

Syria President al-Assad Interview: “New Anti-terrorism Coalition Must Succeed, Otherwise the Whole Region Will Be Destroyed”

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President Bashar al-Assad interview with Iran's Khabar TV

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Question 1: In the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful. Mr. President, thank you very much for accepting the invitation of the Television of the Islamic Republic of Iran to give this interview. Thank you very much.

There are many issues which need to be raised; and in this interview, I'll raise a number of them. I hope that I'll get candid and transparent answers from your Excellency. For about five years now, Syria has been suffering from a war waged by armed terrorist groups that inflicted tremendous damage on the Syrian people. According to available statistics, these damages are estimated at more than USD 200 billion to the infrastructure, about 250,000 casualties and about six to seven million displaced Syrian individuals. All this was the result of Western states' insistence on overthrowing the Syrian regime. They haven't succeeded in doing so. Now we can see a change in positions regarding the situation in Syria. The states which used to call for overthrowing the regime have started to declare that they accept President Assad's participation in an interim government. What's your reading of this change in positions, and why has it happened?

No foreign officials might decide Syria's future, political system or the individuals to govern

President Assad: In the beginning, I would like to welcome you in Damascus; and I'm glad to be talking to our Iranian brothers through your TV station. Concerning the changes that you see happening in the Western world, part of this is based on their statements to the media. For us in Syria, we cannot take these statements seriously, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, for many reasons. I believe that our Iranian brothers, including Iranian officials, share our view on this. In other words, both of us do not trust Western officials. As to their recent statements about a transitional period and other issues, I would like to be very clear: no foreign officials might decide the future of Syria, the future of Syria's political system or the individuals who should govern Syria. This is the Syrian people's decision. That's why these statements mean nothing to us.

But what is absolutely certain is that Western officials are in a state of confusion and their vision lacks clarity. At the same time, they are overwhelmed by a sense of failure concerning the plans they drew and didn't achieve their objectives. The only objective of

course is what you mentioned in your question, i.e. destroying Syria's infrastructure and causing a great deal of bloodshed. We have paid a heavy price, but their objectives were subjugating Syria completely and replacing one state with another. They aimed at replacing this state with a client state which implements the agendas dictated by foreign governments.

We cannot trust Western positions regardless of whether they were positive or negative

At the same time, the lies they propagated at the beginning of the events in Syria, in order to promote their positions to their audiences, have started to unravel. You cannot continue to lie to your people for years. You might do that for a limited period of time. Today, as a result of technological advances in the field of information, every citizen in every part of the world could know part of the truth. These parts have started to come together in the minds of their people, and they have found out that their governments have been lying to them concerning what has happened in Syria. They have also paid the price either through terrorist operations, the terrorism that started to affect those countries or through the waves of migrants coming to their countries, not only from Syria, but from different countries in the Middle East. All these factors started to effect a change, but I would like to stress once more that we cannot trust Western positions regardless of whether they were positive or negative.

Question 2: Mr. President, some countries, like France, used to have good relations with you, between 2008 and 2010. You enjoyed good relations with President Sarkozy. Why have such people moved to the enemies' side and started calling for overthrowing the Syrian regime?

President Assad: Because Sarkozy was charged by George Bush's administration to build contacts with Syria. Those contacts had a number of objectives which aimed in general at changing the political line of Syria. But there was an essential objective that the Americans wanted Sarkozy to achieve. At that time there was talk about how the 5+1 group should deal with Iran's nuclear file, specifically how to deal with nuclear materials or the radioactive materials which were enriched in your reactors in Iran. I was required to persuade Iranian officials to send these materials to Western countries to be enriched and returned to Iran, without any guarantees of course. That was impossible. It did not convince us, and the Iranian officials were not convinced.

When the West was unable to change Syrian policies, they found an opportunity at the beginning of the events of what is called the "Arab Spring", an opportunity to attack the states whose political line they didn't like. That is why the period you are talking about was concerned with appearances. In other words, the West opened up to Syria, but in fact that period was replete with pressure and blackmail. They haven't offered one single thing to Syria, neither politically, or economically, or in any other field.

Question 3: What you said was about France. How do you read the positions of other countries, like the UK and the USA?

President Assad: Their positions today?

