

President Bashar Al-Assad Interview: The War on Syria, The Insidious Role of Terrorism

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President Bashar Al Assad interview with Sky News Arabic might be the first interview with a media outlet from the Gulf region since the early days of the US-led war of terrorism against Syria in which most Arab countries and all of Syria's neighboring countries and entities have contributed heavily in sponsoring terrorism in Syria. The interview was aired on the 9th of August.

During the interview, President Al Assad addressed important topics from the obstacles facing the return of the Syrian refugees, to the continued US-led war of terrorism and war of attrition against the Syrian people, to the earthquake and its ramifications on the Syrian people, in addition to explaining why he deems a meeting with the Turkish madman Erdogan as fruitless, and why Syria considers any talks of peace with Israel as a waste of time, to name a few of the topics discussed in the interview.

Following is the video with English subtitles and the full transcript of the English translation of the interview:

Transcript

Intro: We welcome you, our viewers, to this special meeting from the Muhajireen Palace in the Syrian capital, Damascus with President Bashar Al-Assad.

Mr. President, welcome to Sky News Arabia, and thank you for the opportunity to meet with you for this long-awaited meeting.

President Assad: Welcome to Syria, and I am very happy to receive you today, and to have a fruitful dialogue between us.

Q: Thank you. Since this is the first meeting, Mr. President, on Sky News Arabia as the first Arab channel, we go back with you to the beginning of the events in 2012, was it possible, in your opinion, to avoid what happened?

Would you have gone through the war, this confrontation in the same way with the same vision for more than a decade?

President Assad: Of course, theoretically, this could have been avoided if we had submitted to all the demands that were demanded or imposed on Syria on various issues, foremost of which was the abandonment of Syrian rights and Syrian interests.

I say in theory because in practice we will not go in this direction. But if we assume that we will go in this direction then this means that we will avoid war but we will pay a much greater price later. Would we have handled things the same way? There may be different ways to the same goal, what is important is the policy. What is the national vision?

Our vision was to defend Syrian interests and Syria in the face of terrorism and in the independence of the Syrian decision. If we go back in time, we will build and adopt the same policy.

Q: Did you expect the damage to be of this magnitude at least during the first year?

President Assad: No, we did not expect it because we did not know what plans were being prepared. We knew that things were being prepared for Syria, and we knew from the beginning of the war that it would be a long war, and not a fleeting [crisis](#) as some thought, but no one expected the details.

Q: Mr. President, allow me this question, the battles were taking place meters away from the presidential palaces, so to speak, for a moment, did you not fear for your life, for the lives of your children, and there are truly terrifying scenarios in the region, for example, what happened to presidents, like what happened to President Gaddafi?

President Assad: First of all, anyone who does not fear danger is an abnormal and imbalanced person. Fear is part of human nature, and it is natural for a person to fear. But fear has forms that range from panic to apprehension and everything in between. We certainly did not reach this level of panic, but on the other hand, you are living in a general situation, I was not the target as a person, everyone was targeted.

We have all been walking in these streets and roads and in our homes and shells have been falling for years, so fear and anxiety become part of our subconscious...

Q: You represent the leadership of the country...

President Assad: It is true, but in the end, you are a human being, and you interact with others, as it was a general case, and when it becomes a general condition that you cannot live with fear for years, it becomes part of something you live with on daily bases.

As for the scenarios that happened, the truth is that these scenarios were drawn up, as happened with Gaddafi, or as happened with Saddam Hussein in Iraq in order to create a state of fear, therefore, in Syria, we had an awareness of the scenarios that were developed and were circulated in the media in order to create a state of fear, so these scenarios were not in our minds in general, especially as we were fighting an existential battle; the target

was not Gaddafi, it was Libya, the target was not Saddam Hussein, it was Iraq, and the target was not President Bashar, it was Syria.

When you take these things into account, you will not live obsessed with the personal cases that they tried to market in order to create a state of fear.

Q: But under so much pressure, have you ever considered relinquishing power, Mr. President?

President Assad: To be clear, when they talked about the necessity of the Syrian president's departure, the picture was as follows: that the problem is about a person's problem; this person cannot be more important than the homeland, and he must go regardless of his specifications and attributes. We were aware of this in Syria, in general, not only me but as a country and as citizens. Therefore, there were no internal calls for the president's departure from power.

When a president leaves his post or responsibility, to be more precise, he leaves when the people want him to go, and not because of external pressure or because of an external war.

This is a natural thing when it is caused by an internal demand, but when it is caused by an external war, then it would be an escape, not a relinquishment of power, and fleeing was never an option.

Q: But a large number of protesters were raising this slogan?

