senator Walsh again.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: It is a very important question, but the root causes in my view have much less to do with religion and much more to do with politics. What I mean by that is the following. The roots of the ISIS crisis is fundamentally to be located in the broken politics of the Middle East. The broken politics of the Middle East is a function of two converging variables that have produced the ISIS crisis. First, the legacy of political tyranny and political despotism that has characterised the politics of the region has been most manifested in the two countries that have been most adversely affected by the legacy of political tyranny, Iraq and Syria. When compared to the countries of the Arab League, Iraq and Syria are the two countries whose post-colonial political condition has been most severely decimated by political authoritarianism. The human rights record for example of the Ba'ath Party under President Assad and Saddam Hussein has devastated this society. That is a main cause.

The other main cause is that Iraq and Syria have been devastated by the predictable consequences of state breakdown that has resulted from ongoing war. The state in Iraq and Syria no longer functions as a normal state. Iraq has been in constant war for the past 35 years - the Iran-Iraq war, the Iraq-Kuwait war, devastating sanctions, the American occupation from 2003 until today. It is a devastated society. Syria has been the site of the worst humanitarian and moral crisis of the 21st century with borderline genocidal conditions. The state has withered away.

In this vacuum produced by state breakdown, war and also the legacy of political tyranny and chaos ISIS has emerged. It provides a narrative. Most of the people who join ISIS have been born, bred and raised in politically authoritarian tyrannical societies, where the state has broken down and where they or their families have either been in prison, as a political prisoner, have been suffocated or have been scared. This is the enveloping context that produced the ISIS crisis.

One has to ask oneself why this is happening in Iraq and Syria. If this is a religious question, a problem of Islam, how come in those parts of the Muslim world where Muslims are in the greatest majority, Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh, one does not see these things happening? One sees them happening in Iraq and Syria precisely for the reasons I mentioned, namely, the predictable consequences of the convergence of the legacy of political tyranny; state breakdown; war and chaos which put together creates a fertile soil for this particular group to emerge.

On top of that, religion is important here. There is a particular theological interpretation of people who subscribe to the ISIS world view that comes out of a puritanical, ultra conservative, anti-humanistic and intolerant interpretation of Islam rooted in the Arabian peninsula, coming out of the Wahabi creed of Islam. If one looks at the theological interpretation of ISIS, the books they are using in their classrooms, the intolerance, the beheading, the animosity toward Shia, towards women, towards culture, toward peoples who are minorities, all of this is straight out of the playbook of a particular puritanical and ultra-conservative orientation that comes out of the Saudi peninsula. One does not see this in other parts of the Islamic world. One does start to see it in the later half of the 20th century largely as a result of the marriage of Wahabi Islam, ultra-conservative puritanical Islam and the development of oil and the wealth that is generated in the Persian Gulf area that allows this particular interpretation of Islam to be disseminated.

If one looks at the whole history of Islam, 1,400 years, one does not see these types of manifestations of Islam but one sees them happening at certain moments in certain places of time because of the convergence of what I would call three factors, state breakdown and war, the legacy of political tyranny and also this ultra puritanical conservative interpretation of Islam. Put it all together and one gets ISIS.

Senator Jim Walsh: I want to follow through on this thread. I would go some of the way with Dr. Hashemi's view, but many of those who are fighting in this conflict come from the Western world. Some of them are converts to Islam. Some of his prognosis does not answer that.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: It actually does.

Senator Jim Walsh: Why do so few Muslim leaders and Muslim states condemn these atrocities? The condemnation of these atrocities seems to be absent. Dr. Hashemi referred to the role of Saudi Arabia, but Qatar has a role. Not alone are these countries funnelling the ideology, they are also funding it.

Looking at other authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, when they move to what appears to be more democratic structures, it transpires that the minorities, who had lived there peacefully for 1,000 years under some of these authoritarian rulers, now find themselves being targeted and rooted out. That is a major scandal.

Chairman: A question, Senator.

Senator Jim Walsh: Does Dr. Hashemi agree that is a significant blemish on Islam? Dr. Hashemi mentioned saving Aleppo. In Iraq there is a legitimate Government which President Obama has backed and is supporting. That is logical, but the choice in Syria is between a discredited regime, which is in power or an atrocious barbaric terrorist group which would take over. Is that choice not impossible? Dr. Hashemi appears to be coming down against President Assad, but should the first priority be the defeat of ISIS? Would he agree that will mean international troops on the ground?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: There is a third choice, which is the choice the international community did not pursue and that has led to where we are today, namely, to support the peaceful non-violent protesters who began this conflict, to support today the moderate Syrian rebels whom I think provide an alternative to President Assad and an alternative to ISIS. That is the third option that has not been pursued. We have to start from the drawing board again because they have been decimated. They are the weakest party to this conflict. This third option can be

pursued and should be pursued. The only way we will get a stable future in Syria is by supporting those people who are committed to basic principles of human rights and democracy. That is the third issue.

I must disagree with the earlier comments on religion and Islam. It is absolutely wrong to state there has been no condemnation of ISIS by Muslims. I challenge the Senator to find any mainstream or even marginal Muslim group which supports ISIS. I am asked this question all the time. On my website I have a list of every major Muslim organisation which I know has issued a condemnation of ISIS. Not only that, but more than 300 leading Muslim scholars have issued a public document pointing out how the ISIS interpretation of Islam is a violation of mainstream interpretations of Islam. There has been broad condemnation and I will be happy to share the document with the Senator if it will help.