Intervention: I mean that France wanted to intervene through the relationship that connects you with Iran. How did other countries, like the UK and the USA get involved in dialogue with you at that time?

Western countries have one master, which is the United States

President Assad: Yes. When we talk about these states, we are talking about an integrated system. We use the term "Western countries", but these Western countries have one master, which is the United States. All these countries behave in accordance with the dictates of the American maestro. Now, the statements of all these countries are similar. They say the same thing, and when they attack Syria, they use the same language. That is why when the United States gives the signal, these countries move in a certain direction, but there is usually a distribution of roles. At that time France was asked to play that role, considering the relatively good historical relations between France and Syria since independence. There is a big Syrian community in France, and there are economic, even military, and of course political relations. That is why the best option for them was to ask France, and not any other country. But ultimately, Western officials follow the orders of the American administration. This is a fact.

Question 4: Does that mean that you know specifically what the West wants from Syria?

President Assad: They want to change the state. They want to weaken Syria and create a number of weak statelets which can get busy solving their daily problems and internal disputes with no time for development or extending support to national causes, particularly the cause of Palestine, and at the same time ensuring Israel's security. These objectives are not new. They have always been there, but the instruments of dealing with them differ from time to time.

Question 5: It seems that some of these countries, working on behalf of the United States, have very close ties with the terrorists, and their policies are identical with those of the terrorist groups. What is the damage that such countries, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, can inflict on regional security and stability?

President Assad: There are, of course, different kinds of terrorism in our region, but they are all overshadowed by what is called Islamic terrorism because these terrorist groups or organizations have adopted Islam without having anything to do with Islam in reality. But this is the term being used now. These groups are promoting sedition among the different components in the region in general. This means that the greatest damage is the disintegration of societies in time. Now, fortunately, there is a great awareness in our society about the danger of sectarian sedition, and the necessity of uniting ranks, particularly as far as the Muslims are concerned. But with time, and with the continuation of sectarian incitement, creating gaps between the different components of society and producing a young generation brought up on the wrong ideas, that will be a very serious danger. This disintegration will become one day a de facto situation, and will lead to confrontations, conflicts and civil wars. This is very dangerous, and it is not exaggerated. It is a fact.

Question 6: Now, it has become common in international forums for states to announce that the Syrian crisis cannot be resolved except through a political solution. But Saudi Arabia and the Saud clan insist that you should step down from your position. What is your response to that?

Neither Saudi Arabia nor Turkey have right to talk about democracy

President Assad: What I said a short while ago: any talk about the political system or the

officials in this country is an internal Syrian affair. But if they are talking about democracy, the question begs itself: are the states you mentioned, especially Saudi Arabia, models of democracy, human rights or public participation? In fact, they are the worst and the most backward worldwide; and consequently they have no right to talk about this. As to Erdogan, he is responsible for creating chasms inside his own society, inside Turkey itself. Turkey was stable for many years, but with his divisive language, and his talk about sedition and discrimination between its different components, neither he nor Davutoglu are entitled to give advice to any country or any people in the world. This is the truth, simply and clearly.

Question 7: Mr. President, you said more than once that some states caused the current situation in Syria, and that foreign intervention played a significant role in creating the crisis. However, this crisis happened on your watch. To what extent have you played a role in creating this situation?

President Assad: When there is foreign intervention, it cannot make a significant negative impact unless there were gaps in this country or in that society. That is why we said from the very beginning that there are many things which need to be reformed in Syria. There are gaps; and we are all responsible for these gaps, as Syrians. Of course, the state has its share of responsibility in this regard, and the higher the official, the greater the responsibility.

This is in general terms, but when we come to the facts about what happened in Syria, we cannot deny the importance of the foreign factor. Money was paid to make people demonstrate under slogans related to the constitution, the laws or to reforms. From the very beginning we responded positively to all these proposals, despite the fact that we knew that a large part of it was unreal and not genuine. But it was merely a slogan. Nevertheless, and from the very beginning we called for a political dialogue among Syrian political forces. The result of that dialogue was that the constitution was changed, and the provisions which they claimed, or as some have claimed to be the cause of the crisis, have also been changed. New laws, providing for more freedoms, were passed, new parties established and the media law was changed. All the things which were demanded, or which were used as slogans in the demonstrations, were implemented.

