

# President Bashar Al-Assad: Fighting Terrorism in Syria. Rebuilding in the Wake of the Crisis.

## Interview

Interview with the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

By [Bashar al Assad](#)

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

President Bashar al-Assad gave the following interview to the German Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper:

Interviewer: Mr President, how do you view the situation in your country? The Syrian Army has lost control over large parts of Syria, in other words those areas are outside the control of central government. What's your take on the situation?

President Assad: Your question requires us to put things into their proper context: this is not a conventional war with two armies fighting to control or liberate particular areas or parts of land. What we are in fact dealing with is a form of guerrilla warfare.

As for the Syrian Army, there has not been any instance where our Armed Forces have planned to enter a particular location and have not succeeded. Having said this, the Army is not present – and should not be present – in every corner of Syria. What is more significant than controlling areas of land, is striking terrorists. We are confident that we can successfully fight terrorism in Syria, but the bigger issue is the ensuing damage and its cost. The crisis has already had a heavy toll but our biggest challenges will come once the crisis is over.



Foreign element seeks politically and militarily to prolong crisis

Interviewer: In your recent interview with Al-Manar it appeared as though you were preparing the Syrian public for a protracted struggle. Was that your intention?

President Assad: No, this was not specific to Al-Manar. From the early days of the crisis, whenever I was asked, I have stated that this crisis is likely to be prolonged due to foreign interference. Any internal crisis can go in one of two ways: either it is resolved or it escalates into a civil war. Neither has been the case for Syria because of the foreign component, which seeks to extend the duration of the crisis both politically and militarily; I think its fair to say that my predictions were right.

Genuine re-construction is reconstructing mentalities, ideologies and conceptions

Interviewer: Mr President, how do you expect to overcome the large-scale destruction that has been inflicted in Syria?

President Assad: In the same way you, in Germany, overcame the devastation after World War II, and in the same way many other nations have progressed and been rebuilt after their wars. I am confident Syria will follow the same path. As long as we have resilient people, we can rebuild the country. We have done this before and we can do it again, learning from all we have been through.

In terms of funding, we have been a self-sufficient country for a very long time. Of course we will need to be more productive than before as a result of the situation. Friendly countries have helped us in the past and continue to offer their support, maybe in the form of loans in the future. It may take a long time, but with our determination, our strength and our solidarity, we can rebuild the country.

However, the more arduous challenge lies in rebuilding, socially and psychologically, those who have been affected by the crisis. It will not be easy to eliminate the social effects of the crisis, especially extremist ideologies. Real reconstruction is about developing minds, ideologies and values. Infrastructure is valuable, but not as valuable as human beings; reconstruction is about perpetuating both.



Re-drawing map of region will be map of wars in the Middle East

Interviewer: Mr President, during the crisis some areas of the country have become either more self-reliant or more reliant on external support. Do you think this could potentially lead to the re-drawing of borders?

President Assad: Do you mean within Syria or the region in general?

Interviewer: The region – one hundred years after the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

President Assad: One hundred years after Sykes-Picot, when we talk about re-drawing the borders in our region, we can use an analogy from architecture. Syria is like the keystone in the old architectural arches; by removing or tampering with the keystone, the arch will collapse. If we apply this to the region, to the world, – any tampering with the borders of this region will result in re-drawing the maps of distant regions because this will have a domino effect which nobody can control. One of the superpowers may be able to initiate the process, but nobody – including that superpower, will be able to stop it; particularly since there are new social borders in the Middle East today that didn't exist during Sykes-Picot. These new sectarian, ethnic and political borders make the situation much more complicated. Nobody can know what the Middle East will look like should there be an attempt to re-draw the map of the region. However, most likely that map will be one of multiple wars, which would transcend the Middle East spanning the Atlantic to the Pacific, which nobody can stop.

Interviewer: Mr President, in your opinion what will the region look like in the future?

President Assad: If we rule out the destructive scenario of division in your last question, I can envisage a completely different and more positive future, but it will depend on how we act as nations and societies. This scenario involves a number of challenges, first of which is

restoring security and stability; our second challenge is the rebuilding process. However, our biggest and most important challenge lies in facing extremism.

