

President al-Assad Interview: “If support to Terrorism continues, al-Qaeda will be the future of Europe and the Region”

Moscow talks are a Breakthrough

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President Bashar al-Assad described in an interview with the Swedish Expressen Newspaper the outcomes of Moscow talks as a breakthrough and said that the UN envoy's Aleppo plan, which is supported by the government, was spoiled by external intervention, renewing his warning that the terrorism imported to Syria will “bite” its backers whenever it has the chance.

He also called on Sweden to influence the EU to lift the economic sanctions imposed on the Syrian people.

The following is part of the full text of the interview:

Question 1: Mr. President, I would like to offer my most sincere thanks on behalf of Expressen for giving us this interview. Thank you so much. While we are sitting here, doing this interview, the terrorist organization ISIS and even al-Nusra is overrunning al-Yarmouk refugee camp. At the same time, al-Nusra is controlling the Syrian-Jordanian border and have taken control over Idleb. How serious would you describe the situation now?

President Assad: Whenever you talk about terrorism, it's always serious, because it's always dangerous, anytime, anywhere, no matter how. That's what you always say about terrorism, and it is not related directly to the example you have mentioned, because this is only a manifestation of terrorism. It's a long process that started years ago even before the crisis in Syria. Terrorism is serious and dangerous because it doesn't have borders, it doesn't have limits. It could hit anywhere, it's not a domestic issue. It's not even regional; it's global, that's why it's always dangerous. In our case, it's more dangerous, let's say, the situation is worse not only because of the military situation that you have mentioned in your question. Actually because this time it was having a political umbrella by many countries, many leaders, many officials, but mainly in the West. Many of those officials didn't see the reality at the very beginning. It's more dangerous this time because we don't have international law, and you don't have the effective international organization that would protect a country from another country that uses the terrorists as a proxy to destroy another country. That's what's happening in Syria. So, I'll say yes, it is dangerous, but at the same time, it's reversible. As long as it's reversible, it's not too late to deal with it. It's going to be more serious with the time when the terrorists indoctrinate the hearts and minds of people.

Question 2: But they are overrunning more areas in Syria. Are the Syrian forces and army

weakened?

President Assad: That's the natural, normal repercussion of any war. Any war weakens any army, no matter how strong, no matter how modern. It undermines and weakens every society, in every aspect of the word; the economy, the society, let's say, the morals, and of course the army as part of this society. That's normal.

Question 3: But is the army weaker than before? Because last year, we could see win-win effect from your side, from the army's side, you overrunning more areas, more control over al-Qalamoun and other areas, but now, they have control over Idleb, as an example.

President Assad: It's not related to that issue, whether it's stronger or weaker. As I said, any war undermines any army, that's the natural course of events. But in your case, when you look at the context of the war for the last four years, you have ups and downs. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, and that depends on many criteria, some of them related to domestic, internal and military criteria, or factors, let's say, which is more precise. Some of them are related to how much support the terrorists have. For example, the recent example that you mentioned about Idleb, the main factor was the huge support that came through Turkey; logistic support, and military support, and of course financial support that came through Saudi Arabia and Qatar.



Question 4: Is it information, or is it an opinion?

President Assad: Information, everything, they were like one army; the terrorists, al-Nusra Front which is part of al-Qaeda, and the Turkish government or institutions or intelligence, were like one army in that battle, so it doesn't depend on the weakening of our army. It depended more on how much support the terrorists have from Turkey.

Question 5: Turkey and Qatar and Saudi Arabia, they had an agenda four years ago. Did it change? Did they change that agenda?

President Assad: First of all, they're not independent countries, so they won't have their own agenda. Sometimes they have their own narrow-minded behavior or vengeful behavior or hateful behavior that's been used by others' agenda, let's be frank here, sometimes the United States. So, we cannot say that they have their own agenda, but they haven't changed. They still support the same terrorists, because this behavior is not related to the crisis in Syria. They supported the terrorists in Afghanistan, they supported the Wahhabi ideology, the extremism that led to terrorism recently in Europe, for decades, and now they are supporting the same ideology and the same factions under different labels and names in Syria. So, there's nothing to change because this is their natural behavior.