President Assad: Even this large number did not exceed at its best, a little over 100 thousand protesters in all the provinces, compared to tens of millions of Syrians, that's first; secondly, let's assume that there was a large number, and the richest and most powerful countries in the world stood against this president, and a large section of the people stood against him, so how can he remain in power? There's no logic in that.

So, he remained in power because a greater number of people support the causes that the president supports.

Q: We will come back to this point, but you fought a big challenge, the enemy, the terrorism that surrounded many regions, including the capital, Damascus, but Mr. President, civilians have been harmed, we followed this at least through the media, including killing, displacement, and suffering, are you responsible for these?

President Assad: If we assume that the state was the one that carried out the killing and displacement, then it does bear responsibility, but there is terrorism, and the state was combating terrorism, and terrorism was killing, destroying, and burning. There is no state, even if it was called a "bad" one that destroys the homeland, it does not exist according to my information. So, naturally, terrorism carried out the destruction.

The role of the state, by virtue of the constitution and national norms, is to defend the state. Does this mean that confronting terrorism is what destroyed the country?

Image is from Twitter/The Cradle



In other words, if we did not combat terrorism, the state would've flourished? This is illogical. So, those who stood with terrorism bear the responsibility, and not those who defended against terrorism. The one who bears the responsibility is the one who intended the war, who planned the war, and the one who attacked, and not the one who was attacked.

Q: We return, Mr. President, to the idea of the state's steadfastness after all this great pressure on the internal level, and even the external pressure, is the Iranian and Russian support from the early years of this [crisis](#) the secret of the steadfastness in this battle?

The Arab street, Mr. President, is asking about the secret of the survival of the Syrian state after all these pressures.

President Assad: In the beginning, we did not claim that we are a superpower, and we did not say that we are capable of fighting the world; it is natural that when we asked our friends to stand with us, it is because we need this support. Their support had an important impact on the steadfastness of Syria, this is self-evident.

But friends cannot replace us in war, in battle, and in steadfastness, this is also self-evident. The real steadfastness is the steadfastness of the people, the question you ask has many factors, you are talking about tens of millions and about one of the oldest peoples and societies in the world, there is an accumulation, today we can say that there is faith in the cause, there is experience, there is knowledge, there is adherence to rights, there is awareness and maturity of the game method in which matters were managed when preparing for this war, and when starting this war.

All these things and many other factors that cannot be mentioned now are what constituted the state of steadfastness, and it was not a matter of neither a president, nor an official, nor a state, nor just an army.

Q: How can you summarize the secret for this resilience during these years?

President Assad: The secret is awareness of the plot, we have not fallen into any of the traps that were set for us abroad. Awareness is the basis for success and resilience sooner or later.

Q: After all these years, the suspension of Damascus's membership in the Arab League was lifted. You reject the idea of Syria returning to the Arab League. The door was opened to questions about the future of the relationship between you and these Arab capitals. Is it a symbolic return or do you think it will have its outcomes, at least in the near future?

President Assad: The truth is that Arab - Arab relations since I gained political awareness

four decades ago are symbolic relations, why?

For a simple reason, because our way of thinking may be at the state level, or it's a general culture, I don't know, we do not offer practical solutions or practical ideas for anything, we love speeches, statements, and formal meetings, this is the nature of the relationship.

The return of Syria, therefore, whether it will be symbolic or something else depends on the nature of Arab – Arab relations. Have these relationships changed? I don't think it has deeply changed. There is a beginning of awareness of the size of the risks that affect us as Arab countries, but it has not reached the stage of developing solutions. As long as there are no solutions to the problems, then the relationship will remain symbolic.

Q: But despite the awareness of these dangers, the dangers have become real in the Arab world and are great for some capitals, despite that, why the forces did not join together, at least because the interests would be mutual?

President Assad: True, because you face two stages when you have a problem, the first is to see the problem, to understand the problem, to diagnose the problem, and the second stage is to put the remedy. We are in the first stage and we have not moved to the second stage yet, according to my belief.

Q: As for Syria, what do you expect from the Arab side, Mr. President?

President Assad: I cannot expect, I can hope, I hope we can build institutions; the problem with the Arabs is that they did not build institutionalized relations, therefore, they did not build institutions, and if we talk about bilateral relations, they are weak for this reason, and the collective relations through the Arab League, because the Arab League did not turn into an institution in the true sense.

This is what we see and this is what we hope to be able to overcome.

Q: Regarding the opposition, who is the opposition that you recognize today after all these years?

President Assad: In short, it is the opposition that is manufactured locally, not manufactured externally.

Locally manufactured means that it has a popular base, a national program, and national awareness; all the other features of ignorance are not enough.