It has become extremely clear that there has been a shift in the societies of our region away from moderation, especially religious moderation. The question is: can we restore these societies to their natural order? Can our diverse societies still coexist together as one natural whole? On this point allow me to clarify certain terms. The words tolerance and coexistence are often used to define our societies. However, the more precise and appropriate definition, of how our societies used to be – and how they should be, is harmonious. Contrary to perception, the issue is neither about tolerance – since there will come a day when you are not tolerant, nor is the issue about coexistence – since you co-exist with your adversaries, but rather it is about harmony. What used to characterize us in the region was our harmony. You cannot say that your hand will coexist with or tolerate your foot because one compliments the other and both are a part of a harmonious whole.

Another challenge is political reform and the question of which political system would keep our society coherent: be it presidential, semi-presidential or parliamentary, as well as deciding the most appropriate legislation to govern political parties. In Germany, for example, you have the Christian Democratic Party. In Syria we could not have religious parties, neither Christian nor Muslim, because for us religion is for preaching and not for political practice. There are many other details, but the essence is in accepting others. If we cannot accept each other we cannot be democratic, even with the best constitution or the best legislations.

we are a secular state that essentially treats its citizens equally

Interviewer: Mr President, where do you see secularism in the midst of the rising Islamic current in the region?

President Assad: This is a very important question; many in the region do not understand this relationship. The Middle East is a hub of different ideologies. Arab society is primarily based on two pillars: Pan-Arabism and Islam. Other ideologies do exist, such as communism, liberalism, Syrian nationalism, but these are not nearly as popular. Many people understand secularism as synonymous with communism in the past, in that it is against religion. In fact it is the complete opposite; for us in Syria secularism is about the freedom of confession including Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and the multiple diverse sects within these religions. Secularism is crucial to our national unity and sense of belonging. Therefore we have no choice but to strengthen secularism because religion is already strong in our region, and I stress here that this is very healthy. What is not healthy is extremism because it ultimately leads to terrorism; not every extremist is a terrorist, but every terrorist is definitely an extremist.

So in response to your question, we are a secular state that essentially treats its citizens equally, irrespective of religion, sect or ethnicity. All our citizens enjoy equal opportunities regardless of religious belief.

Syria is passing through most difficult circumstances, definitely not a spring

Interviewer: Mr President, how do you view the two-and-a-half years since the so-called 'Arab Spring?'

This is a misconception. Spring does not include bloodshed, killing, extremism, destroying schools or preventing children from going to their schools, or preventing women from choosing what to wear and what is appropriate for them. Spring is the most beautiful season whilst we are going through the direst circumstances; it is definitely not Spring. Is Spring compatible with what is happening in Syria – the killing, the slaughtering, the beheading, the cannibalism, I leave it to you to decide.

Interviewer: What are the issues that the so-called “Arab Spring” is supposed to resolve?

President Assad: The solution doesn't lie in the 'Spring' or in anything else, the solution lies in us. We are the ones who should provide the solutions, by being proactive instead of reactive. When we address our problems proactively we ensure that we get the right solutions. Solutions imposed reactively by the 'Spring' will only lead to deformed results.

Like many countries in the Middle East, we have numerous problems that we are aware of and view objectively. This is how these problems should be solved, in that the solutions are internally manufactured and not externally administered, as the latter would produce a distorted or stillborn solution. It is for this very reason that when we call for dialogue or solutions, they need to be home-grown in order to ensure that they lead to the Syria we aspire to.

what is happening in Iraq now, and in Lebanon previously, are repercussions of the situation in Syria

Interviewer: Mr President, you have rejected any form of foreign intervention and have warned that this would extend the battle to wider areas, have you reached this?

President Assad: Let's be clear about this, there are two types of foreign intervention: indirect through proxies or agents, and direct intervention through a conventional war. We are experiencing the former. At the beginning of the crisis I warned that intervention in Syria – even indirectly, is similar to tampering with a fault line, it would lead to shockwaves throughout the region. At the time, many people – especially in the media, understood this as President Assad threatening to extend the crisis beyond Syria's borders. Clearly they did not understand what I meant at the time, but this is exactly what is happening now.