One cannot compare the predictable consequences of Qatari foreign policy and the type of Islam coming from Qatar with that of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has been producing, promoting and disseminating a very intolerant and puritanical interpretation of Islam for at least 50 years. The reach of Saudi oil money and the scholarships given to students from around the Islamic world to come to Saudi Arabia to internalise a particular intolerant interpretation and return to their own communities to spread it has been a long-standing story. It has been well documented and is partly responsible for producing this intolerant interpretation of Islam which has now manifested itself in ISIS. The challenge is to try to promote and support those interpretations of Islam which are more inclusive and tolerant.

As committee members know from this country's experience, religion can be interpreted in many ways, in exclusive, intolerant and backward ways but also the converse, with tolerant, ecumenical and inclusive interpretations. Ireland and the rest of the international community have a deep interest in trying to support those forces and voices which promote the latter interpretation of Islam. One will not get away from the question of religion. The Islamic world is deeply religious and we have an interest in promoting more tolerant and inclusive interpretations of Islam. I wish there were many expressions, but they just do not receive the same type of financial backing with oil money as this ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam.

Chairman: I will allow Senator Jim Walsh back in after other members have spoken, if he wishes to reply.

Senator Michael Mullins: To follow on from what Senator Jim Walsh stated about support for the moderate forces, how representative and how strong are they? Does Dr. Hashemi have concerns that if they were supported militarily, three factions would have strong military support? Would this lead to further loss of life, bloodshed and human rights violations?

Dr. Hashemi would like us to support the struggle for democracy in Syria. As a democratic country, we strongly want to support every effort to install a strong democratic regime in every country. Will Dr. Hashemi flesh out the Syrian freedom charter to which he referred? What does it contain and what role can it play in resolving the issue?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: In 1955 the South African pro-democracy movement, led by the African National Congress, produced a document, South African Freedom Charter, about which committee members will have heard. It was a blueprint for a future post-apartheid South Africa. Looking back, we see that the document played a role in bringing various political constituencies around a common agenda. The civil society organisations led by the local co-ordinating councils in Syria which have representation throughout the country have produced a similar

document based on the South African blueprint. It is an inclusive document for democracy, human rights and civil society which lays out a blueprint for a future Syria. It was not dreamed up by a handful of activists; it is based on the most detailed survey of Syrian public opinion ever conducted. A total of 50,000 people in every district in Syria and including the exiled community of those who were kicked out and have become refugees were surveyed and they voiced their opinions. The document is far more representative than anything we have seen in the history of modern Syria. Ireland and the international community could get behind this document because it is the embodiment of the values to which we subscribe in western liberal democracies. It is also a reflection of Syrian views. It is representative and overlaps with the views of moderate Syrian rebels who stand for the freedom charter principles. It is a new document which has just been released and about which committee members will hear much more. I encourage them to find out more about it.

If we support the Free Syrian Army, the weakest of the three groups, we will prolong the conflict, but I argue that not supporting it is to guarantee Syria's future will be mired in conflict, resistance and a war of attrition that will constantly produce instability as long as the Assad regime and ISIS stay in power. Unfortunately, in some conflicts one must invest in a military struggle to defeat those political parties which simply are not willing to compromise or share power. We are in this crisis because of Assad's obfuscation, gerrymandering of the political system and authoritarian policies. He does not want to leave. There is no way out of the problem in Syria unless a military solution is used as part of a broader political agenda. They must go together, as one cannot separate them. That is how we must start to think about the solution. If we start to think about it in these terms, emboldened by the freedom charter principles, we can start to move the conflict in a much more positive and better direction.

Deputy Eric Byrne: What a complex crisis it is. We extend our sympathy to the people of Syria who have suffered. They are heading into the winter months and have gone from having a very sophisticated wealthy middle class society to what it is today.

I am concerned about several issues. While I accept and applaud Dr. Hashemi's outline of how Ireland can play a role in finding a solution, it is startling to hear that 50% of ISIL fighters are not Syrian. It is also frightening to think British, as well as two French, people have been connected with the beheading of aid workers. Dr. Hashemi has explained that he believes the chaos, dictatorship and horrible leadership in Syria and Iraq bred this sandstorm and volcano. One can accept this, but what is the attraction for the 50% of fighters who do not come from this culture? That is a big concern. I do not want to be simplistic, but it seems there must be a religious motivation for people to leave Ireland, England and France as Muslims to fight exclusively with ISIL.

Dr. Hashemi has requested our support for the weak democratic forces, but I have read in the newspapers that last week ISIL defeated what was to be a stronghold of these democratic fighters. There is the power of Russia and its influence, as well as of China to some degree. In particular, does Dr. Hashemi agree that unless the two major Islamic states and key players of Saudi Arabia and Iran are forced into some compromise, the region will always be destabilised? People from Tehran who have come before the committee state things are wonderful in all of these kingdoms. People from Morocco who have come before the committee state all of these kingdoms are fundamentally undemocratic. One can sense the tension in Iran in the case of Shia Muslims and see the response given by Sunni leaders. Are the key players, Saudi Arabia and Iran, working together? Will Dr. Hashemi explain why 50% of the fighters come from countries outside Syria and Iraq?

