

President al-Assad Interview: “No Dialogue with Gunmen, All Decisions taken by the West for the Past Ten Years have been in Support of al-Qaeda”

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President Bashar al-Assad said that all the political decisions that have been taken by the west in the last ten years have been in support of al-Qaeda, intentionally or inadvertently.

In an interview with the German Der Spiegel News Magazine, President al-Assad said that through Western support, now there are thousands of al-Qaeda fighters from 80 countries in Syria.

Following is the full text of the interview:

Der Spiegel: Mr. President, do you love your country?

President Assad: Of course, and in this I am no different from most people. This is not merely about emotions, but rather about what one can do for his country if he has the power and especially in times of crisis; and at this particular time, I realize more than ever how much I love my country and so I must protect it.

Der Spiegel: Wouldn't you be more patriotic if you stepped down and allowed for negotiations over an interim government or for a cease-fire with the armed opposition?



President Assad: The Syrian people determine my fate; no other party can determine this issue. As for the armed opposition or factions, who do they represent – the Syrian people? If so, this can be proven only through the ballot box.

Der Spiegel: Are you prepared to run in the next elections?

President Assad: My term ends in August next year. The presidential elections should take place before that time. I cannot decide now whether I am going to run; this depends on what the Syrian people want. If people are not behind me, I won't stand in the elections.

Der Spiegel: Will you seriously consider giving up power?

President Assad: This is not about me or what I want. It's about what people want. The country is not mine alone, it's the country for all Syrians.

Der Spiegel: But some people say that you are the cause of the rebellion, because people want to get rid of corruption and tyranny. They call for a true democracy; and according to the opposition,

this is not possible with you in power.

President Assad: Do these people speak for themselves, or do they speak on behalf of the Syrian people or on behalf of the countries that are backing them? Do they speak on behalf of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Saudi Arabia or Qatar? Let me be clear about this: this conflict is being brought to our country from the outside world. These people live in five-star hotels, they are dictated to by their financial backers and have no grass roots in Syria.

Der Spiegel: Do you deny that there is a strong opposition against you in your country? President Assad: There is certainly an opposition in our country. What country doesn't have opposition? It's impossible for all the Syrians to be on my side.

Der Spiegel: It's not only us who deny the legitimacy of your presidency. U.S. President Barack Obama said at the U.N. General Assembly meeting in New York that a leader who kills his people and gasses children to death has forfeited any right to rule his country.

President Assad: First, he is the president of the United States and has no right to pass judgment on Syria. Second, he has no right to tell the Syrian people whom to choose as their president. Third, what he says in reality has no foundation whatsoever. He has been calling for me to step down for one and a half years. What next? Have his statements made any impact? None whatsoever.

Der Spiegel: For us, it seems that you are ignoring reality. By stepping down, you save the people a great deal of suffering.

President Assad: This has nothing to do with me being president. Killing innocent people and terrorizing them by explosions and car bombs, brought to our country by al-Qaeda, is what causes pain to the Syrian people. What does that have to do with me being in office?

Der Spiegel: It is relevant because your forces and security services have committed some of these atrocities and you are responsible for that.

President Assad: Despite the fact that the protests were not peaceful at all, it was our policy from the beginning to respond to the demands of the demonstrators. In the first weeks, we lost soldiers and policemen who were killed in those protests. Nevertheless, a specialized committee changed the constitution to meet protesters' demands and a referendum was held. On the other hand, we also needed to confront terrorism; it's the duty of the government to defend the country and take the relevant decisions to that effect. In the context of implementing these decisions, mistakes were made. We must acknowledge that.

Der Spiegel: The rebellion started with demonstrations in Dara'a and the victims were not only members of your security forces. The other side also suffered a great deal. The protesters were beaten and fired at. This harsh treatment was one of the regime's mistakes.

President Assad: When political measures are implemented – anywhere in the world – mistakes are made; we are only human.

Der Spiegel: So, you acknowledge that the harsh treatment meted out at the protesters was a mistake.