If we look at the reality in front of us, we can see clearly that what is happening in Iraq now, and in Lebanon previously, are repercussions of the situation in Syria, and this will only extend further and further. We are seeing these ramifications and the intervention is still indirect, so imagine the consequences of military intervention? The situation will, of course, be much worse and then we will witness the domino effect of widespread extremism, chaos and fragmentation.

Relations with Russia and Iran are cooperation guaranteed by international law

Interviewer: You criticise countries including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Britain for their interference in the Syria crisis, isn't it true that Russia and Iran are also involved?

President Assad: There is a significant difference between the co-cooperation of states as opposed to the destabilisation of a certain country and interference in its internal affairs. Cooperation between countries is conceived on the concept of mutual will, in a way that preserves their sovereignty, independence, stability and self-determination. Our relationship with Russia, Iran and other countries that support Syria are cooperative relations certified

under international law.

The countries you mentioned, have adopted policies that meddle in Syria's internal affairs, which is a flagrant violation of international law and our national sovereignty. The difference therefore, is that cooperation between countries is intended to preserve stability and perpetuate the prosperity of these nations, whilst foreign interference seeks to destabilise countries, spread chaos and perpetuate ignorance.

Interviewer: Sir, you have discussed the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on Iraq and Lebanon whose societies are based on what one might call a sectarian system. Do you think that such a system with Sunni and Shiite pillars could be established in Syria?

President Assad: Undoubtedly, sectarian systems in neighbouring countries, sectarian unrest or civil wars – as in Lebanon 30 years ago, will inevitably affect Syria. That is why Syria intervened in Lebanon in 1976 – to protect itself and to safeguard Lebanon. It is for this reason that we are observing carefully the unfolding events in Iraq – they will affect us directly. This was also for this reason that we adamantly opposed the war on Iraq, despite a mixture of American temptations and threats at the time. We rejected losing our stability in return for appeasing the Americans. Sectarian systems are dangerous and that is why we insist on the secular model where all citizens are equal regardless of religion.

Jabhat al-Nusra is a branch of al-Qaeda, they uphold the same ideology

Interviewer: Mr President, you are fighting “Jabhat Al-Nusra.” Can you tell us about it, what is this organization, who supports them, who supplies them with money and weapons?

President Assad: Jabhat Al-Nusra is an Al-Qaeda affiliated group with an identical ideology whose members live in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan as well as other Arab and Muslim countries; they are very well financed and have plenty of arms. It is difficult to trace their sources due to the fact that their support resides in a covert manner through wealthy individuals and organisations that adopt the same ideology.

Their primary aim is to establish an Islamic State in accordance to their interpretation of Islam. Central to their political thought is the Wahhabi doctrine – comparable to Al-Qaeda's in Afghanistan. This ideology is administered wherever they are present, especially on women. They claim to be applying Sharia Law and the Islamic Religion; however, in reality their actions are a complete distortion of the real religion of Islam. We have seen examples of their brutality on our satellite channels taken from footage they publish on purpose on YouTube in order to spread their ideology; a recent example was the beheading of an innocent man, which was aired on Belgian TV.

Interviewer: What is the motivation for Saudi Arabia and Qatar to assist and arm the terrorists against you, what do they seek to achieve?

President Assad: Firstly, I believe that this is a question they should be answering. I will respond by raising a few questions. Do they support the armed gangs because of their vehement belief in freedom and democracy as they claim in their media outlets? Do they harbour any form of democracy in their own countries, in order to properly support democracy in Syria. Do they have elected parliaments or constitutions voted on by their people? Have their populations decided at any time during the previous decades on what type of governing system they want – be it monarchy, presidency, principality or any other

form? So, things are clear: they should first pay attention to their own nations and then answer your question.

France and Britain look for puppets to carry out their interests

Interviewer: In this quagmire, why do Britain and France delegate leadership to Saudi Arabia and Qatar? What do they hope to achieve?

President Assad: I also cannot answer on behalf of Britain or France, but I can give you the general impression here. I believe that France and Britain have an issue with the 'annoying' Syrian role in the region – as they see it. These countries, like the United States, are looking for puppets and dummies to do their bidding and serve their interests without question. We have consistently rejected this; we will always be independent and free. It seems as though France and Britain have not forgotten their colonial history and persist in attempting to manipulate the region albeit through proxies. Indeed, Britain and France can direct Saudi Arabia and Qatar on what they should do, but we must also not forget that the policies and economies of France and Britain are also dependent on petrodollars.

