

President Bashar al-Assad's Interview on Syria's Chemical Weapons. Transcript

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[Fox News and SANA](#)

President Bashar al-Assad gave an interview to Fox News.

Following is the full text of the interview conducted on Tuesday by Former U.S. Congressman Dennis Kucinich and Journalist Greg Palkot:

Excerpt of the interview on the Issue of Terrorism [scroll down for complete transcript and video]

Fox News: Let us look five years into the future, what will Syria look like?

President Assad: We have so many challenges if we get rid of this conflict, of course, the shorter one is to get rid of the terrorists as I said, but the most important thing is their ideology. We have no doubt that the existence of terrorists from all over the world – extremist terrorists – have left so many side-effects within the hearts and minds of at least the young people. What would you expect from a child who tried to behead somebody with his hand! What would you expect from children that have been watching beheading and barbecuing heads and watching cannibals in Syria on the TV and the internet?! I am sure it has a lot of psychological and side-effects and bad effects on the society. So, we have to rehabilitate this generation to be open again as Syria used to be. Of course, I am talking about local focal that if we leave it, it is going to be like a ripple in the water that expands into the society, this is first. Second, we have to rebuild our infrastructure that has been destroyed recently, to rebuild our economy and, as I said, to have a new political system that suits the Syrian people and the economic system, and other accessories regarding main headlines.

Fox News: Mr. President, as a reporter, I just want to tell you what I see and I travel around the country. I have seen this crisis going on. Right now, looking as you do at your country with may be 60% or 70% of your territory out of your control, and may be 40% of your population out of your control; six million people are displaced; almost third of your country have been displaced by this war. We talk about the death toll and those who were injured. Do you see any way back, do you see any way that the people could again be behind you in totality? Do you see anything that you could do at this point to make up for these two and a half years of horror, bloody grinding war which this country had been put through?

President Assad: Today, after the majority of the people experienced the meaning of terrorism – I am talking about the country that used to be one of the safest countries in the world; we used to be number four on the international scale of safety – and after they directly experienced the extremism and terrorism, those people are supporting the government. So, they are behind the government. It does not matter if they are behind me or not. The most important thing is for the majority to be behind the institutions. Regarding the percentage you

put, of course it is not correct. Anyway, the army and police do not exist anywhere in Syria, and the problem now is not a war between two countries and two armies that if you say that I took that land and I liberated the other land and so on. It is about the infiltration of terrorists.

Even we liberate or get rid of terrorists in certain area, they will go to another area to destroy, kill and do their routine. The problem now is the infiltration of those terrorists into Syria and the most dangerous problem that we are facing is their ideology; this is more important than what percentage we have and what percentage they have. At the end, large numbers of them are foreigners not Syrians, and they will leave someday or they will be dead inside Syria but ideology will be the main worry of Syria and neighbouring countries, and this should be the worry of any country in the world, including the United States.

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TRANSCRIPT COMPLETE INTERVIEW

Fox News: Hello Mr. President, thank you very much for providing Fox News with this opportunity for an interview. I'm joined by my colleague, reporter Greg Palkot, and we're very interested in proceeding. As you know, there's been a number of breaking stories which we need to discuss with you. The UN has just released its chemical weapon report. My colleague Greg Palkot will be discussing that with you in a moment. I want to talk to you about other major developments regarding the chemical weapons plan, which has been agreed to by the US and the Russian government. Do you agree with this plan to secure and to eventually destroy the chemical weapons?

Syria joined the international agreement of preventing chemical WMDs

President Assad: Last week we joined the international agreement of preventing chemical WMDs, and part of this agreement, the main part, is to not to manufacture these armaments, not to store, and not to use, and of course not to distribute, and part of it is to get rid of those materials, the chemical materials. Of course, when we are part now of this agreement, we have to agree on that chapter.

Fox News: You have to agree on...?

President Assad: On getting rid of all these armaments, I mean to destroy them.

Fox News: Why do you agree now?

President Assad: No, actually it's not now. If you go back ten years ago, when we were a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 2003, we proposed to the United Nations, to the Security Council, a Syrian proposal to get rid of the WMDs from the Middle East, to have chemical-free zone or WMD-free zone in the Middle East. And actually, the United States opposed that proposal, so as conviction, we wanted to see our region free of WMDs, all kinds of WMDs because it's a very volatile region, it's always on the verge of anarchy and wars, so that's why we don't say that we agreed now.

Fox News: We know that President Obama and Secretary Kerry have said in the past that you were lying – that's their word, not mine – when you said that you didn't have any chemical

weapons. A few days ago, in an interview with Russia Channel 24 you admitted you had chemical weapon stockpiles. Now, I just want to make sure we're clear before we go forward: do you or do you not have chemical weapons?

President Assad: First of all, regarding what Obama and Kerry said, I dare them to say that we said "no" once. We never said it. We never said no, we never said yes, but we always say it's a classified issue, we don't have to discuss it, and if we want to talk about it, we say "if" and "if" means you may have it, you may not. So, this is a blatant lie.



Fox News: Okay, but can you tell us now? Do you have chemical weapons or don't you?

President Assad: Of course, when we joined the treaty last week, it means that we have, and we said that, so it's not secret anymore.

Fox News: So, as far as the American people, you will agree that you do have a stockpile of chemical weapons?

President Assad: That's why we joined the international agreement, in order to get rid of them.

Fox News: My former colleagues in Capitol Hill are sceptical about your agreement with this plan. They say it's just a stalling tactic. Is it?

President Assad: A stalling tactic? To join the agreement?