National awareness and sincere patriotic intent, apart from that, the opposition is a natural thing. We are human beings and we differ in opinion in the same house, how can we not differ at the national level regarding many issues?

Q: Some believe that even the opposition abroad has a vision that may differ from the Syrian state, and may represent a part of this people.

President Assad: Of course, the word external does not mean bad, he may be an internal opposition and linked to the outside, and he may be an external opposition but linked to the homeland, the issue has nothing to do with the outside and the inside, it has to do with where your starting point lies, from the people or from foreign intelligence? This is the only

question.

Q: You announced your welcome to the return of the larger number of refugees, but some are afraid of the idea of punishment after the return, what do you say to these millions via this screen?

President Assad: Over the past years, just under half a million have returned to Syria, and none of them has been imprisoned, why did this return stop? It stopped because of the reality of the living conditions. How can a refugee return without water, electricity, schools for his children, and no medical treatment? These are life basics, this is the reason.

As for us in Syria, we issued an amnesty law for everyone who was involved in the events during the past years, except, of course, for proven crimes that have personal rights, blood rights, as they are termed...

Q: But many have talked about this point as security accountability could be a dilemma and thus increase the state of apprehension.

President Assad: Even those who doubt can return to reality, this is why started with reality, I said about half a million have returned, how can these people return if the state is going to imprison them? This is a realistic indicator regardless of what I say in this interview.

Q: What is the most important logistical challenge for their return, in your opinion?

President Assad: Logistically, the infrastructure is destroyed by terrorism, and this is what most of the refugees we communicate with are saying, they want to return by they say how do we live, how do we survive?

Q: What are the chances of the return of those (refugees) during the coming period in light of the great challenge in terms of infrastructure?

President Assad: Now there is a dialogue between us and a number of agencies in the United Nations concerned with the humanitarian aspect, and have begun to discuss with them practically the return projects, how to finance them, and what are their requirements in detail? There is work in this regard.

Q: One of the challenges inside Syria that have affected the surrounding countries is drug trafficking. The Syrian state is accused of turning a blind eye to those who carry out this trafficking, who are linked to such crimes, and turning Syria into a hub for the Captagon 'drug', how do you respond to these accusations, Mr. President?

President Assad: If we are the ones seeking as a country to encourage this trafficking in Syria, this means that we, as a state, encouraged the terrorists to come to Syria, and carry out the destruction and killing, because the result is the same, and I have said that on more than one occasion and some of those are public. If we place the people between terrorism on the one hand and drugs on the other, then we are destroying society and the country with our own hands. Where is our interest?

Therefore, when they tried to use the issue of drugs recently, first by the Americans and then by the West later, and some regional countries for their political agendas against Syria, we were the first enthusiasts and collaborators in order to combat this phenomenon, because it is a dangerous phenomenon in every sense of the word. It is illogical for the state

to be supportive of it.

But let me add a point that the gangs do not deal with countries, because they operate in secret, coming from the far west and the far east in order to pass through secretly. It deals with people through bribery, so it cannot deal with a state, because it becomes an open trade and not a secret one.

Q: What is the extent of the danger, in your opinion, with regard to drug trafficking? Was this matter raised as a priority, at least with the Arab leaders, at the last summit?

President Assad: First, the drug trafficking as a transit and as a settlement has been present and has not stopped, this is a fact, but when there is war and the state is weakened, this 'trade' is bound to flourish, this is a natural thing, but those who bear responsibility, in this case, are the countries that contributed to creating chaos in Syria, not the Syrian state.

Nevertheless, we were in dialogue with more than one Arab official who visited us in the recent months or weeks and this issue was one of the topics raised by Syria, and not only by them because we have a common interest with them in eliminating this phenomenon.

Q: I approach you, Mr. President, with your relationship now with abroad. There is talk about negotiations taking place between you and the Americans at the level of diplomatic officials, what happened? What has been achieved so far?

President Assad: Nothing. The dialogues have been intermittently going on for years, and we had no hope even for a single moment that the Americans would change, because the Americans ask and demand, take and take and give nothing. This is the nature of the relationship with the Americans since 1974, five decades ago, it has nothing to do with any administration, therefore, we have no hope, but our policy in Syria is not to leave any closed door in the face of any attempt to prevent the saying that if they did this, this would have happened, but I do not expect that in the foreseeable future, there will be any results from any negotiations held with the Americans.

Q: Washington significantly supports the Arab – Israeli rapprochement, at least during the previous and current administrations, have you received any offers to establish a relationship with Israel?