Then, they started in the West and in the regional countries which are subject to the Western agendas, particularly Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, started talking about the issue of the president specifically. Why? Because they wanted to personalize the issue, in order to say that the whole problem in Syria is caused by one individual, and consequently he, and not the terrorists or the regional and Western states which seek to destabilize Syria, is responsible. That is why I say again that the issue of the presidency or other issues are the concern of the Syrian people. I, personally, have said, on more than one occasion that when the Syrian people decide that a certain individual should stay, he will stay; and when the Syrian people decide that he should go, he will go immediately. This issue cannot be subject to any discussion, but if the opinion of the West is contrary to that of the Syrian people, it has no value whatsoever. That is why we say that returning to dialogue and continuing the dialogue which is conducted from time to time is the solution for the Syrian crisis. If there are demands for reform, that shouldn't be the responsibility of the President but the responsibility of the state's institutions, because they define the shape of the reform. When there is a national issue, it should be shouldered by the institutions and should be carried out by these institutions, particularly elected ones, foremost among which is the People's Assembly.

Question 8: So, you believe that what happened in Syria has to do with institutions and not

the person of the president of the republic?

President Assad: Of course, because the president comes to power through institutions and leaves power through institutions. The president assumes power through the constitution and steps down through the constitution, the laws and the elections. Those are the mechanisms. A president cannot assume power through terrorism or step down as a result of terrorism. He does not assume power through chaos and does not step down because of chaos. He does not assume power through foreign intervention or under foreign cover as is the case in most countries in our region. As you know, this is a fact. When he comes to power through a foreign country, he continues in power through a decision of this foreign country and leaves power upon a decision of that country. This, however, is not the case neither in Syria nor in Iran, and will not be the case in the future.

Question 9: If we go back to the beginning of the crisis in March 2011, would you manage the crisis in the same way you did?

From the beginning we decided to fight terrorism, and today we are more committed to this principle

President Assad: In all things in our lives, there are always main titles and small details which constitute these titles. What changes often are the details and not the main titles, except in special cases. This crisis has been a rich lesson. Every national crisis is a very rich lesson to the officials, to the population and to society in general. Every day, you learn a new thing and see things from a different perspective. Sometimes you see things which you don't know even about yourself or the society you live in. That is why it doesn't make sense to say that the crisis is passing by and we will not learn new things from it and will not change accordingly. It is natural to have differences concerning the details, but not the main titles. The reason is that these are basic principles. For example, in the beginning we decided to have dialogue, to respond to dialogue and that the solution should be through dialogue. We still believe in this principle.

Concerning fighting terrorism, from the beginning it was clear to us that there were foreign hands behind it, and that it aimed at creating chaos and a terrorist environment to destabilize Syria. From the beginning we decided to fight terrorism, and today we are more committed to this principle. From the beginning we decided to be independent in solving our problems. We want help from our friends; and this is what Iran is offering, and what Russia is offering, together with other countries of the world. But no other country can replace us in solving our problems. I believe that we are more determined today to be committed to these principles; and the events have shown that what we used to say at the beginning of the crisis was right. When we come to the details and mechanisms, there is no doubt that the way we see them now is different from the way we saw them then.

Question 10: You said that the Syrian crisis should be resolved through Syrian-Syrian dialogue. Are you prepared, Mr. President, to sit at the same table with those armed groups fighting on the ground?

President Assad: It is self-evident that no state in the world conducts dialogue with terrorists, because terrorists, like other citizens, should be subject to the laws and should be brought to account. However, the state might conduct dialogue with terrorists in one case, when the objective of the dialogue is for the individuals who carried out terrorist acts to lay down their arms and embrace the state and the law. This has actually happened in Syria;

and we held dialogue with many groups within the framework of what we call reconciliations through which the state grants amnesty to those individuals, provided that they go back to their normal lives.

This mechanism or approach has achieved reasonable success in many regions, especially when you know that many of those who carried out terrorist acts did so probably because of certain conditions which pushed them in that direction and not necessarily because they have a genuine conviction or desire to do so. There are those who were deceived and those who were misled.

On the other hand, there are ideological terrorist groups which do not believe in dialogue. They reject dialogue and reject reconciliation. They believe that these killings and these acts of terrorism are part of religion and part of Islam. They believe that when they commit these acts and get killed, they have done a service to religion, and then go to heaven. It is impossible to conduct dialogue with these groups; they do not accept it and we do not accept it.