Fox News: That you're stalling right now for time, and that you really don't have any intention of going along with the plan. Are you stalling?

President Assad: When you join the agreement, you have a mechanism, and you have to obey this mechanism, and according to the history of Syria, we never made an agreement with any party in this world and we didn't fulfil what we have to do or our role in that agreement, never.

Fox News: So you would say that President Obama then can trust you to follow through?

President Assad: I don't think that President Obama should trust me; first, the Syrian people should trust me, not President Obama. Second, when you talk about agreements and the international relations, you have mechanisms, and those mechanisms should be based on objective criteria, so if you want to trust or not trust, watch this country, see if they obey those mechanisms and those rules or not. This is where you can trust them or not. It's not a personal relation.

Fox News: I understand. So, you're under a tight time deadline. Are you going to be able to provide the list that is part of the agreement, a list of chemical weapons?

President Assad: It is a part. You should provide a list of the arsenal you have to the organization of chemical weapons.

Fox News: And are you ready to open chemical weapons sites to international inspection?

President Assad: We didn't say that we are joining partially that agreement or that organization; we joined fully. We sent the letter, we sent the document, and you are committed to the full requirements of this agreement.

Fox News: Would you be ready to let our Fox News cameras have access to some of the chemical weapons sites so that the American people can see for themselves? Is that possible?

President Assad: In Syria we have institutions, we have rules, we have conditions, so we have to go back to these institutions to ask them for that request, and after they study the request, they can say yes or no, but it's not about the President to take that decision alone. So, we have institutions, and you can do that after this interview, you can ask for permission.



Fox News: Can you destroy these chemical weapons quickly, and if not, why not?

President Assad: I think it's a very complicated operation technically, and it needs a lot of money, some estimated about a billion for the Syrian stockpile. We're not experts in that regard, but that's the estimate that we've had recently. So, you have to ask the experts what do they mean by "quickly" because this has a certain schedule, it needs a year, maybe a little bit less or a little bit more. So, what do you mean by "quickly"?

Fox News: Since it's the United States that demanded you give up chemical weapons, would you be prepared to turn over your chemical weapons to the US government for the purposes of safely destroying those weapons?

President Assad: As I said, it needs a lot of money, it needs about one billion, and it's very detrimental to the environment. If the American administration is ready to pay this money and to take responsibility of bringing toxic materials to the United States, why don't they do it? But of course it is going to be in cooperation with a specified organization in the United Nations.

Fox News: But you're prepared to hand them over at some point for the safe destruction of them?

President Assad: It doesn't matter where. As I said, in the end, if you're going to destroy them, it doesn't matter where they go.

Fox News: Are there any conditions?

President Assad: No, we don't have any conditions. Send it anywhere. In the end, if they're going to be destroyed, they could be destroyed anywhere. As I said, it's very detrimental to the environment, so whichever country is ready to take risk of these materials let them take it.

Fox News: Do you have a security agreement with the Russian government that, if and when you give up your chemical weapons, that you, in fact, will be protected so that you're not vulnerable to attacks? Because we know there are other nations which gave up their weapons then they were attacked.

The Russian role, politically, was very efficient during the crisis in Syria

President Assad: You know, the Russian role, politically, was very efficient during the crisis in Syria, during the last two years and a half, and they vetoed three times in the Security Council, so actually they protected Syria politically. They don't have to have a security agreement with Syria regarding this. It's not only about the army and the war; it's about politics. So, I think they are doing their job without having this agreement.

Fox News: So, just so summarize, you do have chemical weapons, you're prepared to go along with the plan to destroy them, and that you're prepared to cooperate with the international community in that.

President Assad: Again, as I said, what you mentioned all are part of the international agreement, and when we agreed to join this agreement we wanted to fully cooperate with this agreement, not partially. I think this is very clear.

Fox News: Greg?

Fox News: Thank you, Dennis. Mr. President, this is so important, let me just follow up on just one or two points then move on. Again, no conditions; you will agree to this plan to destroy your chemical weapons. You had put conditions on this in the past, in the past week or so. No conditions?

President Assad: The only conditions that the agreement will entail, propose and provide. So, now we are going to discuss the details with the international organization, so I don't have all the details to discuss it with you now, and I'm not the expert; we have specialized people to discuss the details. But in general, as headlines, whenever we join an agreement, as Syria, we are always committed to those agreements.

Fox News: Your problem was that there was a threat of force coming from the United States, there's still discussion of the so-called Chapter Seven resolution being put forward to the UN which would include the possibility of force. Would that be a deal-breaker for you if that went forward?

President Assad: What is the deal-breaker?

Fox News: Chapter Seven resolution in the UN which allows bodies in the UN to use force if you're not complying.

President Assad: There's a misunderstanding that we agreed upon this agreement because of the American threat. Actually, if you go back before the G20, before the proposal of this Russian initiative, the American threat wasn't about handing over the chemical arsenal; it was about attacking Syria in order not to use the arsenal again. So, it's not about the threat. Syria never obeyed any threat. Actually, we responded to the Russian initiative and to our needs and to our conviction. So, whether they have Chapter Seven or don't have Chapter Seven, this is politics between the great countries.

Fox News: So that's irrelevant to you?

President Assad: No, no, irrelevant. We obeyed because we want to obey, we have completely different incentives.

Fox News: And again that timeframe which Dennis mentioned, one week to come up with a full account of your chemical weapons, November for the first inspectors to come in, mid 2014 for all your chemical weapons to be destroyed; that's an ambitious timetable even by expert standards, but you think that is doable?