What happened in Syria was an opportunity for all these countries to get rid of Syria – this insubordinate state, and replace the president with a "yes man." This will never happen neither now nor in the future.

Interviewer: The European Union has not renewed the arms embargo imposed on Syria and yet it has not approved arming the opposition. What is your assessment of this step?

President Assad: Clearly there is a split within the European Union on this issue. I cannot state that the EU is supportive of the Syrian government; there are countries, especially Britain and France, who are particularly hostile to Syria. On the other hand, there are countries – Germany in particular, which are raising logical questions about the future consequences of arming the terrorists. Well firstly, that would perpetuate the destruction in Syria, forcing the Syrian people to pay an even heavier price. Secondly, by supplying arms, they are effectively arming terrorists, and the Europeans are well informed that these are terrorists groups. Some are repeating the American rhetoric of "good fighters and bad fighters," exactly as they did a few years ago with the "good Taliban and bad Taliban, good Al-Qaeda and bad Al-Qaeda." Today there is a new term of "good terrorists and bad terrorists" being promoted. Is this logical?

When terrorism prevails, it will spread towards Europe

They are aware that weapons sent to the region will end up in the hands of terrorists, which will have two consequences. First, Europe's back garden will become a hub for terrorism and chaos, which leads to deprivation and poverty; Europe will pay the price and forfeit an important market. Second, terrorism will not stop here – it will spread to your countries. It will export itself through illegal immigration or through the same terrorists who returned to their original countries after being indoctrinated and trained more potently. These pressing issues in my opinion are creating a considerable split or disagreement within the European Union; they may not like it, but they have no other choice than to cooperate with the Syrian government, even if they disagree with it.

Interviewer: Your Excellency has stated that if European countries were to send weapons to Syria, they would effectively be arming terrorists. Do you consider all armed militants as



terrorists?

President Assad: As a European or German citizen I will pose the following question: does your country allow you to carry arms, intimidate or kill innocent people, vandalise and loot? Any individual or group excluding the army and police who carries arms, kills people, threatens and intimidates public safety are by definition terrorists, this is a norm in every country. Regardless of their background, be it extremists, criminals or convicted felons, those who are carrying weapons in Syria are essentially committing these acts. Therefore, they are terrorists. We differentiate between terrorists and conventional opposition groups, since the latter is a political entity and has a political agenda. Killing and slaughtering is terrorism and plunges the country back years into regression.

Interviewer: So Mr President, you see the future as being against terrorism?

President Assad: This is the logical conclusion; however in Europe you have many illogical, unrealistic and irresponsible politicians who are applying their negative sentiments instead of their reason. Politics should not be fuelled by love or hatred, but by interests. As a German citizen, you should ask yourself what do you stand to gain from what is happening in our region? Basically, what is happening now is against your national interests, your genuine interest lies in fighting terrorism.

Interviewer: Some view Hezbollah as a terrorist organization; we know that it has fought alongside Syrian troops in al-Quseir. We have also heard that there are fighters from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard fighting with you. Do you really need these forces?

President Assad: The media is trying to portray Hezbollah as the main fighting force on the ground and the Syrian Army as weak and unable to achieve victory. In reality, over the last months we have achieved significant victories on the ground in different parts of Syria; in all of these victories, some of which were more important than al-Quseir, the Syrian army fought alone. None of this is highlighted in the media. One of the reasons for these victories is the National Defence Forces – local citizens fighting alongside the army to defend their communities and regions. Al-Quseir received more international attention because of statements by western officials projecting it as a strategic town, to the extent that even some United Nations officials claim to understand the situation in al-Quseir! There was a lot of exaggeration, but there were also a large number of arms and militants. These terrorists started attacking the bordering towns loyal to Hezbollah, which warranted their intervention alongside the Syrian army in order to restore stability.

The Syrian Army is a large army capable of accomplishing its missions across Syria, with the support of the local communities. If we were in need of such assistance, why not use these forces in the rural parts of Damascus, close to the capital? Damascus is certainly more important than al-Quseir, as is Aleppo and all the other major cities; it doesn't make any sense. But as I said at the beginning, the aim of this frenzy is to reflect an image of Hezbollah as the main fighting force and to provoke Western and International public opinion against Hezbollah.