Chairman: On that question, does Dr. Hashemi think national governments are doing enough to prevent citizens from going abroad to fight in Syria? We have approximately 33 Irish people there and a few have been killed in the crisis. Our police force is monitoring the situation. These are small numbers compared with the UK, France and other countries.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: We can always do more but we have to realise there are limits. In a free democratic society, governments cannot monitor every single behaviour. A lot of this has to come from local communities and families. This speaks to the question about youth radicalisation in Muslim communities. The key trigger that can predict if one particular young person, living in the West, born and raised in, for instance, England or the United States, is going to become radicalised is not religion - although religion is part of it and I will address that in a moment. It is an inner personal crisis, sense of alienation, or a search for a particular identity. This is the trigger that will explain why one particular person as opposed to another ends up leaving a comfortable home in the West and joining ISIL. There is a certain ideological and psychological crisis of confidence, identity and of social alienation which explains why some individuals become radicalised and not others.

Often those individuals who are searching for a meaning or a cause have in many ways, in one iteration of their lives, before they go to the ISIS, group, no interest in religion. The books that were purchased online by some of these British Muslim youths who had gone over to join ISIS were identified. These books included *The Koran for Dummies* and *Islam for Dummies*. These are young kids who were partying, drinking and doing all things un-Islamic in one particular phase of their lives who then become, all of a sudden, hyper religious in another phase of their lives. They then think they can join some sort of cause, redeem themselves and fill a particular void in their lives by joining up with ISIS. Religion is part of it. There are also other things going on within the personal lives and in the family homes of many of these radicalised kids.

Generally speaking, governments can do more but there is nothing that can be done to absolutely solve this problem. A figure of 33 people from Ireland is a lot. The same numbers are seen in the United States and it is a much bigger country. Ireland is doing a pretty good job compared to other countries in the world facing similar problems. However, there is nothing absolute that can be done. A lot of this has to be done within families and communities. It needs to be self-regulating.

In Canada, where I come from, there was a problem with youth radicalisation. There also was an attack on the Canadian Parliament a couple of months ago. The local mosque in the city where the person responsible for that particular attack lived kicked him out when he started to talk about his radical views. That is something we want to see happening in more communities; radicals being kicked out of the community. That is one way of addressing this broader problem.

The question of youth radicalisation is also a by-product of a point I mentioned earlier. There is a mainstream interpretation of Sunni Islam that has been deeply informed and warped by Wahabi interpretations of religion that have distorted. Many mainstream Muslims growing up in any urban city in the world have, over the course of their particular upbringing, been exposed to one particular variant of Islam which they think is authentic and real and all other interpretations are considered by them to be heretical and distorted. That is a conservative, intolerant interpretation of Islam. Practices have manifested, that are very much localised and only to be found in the last two or three decades in Muslim communities around the world, where all of a sudden Muslims are taught that they cannot listen to music, wish their Christian neighbours

a merry Christmas and that women and men have to be completely separated behind a partition. These are all recent manifestations of a puritanical and ultra conservative interpretation of Islam that has been becoming mainstream in the last two to three decades of the 20th century.

If one goes back to the earlier part of the 20th century, or to other moments in Islamic history, this type of intolerance, rejection and animosity towards women, minorities and Sufi Muslims is not seen. It is a by-product of a particular mainstreaming of an ultra conservative, intolerant, puritanical interpretation that has affected the minds of some of these young people. There is an almost identical overlap with Wahabi puritanical Islam when one looks at their behaviour and what they think is authentic Islam.

That is one reason the radicalisation is occurring. The challenge is to provide alternative interpretations of religion that challenge the puritanical, intolerant Wahabi version and give Muslim young people another option, namely, that a person can be religious and a member of a democratic society, respect pluralism and be tolerant. That is a challenge for Muslim communities, in every part of the world. They need to try to compact this particular negative interpretation which feeds into the radicalisation process.

Deputy Eric Byrne: I always feel uncomfortable when we as Westerners are asked to provide solutions to problems in Africa, the Middle East or, as now for instance, in this war zone. Does Dr. Hashemi think the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, group have a structure with which to negotiate on peace or other alternatives to what it is doing? Does he see a role for the Arab League? The West should not always be the leading force in providing a solution.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: There are some organisations that are so radical, extreme and intolerant that it is not possible to engage in negotiations and diplomacy with them. Unfortunately, there are some organisations that have to be dealt with militarily and defeated. Part of the strategy to defeat them is to provide alternative options for young people who are looking towards ISIS and think ISIS can represent a positive future for them. It is not possible to invite representatives of ISIS to the table and agree some sort of solution that can help solve this particular problem. Alternative options have to be part of the strategy.

ISIS is a small band of militants which draws on a larger section of support that is rooted, in the case of Iraq and Syria, in what was mentioned by one of the members earlier, in the broad feeling that Sunni populations are politically marginalised and excluded - that they have no representation and no hope in the existing states in which they live and they look to ISIS as an alternative option. We should seek to strengthen the legitimacy of the existing states in Iraq and Syria and start to drain away some of the support base that exists in some of these Sunni communities. It is members of this support base who have looked to ISIS for inspiration and as an option for a better future. It is not possible to negotiate with them. I wish there was a non-military solution.