President Assad: Yeah, but we have to discuss these details with the organization first, this is first. Second, the time is not our problem; it is the problem of the organization, how much time do they need to implement this agreement.

Fox News: You don't necessarily sign on to that time limit?

President Assad: No, no. The only thing we have to do is provide the information, and to make them accessible to our sites, which is not a problem. We can do it tomorrow, we don't have any problem.

Fox News: You could do it tomorrow?

President Assad: Yeah, of course. We don't have a problem. The problem is how fast they can be in getting rid of any chemical material, because this is a very complicated situation. It's not about will; it's about techniques. So, only experts can answer your question.

Fox News: Which leads to my last question on Dennis's topic and that's exactly what some people are saying, that this is just a ruse, just a game, because it is so difficult. Experts say it will be so difficult to get rid of these chemical weapons, especially in a war situation like this. This is indeed buying you a lot of time.

President Assad: Even if you don't have war, it is difficult. Even if you have all the requirements afforded by every party, it takes time to get rid of them.

Fox News: So you're saying this could take years?

President Assad: As I said we don't have experience in that regard, but some say it takes one year. I didn't say years. As I heard it takes about one year, maybe a little bit less, a little bit more. But at the end we have to see the experts, and they will tell us.

Fox News: Let's go on to the latest breaking news. There's a lot of breaking news in this region right now, and that's the just-released UN report on the chemical weapon attack last month in the outskirts of Damascus right now. According to this report, and this is the report you said you were waiting for. You said you didn't want to hear the US, you didn't want to hear the UK, you didn't want to hear France, you want the UN to speak, and they have spoken, and they have said and I quote "there's clear and convincing evidence that the nerve gas Sarin has been used", and they base this on environmental, chemical, medical samples, they say the killing happened on a relatively large scale, that killing included children. Do you agree with this assessment?

President Assad: They have the samples, and they're supposed to be objective. We didn't have any formal report, but the question is if I agree about the use of Sarin gas.

Fox News: No, do you agree with the assessment that a chemical weapon attack occurred on the outskirts of Damascus on August 21st?

President Assad: That's the information that we have, but information is different from evidence.

Fox News: It's different. You disagree with the UN report?

President Assad: No, no, I don't disagree. You have to wait till you have evidence. You can agree or disagree when you have evidence.

Fox News: They have the evidence. They've interviewed 40-50 people on the ground.

President Assad: Yeah, we have to discuss the evidence with them. We have to discuss it with them because they are coming back; they haven't finished their mission yet. They are going back, and we have to discuss it with them, we have to see the details, but we cannot disagree without having the opposite evidence. So, nobody said that it was not used, because in March, we invited the delegation to Syria because Sarin gas was used in March. We have the evidence that it was used in March in Aleppo. So, when I talk as an official, I can talk about the evidence that I have.

Fox News: Okay, but they put out a 38-page report; I mean it's been posted since yesterday. I don't know whether you've had a chance to look at it.

President Assad: No, not yet. We have to look at it, we have to discuss it before saying we agree or disagree. It's only yesterday evening.

Fox News: Let's go hypothetical then. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said that this is in fact a war crime, that it is despicable, and that it is a grave violation of international law. If that event happened as they say it did happen, would it be despicable, would it be a violation of international law?

President Assad: That is self-evident of course.

Fox News: Self-evident.

President Assad: Of course, that's self-evident, it is despicable, and it's a crime.

Fox News: Because I'm sure you've seen the videos that we have seen of the child gagging on the ground, of the people vomiting on the floor.

President Assad: Yeah, but no-one has verified the credibility of the videos and the pictures. No one verified them. The only verified things are the samples that the delegation went and took; samples of blood and other things from the soil and so on.

Fox News: Which is what they say they have.

President Assad: But you cannot build a report on videos if they are not verified, especially since we lived in a world of forgery for the last two years and a half regarding Syria. We have a lot of forgery on the internet.

Fox News: There's a last key element to this UN report, and while the UN inspectors did not lay blame, that is they did not place culpability for the attack, there are many experts interpreting this report, some that I've spoken to in the last 12 hours, they frankly say this attack looks firmly like an attack coming from your government, from the Syrian government. They point to a few things; they say it was a large amount of gas, Sarin gas, maybe as much as a ton. The rebels could not have had that. They said the type of rocket, an M-14 artillery at 300 millimetres never used by the rebels before, that they needed large vehicles to send these rockets up, the rebels don't have that, and maybe most importantly they point to the trajectory of the rockets. They say they were able to trace the rockets back from the impact point to where they came from, and in two different occasions, this is according to the UN, they say that the start point was Qasyoun Mountain, the headquarters of the republican guards. What do you say to that?

President Assad: Everything you mentioned is part of the report? All these points are part of

the report?

Fox News: These points are all part of the report. These are all facts.

President Assad: The report didn't mention anything regarding the republican guards or things like this.

Fox News: They said they gave the azimuth tracking of the trajectory, and people have extrapolated from the azimuth track that is where it was coming from, north-western Damascus.

President Assad: First of all, the Sarin gas is called kitchen gas, do you know why? Because anyone can make Sarin in his house.

Fox News: They said it is very high quality. Higher quality than even used in Iraq by Saddam Hussein, your neighbour at the time.

President Assad: First of all, any rebel can make Sarin. Second, we know that all those rebels are supported by governments, so any government that would have such chemical material can hand it over to those.

Fox News: The experts say that they have tracked nothing like this, a ton of Sarin gas, it is launchers, it is rockets, it's a whole fleet, which happens to be, from time to time, those kinds of armaments, those kinds of munitions, happen to be in your bases.