President Assad: There were individual errors. We all make mistakes. Even the president might make mistakes. Even if mistakes were made in on the ground, our principal decisions were the right ones.

Der Spiegel: Was the Houla massacre also the result of mere individual failure?

President Assad: Neither the government nor its supporters are to blame for that, because it was the armed gangs and the extremists who attacked the families who supported the government. This is exactly what happened. If you want to assert something to the contrary, you need to provide the evidence and this is what you cannot do. We, however, and contrary to your claims, can give you the names of the victims who were killed because they stood against terrorism.

Der Spiegel: We have evidence. Our reporters were in Houla and talked to the victims and carried out thorough investigations. The U.N. experts reached a conclusion, after investigating the case, that 108 people in the village were killed, including 49 children and 34 women, victims of your regime. How can you deny responsibility and accuse the so-called terrorists.

President Assad: With respect to your reporters, we Syrians, know our country better, know the truth better and can fully document that.

Der Spiegel: The culprits were 'shabiha', members of the militias with links to your regime.

President Assad: Do you have any evidence to prove that?

Der Spiegel: We heard this from people we consider credible.

President Assad: I'll be candid and even blunt with you: your question is based on wrong information. What you are asserting has no ground in reality. A lie is a lie, no matter how you phrase it or present it.

Der Spiegel: That's right. So, you don't acknowledge that your 'shabiha' took part in the massacre.

President Assad: What do you mean by 'shabiha'?

Der Spiegel: The militias close to your regime.

President Assad: This name is actually of Turkish origin, in Syria don't know 'shabiha.' The reality is that, when armed groups attack remote areas, and the army and police cannot provide sufficient protection to citizens, villagers arm themselves and create patrols in self-defense. It's true that some of those fought with our forces, but these are not militias formed to protect the president. What concerns these people is their country, which they are defending against al-Qaeda terrorists that have been attacking them for months.

Der Spiegel: So, it was only the other side who committed massacres and terrorism, and your soldiers, militias, security forces and intelligence services have nothing to do with that?

President Assad: One cannot make such sweeping generalizations: "They are one hundred percent guilty, and we are zero percent." The truth is not always black and white; in the middle there are shades of grey. But, in principle this is true. We are defending ourselves and not anything else. As to individual mistakes, I cannot, as president of all the Syrians, follow and check on each and every one of the 23 million Syrians.

Der Spiegel: Wouldn't it be possible that the crimes against the villagers were committed by parts of the Syrian Army outside your control?

President Assad: There are criminals in every country, even in your country. Those can be

everywhere. This is normal; but we don't have sufficient information about this.

Der Spiegel: The legitimacy of a president does not rest on slogans and promises, but on actions. As a result of the gas attack against your people, you forfeited every right to be in your position.

President Assad: We did not use chemical weapons; this is not true. And the picture you are drawing of me is not true. The United States, the entire western world, the richest countries in the Arab world and neighbouring Turkey are against me, and terrorists are crossing the borders from Iraq. On top of all of this, I kill my people, who support me nevertheless! Am I superhuman? No. So, why am I still in power two and half years on? The answer is simple: because a large segment of the Syrian people support me, they support the government and the state. Whether they constitute 50% or less, that is a different issue. But this large segment also means 'legitimacy.' This is how things are in reality.

Der Spiegel: After the U.N. investigation of this crime, U.S. President Obama had no doubt that your regime used chemical weapons on August 21 in an attack that claimed the lives of over a thousand people, including hundreds of children.

President Assad: Once again, Obama never provided one shred of evidence. The only things he provided were lies.

Der Spiegel: But the conclusions reached by the U.N. investigators ...

President Assad: What conclusions? When the investigators came to Syria, we asked them to continue their work and we hope that they will provide an explanation of who is responsible for this act.

Der Spiegel: The trajectory of the gas shells could be traced back from their point of impact to their point of launching. And it shows that they were launched from 4th division installations.

President Assad: This doesn't prove anything. These terrorists can be anywhere; they are even in Damascus itself. They could fire a missile next to my home.