Interviewer: How strong and large are the Hezbollah brigades currently in Syria?

President Assad: There are no brigades. They have sent fighters who have aided the Syrian army in cleaning areas on the Lebanese borders that were infiltrated by terrorists. They did not deploy forces into Syria. As you are aware, Hezbollah forces are positioned towards

Israel and cannot depart Southern Lebanon. Additionally, if Hezbollah wanted to send fighters into Syria, how many could they send? A few hundred? The Syrian Army has deployed hundreds of thousands of troops across the country. Several hundred would make a difference in one area, but it would not conceivably constitute enough to tip the balance across all of Syria.

Interviewer: Mr President, Britain and France claim to have clear evidence that chemical weapons have been used. The White House has stated that it possess information to ascertain this claim, which consequently led to the death of 100 to 150 people in one year, in addition to that you have denied the UN investigators access to areas in Syria except for Aleppo. How do you explain the situation?

President Assad: Let's begin with the statement from the White House regarding the 150 casualties. Militarily speaking, it is a well-understood notion that during wars, conventional weapons can cause these number of deaths, or even higher, in a single day, not in a year. Weapons of mass destruction generally kill thousands of people at one given time; this high death toll is a primary reason for its use. It is counterintuitive to use chemical weapons to create a death toll that you could potentially reach by using conventional weapons.

America, France, Britain and some European officials claimed that we have used chemical weapons in a number of areas. Regardless of whether such weapons exist or not, we have never confirmed or denied the possession of these weapons.

Had they obtained a single strand of evidence that we had used chemical weapons, do you not think they would have made a song and dance about it to the whole world?, then where is the chain of custody that led them to a such result?

These allegations are ludicrous. The terrorist groups used chemical weapons in Aleppo; subsequently we sent an official letter to the United Nations requesting a formal investigation into the incident. Britain and France blocked this investigation because it would have proven the chemical attacks were carried out by terrorist groups and hence provided conclusive evidence that they (Britain and France) were lying. We invited them to investigate the incident, but instead they wanted the inspectors to have unconditional access to locations across Syria, parallel to what inspectors did in Iraq and delved into other unrelated issues. We are a sovereign state; we have an army and all matters considered classified will never be accessible neither to the UN, nor Britain, nor France. They will only be allowed access to investigate the incident that occurred in Aleppo.

Therefore, all the claims relating to the use of chemical weapons is an extension of the continuous American and Western fabrication of the actual situation in Syria. Its sole aim is to justify their policies to their public opinion and use the claim as a pretext for more military intervention and bloodshed in Syria.

Interviewer: The protests started in Syria peacefully before they turned into an armed struggle. Your critics claim that you could have dealt with the protests through political reforms, which makes you partly responsible for the destruction in Syria. What is your take on this?

President Assad: We started the reforms from the first days of the crisis and, perhaps even



to your surprise, they were initiated years before the crisis. We issued a number of new legislations, lifted the emergency law and even changed the constitution through a referendum. This is a well-known fact to the West; yet what the West refuses to see is that from the first weeks of the protests we had policemen killed, so how could such protests have been peaceful? How could those who claim that the protests were peaceful explain the death of these policemen in the first week? Could the chants of protesters actually kill a policeman?

From the beginning of the crisis, we have always reiterated that there were armed militants infiltrating protesters and shooting at the police. On other occasions, these armed militants were in areas close to the protests and shot at both protesters and police forces to lead each side into believing that they were shot at by the other. This was proven through investigations and confessions, which were publicised on a large scale in the media.

Interviewer: Mr President, it is reported that the Syrian Army has bombarded certain areas. Was there no other option?

President Assad: We are pursuing terrorists who repeatedly infiltrate populated areas. If we take Al-Qseir as an example, there was a western media frenzy claiming that there were 50,000 civilians, which is more than the town's original population. In fact, when the terrorists entered the area, the inhabitants consequently fled; when we entered we did not find civilians. Usually wherever the terrorists infiltrate, civilians flee and battles occur afterwards. The evidence clearly shows that most of the casualties in Syria are from the armed forces. Civilians mostly die in suicide bombings. They also die when terrorists enter an area, proceed to carry out executions and use them as human shields. The rest of the casualties are either foreign or Syrian terrorists.