President Assad: This realistically cannot be possible. You cannot use the Sarin beside your troops, this is first. Second, you don't use WMD while you are advancing, you've not been defeated, and you're not retreating. The whole situation was in favour of the army. Third, we didn't use it when we had bigger problems last year. When they talk about any troops or any unit in the Syrian army that used this kind of weapon, this is false for one reason because chemical weapons can only be used by specialized units. It cannot be used by any other units like infantry or similar traditional units. So, all what you mentioned is not realistic and not true. Definitely, so far as government, we have evidence that the terrorist groups have used Sarin gas and those evidences have been handed over to the Russians. The Russian satellites, since the beginning of these allegations at the 21st of August, they said that they have information through their satellites that the rocket was launched from another area. So, why to ignore this point of view? So, the whole story doesn't even hold together. It's not realistic. In one word, we didn't use any chemical weapons in the Ghouta, because if you want to use it, you would harm your troops, you would have harmed tens of thousands of civilians living in Damascus.

Fox News: Just to conclude this portion, Mr. President, will you allow more investigation? Will you allow UN investigators to come in, maybe to further investigate this attack, as you say, other attacks? There's something like 14 different attacks where accusations are being made on both sides and even a UN team to decide on the culpability, the blame for this attack. You will allow those UN teams to come in?

President Assad: We invited them to come to Syria first, in March, and we've been asking them to come back to Syria to continue their investigations because we have more places to be investigated. The United States is the one who made pressure on them to leave recently before they finish their missions. When we invited the delegation, we wanted this delegation to have full authority to investigate everything, not only the use of the Sarin gas or the chemical weapons, but to investigate everything about who did it and how, but the United

States made pressure in order to keep it only about was it used or not. Why? Because, I think the United States administration thought that if they're going to investigate who and how, they're going to reach the conclusion that the rebels or the terrorists have used it, not vice versa.

Fox News: Thank you, Mr. President. Dennis?

Fox News: Thank you. Mr. President, one of the things that appear possible is that Syria's place as a secular state is at risk. Would you agree with that?

President Assad: Of course, when we have this kind of extremism and terrorism and violence, that will render the whole society into a more closed society, more ideologically fanatic, and that's what the extremists are doing.

Fox News: But what does it mean to have a secular state? I mean there are questions about whether or not your position is authoritarian, whether you believe in democratic values. What is the secular state mean to Syria?

President Assad: Secular state means to deal with its citizen regardless of their religion, sect and ethnicity, because Syria is a melting pot. We have tens of different cultures in Syria. If we don't have a secular state that reflects this secular society, Syria will disintegrate. So, that's what it means to have a secular society.

Fox News: One of the notions about this very serious conflict is that it's a civil war. Would you agree with that characterization that you're involved in a civil war?

President Assad: No, civil war should start from within the society. Civil war needs clear lines, geographical lines, social lines and sectarian lines, but we don't have these lines in Syria. Civil war doesn't mean to have 80 or 83 nationalities coming to fight within your countries supported by foreign countries. What we have is not a civil war; what we have is a war, but it's a new kind of war.

Fox News: So, you're blaming outside interests for the acceleration of war. Now, there's just some statistics that have come out from IHS James. They're a defence analyst group. They estimate the opposition as a hundred thousand, 30,000 of which are hard-line Islamists sympathetic to the 10,000 Al Qaeda-inspired Jihadists. Are any of these Syrians? Are they all outsiders? Where are they getting their money?

President Assad: First of all, no-one has these precise numbers. This is exaggeration, because most of the Jihadists, when they come to Syria, don't come through countries or organizations. They just come by plane to neighbouring countries and they cross the border like any other one, and they just want to come to Syria for the Jihad with the other Jihadists. So nobody has these numbers. We know that we have tens of thousands of Jihadists, but we are on the ground, we live in this country. What I can tell you is 80, and some say 90 – it is difficult to be precise, you don't have clear and precise data – 80 to 90% of the rebels or terrorists on the ground are Al Qaeda and their offshoots.

Fox News: These are the rebels? You're not maintaining that all of your opponents are Jihadists, are you?

President Assad: No, not all of them. Of course we have many other different groups, but they are small, they are becoming a minority. At the very beginning, the Jihadists were the

minority. In the end of 2012, and during this year they became the majority with the flow of tens of thousands from different countries.

Fox News: Where are they getting their money from? Can you tell us right now?

President Assad: Mainly from donations.

Fox News: But donations from where? Can you name nations that are donating?

President Assad: From everywhere in the Islamic world. They mainly come from individuals, not from countries. We don't know if some countries support them directly, we don't have any information. I have to be very precise, but mainly from donations from people who carry the same ideology in their minds.

Fox News: You mentioned before that some figures that are given are exaggeration. Can you tell us now how many Syrians have died in this conflict?

President Assad: We have tens of thousands of Syrians that have died, mainly because of the terrorist attacks, assassinations, and suicide bombers, the majority.

Fox News: And how many are your government's soldiers?

President Assad: More than 15,000.

Fox News: And how many are insurgents or Jihadists?

President Assad: We don't have numbers, because we cannot count them.

Fox News: But there are innocent people being killed in this. And the reports are that your government has bombed villages in which innocent people are killed. What about them, Mr. President?

President al-Assad: No wise government in the world would kill its own people

President Assad: The majority of the innocent people have been killed by the terrorists, not by the government. No wise government in the world would kill its own people. How can you withstand if you kill your own people for two years and a half, while the West is against you, many of the regional countries are against you, and your people are against you while you kill them? Is it possible? Is it realistic?!