Der Spiegel: But launching rockets containing Sarin gas cannot be done by your enemies. They don't have the capabilities to do that because it requires military equipment, training and accuracy.

President Assad: Who says so? Terrorists used Sarin gas in a Tokyo attack in the 1990s. Sarin is called the "kitchen gas" because anyone can make it anywhere, in any room. Der Spiegel: The two attacks cannot be linked or compared. This is about a military operation in Damascus.

President Assad: No one can say with any certainty that they used rockets. We have no evidence. But the certain thing is that Sarin was used. Is it not possible that one of our rockets hit a terrorist site containing Sarin? Or that they made a mistake while dealing with it? They are in possession of Sarin and they already used it in Aleppo.

Der Spiegel: 13 cases were identified where Sarin was used, but in no case has it been used with such intensity as on August 21st. Have you conducted any investigations of your own?

President Assad: Every investigation should start with identifying the number of the real victims. The armed groups speak about 350. The United States speaks about 1,400. Médecins Sans Frontières mention about 280. This cannot be right. Even the photos taken of the victims contain discrepancies. For instance, a dead child appears in two different locations.

Der Spiegel: You mean that the photos of the victims have been manipulated?

President Assad: I want to say this case should be verified thoroughly; and no one has done that so far. We cannot do it, because it is an area where terrorists operate.

Der Spiegel: This close to the city?

President Assad: They are very close to Damascus, close to our military barracks; they could kill our soldiers.

Der Spiegel: Do you think you can regain control of the areas you lost?

President Assad: It is not about winning or losing in territorial terms. We are not two states, one controlling an area belonging to the other, as in the case with Israel, which occupies our Golan Heights. This is about terrorism, which should be eliminated. When we liberate a certain area, as we have done in many areas of Syria, it doesn't mean that we are winning, because the terrorists withdraw to another area and destroy it. That's why we are also concerned about our citizens' security. It is also important for us to win the support of our population: we win with their support and vice versa.

Der Spiegel: Do you still control the chemical weapons stockpiles?

President Assad: Yes, certainly. Furthermore, to assure you, I would like to add that the stored materials haven't been activated; and no one can use them before they are prepared for that purpose.

Der Spiegel: This doesn't rule out that the army was responsible for the attack. Western intelligence services intercepted phone calls in which your commanders urge the general command to use poisonous gas.

President Assad: This is complete fabrication and forgery and I will not waste my time with such allegations.

Der Spiegel: Isn't it puzzling that we, in the West, have a completely different assessment of the situation?

President Assad: In fact, your region is always late in recognizing reality and is extremely slow in understanding this reality. In the beginning, we talked about violent protests, while you talked about peaceful demonstrations. When we started talking about extremists, you were still talking about "some militants." When we talked about al-Qaeda, you were still talking about a few terrorists, although they are actually the majority. Now you realize that it is about 50/50. Take, for instance, Secretary of State Kerry who still sticks to the past and talks about 20%. This is exactly what I meant with the reality deficit you have.

Der Spiegel: Is the reluctance the West to trust your assessments due to the lack of confidence in you. Where does the reason lie?

President Assad: I think the West prefers to trust al-Qaeda rather than to trust me.

Der Spiegel: This is absurd!!

President Assad: I mean it. Maybe you didn't mean it, but it looks like it: all the decisions you have

taken in the West for the past ten years have been in support of al-Qaeda. Some might have done that intentionally and some inadvertently. In any case, and through Western support, now we have thousands of al-Qaeda fighters from 80 countries. We have to deal with them. I am referring to those who have come from outside Syria.

Der Spiegel: You are losing many soldiers, those who defect to the opposition. Are you telling us that they became al-Qaeda affiliates overnight?

President Assad: No, I am not saying that they are all al-Qaeda, but most of them are. The minority are defectors or criminals. At the beginning of the crisis, we had over 60,000 outlaws at large. Those alone could form a whole army. How many are fighting us? I cannot give a specific figure. Most of them cross the border illegally for jihad. They come to Syria in the belief that they will go to heaven by waging war on atheists and non-Muslims. Even when we get rid of thousands of them, their ranks are replenished by other jihadists.