Image: Israel's Merkava Tank in the Golan Heights. (By ChameleonsEye /Shutterstock)



President Assad: Not at all, because they know our position since the beginning of the peace negotiations in 1990, if there is no Israeli willingness to return the land, there is no need to waste time.

Q: Yesterday, we heard the sound of an explosion in the heart of the capital, Damascus, today it was announced that this was an [Israeli bombing](#), how long will this last? Does this bombing target the Syrian Army or the Iranian presence in Syria?

President Assad: The truth is that the Syrian Army is mainly targeted under the pretext of the Iranian presence, and it will continue as long as Israel is an enemy and as long as we are able to foil the terrorists' plots, even partially, because these bombings began when the Syrian Army began achieving phased victories in the battles it is waging, and taking into consideration that we have not finished the war yet.

Q: How long do you think it will last, in your opinion?

President Assad: As I told you, as long as Israel is an enemy and stands with the terrorists, it will continue, therefore, it will not change.

Q: Let's address the north, it is also necessary to talk about the relationship with Turkey, you have two conditions for the return of this relationship with Turkey: the withdrawal of the Turkish forces and the cessation of support for the terrorists. Turkey asked that you meet without preconditions. In light of this proposal, when is it possible to meet between you and President Erdogan especially since he does not oppose this meeting?

President Assad: The word without preconditions for a meeting means without an agenda, without an agenda means without preparation, and without preparation means without results, why do Erdogan and I meet? To drink refreshments, for example? We want to reach a clear goal, our goal is the Turkish withdrawal from the Syrian territories, while Erdogan's goal is to legitimize the presence of the Turkish occupation in Syria, therefore, the meeting cannot take place under Erdogan's conditions.

Q: But Erdogan says that as long as there is terrorism threatening the Turkish state, these forces cannot be removed.

Image is from Syria News



President Assad: The truth is, terrorism in Syria is Turkish-made; Jabhat Al Nusra (Nusra Front aka Al Qaeda Levant), and Ahrar Al Sham are different names for one side, all made by Turkey and funded until this moment by Turkey, so what kind of terrorism is he talking about?

Q: Regarding the relationship with Hamas, Mr. President, you, as the Syrian state are greatly appreciated for supporting (Hamas), but how did you receive Hamas's position at the beginning of the [crisis](#), and did the relationship return to what it was with Hamas with Hamas announcing restoring its relations with Damascus?

President Assad: After all that time, I want to clarify one small point, some [Hamas](#) leaders were saying that Syria asked them to support us, how they stand with us, and how they defend the Syrian state. They do not have an army and they are a few dozen in Syria, this is not true.

The position we have declared on more than one occasion is that it was a position of treachery (by Hamas), not because we stood with Hamas, but because it was claiming to be a resistance group at that time, and I'm talking about the leaders, I am not talking about all Hamas because I do not know all Hamas, those who claimed to be standing with the resistance are the same ones who carried the flag of the French occupation of Syria.

How can a person claiming to be resistance to stand with an occupation that resulted in the American and Turkish occupation and Israeli aggression under the flag of a French occupier? This position is a mixture of treachery and hypocrisy.

As for our relationship today, it is a relationship within the general principle, we stand with every Palestinian party that stands against Israel in order to regain its rights, this is the general position.

Q: Can the relationship return to what it was in the past?

President Assad: No, currently, Hamas does not have offices in Syria, and it is early to talk about such a thing, we have priorities now, and the battles inside Syria are our priority.

Q: We return to the issue of priorities, when I spoke to the Syrians inside the country, about the reality of the Syrian citizen and the challenges facing the state, some believed that with the end of the war, relatively, and the lifting of the suspension of Syria's membership in the Arab League, that the economy will improve rapidly or gradually, at least there will be something tangible, Mr. President, but this did not happen, why?

Q: Do you think the main obstacle is the Caesar Act? Or what are the obstacles?

President Assad: Caesar Act is an obstacle, no doubt, but we managed in several ways to bypass this law, it is not the biggest obstacle. The biggest obstacle is the destruction of the infrastructure by the terrorists. The biggest obstacle is the image of the war in Syria which prevents any investor from coming to deal with the Syrian market.

The biggest obstacle is also time, you can strike and destroy economic relations within weeks or months, but you also need years to restore them. It is illogical and unrealistic to expect that the return of these relations that have begun to appear closer to normal will lead to economic results within months, this is not logical. We need a lot of effort in order to reach this result.

Q: Concerning Lebanon which is living in a deteriorating political and economic situation, have you intervened politically to end the political [crisis](#) in Lebanon, and do you support candidate Suleiman Franjeh to solve this [crisis](#) in the Lebanese scene?