Fox News: So you're saying you're not killing your own people, but your forces have launched attacks on villages where your own people have been killed.

President Assad: No, actually what you're talking about is when the terrorists infiltrate residential areas in villages and sometimes in the suburbs of the cities, and within large cities, and the army has to go there to get rid of those terrorists. The army should defend the civilians, not the opposite. You cannot leave the terrorists free, killing the people, assassinating the people, beheading the people and eating their hearts. When we go to defend them, you say you are killing your own people! You don't, but in every war, you have casualties. This is war. You don't have clean war, you don't have soft war, and you don't have good war.

Fox News: The international community reports that Syrian rebel forces opposed to you are

equally if not more worried now about Jihadist fighters than they were previously by your government. Now, in this new development, is there an opening for you to achieve a rapprochement with your Syrian opponents?

President Assad: Yeah, here we have to differentiate between what you call opposition and the terrorists. Opposition is a political term. When you oppose somebody, like in your country and any other country in the world, you have your own program, your own vision, you have your own grassroots, and you go and propose whatever you want regarding the political system or anything else, and you can change that system if you oppose the other party. Opposition doesn't mean to carry weapons, kill innocent people, destroy school and infrastructure, and behead. What's the relation between opposition and beheading?

Fox News: Well, let me then, as a follow-up, ask you about diplomacy. What diplomatic moves are you prepared to make as confidence-building measures towards peace in your country?

President Assad: Any diplomatic move without having stability and getting rid of the terrorists is going to be just an illusion. Any diplomatic move should start with stopping the flow of the terrorists, the logistical support of those terrorists, the armament support and the money support. Then, you have a full plan, the Syrians could sit on the table, discuss the future of Syria, the political system, the constitution and everything.

Fox News: Would that future include negotiations with the Syrian opposition?

President Assad: Exactly, that doesn't mean negotiating with the terrorists.

Fox News: I understand. Now, but does it mean that you're ready for, let's say, a program of reconciliation with those who have opposed you? Are you ready for that?

President Assad: Of course, we announced it at the beginning of this year. We said we are ready to discuss with any political party inside and outside Syria.

Fox News: Let's take this down the road into next year. Would you be prepared to offer amnesty to all the Syrians who opposed your government?

President Assad: They didn't breach the law, so if they oppose the government, they can come to Syria without amnesty. Amnesty should only be offered to anyone who violates or breaches the Syrian law. If you oppose it, it is not a crime.

Fox News: Do you believe in amnesty as a path towards peace?

President Assad: That depends on to whom; if it's to whom stained their hands with Syrian blood, it could be as part of a national reconciliation.

Fox News: Would that include reparations to the families of those who were killed?

President Assad: It's not the President who should put all these details. I think the Syrian meeting of every faction or all the parties that will define all these details.

Fox News: What would you say, Mr. President, to the millions of Syrians who are now refugees, as you move towards the peace process? What would you do to say "please come home?"

President Assad: Of course we want them to come back to their villages, to their cities, to their

houses, to their homes, we want them to. But we have to help them with getting rid of the terrorists, because the majority of those refugees left because of the terrorists, not because of the government. Actually, we have refugees within Syria that are being helped by the government.

Fox News: Let me ask you this, have you spoken to President Obama?

President Assad: Never.

Fox News: Have you ever spoken to him?

President Assad: No.

Fox News: Are you interested in speaking to our President?

President Assad: That depends on the content. (Laughing) It's not a chat.

Fox News: If you want to send him a message right now, what would you say to him?

President Assad: Listen to your people; follow the common sense of your people. That's enough.

Fox News: And Pope Francis instructed the international community to lay aside the futile pursuit of a military solution. Do you believe the Pope's advice is valid, for your government as well as other countries?

President Assad: Of course, we invited every militant in Syria to give up armament, and offered amnesty to whoever laid down his armament and wants to go back to his normal life as a Syrian citizen. Of course we believe in that.

Fox News: Thank you, now before I give this back to my colleague, I want to ask you a question that's been bothering me and perhaps other Americans. Not everyone who's watching this interview today knows that you're a doctor, you're an MD. You've done this before you were President. As you know, doctors take an oath never to do harm to anyone. That's a direct quote from the Hippocratic Oath. Does a doctor give that up when he takes political office?

President Assad: First of all, doctors take the right decision to protect the life of the patient, so you cannot say they don't do harm physically because sometimes they have to extract the bad member that could kill the patient. You could extract an eye, a leg and so on, but you don't say that he's a bad doctor. It is still a humanitarian job whatever they do; the same for politicians but in a larger scale. A doctor deals with one patient while the politician should with the public, with millions or tens of millions and so on. So, the question is whether your decision should help the life of the Syrians or not in such a situation. Nobody likes the violence, we are against the violence. But what will you do when the terrorists attack your country and kill the people? Will you say that I'm against violence or you defend? You have an army, you have police, they have to do their job, this is the constitution, and this is the role of any government. What did you do in Los Angeles in the 90s when you had rebels? Didn't you send your army? You did. So this is the mission of the government. The most important thing is, when you take the decision, whether it harms or not, it should help the majority of the people. It is better that you take the decision that could help everyone, but sometimes, in certain circumstances, in difficult circumstances, you cannot, so you have to take the less harmful

decision.

Fox News: Thank you, Mr. President. Greg?