In one sense, the Arab League can be helpful in this particular challenge, particularly on the short-term basis in terms of helping with the military dimension of the problem. Air forces and military components have been part of the American-led effort against ISIS. However, long term we have to remember that the Arab League is a joke. They are all political tyrannies, non-democratic and headed by ruling elites. I do not see a significant or constructive role for many of the Arab League states, particularly the prominent ones - Egypt and Saudi Arabia for example - in dealing with a political legitimisation crisis and a crisis of democracy and representation. All of the Arab League countries, with the exception of Tunisia, are non-representative and have their own internal legitimisation crisis. One has to be very honest on this. Many of

these so-called Arab moderate governments with which we have close relationships are really very immoderate in terms of how they treat their own populations and how they deal with questions on democracy and human rights. I am very wary of any suggestion of working with non-democratic political systems to solve a problem that is fundamentally rooted in a crisis of democracy and human rights. That is a non-starter.

I take the Deputy's point. Why should the West have to go in and solve other people's problems? No one is asking the West to go in and solve the problems of Syria and Iraq. It is a question of supporting the moderate, democratic and inclusive-oriented elements of those societies. They are begging the West for support and assistance. In the case of Ireland, we are really talking about moral support. It would be a huge boon to have the Government speak out and defend basic universal principles, get behind the freedom charter, support the International Criminal Court and get behind, support and invite to this country those elements of in particular Iraqi and Syrian society, who have a blueprint for an inclusive, democratic future. It would be a huge boon if, for example, the Irish Parliament were to pass a non-binding resolution in support of the Syrian freedom charter for a future Syria that is inclusive, democratic and protects minority rights in particular, including Christian and Alawite minority rights. The resolution could reflect the blueprint for a future Syria and Ireland's values as a liberal western democracy and view that anyone agreeing to the blueprint would have the support of Ireland and the international community. Such a simple statement would go a long way to boosting the morale, self-esteem and hope of people fighting in very difficult circumstances in Syria against a fascist regime in Damascus and an Islamic-fascist movement in the form of ISIS.

Chairman: I have made it a rule that members may ask one or two questions. I will allow further comments after questions have been answered.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I will not take too much time.

I congratulate Dr. Hashemi on his presentation which I have read. I apologise that I did not get here in time to hear him. I have two or three brief questions because I will need to leave to go to the House.

What are the origins of the problem? What motivates people in western society, living in comfortable and safe surroundings, to become involved in a war? Are the reasons political or religious or a combination of the two? Is it a product of modern telecommunications? Fifty or 100 years ago communication was by letter or newspaper. I am a keen student of history. Abraham Lincoln decided on the abolition of slavery when things were going wrong in the American Civil War. It marked the turning point, was the holy war and the *cause célèbre*. What is the *cause célèbre* motivating people in western society to live a dangerous life and become radicalised? What is driving them to do this?

Dr. Hashemi referred to the American intervention in Iraq and its withdrawal from that country. He also referred to the international intervention in and withdrawal from Libya. I agree entirely that it is a critical issue because it leaves behind a society that is not ready, when it does not have the support to carry on and is not capable of doing so.

How does our society support the moderates? We cannot declare peace or do anything that will force people to come to the negotiating table. People who wear masks and hoods cannot be identified and, therefore, prosecuted. How can we deal with this aspect of the matter? How do we prevent the funding of an ongoing war when those creating the problem have access to oilfields and associated revenue?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: Youth radicalisation is not something that happens overnight. There is a large body of good scientific studies of how a particular person, born and raised in Denver, Colorado, for example, where I live, can become radicalised all of a sudden. What explains that phenomenon? The critical question is why does it happen to some youth and not to others living in the exact same environment. They are exposed to the same family and one brother becomes radicalised while another does not. Much of the answer has to do with the personal idiosyncrasies and crises of the particular individual. The key trigger is that he is looking for something bigger than himself, a cause, an identity. He is exposed to different points of view. The Deputy hinted at one common theme that keeps emerging and explains the phenomenon as it relates to ISIS. Much of the radicalisation is happening online by means of social media. However, it does not happen overnight. People wonder about how can anyone be so attracted to beheadings? What interpretation of Islam or religion produces that connection? If one listens to the online recruiting, that is not how they attract young people. The narrative of ISIS that is very appealing, attracts some young disgruntled, disoriented and confused Muslims is the following: there is a major humanitarian and moral crisis in Syria today which is borderline genocidal. The world has abandoned the refugees, the women and children and there are chemical weapons being used. The narrative reasons that the person, as a believing Muslim, has a moral obligation to come to the aid of his or her brothers and sisters who are suffering; that the person has a moral obligation to stand up for his or her co-religionists; that he or she should abandon this secular material lifestyle of comfort he or she is living in the West and come and be part of something that is bigger; that he or she should come and change the course of history; that no one cares about Syrian suffering, Syrian refugees, Syrian displacement but that he or she can play a role. That is what attracts people, but, of course, when young people go there, which is easy to do, they discover it is very difficult to come back. The narrative that draws people in is really one of moral suffering, abandonment, appealing to young people in their late teens and 20s, many of whom have a sense of adventure, that they can be part of something bigger. However, as I hinted, other things are going on.