Der Spiegel: Yet, you believe you will win in this conflict?

President Assad: Even if there was no chance of winning the fight, we have no other choice but to defend our country.

Der Spiegel: On the subject of trust, we want to remind you that you have always denied that you possessed chemical weapons, while now you acknowledge that you have them.

President Assad: We never stated that we had no chemical weapons. We always phrased our statements "if we had ..., then ..." But we never lied.

Der Spiegel: It is reported that German companies supplied you with chemical materials, which you used to make chemical weapons. Do you have more specific information about this? President Assad: No, because these are technical issues. But, in principle, we didn't receive outside help to make these weapons, because we didn't need assistance. We are experts in the field.

Der Spiegel: Then, how many tons of Sarin gas or other agents do you have?

President Assad: This remains classified information until it is provided to OPCW.

Der Spiegel: According to intelligence agencies, you have a thousand tons in your stockpile. President Assad: What's important is the principle not the figure. We have these weapons – yes, but we are committed to making the whole Middle East a WMD free zone. Der Spiegel: This is also a matter of trust. You say you have 32 stores, while Western intelligence services put the figure at 50.

President Assad: This is a technical issue better determined by specialists. As president, my focus is on the political track. We are transparent and the experts can access any facility. We'll provide them with the data, which they can examine and verify and then judge our credibility. When we say we are transparent, we mean it: to date, we have complied with every agreement we have signed. Our history testifies to this. However, we will not bear the costs of destroying the weapons.

Der Spiegel: And the international community should simply accept that you haven't hidden secret stockpiles somewhere?

President Assad: In international relations, things are not about trust and believing, they are about setting up the mechanisms on which the approach can be based. Whether you trust me as a person is not important. What is important is for institutions to work with each other: my government and

the OPCW. What is important for me is to win the trust of the Syrian people and not the West. What is important for me is Syria not the West.

Der Spiegel: Don't you need the West?

President Assad: Of course, but not to replace the Syrians, or the Russians who are real friends. They understand better than the West the truth about what is happening here in reality. If I am praising them now, this is not because of the close ties that have linked us for years, but because, frankly, the Russians are more independent than you are in Europe. You rely too much on the United States in your policies and easily adopt its policies.

Der Spiegel: The fact of the matter is that the Russians have strategic interests in Syria. President Assad: You can discuss that with President Putin. But I will say that some Europeans have come and signaled that they are convinced with our political position and that they share our analyses and explanations of the situation. But they cannot say this in public because it's difficult for them at this moment in time.

Der Spiegel: And this applies to the poisonous gas attack?

President Assad: Of course. I say some, not all. To make this clearer, I'll elaborate on the accusations against us. Both Obama and Kerry presented lies. But Obama couldn't convince his people with his lies. According to one opinion poll, 51% of the American people reject a military strike against Syria. The British Parliament was against the strike too; and there was a tough debate in the French parliament. The whole "atmosphere" in Europe was against the strike, including the Vatican. Why? Because most people didn't believe Obama's story.

Der Spiegel: Is Germany part of the contacts you are making?

President Assad: We have contacts with some institutions and recently there have been channels that didn't exist before. We exchange information, but we cannot talk about political communications.

Der Spiegel: Does Germany play a special role for you?

President Assad: When I look at Europe, the question for me is: who is closer to the reality of what is happening in our region? For us now, Germany and Austria have the most objective vision and are the closest to reality. This helps achieve Europe's interests.

Der Spiegel: Could Germany play an intermediary role?

President Assad: I would be happy if German envoys visited Damascus to engage with us directly. If they talk to us, it doesn't mean they support our government. They can ascertain for themselves the situation and base their work on the facts. If they think that by not engaging with us, they are isolating us, I tell them: you are isolating yourselves from reality; so, it's about their interests. What do they gain when al-Qaeda is in their backyard wreaking havoc on the world? After two and half years, they should reconsider their policies. They should ask themselves: what are they gaining. What do their people gain when there is a state of chaos that they are supporting?