Fox News: Mr. President, our time is limited and I want to briefly go back in time a little bit. I was here in 2000 for the funeral of your father. You assumed the position of President, and at that time some people had real hopes for you as a reformer, to change things, to bring more democracy to this country. In fact, however, critics and analysts say you pulled back to the point where now you are branded other things; you're branded "dictator" and much, much worse. How does that make you feel when people say you lost the plot, that is, you lost the trail of what you might have done then, that might have avoided all of this now?

President Assad: First of all, if you want to talk about the hope, I would say I'm the hope of the Syrians, it doesn't matter if I'm the hope of any foreign person, whether he's official or any other one. So, all the terms that you've used in your question should be referred to the Syrians to see whether they agree upon these terms or not. At the end, it's not about the term, it's about the content. It doesn't matter what they say, whether he is dictator or reformer. Today, you have propaganda. Do they say the same word about their allies in the Gulf States? Do they talk about dictatorship in the Gulf States?

Fox News: We're talking about Syria.

Reform is not the job of a certain person, reform is a social process

President Assad: Yeah, I know, but I have the right to answer about the other states that are much far from democracy than the Syrian state. Going back to your question, the reform is not the job of a certain person in a country, whether the President or the government or the people. The President and the government can lead the reform, but the reform is a social process, and it's influenced by many different things including the external factors, whether you have a war, whether you have stability, whether you have better economic conditions, whether you have very bad ideologies coming from abroad. So, talking about the reform in the way that I presented at the very beginning and I still believe in the same concept, values and principles. You should have democracy that reflects our own traditions, but democracy is not a goal; it means to reach prosperity, and democracy based on accepting the other. When you have a closed ideology and many taboos that prevent you from accepting the other culture in your country, you are going backwards. It doesn't matter what the President does in that regard. Not the constitution, not the law, not any other process can make the democracy a real one, a realistic one in such a society. Only when the society makes this democracy, you can talk about it. It's a culture. So, I'm still a reformer, I still believe in the same values, but if you go back to the history of the past decades, the most complicated situations happening in our region, this is one of the reasons why the democracy – not in Syria – in the whole region, is going backwards. We are going farther from democracy, not closer.

Fox News: But again, to stay with your country, and stay with a little bit of recent history, move back just two and a half year ago, that was the first protest here in this country. People said that was still a sign that people were unhappy, your own Syrian people, about your move to democracy, and that was simply what they were asking for: more democracy, more reform. They weren't even asking for you to step down at the time. Critics will say you moved in too hard, too fast, with tanks, targeting protestors, torturing, etc. That is the critique of yours, and once again, missed another chance. How do you feel about that, two and a half years on?

President Assad: Let's ask a very simple question: if we want to oppress those people because we don't accept their requests, why did the President himself – I said in one of my speeches at the very beginning of the conflict, why did I say publically that those people have legitimate demands? This is first. Second, if we are going to use the force, why did we change the constitution? Why did we change the law? Why do we have now more than 15 new political parties in Syria? Why did we change so many laws that they asked for? Because we knew it wasn't about democracy. If they asked for democracy, how they did kill some of those people – I'm not generalizing – some demonstrators demonstrated for the reasons you mentioned, but some others they killed soldiers and killed policemen in the first week of the conflict. What is the relation between asking for democracy and killing and assassinating? So, we have to be very precise and differentiate between people who ask for democracy and terrorists. Part of those people who were opposing the government at the very beginning, today they support the government against the terrorists, because they asked for reform, but they didn't ask for terrorists. So, you're talking about two completely different situations between the beginning of the conflict and today. So, we're still moving forward in the path of democracy, and part of the solution that I just mentioned few minutes ago when we sit around the table, the Syrian people will say what is the best constitution, what is the best political system. Do they want it parliamentary, presidential, quasi-presidential, and so on. What laws do they want? Everything! So, it's not the president who is going to set. If the people want to set up their own system, this is democracy.

Fox News: Well, you bring up a point that leads to my next question. Some people will say that you have waged a war of attrition, that is, that you have weighted and ground people down, and some of those that felt, very peacefully, that they wanted a change here and democracy, now, after two and a half years of fighting, they're willing to give in a little bit, and at the outset you talked about terrorists coming inside, and now you've created a situation on the ground because of the long period for the terrorists to come here. My point is: you're not really changing people's minds; you're just forcing them into this box, this box where, over two and a half years on, 110,000 people dead, cities in ruins, and you're hoping that your people will surrender to the idea. I mean, is that really where you wanted to go with that idea?

President Assad: So the core of the idea, is that I created the atmosphere to invite terrorists to Syria?

Fox News: You held on long enough against the demands of the people who wanted peaceful demands.

President Assad: From the very beginning we accepted the demands.

Fox News: You accepted the demands?

President Assad: From the very beginning, before the terrorists or those foreigners coming to Syria. From the very beginning, in 2011, six days after the conflict, we said we are going to change, and we started the process of changing the constitution two or three months after the beginning. And we had the vote. I didn't change the constitution; there was a referendum, and the people voted in that referendum for this new constitution, in the beginning of 2012, in February, before the end of one year of the conflict. So, what you're saying is a far cry from reality, it's a completely different story, none of these things happened in Syria. This is about maybe another country. What happened in Syria, from the beginning we said if there are any demands, we are ready to change anything. What would the President do or how could he succeed if the people are against him? How can he succeed? Do you want to be the President

just for the sake of being President? That's not realistic, that's impossible.

Fox News: Did you back your tactics in this war? A year ago, we stood in Homs, one of your great cities, and we watched as your artillery which was lined out around the outskirts of the city pound again and again relentlessly the centre of the city. You say you're going for the enemy, you say you're going for the terrorists, but that, some would call it indiscriminate shelling, has left many, many civilians dead and, frankly, left that city, and many of your other great cities like Aleppo and others, in ruins. I mean, is this the way to go after, if you think that there are some terrorists out there, the terrorist enemies of your state?