President Assad: As long as we did not intervene to solve the [crisis](#) in Lebanon, we cannot talk about supporting or standing against any candidate.

No external party, neither Syrian nor non-Syrian can help in resolving the Lebanese [crisis](#) if there is no will on the part of the Lebanese to solve their [crisis](#) . This is the problem.

Therefore, the Lebanese must be pushed for more consensus, then we can talk about a solution to this [crisis](#).

As for us in Syria, we moved away from the Lebanese file less than two decades ago, and we are trying to build normal relations with Lebanon without going into the details at the present time.

Q: We come back to approach your personal view of events, Syria has gone through a war for more than a decade, many challenges, and finally the earthquake that struck large parts of the Syrian territories. What situation has affected you personally all these years, Mr. President?

President Assad: Undoubtedly, the earthquake is a new situation for Syria that has not happened for hundreds of years, and it creates a feeling that is difficult for me to define, but as you work to save what can be saved, and there are people who sleep under the rubble between life and death for days, this is a human situation that has special awe.

But at the level of war in general, there were endless humanitarian situations, there is the teacher who refused the orders of the terrorists not to go to school, and for this reason, male and female teachers were killed. There is the electrician who insisted on fixing the electricity and was killed knowing that he would die, etc...

But the most humane situation that can affect you is the position of the families of the martyrs during the war. The mother and father who lost a number of martyrs from their sons and sent the rest of the sons to defend the homeland. There are human situations that cannot be forgotten for us.

Q: Regarding the future of Syria, Mr. President, you came to power after your father Hafez Al Assad although you succeeded after that in the elections, will your son Hafez have a political role in the future of Syria?

President Assad: First, for me personally, President Hafez Al Assad had no role in my being president, because he did not secure me any civil or military position through which I could be president. I came through the Baath Party after his death, and I did not discuss this point with him even in the last weeks of his life, and he was ill at that time.

The same thing applies to the relationship between me and my son, it is a family relationship, I do not discuss these issues with him, especially since he is still young and has a scientific future ahead of him. He is pursuing a scientific path that he has not finished yet. This is due to his desires.

As for working in the public field, it is up to the national acceptance of any person if he has a desire for public work, but I do not prefer and do not wish to discuss these details with him, not now, nor later.

Q: In conclusion, if you looked at all these years, Mr. President, if you were back in time to the year 2012 (it started in mid-March 2011) since the beginning of the events, what decision did you take that you were not satisfied with, or the decision that if you went back in time, you would have taken differently, given, perhaps, the experience and lessons learned, on the internal as well the external level, Mr. President?

President Assad: This question was often raised personally with me, and I tell them that you

would be surprised if I told you that many of the decisions we took, we were not convinced of them in the first place. We did not take them because we were convinced of them.

For example, regarding the changes that took place with regard to the constitution and other things, I used to tell them that we will take these measures, and yet the war will continue. The demonstrations were called peaceful, and we treated them at the beginning as if they were peaceful. We knew that many Muslim Brotherhood groups and others were involved in them, and started shooting at the police and so on, we treated them as peaceful demonstrations even though we knew that they were not peaceful.

If we return to that time, will we do the same thing? Yes, why? Because dealing with the subject does not always stem from your personal convictions, but rather stems from people's understanding of the subject.

Many people believed that these demonstrations were peaceful, and believed that the constitution was the problem, and it was necessary to take these measures to prove to these people that the problem is neither a constitution nor peaceful demonstrations, the matter is greater than that.

Of course, they were convinced, but it was too late. So, yes, many things we were not convinced of but we will go back and follow them and adopt them once again.

Q: How do you view the issue of alliances with foreign powers?

President Assad: The relationship with Russia and the relationship with Iran proved that Syria knows how to choose its friends correctly. As for the relationship with the Turks, there are those who asked: have we gone too far? Turkey is a neighboring country, and it was natural for us to seek to improve relations with it, and if different circumstances came in the future after Turkey's withdrawal in order to improve the relationship, then it is natural for us to return to the same policy, which is to build good relation with your neighbors. These are principles and not fleeting policies.

Q: On the Arab level, was there a better way to deal with the Arab capitals to prevent this estrangement that lasted for years?

President Assad: We did not initiate this estrangement and did not take any action against any Arab country, even when we returned to the Arab League, and you may have heard my speech, I did not blame any side and did not ask any side why you did that.

On the contrary, we say what is past is past, we always look to the future. Is there a better way? If there is another better way that we hope to be advised to follow, we have no objection, but we do not seek clashes or problems throughout our history. This is part of our policy or the essence of our approach.

Q: Mr. President, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you on Sky News Arabia.

President Assad: Thank you again for coming to Syria, welcome.

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