Der Spiegel: In light of the unrest in your country, are the chemical weapons stockpiles under control?

President Assad: There is no cause for concern, they are very well protected.

Der Spiegel: This applies to biological weapons too? You have biological weapons?

President Assad: We didn't give any information in this regard because it is considered classified information. This should not be understood as confirmation that we possess them.

Der Spiegel: You understand the international community's concern about WMDs falling into the hands of the terrorists.

President Assad: It is not as bad as it is portrayed by the media and believed in the West. There is no need for any undue concern.

Der Spiegel: As far as we know, you lost about 40% of your territories to the armed opposition, and in some areas about two thirds of the land.

President Assad: These are exaggerated figures. 60% of the country is desert and there is nobody there. In other parts of the country, the terrorists don't control any connected areas.

Der Spiegel: This doesn't apply to the area adjacent to the Turkish borders.

President Assad: They exist only in the area north of Aleppo, otherwise, there are only pockets. You cannot talk about a real frontline against us. Sometimes, these fighters are completely isolated and exist in areas where we don't want to deploy the army. The percentage of land is not important to us. People's solidarity is much more important and this is growing all the time, because they see what the terrorists are doing and what it leads to.

Der Spiegel: As a result of the violence of the conflict, a quarter of the Syrian population, i.e. five million people have become refugees.

President Assad: We don't have accurate figures; but even four million is an exaggerated figure. Many of those who are displaced within Syria go to live with relatives and don't appear in any statistics.

Der Spiegel: You talk about this issue as if it were an issue of paying taxes and not a humanitarian disaster.

President Assad: The exact opposite is true. You in the West use these figures as if you were reading a spreadsheet: four, five, six, seven million. These figures are of your making: seventy thousand victims, eighty thousand, ninety thousand, one hundred thousand, as if it were an auction.

Der Spiegel: The reason for this exodus is that people are fleeing you and your regime.

President Assad: Is this a question or a statement? If it's a statement, then it's completely wrong. If people flee, they do so for a number of reasons, first of which is fear of the terrorists.

Der Spiegel: Nobody flees from your soldiers and security forces?

President Assad: The army represents Syria; otherwise it would have disintegrated long ago. It doesn't pose a threat to anyone. When we talk about refugees, let's talk about another government - the Turkish government - which uses these figures for its own interests. It manipulates these figures and plays this humanitarian card at the United Nations in order to put pressure on us. Another reason for their interests is the money they receive to help the refugees, the money that moves only in the wrong direction, to their pockets; there are so many reasons. Of course within

these large numbers of refugees, yes, some did flee in fear of the government but the situation is now changing with about a hundred or a hundred and fifty thousand refugees returning home.

Der Spiegel: How could you push those to take that step?

President Assad: We engaged with them in order to dispel their fears. Those who committed no crime have nothing to fear. Our message was: if you want to be against the government: come back and speak against us; and it worked.

Der Spiegel: You cannot show any military victory on any military front: you regaining control over Aleppo, which you announced, hasn't happened. Ma'aloula is still a big problem. Even parts of Damascus are being shelled. We heard the sound of shelling on our way to your palace.

President Assad: When you are dealing with this kind of crisis, it is impossible for you to be as strong as in the past. The damage is huge and we'll need a lot of time to overcome this. But the army and the people are united; and we have no choice but to trust and believe in our victory and in saving our country.

Der Spiegel: How can you believe in your victory if you brought Hezbollah in to help you?

President Assad: Lebanon is a very small country, about four million people. Damascus alone has five million, and Syria is too large and wide a country to be covered by Hezbollah. We cooperated on the borders with Lebanon in the fight against those terrorists who were also attacking Hezbollah members. That cooperation was fruitful and successful.

Der Spiegel: So, you can at last do without Hezbollah's help?

President Assad: I didn't say that, I only wanted to clarify and correct the western perception that the Syrian army couldn't fight any more and that's why Hezbollah intervened.

Der Spiegel: Hezbollah is one of the few entities that continue to support you. It seems that President Putin is gradually losing his patience with you.