President Assad: So, it's like if you say that when the terrorists infiltrate some area or attack a certain part of any city, the civilians would stay? That's impossible. Whenever the terrorists enter an area, the civilians would leave unless they use them as human shields, but in most of the cases the civilians would quit their area because of the terrorists, and that's why you have so many refugees. So, in most of the cases, the Syrian army attacked an area where there's no civilians living in it. In most cases, you can hardly find civilians with terrorists.

Fox News: But there are estimates, Mr. President, of the total of the 110,000 dead so far, is at least about 50,000 civilians. Are you saying that there were 50,000 human shields?

President Assad: First of all, what is the source of your information?

Fox News: That is a breakdown by analysts who look at these numbers. You think it is lower?

President Assad: Analysts living in the United States or Europe? You can only talk about facts; you cannot talk about estimations and allegations.

Fox News: 110,000 is a fact that everyone agrees with.

President Assad: Of course, I said there are tens of thousands of dead. I didn't say the exact number for one reason: because we have thousands of missing people. We cannot count them as dead till we know that they are dead. It's a war now. So, talking about the number, you have to be very precise. You're talking about the number as a spread sheet, without knowing that they have family, this is tragedy. We live with these people. This is a human tragedy. It's not about numbers; it's about every family in Syria lost dear ones, including my family. We lost members of family. We lost friends and that's why we're fighting terrorism. So, should we allow the terrorists to continue without fighting them, this number, if it's close to the real number, will be so many folds, will be millions, not hundreds of thousands.

Fox News: We don't want to be lost in numbers, because as you say, it's a human issue here. But again, you used the figure of 90% of the opposition, the rebels, are Al Qaeda. You stand by that? 90%?

President Assad: 80 to 90%, no one has the exact number. You don't have the exact number, because they are coming and flowing irregularly.

Fox News: You don't think that's too high? I mean, people are putting that lower, at least 50/50. One would say that it's at least 50/50.

President Assad: Which people? I'm sure not the Syrian people. No-one from Syria says they are 50/50. From abroad maybe, they have their own estimations. But at the end, it's our conflict, we live here, it's our own country. We can tell how much. But 50/50, how did they

count it?

Fox News: But again, just to sum up on what you've been saying, in one quote you said "the opposition has been manufactured from abroad." Do you really feel that?

President Assad: It's not a feeling, and it's not about how I feel. It's about what facts are presented in front of us. If they don't have Syrian grassroots – because we have opposition in Syria that has grassroots – Why to have opposition abroad, how do they live? Who gives them money? How are they financed? And we know that some of them belong to the United States, and Britain, and France, and Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Real opposition only belongs to the Syrian people. As long as it doesn't belong to this people, it's made by other country. It's self-evident.

Fox News: Are you minimizing the deaths by saying it's not 50,000, it is 40,000 or 30,000?

President Assad: You cannot minimize it because in every house you have pain today; in every house you have sadness. You cannot minimize, whether this number or higher number. It's a tragedy. We live in Syria. But we have to talk about the reasons. Who killed those? Not the government; the terrorists. We are defending our country. If we don't defend, this number will be many folds, that is what I meant.

Fox News: I just wanted to clarify that. Now, looking at a broader picture here; this appears to be a watershed moment for the world, from here in war-torn Syria, a new road map towards world peace may be developing, by starting with you relinquishing your chemical weapons, and then moving forward with a concrete plan for peace in Syria. Do you think that we are at that kind of a moment?

President Assad: Are you talking about the situation within Syria? There's no direct relation between the chemical issue and the conflict within Syria. It is completely different. So, if we want to move forward towards the political solution, we can, but that's not related to the chemical agreement.

Fox News: I understand, but the fact that this chemical issue has brought the world together, to finally pay attention; is this a moment you can build from?

President Assad: That depends to large extents on the countries that are supporting the terrorists in Syria.

Fox News: Before I go back to Greg; there are a lot countries now involved in this process; not just the US and Russia, but Iran, Israel, Turkey and even China. So much depends on Syria's cooperation with the Geneva process. Are you prepared to make sure that this opportunity doesn't fall apart?

President al-Assad: Syria supported Geneva process from the very beginning

President Assad: We supported the Geneva process from the very beginning. We cooperated with the UN envoys that came to Syria. Actually, the one who put obstacles wasn't Syria neither Russia nor China; it was the United States, for many different reasons. One of the main reasons is that they don't have real opposition abroad. They know this is one of their main problems, because the core of the Geneva conference is to be based on the will of the Syrian people, so whatever we agree upon in Geneva will be proposed to the Syrian people, and if you don't have grassroots, you cannot convince the Syrian people to move with you. This is

the American problem with their puppets, to be very clear and very frank.

Fox News: Thank you Mr President. Greg.

Fox News: Following up on that, Mr. President, others think indeed that there is a way forward here, that you are for the first time in this last two and a half years speaking seriously to the international community about a negotiation track, granted, just a narrow track of chemical weapons, and in fact, there could be the possibility of longer range talks. Could you be a part of that, or if your strong allies and, basically, the sponsor of this new wave of discussions and negotiations, Russia, feels that perhaps it would be more helpful not to have you in the position, what would be your stand? Are you in this to the end, or if it would facilitate things were you to step aside for the good of your country, would you do that as well?