There is this particular puritanical and intolerant interpretation of Islam that, sadly, has become mainstream within the Sunni Muslim community. In most Sunni mosques in North America, the ones with which I am most familiar, most of the interpretations, in varying degrees, overlap or have shades of Wahabi teachings embedded within them. This is the idea that Christians are not really people of good standing, that they cannot be trusted. This comes from the view that there is only one interpretation of religion that matters - forget Christians, Jews, atheists and Buddhists. In this interpretation of Islam there is also a deep intolerance against other Muslim interpretations - there is one way - my way or the highway. In many ways, this is not unique to Islam. The history of religions is filled with the clash of the intolerance of different voices, some that are radical, some that are more tolerant and some that lie in between. This is also part of the narrative. If one observes the form of Islam to which these young people are exposed, particularly in the English Muslim scene, it is an intolerant interpretation. Sadly, the inclusive, more open-minded, more democratically oriented interpretations of Islam are in the minority. These are the ones that need to be supported and encouraged to provide an alternative voice for young people because it is a problem if all they hear is that the only authentic way to be a good Muslim is to subscribe to that interpretation of Islam. It is part of the overall radicalisation process, but it is not the only one. Youth radicalisation has taken place throughout history, whether in religious or non-religious settings. It is not something that is about religion. There may be an assumption that if the majority of the people in the Middle East were not Muslim, if they were Buddhist, we would not have this problem, but I disagree with that assumption. It is much more than a problem with religion; religion is part of it, but it is not the

key element; it is a contributory factor.

Chairman: The committee visited the Middle East last year. Members visited Jordan and the Zaatari refugee camp on the border with Syria. Most of the political people with whom we met, parliamentarians and the Jordanian Foreign Minister, spoke about what was almost a civil war which most of them were of the opinion would continue for many years - some predicted nine or ten years - that it was unstoppable.

I refer to the influx of refugees into Jordan, Lebanon and other countries. Will this result in a big change in the Middle East in the next ten years? Many of these refugees would like to go back to their homes, just as Palestinians wanted to go back, but it will be impossible for them to do so.

The committee also visited Tehran in January when it met Foreign Minister Zarif and a number of other senior political people, including the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament. We all asked about the question of Syria, to which Dr. Hashemi has already alluded. Deputy O'Sullivan asked about Iran's role in providing an elite guard to President Assad, the fact that there is support from Hezbollah as well, and the fact that they were excluded from the Geneva talks. I know it is a very sensitive time with the nuclear negotiations, in which a decision may have to be made before the end of this month, but how genuine does Dr. Hashemi think the Iranian gesture towards being part of the solution for Syria is?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: Those are good questions. On the Syrian refugee question, one of my big concerns is that the conflict in Syria does not look like it is going to end any time soon and there is already a great number of refugees. There are 3 million Syrians who have been formally registered by the UN as refugees, and another 6 million to 7 million who have been internally displaced. Those are, unfortunately, ideal recruiting grounds for groups such as ISIS who can appeal to these refugees who have no chance of going home, no jobs, no future, to come and join them.

The region was deeply destabilised in 1948 as a result of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the spread of the Palestinian refugee problem, which is ongoing. It has created a lot of instability in neighbouring countries. In Jordan, there was a major civil war in 1970 and its population is majority Palestinian refugees. It has had a long-standing problem with negotiating its Jordanian-Palestinian identity. The big fear is that Syrian refugees are going to play an equally destabilising role. The difference is that now we have ISIS, which can recruit people. In the case of the Palestinian refugees we did not have a radical Islamo-fascist group that could recruit people. It is a cause for concern that unless the crisis in Syria is solved in some way where these refugees can start to go home, we will start seeing ripple effects, spill-over and unpredictable consequences that do not bode well for the stability of the region. Given the globalised world in which we live, all of us in the international community are going to feel the destabilising effects of this conflict in one way or another. This is another reason Syria demands our attention. In many ways it is central to solving the problems of instability in the region. The Chairman just alluded to one small aspect of it that has the potential to be very catastrophic.

With respect to Iran and its role in Syria, I am a strong critic of Iran's foreign policy towards Syria, largely because Iran has arguably been the biggest backer of the Assad regime. The footprints of the Islamic Republic of Iran are all over the atrocities of the Assad regime. The statements from the Iranian leadership suggest that Syria is the equivalent of Iran's 37th province, in other words, that it is more important than the oil-producing regions of Iran. Iran is deeply embedded with the Assad regime and has stated in many different ways, directly and indirectly,

that it is willing to back Assad to the end.

Iran's geostrategic view of the region is based on its rivalry with Saudi Arabia. The big fear is that if a pro-Iranian regime in Damascus falls, it is going to upset the balance of power in the region to the benefit of Saudi Arabia and its allies. The other concern that Iran has for Syria is that Syria is the conduit to Iran's major ally in the region, Hezbollah. It does not want to see the Damascus regime fall, so I cannot see Iran playing a particularly positive role on the Syrian question because it has been so deeply embedded by backing the Assad regime.