Question 11: What are the damages caused to security and stability in the region by what happened in Syria through the acts of these extremist Islamic movements which want to declare an Islamic State or an Islamic Emirate? And how should they be dealt with?

President Assad: These terrorist organizations, whether ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra or al- Qaeda are mere manifestations of a long and deep perversion in our region and our society. This perversion is at least five decades old; but it practically started two centuries ago with perverse interpretation of Islam. The main manifestation of this perversion is the Wahhabi movement which interpreted Islam in a perverted and, in most cases, contradictory manner with the import of Islam itself. So, these are mere manifestations.

Dealing with this short term damage, which is related to the terrorist acts, the destruction and killing they are carrying out, is not easy, but certainly possible. Dealing with it will constitute a victory for society, an important victory because it protects it against a disease and a real epidemic.

The big danger is for this treatment to take a long time and for these organizations to become entrenched within society. In that case you will be dealing with a very dangerous, cultural and intellectual situation. You will be before a new generation of ideological terrorists who believe in killing, takfir and discrimination as a basic method for building an Islamic State, as they believe. Then, the whole region will face a huge dilemma. This type of thought has no boundaries. It does not recognize political borders. It spreads, through contagion, very quickly in our region, and even in Europe, as we see today. That is why these organizations are extremely dangerous, but it is not enough to fight them as organizations. More importantly, we should fight the thought which led to the creation of these organizations, the states which promoted this type of thought and the institutions which provide funds for this thought through religious schools and foundations which promote extremism in the Islamic world.

Question 12: Mr. President, Western countries tried, in a symbolic move, to create an international coalition against terrorism. But this coalition does not seem to have succeeded. Why?

International coalition failed because the thief cannot be himself the policeman

President Assad: That is true, first because the thief cannot be himself the policeman who protects the city from thieves. Similarly, the state which supports terrorism cannot fight it. This is the truth about this coalition we see. That is why, and after more than a year, we do not see any results. On the contrary, we see that it has been counterproductive. Terrorism has expanded geographically, and the number of volunteers or recruits to these terrorist organizations has increased. Second, because these states which support terrorism from the beginning and which provide cover for it, cannot be serious. Take, for instance, the number of air strikes conducted by the sixty countries together in Syria and Iraq. They constitute only a fraction of what the Syrian air force is doing, despite the facts that we are a small country in the end, and the Syrian air force is not big. Nevertheless, we are conducting many folds the number of airstrikes carried out by those countries.

If the US really wanted to fight terrorism, it would have put pressure on terrorists' supporters

There is a more important indicator of their lack of seriousness. How can the United States and its allies fight terrorism or ISIS in Syria and Iraq while their closest allies in the government of Erdogan and Davutoglu are supporting terrorists and enabling them to cross the borders and bring weapons, money and volunteers through Turkey? Had the United States really wanted to fight terrorism, it would have put pressure on those countries. That is why I don't believe that this coalition will do anything except strike a balance between the existing forces in order to keep the fire alive and perpetuate the process of erosion in Syria and Iraq and later other countries of the region, so that we all remain weak for decades and maybe generations.

Question 13: The states which oppose your regime consider your presence in power a pretext for continuing the war. How do you respond to them, Mr. President?

President Assad: If I were a pretext for terrorism in Syria, what is the pretext for terrorism in Yemen. I'm not in Yemen. Who is the pretext for terrorism in Libya? Who is the pretext for terrorism in Iraq? In fact, if we take the example of ISIS, you will find that it did not emerge in Syria. It emerged in Iraq in 2006 when the Americans ran most things, if not everything, particularly the security issues in Iraq. It emerged there on their watch; and all ISIS leaders graduated from the prisons which used to be run by the United States, not the Iraqi government. This does not make any sense. Western officials in America and elsewhere acknowledge that they created this extremism through al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the beginning to fight the Soviet Union. ISIS is a by-product of al-Qaeda that came in a different form and in a different region. What they say does not have any value. The West always looks for some other party or person to hold them responsible because they will not say that it was them who supported terrorism and stood against the Syrian people and sought to destroy them together with their culture, heritage and all the basics of their lives.