Question 6: Which ideology you mean?

President Assad: The Wahhabi ideology, which forms the foundation for every terrorism in the world. No terrorist acts for the last decades in the Middle East and in the world happened without this ideology. Every terrorist bases his doctrine on the Wahhabi ideology.

Question 7: Wahhabi ideology, it's linked to 9-11 and all the terrorist groups. Doesn't the United States know about that link between Wahhabi ideology and terrorists? But they continue to support Saudi Arabia.

President Assad: This is a very important question, because the United States in the 1980s called the same groups of al-Qaeda and Taliban, in Afghanistan, they called them holy fighters, and that's what president Bush described them as, holy fighters. And then, after the 11th of September 2001, they called them terrorists. The problem with the United States and of course some Western officials is that they think you can use terrorism as a card in your pocket, as a political card. Actually, terrorism is like a scorpion; whenever it has the chance, it will bite. So, they know, but they didn't estimate how dangerous terrorism is to be used as a political card.

Question 8: Mr. President, the official Syrian delegation and part of the opposition have recently met in Moscow. Are there any effective results of that meeting?

President Assad: Actually, yes. We can say yes, because this meeting was the first time to reach – because you know we had many dialogues before – this is the first time to reach an agreement upon some of the principles that could make the foundation for the next dialogue between the Syrians. We haven't finalized it yet, because the schedule of that meeting was very comprehensive, so four days wasn't enough. Actually, two days, it was four days, but two days between the government and the other opposition representatives. It wasn't enough to finalize the schedule, but because when you have a breakthrough, even if it's a partial breakthrough, it means that the next meeting will be promising in reaching a full agreement about what are the principles of Syrian dialogue that will bring a Syrian, let's say, solution to the conflict.

Question 9: It's very important, what you say, Mr. President, because the United Nations' Syria Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, he's planning a series of consultations to begin in May or June to assess the chance of finding a common ground between the main states with an interest in the conflict. What do you think about it?

President Assad: Actually, I agree with de Mistura about this point, because if we want to look at the conflict in Syria as only an internal conflict between Syrian factions, that's not realistic and that's not objective. Actually, the problem is not very complicated, but it became complicated because of external intervention, and any plan you want to execute in Syria today in order to solve the problem – and that's what he faced in his plan towards Aleppo – it will be spoiled by external intervention. That's what happened in Aleppo, when the Turks told the factions, the terrorists they support and supervise, to refuse to cooperate with de Mistura, so I think he's aware that if he couldn't convince these countries to stop supporting the terrorists and let the Syrians solve their problem, he will not succeed.

Question 10: What is your opinion about de Mistura's efforts?

President Assad: We discussed with him the plan for Aleppo, and it comes in line with our efforts in making reconciliations in different areas in Syria. This is where we succeeded, and this is where you could make things better, when you have people going back to their normality, when the government gives them amnesty and they turn in their armaments, and so on. So, his plan for Aleppo comes in line with the same principle of reconciliation, so we supported it from the very beginning, and we still support his efforts in that regard.

Question 11: Mr. President, Sweden is the only country in Europe that grants permanent rights of stay for people that flee the war in Syria. What has that meant, and how do you view Sweden's policy?

President Assad: In that regard or in general?

Question 12: In that regard, that's right.

President Assad: I think that's something that's appreciated around the world, not only in our country, and this humanitarian stand of Sweden is appreciated regarding different conflicts, including the Syrian one. So, this is a good thing to do, to give people refuge, but if you ask the Syrian people who fled from Syria "what do you want?" They don't want to flee Syria because of the war; they want to end that war. That's their aim, that's our aim. So, I think if you give people refuge, it is good, but the best is to help them in going back to their country. How? I think Sweden is an important country in the EU. It can play a major role in lifting the sanctions, because many of the Syrians who went to Sweden or any other country, didn't only leave because of the terrorist acts; they left because of the embargo, because they have no way for living, they want the basics for their daily livelihood. Because of the embargo, they had to leave Syria, so lifting the embargo that has affected every single Syrian person and at the same time banning any European country from giving an umbrella to terrorists under different names, whether they call it peaceful opposition, whether they call it moderate opposition. It's been very clear today, it's been proved, that this opposition that they used to support is the same al-Nusra and al-Qaeda and Muslim Brotherhood. Third one is to make pressure over countries that support terrorists and prevent any plan of peace in Syria, like the one that you mentioned, of Mr. de Mistura, to be implemented in Syria, mainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. So I think this is the best help and humanitarian help on the political title that Sweden could offer to the Syrian people.