There is a connection with the nuclear question which is one reason President Obama has been reluctant to go after Assad and get more deeply involved in talking about a political solution with Syria, in my opinion. He knows that will have negative consequences for the US-Iran nuclear negotiations, which are at a very sensitive point right now. There is a lot of evidence suggesting that one reason Obama backed off and turned the conflict over to the Russians last September, having threatened to hit Assad after he used sarin gas on his own people, was that at the time, as we now know, Iran and the US were in secret negotiations over the nuclear issue in Oman. There are statements by Iranian leaders to the effect that, had there been a military strike against Syria, Iran would have pulled out of those negotiations and the interim Geneva agreement would not have been produced. These issues are in many ways intertwined and overlapping, but at least in the short term I do not see Iran playing a positive role. Rhetorically, Iran has said that it supports self-determination for the people of Syria and free and fair elections, but it also very openly supported the fraudulent election that Bashar Assad held in June, which was a fake election. Iran's official rhetoric on supporting the legitimate voices and grievances of the Syrian people is not matched by its military behaviour, or by its support for sham political processes that we have seen take place in Syria. I view it as a very negative player in the Syrian context.

Having said that, Iran is a regional player and has to be part of any stabilisation plan for the broader Middle East. If we can get to a nuclear accord with Iran, that will be an important step forward. It might open the door to solving other regional issues. The Saudi-Iran rivalry was mentioned before. That has exacerbated and raised the political temperature in Syria to new levels, but the fundamental roots of the Syrian crisis go back three and a half years, to a pro-democracy uprising in the context of the Arab Spring, with which Saudi Arabia and Iran were not involved. All that was involved was citizens protesting against a political tyranny. As the conflict spread and became militarised, that allowed for regional countries to get involved, supporting different sides and complicating what had been a very difficult problem to begin with.

Chairman: How strong are the relationships between all these radical Islamic groups like al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and ISIS and the other groups in the region as well?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: Thankfully, they are not very strong at all. We believe that the emergence of ISIS was actually a repudiation and rejection of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They were both united at one point under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri, after Osama bin Laden was assassinated. Thankfully, there are deep divisions and animosity between these different groups. They share certain overlapping world views in terms of their deeply intolerant religious interpretation, but there is no co-ordination of planning and policy in their military activity. I consider that a good thing.

Deputy Eric Byrne: If I can summarise my interpretation of what Dr. Hashemi has been telling us, he would see Saudi Arabia as one of the more dangerous of the Islamic states in the region. Iran is suffering hugely economically, to the extent that the Republican Guard is advis-

ing the ayatollah that the finances of Iran are so treacherous that he cannot sustain the support already being extended to those forces in Syria and other regions. How does Dr. Hashemi see that scenario? If it is true, and if the economic crisis is deepening in Iran and it becomes weaker and weaker, do we in the West see that as a victory? If it were to be seen as a victory that we have made them concede, does that on the other hand strengthen the role of Saudi Arabia in the region?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: It is a good question. There is a rivalry for regional dominance in the Middle East between two of the major powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran has been significantly weakened economically, the Deputy is right, because of its nuclear programme. It has also gained somewhat in political influence after the demise of Saddam Hussein, because the successor Government in Iraq has been a group of Shia political parties that are allied with and sympathetic to Iran. Iran's influence has in many ways expanded into Iraq, where before it had no influence under Saddam Hussein. The economic sanctions have weakened Iran, but it is still able to sell its oil on the international market. It is a fairly rich country by developing-world standards, and is still a long way off from economic collapse and from being a destitute, broken society. It has a lot of cards to play. One reason it has come to the negotiating table on the nuclear question is what Deputy Byrne hinted at, namely, it realises its economic future will not be able to improve unless it resolves this nuclear question and the economic sanctions are lifted. We are still a long way away from any kind of total collapse or a reduction in Iran's regional influence as a result of the current sanctions placed on it.

Saudi Arabia does not want Iran's influence to increase and that is completely understandable. These are two countries that have conflicting interests. One thing the international community could be doing is trying to bring Iran and Saudi Arabia to some sort of common understanding. As long as these two countries are funnelling and fuelling different groups and militias it is going to add to the political conflict in the region. The new, moderate Government in Iran under President Rouhani has tried to reach out to the Saudis and achieve a dialogue, and I hope this is a step forward. However, there is a long way to go before we can hope Iran and Saudi Arabia have put aside their differences, largely because the conflict between them has been ongoing at various levels since 1979. The Deputy put his finger on something that is very important in the destabilisation of the region, namely, the regional rivalries and proxies that are funded by major powers, of which Saudi Arabia and Iran are two of the biggest. This must be part of any regional de-escalation of the conflict in the region.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I return to the possible curtailment of revenue to ISIS, particularly the oil revenue. Why did international intelligence not alert the worldwide community about the impending emergence of ISIS, for example, its run across Iraq, where soldiers deserted their posts?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: It is a good question. Early this year, President Obama called ISIS the junior varsity, JV, team of al-Qaeda. He did not pay much attention to it, and this was not his personal view but what his intelligence services were telling him. The general view is that nobody predicted that ISIS would emerge into the fighting force it has become. It has been a surprise to many people watching events in Iraq to see a group that had formed and announced itself only in 2013 dominating approximately 81,000 sq. m. of real estate, approximately the size of Great Britain, in the heart of the Middle East. It has been a shock to many people and was unpredictable. One explanation for the success of ISIS is that there is nobody to stand against them. The existing states in Iraq and Syria have withered away. There is much Sunni disgruntlement and disillusionment, which has produced support for ISIS in these parts of the

Middle East. The good news is that the world has finally woken up to the fact that it cannot ignore the rise of ISIS and that it is not just a Middle East problem but a global problem. There has been a major intelligence failure, but one of which everybody is guilty because nobody saw it coming.

