Anti-Islamist critic Qanta Ahmed: U.S. ‘tragically late’ on Syria

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Qanta Ahmed, a leading Muslim critic of Islamist extremism, chided the Muslim world Monday for not doing more to stop the bloodbath in Syria and worried that U.S. President Barack Obama’s plans for a strike against the regime of Bashar Assad were coming “tragically late.”

“No one in the Muslim world has stepped up to lead an intervention on their own behalf. As usual, it’s left to the U.S. to act. This puts our president in an impossible situation,” said Ahmed, an author, sleep-disorder specialist, and most famously, an outspoken opponent of fundamentalist Islam and even non-violent Islamist political movements. Here in Israel on her second visit, she said she had come in her capacity as an “anti-Islamist Muslim.”

Ahmed began her speech at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya’s World Summit on Counter-Terrorism by quoting an example of Islamist speech that rings like a battle cry.

"The mosques are our barrages; the minarets our bayonets; the domes are our helms. the believers are our soldiers." It might like sound like something out of the Al-Qaeda handbook or perhaps a more hardline wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, Ahmed offered, it is from an Islamist poem read allowed by the then-mayor of Istanbul in 1997.

Today, that mayor, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is prime minister of Turkey, a country with which Israel once had a strong strategic alliance. Erdogan’s Islamist leanings, she indicated, is the reason. “Erdogan himself has said, ‘Democracy is a train. We take a ride on it and we get off when we reach our destination.’” From recent tensions in Turkey to the bloodshed in Egypt and Syria, the underlying struggle pitting Islamist forces against secularists – as well as Sunnis against Shias – is what’s fueling the fire, she argued. “Make no mistake, this conflict within Islam is originated by Muslims, is being waged by Muslims, and the vast majority of its victims are Muslims. These conflicts are deepening the abyss between major sects in Islam. Unless we confront Islamism or unless we castrate it, we will only see a region with pseudo-democracies.”