Question 14: The Western coalition failed in its fight against terrorism. Now a new coalition has started to form in the region bringing together Iran, Russia, Iraq and Syria. Considering that the terrorists receive a lot of support from the outside, can this coalition succeed?

New anti-terrorism coalition must succeed, otherwise the whole region will be destroyed

President Assad: It must succeed; otherwise the whole region, not only one or two countries, will be destroyed. We have full confidence in this. Of course, what you said about the

support extended to these terrorist organizations by other countries will make the price of victory for these countries which are fighting terrorism very high indeed. If those countries joined the fight against terrorism in a serious and genuine manner, at least by stopping their support to terrorists, it will hasten the process of achieving the results which we all hope to see. But even if they didn't do that and continued to support terrorism, we as states have a vision and have expertise. All of us have suffered because of terrorism. Iran and Russia have suffered different kinds of terrorism. When these countries unite against terrorism and fight it militarily and in the areas of security and information, in addition to other aspects, this coalition will, no doubt, achieve real results on the ground, particularly that it enjoys international support from countries which do not have a direct role in these crises and in this region. This is with the exception of the West, which has always sought to support terrorism, colonization and stood against peoples' causes, most countries of the world feel the real danger of terrorism. There have been recently successive statements from countries which support this coalition. That is why I believe that this coalition has great chances of success.

Question 15: Mr. President, your country has suffered a great deal as a result of terrorism. What is your messages to the states which support terrorism?

The most important terrorist leaders in Syria and Iraq are Europeans

President Assad: We wanted to say to them that terrorism will get to you in the end, but it has actually reached them recently. When we used to say this a few years ago, they said that the Syrians are threatening. Today it is no longer a threat. Terrorism has arrived in different European countries in addition to the regional countries which support terrorism and have started to suffer the consequences. There are waves of immigrants from different countries and for causes related to terrorism and other causes which might push others to leave the region. It is known that a large number of terrorists have infiltrated those immigrants, and now they are in those European countries. More importantly, this region has always been accused of exporting terrorism and extremism to Europe.

The fact today is that the most important terrorist leaders in Syria and Iraq are Europeans. Probably the largest number of terrorists comes from Muslim countries, and particularly Arab countries, but most of the leaders come from Europe, and specifically from northern Europe which is relatively far from our region and has a rich and sophisticated society. Nevertheless, terrorism comes from those countries to our region. This means that terrorism knows no boundaries, and that terrorism cannot be used as a political card whenever we want. I always liken terrorism to a scorpion. You cannot put a scorpion in your pocket, because it will sting on the first opportunity. We are repeating this now. They have started to realize this fact, but they do not dare acknowledge it, because if they do, they will have to acknowledge that they were mistaken from the beginning. This is difficult for them domestically and will constitute political suicide. That is why we hope that they will be brave enough one day to acknowledge this error and to say that they acted against the interests of their people in the service of their electoral interests.

Question 16: Mr. President, in addition to the official sources you use in order to get informed about the condition on the fronts and the condition of the Syrian people, do you rely on other unofficial sources?

President Assad: Of course, in all aspects of official work, it is wrong for an official to rely only on reports and on the work of institutions. There are always errors in the work of institutions. There are always personal opinions and personal views which might be at odds

with reality because of a certain interest, or because of the lack of clarity. That is why the broader the network of relations and the sources of information, the closer to reality the vision is. That is why meetings with relevant individuals who have nothing to do with reports, with ordinary citizens, with any other person might add another aspect of the truth. I believe this is essential, even in times of peace, let alone in a state of war like the one we live in. You need this kind of communication in such situations more than you need it in ordinary times. Paper cannot give you a full picture of reality. This is a general rule for me.

Question 17: You follow foreign TV stations, don't you?

President Assad: Of course, I do that all the time. We should understand how our opponents think.

Intervention: Those media outlets broadcast negative news about Syria. How do you feel when you hear such negative news?