One of the reasons ISIS has been successful is because it has captured a number of Syrian oil fields and has sold oil on the black market, giving it a revenue source. The other major source of funding that has been widely reported is the money that is being given by private charities in the Gulf region. There is a lot of money in the Gulf area, and many people with rich, deep pockets, and they have been a major source of financial support for ISIS. That private money comes largely from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Although it is often misreported in the media that the Saudi and Qatari Governments are supporting ISIS, there is no evidence to support it. Private money has been a major reason ISIS has been so successful. It can pay its fighters more generous monthly stipends to keep them loyal compared to other groups, and this must change if we want to help change the battlefield conditions in Iraq and Syria.

Senator Jim Walsh: I find this enlightening, as other members will. It is a very good insight into the situation. It appears mystifying that a very fragmented opposition to Assad, at one stage comprising 14 disparate groups, emerged as a dominant force ahead of al-Qaeda. From what Dr. Hashemi says, it appears to be the dominant force there. On the other hand, he advises that we should support the other moderate rebels, some of whom are probably already being subsumed into ISIS. In practical terms, how can the situation be turned around? It almost seems as if they will have to be defeated before anything can be done. Most religions place a great emphasis on the dignity, preservation and protection of human life. How can it be that so many within the Muslim communities are prepared to be suicide bombers, for example in 9-11, prepared to lose their own lives as well as killing others? Obviously, it is done in the hope that they can be saved, in religious terms. It seems to jar. Can there be any *rapprochement* between Sunni and Shia, which appears to be the root cause?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: One of the interesting developments that explains why ISIS is so powerful is that former elements of Saddam's Iraqi Government, who were defeated but did not disappear but bided their time, have allied themselves with ISIS. This explains the rapid success, because these people know how to run an army and a state. It is not simply a band of radical Islamic militants. One of the key elements of the support structures of ISIS is the remnants of the former Iraqi Ba'ath army, which has played a critical role. This speaks to the fundamental question of Iraq's future. Iraq's new Government does not have the legitimacy it needs to defeat the remnants of the former regime.

The rebels need to be vetted. There are many Syrian young people, some of whom have joined ISIS or other rebel groups, some more extreme, some more moderate. One of the challenges of supporting a moderate rebel movement is that there must be proper vetting. In any battle that takes place there are people who do not have strong ideological convictions but are young and destitute and have taken up arms to fight for a better future. They will often switch sides based on who is winning a particular war. One reason ISIS has attracted many recruits is because it seems to be winning. It is the lead horse. If one can support the moderate Syrian rebels, show they have a base of support, a buffer zone and a future, many recruits will go the other way, simply because they seem to be on the winning side. This is a major part of any civil war calculation.

On the Senator's question about religion and suicide bombings, it comes down to a confluence of a set of political circumstances that feeds a particular religious interpretation. Do the

members know which country produced most of the 9-11 suicide bombers? It was Saudi Arabia. Of the 19 people involved in the attack, 15 came from one country. Was it a coincidence, or does it tell us something about the internal politics and policies of Saudi Arabia? These were not destitute or the poorest of the poor, but middle class people, many of them educated, but who felt their political future could best be invested in by engaging in such a suicide operation. It highlights the tragedy and nightmare authoritarian regimes produce for their civilians and societies. There have been many reports that many of the ISIS suicide bombers who have engaged in attacks in Iraqi cities against other rebel groups also come from Saudi Arabia.

A predictable set of consequences emerge from closed political systems with no representation, political parties, civil society or newspapers and where the only way a young person feels he or she can change his or her future is by engaging in some type of radical political action. It is not fundamentally a problem of religion, although religion is a component of it, but a question of the political and social circumstances that produce such behaviour at a particular moment in time. This is the root of the problem. It does not happen in Indonesia, the biggest, most populous Muslim country in the world. One reason is because Indonesia is an emerging democracy. For all its flaws and problems as a developing society, the indicators and measurements for democratic development in Indonesia are fairly good by developing world standards, and in terms of the Muslim world, it is one of the most advanced countries. That tells us something about how we should deal with these questions of radicalisation and destabilisation. If we support a broader process of democratisation, political development, inclusion, with strong civil societies and interpretations of Islam that are more inclusive and humanistic, it will not produce the radicalisation we are seeing in the Iraqi, Syrian and Saudi Arabian nexus.

Chairman: Dr. Hashemi is in big demand today.

Senator Michael Mullins: I thank Dr. Hashemi for his wonderful insight into the conflict and educating us all on the serious difficulties encountered as a result. Is he optimistic about the progress of the Carter peace plan which provides for free and open elections supervised by the international community, to which we all strongly subscribe?

What is the level of support for the moderate forces in Syria? Is Dr. Hashemi having this dialogue in the foreign affairs committees of other European countries' parliaments? What level of support is he getting?

Chairman: Deputy Eric Byrne wants to come in again and I have no choice but to let him speak. I ask him to be very brief.

Deputy Eric Byrne: However, you do provoke me because I have to find holes in your argument.

Chairman: Briefly.

Deputy Eric Byrne: The Sunni military forces were not defeated; they just filtered away and have regrouped. Does this not indicate an understanding of society, power and structure, that they are capable of entering into dialogue on a peace process or some other process at some stage?