Question 13: Embargo and war, and millions of refugees or people who fled from the country. This has been described as the worst refugee crisis since World War II. How big of a responsibility, Mr. President, do you have for this situation?

President Assad: I think to compare between what's happening in Syria, even from a humanitarian point of view, and what happened in World War II, I think it's kind of a huge exaggeration. We cannot compare, for political reasons. But regardless of this exaggeration, we have millions of people who are displaced from their areas to other areas because of the terrorist acts, and that's a huge burden. Actually, so far, we bear the major brunt of the crisis. You hear a lot of fuss about what the international organizations and what they call themselves "friends of Syria" spend money and give support and donations to the Syrians. Actually, if you want to have just a glimpse of what we are doing, for example in 2014, last year, all those countries and organizations offered in the food sector 22% of what we offer as a country during the war. That's a huge difference, which is 1 to 5.

Question 14: Inside the country?

President Assad: Inside Syria, yes. Regarding the healthcare sector, it was 1 to 18 in our favor. So actually, we are bearing the brunt. Besides that, we're still paying salaries, sending vaccines to the children, offering and providing the basic requirements for the hospitals in the areas that are under the control of the terrorists. So, we are still running the country and bearing the brunt.



Question 15: According to SAPO, the Swedish intelligence agency, returning jihadists – there are many here in Syria now – returning jihadists are the biggest domestic threat in Sweden

today. Do you agree?

President Assad: I wouldn't look at terrorism as domestic or as regional. As I said, it's global. So, if you want to look at Sweden as part of Europe or part of the Scandinavian group of European countries, you have to take into consideration that the most dangerous leaders of ISIS in our region are Scandinavian.

Question 16: This is information?

President Assad: Yes, it's information. That's what we have as information. So, you cannot separate this group of countries or Sweden from Europe. As long as you have terrorism growing in different European countries, Sweden cannot be safe. As long as the backyard of Europe, especially the Mediterranean and Northern Africa is in chaos and full of terrorists, Europe cannot be safe. So, yes I agree that it is a primary or prime threat, but you cannot call it domestic, but it's a threat.

Question 17: Has Sweden asked you to share information about these ISIS fighters or other jihadists?

President Assad: No, there's no contact between our intelligence agencies.

Question 18: Mr. President, in December 2010, Taimour Abdulwahab, a Swedish terrorist who was trained in Iraq and Syria, carried out a suicide attack in Stockholm. Recently, the same scenario in Paris, Charlie Hebdo, and even Copenhagen. Do you think Western countries will face the same scenario in the future?

President Assad: Actually, everything that happened in Europe, and I mean terrorist attacks, we warned from at the very beginning of the crisis, and I said Syria is a fault line, when you mess with this fault line you will have the echoes and repercussions in different areas, not only in our area, even in Europe. At that time, they said the Syrian president is threatening. Actually, I wasn't threatening; I was describing what's going to happen. It doesn't take a genius because that's the context of events that happened many times in our region, and we have experience with those kinds of terrorists for more than 50 years now. They didn't listen, so what happened was warned of before, and what we saw in France, in Charlie Hebdo, the suicide attempts in Copenhagen, in London, in Spain, ten years ago, this is only the tip of the iceberg; terrorism is a huge mountain. It's not isolated events. When you have those isolated events, you have to know that you have a big mountain under the sea that you don't see. So, yes, I expect, as long as you have this mountain, and as long as many European officials are still adulating countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar just for their money and selling their values and allowing the Wahhabi dark ideology to infiltrate and be instilled in some communities in Europe, we have to expect more attacks in that regard.

Question 19: What is the most effective way to deal with terrorism?