Interviewer: After the momentum you have achieved in Al-Qseir, do you feel it is now time to extend a hand to the opposition and consider reconciliation?

President Assad: From day one we have extended a hand to all those who believe in dialogue; this position has not changed. At the start of the crisis, we held a national dialogue conference whilst simultaneously fighting terrorists. But when we talk about the opposition, we should not put them all into one basket; it is imperative to differentiate between terrorists and politicians. In Germany, you have an opposition but they are not armed. Opposition is a political act, and so when we refer to the opposition, we mean the politicians to whom we are always committed to dialogue, regardless of what happened in Al-Qseir.

As to national reconciliation, I do not think that it can be accurately applied to Syria. It implies a scenario of civil war, as was the case in Lebanon, or the conflict between black and white in South Africa. In our case it is about a national dialogue to determine a way out of the crisis and for the terrorists to put down their weapons. In any case, we are awaiting the Geneva conference, which essentially aims at the same political solution. However there are external impediments; Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, France and Britain, continue to exert all their efforts at sabotaging dialogue in order to prolong the Syrian crisis and prevent a political resolution.

Interviewer: How would you define the legitimate political opposition?

President Assad: Essentially, any opposition party that does not support terrorism, does not carry weapons, and has a clear political agenda. But opposition groups are also linked to

elections; their clout will depend on how well they fare in local administration elections and more importantly, in parliamentary elections. We are dealing with many groups who call themselves opposition, their success will be determined by two important questions: what is their popular base? And what is their political manifesto? We will then act accordingly.

Interviewer: Segments of the opposition claim that you have not taken steps to form a united front with them against foreign intervention. Is this true Mr President?

President Assad: On the contrary, in the national dialogue conference in 2011, there was an open invitation to all those who considered themselves in the opposition to come forward. Some chose to participate whilst others chose to boycott and blame us for not taking steps towards a solution. But we must ask ourselves, what do they mean by making advances towards them? What should we be offering? Ministerial positions in the government? The opposition in the current government has won hard-fought seats in parliament. When an opposition, made up of hundreds, does not have any seats in parliament how does one ascertain who deserves to be part of the government? We need clear criteria; it should not be haphazard.

To put it another way, the government is not owned by the President for him to bestow gifts upon others in the form of ministries. It requires national dialogue and a political process through which the electorate can choose among other things their government and the constitution.

Interviewer: What are your set criteria for dialogue between you and the opposition, could this include foreign-based opposition?

President Assad: We have no issues with autonomous opposition groups who serve a national agenda. With regards to the foreign-based opposition, we need to be very clear; its members live abroad and report to western foreign ministries and intelligence agencies. They are based outside their country and are in essence manipulated by the states that provide their flow of finance. They are best described as a “proxy opposition.” As far as we are concerned, genuine Syrian opposition means representing the Syrian people – not foreign countries, it means being based in Syria and sharing the burdens and concerns of the Syrian people. Such an opposition would inevitably be part of any political process.

Interviewer: Fighting terrorism has become the priority now. In reference to your recent interview most probably on Al-Manar television, you stated that if you were to engage in a dialogue, you would rather do so with the master than the slave. To what extent are you prepared for dialogue with these entities in the future once you have effectively fought terrorism?

President Assad: It is for this precise reason that we will attend the Geneva conference. I used the notion of the master and the slave to explain what we know will happen in reality. Negotiating with those who have no autonomy over their own decisions essentially means that you are in fact negotiating with the decision makers who dictate to them how to act, what to accept and what to reject. You will have seen on television recently footage of the French Ambassador to Syria giving the external opposition orders and insulting them, or the American Ambassador to Syria shouting and insulting them. Therefore in reality, we are negotiating with the United States, Britain, France and their regional instruments, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Those groups who call themselves external opposition are mere employees; hence the masters and the slaves.

We hope that the Geneva conference will push forward the dialogue process in Syria

Interviewer: What are your expectations from the conference? Will it be followed by progress or a continued stalemate?