Dr. Nader Hashemi: I am not sure what Sunni military forces the Deputy is talking about. Is he talking about ISIS?

Deputy Eric Byrne: I am talking about the ones that have formed or reformed or been

created.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: Let me make a distinction between the leadership of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria as embodied in the self-professed caliph by the name of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. I do not believe one can negotiate or engage in dialogue with him and his group. However, it is possible to reach out to those members of the Sunni population in Iraq and Syria who form the bulk of the supporters of his movement and woo them away from this radical movement known as Islamic State. It is possible to offer them alternative options by letting them know that there is a future for them in their countries. There is a new Iraqi Government that is reaching out to them, letting them know that their future lies in Iraq, not with Islamic State. The same general principle also applies in the case of Syria. If people are given options that are more inclusive and tolerant, they will choose the more tolerant and inclusive ones than the more radical ones. That is a broad principle that applies in all societies across different moments in time.

In response to Senator Michael Mullins's questions, I have not been invited by the parliaments of other European Union countries to talk to them about this issue, but if he could set up these meetings, I would be happy to go, especially if he could pay my travel expenses.

I believe the vast majority of the Syrian people support the moderates. We do not know fundamentally what the people of Syria actually want and support because they have never been given the opportunity to express a point of view. That is precisely where the story begins. When one family has been in power for 44 years, with no free elections and no free press, we do not know what the people in that country support. I encourage members to visit the Syrian Freedom Charter website and find out more about it. It is the most detailed survey of Syrian public opinion - inside Syria and outside Syria - which I believe represents the voice of the moderates.

The Senator asked if I was optimistic about the Carter peace plan. Unfortunately, I am very pessimistic. Until major countries - the major powers in the world - come to prioritise the question of Syria, it will not be put on the track to find a solution. Up until now the view has been that Syria is a tragedy, that we cannot do much about it and that the situation can be contained. I may be a little more optimistic today than I was a few months ago because ironically as a result of the ISIS crisis, Syria is now back on the global agenda. People now realise we cannot ignore the situation in Syria and pretend that it will go away. Many people were hoping President Assad would just stay in power, that he would resolve the issue and that it did not matter to us. Actually it does.

There is a deeper lesson. When countries engage in activities that are borderline genocidal, including mass displacement, human rights violations and war crimes, we cannot pretend that the situation will simply contain itself, particularly given that Syria is in the heart of the Middle East and borders seven countries. It has affected Iraq, Jordan and now the international community. Therefore, I am not optimistic about the Carter peace plan. However, if countries such as Ireland start to give voice to Syria, the Carter peace plan and the freedom charter and let people know that we need to take the situation in Syria seriously because it affects all of us, there is some room for optimism.

Chairman: It would be remiss of me not to ask Dr. Hashemi a general question. As he is director of international studies in the University of Denver, I ask him to comment on the Middle East process and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Where does he envisage it going in the future? I am sure members would like to hear his views on it.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: The recent tragic events-----

Chairman: I will not take questions on the issue.

Deputy Eric Byrne: The Chairman is right in the light of the current potential-----

Dr. Nader Hashemi: The recent tragic events in Jerusalem highlight what we have all known for a very long time. There can be no security and safety for Israelis at the expense of safety and security for Palestinians. The safety and security of both peoples are deeply intertwined. We have this crisis in Jerusalem today because of a series of very aggressive, draconian and arrogant moves by the Israeli Government led by the Prime Minister, Mr. Netanyahu, that have disadvantaged the Palestinian people. This is a long story and we have been through it before. These events will keep recurring until someone in the international community starts to say enough is enough and recognises that both Israelis and Palestinians deserve security, safety and statehood. We need to work towards a solution that will embody the security of both peoples or else we will be in this cycle time and time again.

I applaud the Government of Ireland which is way ahead of the curve - at least way ahead of the country the passport of which I carry, Canada, and the country in which I live, the United States - in respect of the Israel-Palestine conflict. This country is supportive of the safety and security of the state of Israel, but it has also been very outspoken in raising the question of Palestinian suffering. If more countries were to do this, we would be a little closer to finding a political solution to the conflict.

Deputy Eric Byrne: Does Dr. Hashemi support the recent Swedish-----

Dr. Nader Hashemi: Sweden is taking a good step forward and I would like to see Ireland reproduce its example. It helps to push the conflict in the direction in which it needs to go.

Chairman: I know that the issue was discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council on Monday.

I thank Dr. Hashemi for a most comprehensive and interesting contribution. We have had a very good debate in which members asked questions which Dr. Hashemi answered. There was interaction between us and we got a lot out of the meeting. I thank members for their co-operation. They have considerable interest in the conflict in the Middle East and the-----

Dr. Nader Hashemi: They were great questions, by the way.

Chairman: I wish Dr. Hashemi well. Unfortunately, we cannot fund his future travels in Europe, but I am sure he will speak to other parliaments. I believe he has answered the questions put in a very balanced way. He is different from many politicians, which is great.

Dr. Nader Hashemi: I will take that as a compliment.

Chairman: That is important. On behalf of the joint committee, I thank Dr. Hashemi for taking the time to appear before it and dealing with members' questions in a very fair and comprehensive way and not evading answers.

The joint committee went into private session at 4.20 p.m. and adjourned at 4.30 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 3 December 2014.