President Assad: First of all, terrorism is not a war. First of all, it's a state of mind, it's a culture, so you have to deal with this culture. You have to deal with it in an ideological way, and that implicates the education and the culture. Second, those terrorists exploit the poor people. You have to deal with poverty, so economic growth is very important, development. Third, you have to deal with the political issue that's being used by these terrorists in order to indoctrinate those youths or children in solving the political problems in our region, for example the peace issue was one of the primary reasons for those terrorists to recruit

terrorists.

Question 20: Which peace? You mean the peace process?

President Assad: I mean between the Arabs and the Israelis. Solving this problem, because this is one of the reasons to having desperation, you have to deal with the desperation of those youths who wanted to go and die to go to heaven to have a better life. That's how they think. So, you have to deal with these desperations. The last measure is exchanging information between the intelligence. War is only to defend yourself against terrorism. You cannot go and attack terrorism by war, you can only defend yourself if they use military means, so that's how we can defend against terrorism.

Question 21: Mr. President, ISIS has asked its supporters from around the world to come to Syria and Iraq to populate their so-called caliphate. How do you see the future for ISIS?

President Assad: I don't think that ISIS so far has any real incubator in our society. Let me talk about Syria first. I cannot talk on behalf of other societies in our region, because when you talk about ISIS it's not a Syrian issue now; Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Libyan, in Egypt, in many areas they have it. But regarding Syria, they don't have the incubator, so if you want to talk about the short term, ISIS doesn't have a future, but in the midterm, in the long term, when they indoctrinate the hearts and minds of the people, especially the youths and children. This area will have only one future; al-Qaeda future, which is ISIS, al-Nusra, and Muslim Brotherhood, and this is going to be your backyard, I mean the European backyard.

Question 22: In the middle and long term, it's very dangerous.

President Assad: Of course it is, because you can take procedures against many things, but ideology you cannot control. When it is instilled, it's very difficult to get rid of. So, when it's instilled, this is the only future of the region.

Question 23: ISIS and al-Nusra, they get help, they receive support from outside, you said Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and like that, but so does your side too. You have Hezbollah fighting for you. Do you need Hezbollah here in Syria?

President Assad: As a Swedish citizen, you don't accept anyone to tell you or to draw comparison between Taimour Abdulwahab, for example, as a terrorist, and your government, no matter whether you agree with your government or oppose your government. The same for Charlie Hebdo, terrorists and the French government, you cannot make comparison. So, we don't accept as Syrians to have comparison between the state and the terrorist organizations. Our mission is to help the country, to defend the citizens, while I don't think this is the role of ISIS or al-Nusra or the Muslim Brotherhood. Their role, actually, is only to kill people and terrorize them. So, you cannot make a comparison. Second, as a government, we have the right to ask for support from any state or organization or any entity that will help us in our war against terrorism. Third, because when I said terrorism cannot be a domestic issue, and this is wrong to look at it as a domestic issue, the good thing is to have cooperation with different powers in the region. For example, we had cooperation between the Syrians and the Iraqis even before the rise of ISIS recently during the summer of last year in Mosul. Before that we had good cooperation, intelligence and even military, for one reason; because the Iraqis were aware that the terrorism in Syria could spill over to Iraq, and that's what happened in Mosul. The same is with the Lebanese. So, Hezbollah is aware that terrorism in Syria means terrorism in

Lebanon. Chaos here means chaos there, so this kind of regional cooperation is very important for all of us.

Question 24: Mr. President, once again you are accused for having used chemical weapons in Syria. Two sets of tests carried out for *The Times* and medical charities reveal that your forces chlorine and cyanide, according to *The Times* and even Amnesty International, I think. What do you have to say about it?