Western media and officials lost their credibility...what they say has no value or impact

President Assad: Since the early days of the crisis, this war has been a media and psychological war in the first place. This media war, particularly through Arabic TV stations, since only a few people here watch foreign TV stations, has made a great impact and has been able to distort reality for a large number of Syrians. But if we say that this was the case in the first year, things have started to become clearer gradually. So, these media outlets continue to make an impact in their countries, but they no longer have an impact in our countries, especially when it comes to foreign media outlets. I think that they are deceiving their people, not us. Second, when you have a national cause and you defend your country, you do not pay attention to what others say. You are concerned first and foremost with protecting your country, with achieving the popular interest, the national interest. Everything else has to take a second seat. Since these media outlets have lost their credibility, and since Western officials have no credibility to start with, what they say has no value or impact even from a psychological perspective. I read and listen to such things only to understand how they think, but really it no longer has any impact as far as I'm concerned.

Question 18: You heard the news about the immigrants and refugees who went to other countries. When you see images and videos of those refugees, how do you feel?

Western exploitation of refugee crisis is more painful than being a refugee

President Assad: This is painful of course. Syria has always been a safe haven for refugees throughout its history, since before the Ottoman Empire, and even throughout ancient history, because of its geographical location, the nature of its society and culture, and because of many other factors. But recently, at least throughout the last century, it hosted the Palestinians, the Lebanese, and before that the Armenians who fled to Syria because of the massacres perpetrated against them. There were also the massacres perpetrated against the Syrians during the days of the Ottoman State and in other junctures. We should not also forget the Iraqis after the American invasion in 2003. It is very painful for a Syrian to turn into a refugee; and perhaps this is a black spot in Syria's history which we will remember for decades and centuries. But what is more painful is the exploitation of the refugees' problems on the part of Western countries and Western media. They portray it as a humanitarian tragedy from which they feel pain, while in reality they are the greatest contributors to this condition through their support of terrorism and through the sanctions they imposed on Syria. Consequently, in many parts of Syria, and in many situations, the

basic requirements of life might not be available. So, terrorism, on the one hand, and these Western countries, on the other, are perpetrating the same act. They attack terrorists, but they are terrorists in their policies, whether by imposing sanctions or by supporting terrorism. This is another painful aspect of the refugees question; they fire at the Syrian refugees with one hand and give them food with the other. This is what the Europeans or the Westerners are doing.

Question 19: Mr. President, the Syrian refugee crisis has become a regional and international issue. Who, do you think, should address this issue? What do you expect of international organizations?

Every refugee is asking for countries to stop supporting terrorism

President Assad: Before talking about the services that should be provided to them. We should deal with the cause; why did these Syrian citizens emigrate? Most of those emigrants do not wish to live one single day outside their country, but there are certain circumstances which forced them to do so, on top of which are terrorism and the support of terrorism from outside Syria. So, if we ask anything of the international organizations or of the states – and I believe every refugee will ask for the same thing – It would be for them to stop supporting terrorism, and to put pressure on countries, especially Turkey, Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to stop sending terrorists to Syria and providing them with weapons and money. When they do that, there will be no problem. Solving the problem in Syria is not complicated at all. The Situation will be better, and the larger part of the refugees will come back to their country immediately, because regardless of the services provided to them in any country in the world or through whatever organization, it will not be the same as for this person to be in his country and environment and among his family and friends, neither materially nor morally.

Question 20: Mr. President, this is the second time I visit Syria this year, and I have talked to the Syrian people. They are concerned about how long this war might last. How do you, Mr. President, assess the situation in Syria? How long will this situation last?

We pin great hope on Putin's coalition and on international changes

President Assad: The war will continue as long as there are those who support terrorism, because we are not fighting terrorist groups inside Syria, we are fighting terrorist groups coming from all over the world with the support of the richest and the most powerful countries. We are a small country, but when you defend your country, you do not have a choice, and you cannot ask how and how long unless you have decided to give up on your country. In that case you as a citizen will not have a homeland. This is out of the question in Syria. That is why I believe that the new atmosphere which has started to emerge in the international arena – although once again I exclude the West – started to push towards finding a real solution to the Syrian crisis. It is true that this is proposed under the title of a political solution, but there cannot be a political solution while there are states supporting terrorism. This is one package. We hope that this new direction started to put pressure on the governments which support terrorism. And this has actually started to exert pressure on these states in order to reduce their support. The second cause of optimism is President Putin's initiative to form a coalition which includes Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria. All these steps have been the natural answer to this question. For how long this war will continue? This war will continue until either terrorism defeats the people or the people defeat terrorists. So, we pin great hope on this coalition now and on these international changes.