President Assad: President Putin is more supportive of us now than any other time. He showed this by using three vetoes at the Security Council to prevent sanctions against us. Der Spiegel: But he endorsed the most recent resolution, which calls for the destruction of the chemical weapons.

President Assad: That was a good resolution.

Der Spiegel: Because it averted the military strike?

President Assad: There was no item in that resolution that undermined our interests. President Putin knows from his experience in fighting terrorism in Chechnya what we are going through here.

Der Spiegel: That's why you are confident Moscow will provide you with the S300 air defense system, which you have been waiting months for?

President Assad: He has said more than once that he will support Syria in different fields and that he is committed to the contracts signed between us. This doesn't only apply to air defense systems but to other weapons as well which enable us to defend ourselves.

Der Spiegel: The international community will do everything to prevent arming you.

President Assad: What right do they have? We are a sovereign state, and we have the right to defend ourselves. We don't occupy anybody's land. Why isn't the international community bothered when Israel gets all kinds of weapons? Why should Israel receive three submarines from Germany, despite the fact that it is an occupying power and still occupies our land? We have the right to arm ourselves in accordance with the U.N. charter. This is why the West isn't objective in this position; it's because of these double standards that we don't trust the West.

Der Spiegel: Aren't you concerned that Israel will shell the new defense system as soon as it arrives from Moscow?

President Assad: In our case, and in this state of war, we don't allow ourselves to feel fear. We have to do everything to be strong; and we shall not allow anyone to destroy our armaments and military equipment.

Der Spiegel: And if it happened? President Assad: Then, if things come to that, we shall talk about it then.

Der Spiegel: In the past your rhetoric about Israel was more self-confident.

President Assad: No, we need peace and stability in this region. We have always been aware of this. When it comes to revenge and reacting to a strike, we need to ask ourselves: where would that lead, particularly now that we are fighting al-Qaeda. We need to be careful not to ignite a new war.

Der Spiegel: When will you win against al-Qaeda?

President Assad: When we restore stability; that's why we must get rid of the terrorists. Then, we need to get rid of their ideology that has infiltrated certain areas of Syria, because it is more dangerous than terrorism itself. This ideology, which encourages an eight-year old boy to slaughter a man while adults and children watch and cheer as if they were watching a football match. This actually happened in northern Syria. Getting rid of this mentality and liberating ourselves from it is going to be more difficult than getting rid of the chemical weapons.

Der Spiegel: Such scenes might not be strange in states like Somalia, Liberia and Sierra Leone, but in Syria?

President Assad: The brutality we are witnessing in Syria is incredible. Think of the Bishop whose head the terrorists severed with a small knife.

Der Spiegel: Somalia, Liberia and Sierra Leone have been "failed" states for decades. Yet, you believe you can restore Syria back to pre-rebellion times?

President Assad: Concerning stability, yes, when an end is put to billions of dollars flowing from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, when Turkey stops its logistical assistance to the terrorists. Then we can solve the problem in a few months.

Der Spiegel: Is a negotiated solution still possible?

President Assad: With the armed groups – no. My definition of the opposition is a political program or entity that doesn't carry weapons. If they were to lay down their weapons and return to normal life, it would be possible to talk to such people. When we spoke earlier about defectors, it is also important to point out that now many of them are withdrawing from rebel camps and joining the fight on our side.

Der Spiegel: For the international community, you are responsible for escalating this conflict, which has no end in sight. How can you cope with such guilt?

President Assad: It's not about me, but about Syria. The situation in Syria worries and saddens me; that's where my concern is, I am not concerned for myself.

Der Spiegel: Do your wife and three children stand at your side?

President Assad: Certainly, they have never left Damascus for one moment.

Der Spiegel: Has it crossed your mind that your end will be similar to President Ceausescu of Romania, when he was killed by a group of his soldiers?

President Assad: I am not worried about myself. Had I been worried and fearful, I would have left Syria a long time ago.

Der Spiegel: Mr. President, thank you very much for this interview.

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