President Assad: We always said this is propaganda against Syria from the very first day, to demonize the president to demonize the state, in order to bring the hearts and minds of the Syrian people toward their agenda. That didn't work, and if you want to compare this propaganda to what is happening now in the West regarding Ukraine, it's nearly the same; demonizing Putin and telling and forging, a lot of videos and things that only tell the public opinion in the West lies. This is reality. Western people should be aware about this. That doesn't mean we don't have mistakes, we don't have something wrong or something bad going on, but at the end, this media propaganda doesn't reflect the reality in our region. So, talking about the chemical weapons, they didn't have a single evidence regarding this, and even the numbers that are being published by many European organizations as part of that propaganda were varied from 200 victims to 1,400 victims. It means it's not objective, it's not precise, and so far there's no evidence that those people were killed because of this attack. The only evidence that we have when the committee came from the United Nations, it proved that the sarin gas was used in that area, but they couldn't tell how and by whom, so they just keep accusing Syria of that. That's not realistic, because if you want to use WMDs, you don't kill a few hundreds; you kill tens of thousands of people, and that's beside the capital, it will affect everyone. So, many stories regarding this issue are not correct. Second, we are the party who asked the United Nations to send a delegation to verify this allegation.

Question 25: You still do that?

President Assad: We did, Syria did. Syria asked the United Nations, not any other country. When there was proof that terrorists used it in the north of Syria, they didn't try to verify it. They didn't mention it. So it's part of the political agenda against Syria.

Question 26: As you know there are many serious allegations against your government, about human rights abuses committed by your side. How much do you know about torture in your prisons here?

President Assad: When you talk about torture we have to differentiate between policy of torture and individual incidents that happen by any individual. When you talk about a policy of torture, the closest example is what happened in Guantanamo. In Guantanamo, there was a policy of torture by the American administration that was endorsed by president Bush and by his minister of defense and the rest of the administration. With Syria we never had under any circumstances such a policy. If you have any breach of law, torture, revenge, whatever, it could be an individual incident that the one who committed should be held accountable for. So, that's what could happen anywhere in the world, like any other crime.

Question 27: Can Amnesty International or Red Cross visit your prisons here?

President Assad: We had many reporters and many organizations that came to Syria, but if you want to mention a certain name to come and visit, that depends on the kind of

cooperation a certain organization and our government and that depends on the credibility of the organization. But in principle, many organizations and entities can visit our prisons.

Question 28: Mr. President, I have covered the war in Syria for the last four years. I met different groups and activists who were involved in the conflict. I even met soldiers from your army here. Some of those activists are actually not Islamists. I have been told that they fight for freedom. What would you like to say to them?

President Assad: We never said every fighter is an Islamist. We know that. But they are prevailing now, the terrorists, ISIS and al-Nusra, but if you want to talk about freedom, freedom is a natural instinct in every human since our ancestor Adam, and this is a divine thing for anyone to ask for, so it's going to be illogical and unrealistic and against the nature of the Earth and the people to be against freedom. But we have to ask a few simple questions. Is killing people part of that freedom? Is destroying schools and banning children from going to schools part of that freedom? Destroying the infrastructure, electricity, communications, sanitation system, beheading, dismemberment of victims. Is that freedom? I think the answer to that question is very clear to everyone regardless of their culture. So, we support anyone who works to get more freedom, but in an institutional way, under the constitution of that country, not by violence and terrorism and destroying the country. There's no relation between that and freedom.

Question 29: They blame even the Syrian army for the same things, as in killing and like that.

President Assad: They have to prove. I mean, the army has been fighting for four years. How can you withstand a war against so many countries, great countries and rich countries, while you kill your people? How could you have the support of your people? That's impossible. That's against reality, I mean, that's unpalatable.

Question 30: If you could turn back the time to 2011 and the start of the crisis, what would you, with the benefit of hindsight, have done differently?

President Assad: We have to go to the basics first. I mean, the two things that we adopted in the very beginning: fight the terrorists, and at the same make dialogue, and we started dialogue during the first year, a few months after the beginning of the conflicts in Syria. We invited everyone to the table to make dialogue, and we cooperated with every initiative that came from the United Nations, from the Arab League, and from any other country, regardless of the credibility of that initiative, just in order not to leave any stone unturned and not to give anyone the excuse that they didn't do this or didn't do that. So, we tried everything. So, I don't think anyone could say that we should have gone in a different way, whether regarding the dialogue or fighting terrorism. These are the main pillars of our policy since the beginning of the problem. Now, any policy needs execution and implementation. In implementation, you always have mistakes and that's natural. So, to talk about doing things differently, it could be about the details sometimes, but I don't think now the Syrians would say we don't want to make dialogue or we don't want to fight terrorism.

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