President Assad: We hope that the Geneva conference will push forward the dialogue process in Syria especially since, earlier this year we presented a vision for a political solution based on the Geneva I communiqué. However, even though we will attend the conference with this understanding, we should be clear on the facts. First, the same countries I mentioned earlier that are supporting the terrorists in Syria have a vested interest in the talks failing. The logical question is: what is the relationship between the Geneva conference and terrorism on the ground? Simply, if the Geneva conference is successful – as is our hope, in preventing the smuggling of weapons and terrorists – there are over 29 different nationalities documented to be in Syria, then this would be a catalyst for resolving the Syrian crisis.

However if the smuggling of weapons and terrorists continues, there is no value for any political solution. We hope that the Geneva conference will make this its starting point; it is the single most important element in the Geneva talks, which would ultimately determine its success or failure.

Interviewer: If Geneva II fails, what are the consequences?

President Assad: The countries I mentioned previously would continue to support the terrorists. Failing to solve the Syrian crisis will make it spread to other countries and things will only get worse. Logically speaking therefore, all parties have a vested interest in its success. As to the external opposition, if Geneva succeeds they will lose their funding; if you don't have money and you don't have popular support, you end up with nothing.

Interviewer: Could Geneva II propose a government from different political entities?

President Assad: This is what we have suggested in our political initiative. We proposed the formation of an extended government from diverse political entities that would prepare for parliamentary elections; the winners of these elections would have a role in the future. This is an approach that we have been open to from the beginning.

Interviewer: Mr President, some of your critics claim that much blood has been shed in Syria; they blame the leadership and see it as an obstacle standing in the way of Syria's future. Would you consider stepping down in order to bring about a new Syria?

President Assad: The president has a mandate in accordance with the constitution; my current term ends in 2014. When the country is in a crisis, the president is expected to shoulder the burden of responsibility and resolve the situation, not abandon his duties and leave. I often use the analogy of a captain navigating a ship hit by a storm; just imagine the captain jumping ship and escaping in the lifeboat! If I decide to leave now, I would be committing treason. If on the other hand, the public decided I should step down, that would be another issue. And this can only be determined through elections or a referendum. As an example, in the previous referendum on the constitution, there was a 58% turnout – which is pretty good in the circumstances, and the constitution was approved by 89.4%.

The issue was never about the president, however they tried to project it as such in order to force the president to sell out to those countries backing the opposition, in order to install a

puppet president.

Interviewer: Mr President, you live with your family in Damascus. How much public support do you and your family enjoy?

President Assad: When numerous neighbouring and regional countries as well as the West are all opposing you, you couldn't possibly continue without popular public support. The Syrian people are highly aware of what is happening and have understood the dynamics of the crisis early on; hence their support for their government and their army.

Interviewer: Next year there will be presidential elections, how do you see these elections playing out?

President Assad: They will follow the new constitution, in other words multi-candidate elections. It will be a new experience, which we cannot predict at this point.

Interviewer: Mr President, what is your vision for Syria in the next five years?

President Assad: I reiterate that our biggest challenge is extremism. If we can fight it, with better education, new ideas and culture, then we can move towards a healthy democratic state. Democracy, as we see it in Syria, is not an objective in itself, but rather a means to an end – to stability and to prosperity. Legislations and constitutions are also only tools, necessary tools to develop and advance societies. However, for democracy to thrive, it needs to become a way of life – a part of our culture, and this cannot happen when so many social taboos are imposed by extremist ideologies.

In addition to this, there is of course the reconstruction process, reinvigorating our national industries and restoring and opening up our economy. We will continue to be open in Syria, continue to learn and benefit from the lessons of this crisis. One of these lessons is that ignorance is the worst enemy of societies and forms the basis for extremism; we hope that Europe has also learned from these lessons.

Interviewer: Mr President, thank you very much. I have been greatly influenced by your personality and your vision; I hope Europe and the West will benefit from this interview and look at you and your country differently.

President Assad: Thank you very much and welcome again to Syria.

Link to the original interview in German:

[Syriens Machthaber Assad im F.A.Z.-Gespräch „Europa wird den Preis für Waffenlieferungen zahlen“](#)

*Von Rainer Hermann, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 17 Juni 2013*

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