President Assad: Being here or not being here, that position, as President, should be defined and decided by the Syrian people and by the ballot box, no-one else whether friend or opponent or anyone has word on that issue. If the Syrian people want you to be President, you have to stay. If they don't want you, you have to quit right away, with the conference or without a conference. That's self-evident, we don't discuss it, and I said it many time. So, no-one has to say that, and Russia never tried to interfere in the Syrian matters. There's mutual respect between Syria and Russia, and they never tried to involve themselves in those Syrian details. Only the American administration, their allies in Europe, and some of their puppets in the Arab world repeat these words, whether the President should leave, what the Syrian people should do, what kind of government; only this bloc interferes in the matters of a sovereign country.

Fox News: I know you said that there are elections scheduled here, at least, in 2014. You would stand for those, and you would see if the people should decide for or against you, and those could be conducted in this current atmosphere?

President Assad: You have to probe the mood of the people, the will and desire of the people at that time to see whether they want to run for presidency or not. If they don't see it that they are positive, you don't run. So, it is too early now because you have something new every day; it is too early to talk about it. I can make my decision before the elections.

Fox News: Mr. President, according to the New York Times President Obama said the greater goal with respect to Syria is to curb chemical weapons use and proliferation of chemical weapons worldwide. Do you believe this could be a chance to reset Syria's relations with the United States?

President Assad: That depends on the credibility of the administration; any administration, and that depends on the US administration.

Fox News: But you do not say that our president does not have credibility; I am asking you if this is an opportunity for you to reset relations with the United States?

President Assad: As I said, the relation depends on the credibility of the administration. We never looked at the United States as enemy; we never looked at the American people as enemy. We always like to have good relations with every country in the world and first of all the United States because it is the greatest country in the world. That is normal and self-evident. But that does not mean to say and to go in the direction that the United States wants us to go in. We have our interest, we have civilization and we have our will. They have to

accept and respect that. We do not have a problem with mutual respect. We want to have good relations, of course.

Fox News: Let me ask you some specifics with respect to going forward, are you going towards a kind of constitution for Syria that guarantee more freedom for the people of Syria? Will you really work for that?

President Assad: Our constitution today guarantees more freedom but that depends on the content of freedom. That's what the Syrian parties could discuss on the table. It is not the constitution of the president; it is not my vision or my own project. It should be a national project. So, the Syrians should define exactly what they want and I have to accept whatever they want.

Fox News: What, for example, do you think of free elections?

President Assad: Of course, we have free elections now in this constitution. We are going to have free election next year in May 2014.

Fox News: Is there anyone else who can be a president of Syria?

President Assad: Of course, anyone who wants to be now can be a president.

Fox News: So, you are not the only person who could do so?

President Assad: No, I would not be the only person.

Fox News: So, you believe that it is possible for Syria to have peaceful transition without you in power? Is that possible?

President Assad: What do mean be transition; transition of what?

Fox News: A transition towards a resolution of the conflict and the war, is that possible with you not being in power?

President Assad: If the Syrian people want me not to be in the transitional, permanent or normal or natural situation, this means it is going to be peaceful. Anything people do not want cannot be peaceful.

Fox News: Let us look five years into the future, what will Syria look like?

President Assad: We have so many challenges if we get rid of this conflict, of course, the shorter one is to get rid of the terrorists as I said, but the most important thing is their ideology. We have no doubt that the existence of terrorists from all over the world – extremist terrorists – have left so many side-effects within the hearts and minds of at least the young people. What would you expect from a child who tried to behead somebody with his hand! What would you expect from children that have been watching beheading and barbecuing heads and watching cannibals in Syria on the TV and the internet?! I am sure it has a lot of psychological and side-effects and bad effects on the society. So, we have to rehabilitate this generation to be open again as Syria used to be. Of course, I am talking about local focal that if we leave it, it is going to be like a ripple in the water that expands into the society, this is first. Second, we have to rebuild our infrastructure that has been destroyed recently, to rebuild our economy and, as I said, to have a new political system that suits the Syrian people

and the economic system, and other accessories regarding main headlines.

Fox News: Mr. President, as a reporter, I just want to tell you what I see and I travel around the country. I have seen this crisis going on. Right now, looking as you do at your country with may be 60% or 70% of your territory out of your control, and may be 40% of your population out of your control; six million people are displaced; almost third of your country have been displaced by this war. We talk about the death toll and those who were injured. Do you see any way back, do you see any way that the people could again be behind you in totality? Do you see anything that you could do at this point to make up for these two and a half years of horror, bloody grinding war which this country had been put through?

President Assad: Today, after the majority of the people experienced the meaning of terrorism – I am talking about the country that used to be one of the safest countries in the world; we used to be number four on the international scale of safety – and after they directly experienced the extremism and terrorism, those people are supporting the government. So, they are behind the government. It does not matter if they are behind me or not. The most important thing is for the majority to be behind the institutions. Regarding the percentage you put, of course it is not correct. Anyway, the army and police do not exist anywhere in Syria, and the problem now is not a war between two countries and two armies that if you say that I took that land and I liberated the other land and so on. It is about the infiltration of terrorists.

Even we liberate or get rid of terrorists in certain area, they will go to another area to destroy, kill and do their routine. The problem now is the infiltration of those terrorists into Syria and the most dangerous problem that we are facing is their ideology; this is more important than what percentage we have and what percentage they have. At the end, large numbers of them are foreigners not Syrians, and they will leave someday or they will be dead inside Syria but ideology will be the main worry of Syria and neighbouring countries, and this should be the worry of any country in the world, including the United States.

Fox News: Mr. President, Thank very much for this interview.

President Assad: Thank you for coming to Syria.

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