Question 21: Mr. President, what are your own proposals to find a solution to this crisis?

President Assad: Of course, we support any political move in parallel with fighting terrorism. But this needs a number of factors to succeed. When we talk about dialogue among the Syrians, this dialogue has two aspects: there is a dialogue on the future of Syria, and it includes all Syrians. Every Syrian has the right to express an opinion in this dialogue in order to know the shape of the Syria we want. Later, there are institutions, there is the public opinion, there is a referendum on a constitution which might be produced by this dialogue. Whatever the people decide, then, will be binding to us as a state and for me as an official. But there is also a dialogue which is specific to the crisis: how to put an end to terrorism and how to restore security. If we talk about political reform, it does not concern the terrorists, because terrorists do not fight for political reform. They fight because they receive money or because they have a perverted doctrine, or because they want to have a role in a state that becomes another state's client.

This dialogue requires an answer to the following questions: If we agree on something, what is our impact in reality? If we conducted a dialogue and reached the best possible ideas but without being able to implement them because the opposition we are conducting dialogue with has no influence on the terrorists, what do we get? On the other hand, shall we conduct dialogue with an opposition tied to foreign powers? From a national and patriotic perspective, this is unacceptable. You in Iran have political opposition, but you cannot call it an opposition if you knew, as Iranian citizens, that they receive money from a foreign country, or that they implement policies which are at odds with the interests of the Iranian people, and that they serve the interests of a foreign country. These factors do not exist so far. We have conducted dialogue with a number of groups, some of which were patriotic, we are not saying otherwise, but they told us that they have no influence on the terrorists. So, dialogue with them might be useful for the future of Syria, but not for solving the problem of terrorism. That is why the only option for us now is to destroy terrorism, because implementing any solution or any political ideas that might be agreed on will need a state of stability. Otherwise it has no value. Consequently, destroying terrorism is the foundation of any action in Syria. Political ideas can be implemented later.

Question 22: Your Excellency, Dr. Bashar Assad, you studied ophthalmology. How did you make the move to politics?

President Assad: This question cannot be raised when somebody enters the world of politics. It is legitimate when someone moves from medicine to engineering, let's say. But politics is not a sector, it's not economics or science. It is the outcome of all aspects of life: the economy, the military, security, people's culture and all daily problems. All these things create something called politics. Politics is not a profession or an academic specialization. It is your link to the life you live. And in this region the complicated details of politics affect our daily life, and one cannot be but interested in politics. It is part of our lives in this region as a result of circumstances we live under and which influence us continually. So, I haven't moved from one specialization to another or from one sector to another. I moved from place of work to another in the same public field.

Question 23: Going back to our earlier question about reforms in Syria, I read your biography and found that you made a good start with the reform process in 2000. Why haven't you continued with these reforms?

Developing the economic situation was the basic challenge to reforms since 2000

President Assad: No, Syria has proceeded in a continuous development process, but there were priorities. For us, the basic challenge was the economic situation, which has always suffered from different problems, even before the crisis, and even under the relatively good circumstances. That was our priority. When I used to meet the citizens – before the crisis – complaints were always about the living conditions and the conditions of the economy. Political reform was linked to a certain extent to political elites in certain sections of society. It did not include everyone. As I said, the comprehensive issue was living conditions. Our basic challenge was how to develop the economy in addition to facing outside pressure because of different political reasons. That was our priority as a state. But if you talk to a large number of people, you will hear different views about priorities. Every person has his own view depending on their culture and problems. Some people might not have economic problems, so their priorities become different. For us as a state, we used to take the most common problems for the population. The state was moving forward, probably not quickly, but carefully and steadily.

Question 24: Mr. President, you have repeatedly said that important decisions need to be taken inside Syria, and that the dialogue must be among the Syrians themselves, but now we see that there are negotiations and discussions outside Syria, for instance like the negotiations between America and Russia. There are those who say that they are interfering in drawing Syria's future. Does not that constitute a red line for you?

The Russians have never tried to impose anything on us

President Assad: We have old relations with the former Soviet Union and later with Russia, for more than six decades now. They have never tried to impose anything on us throughout the history of this relation, particularly during this crisis. The dialogue between Russia and America is not about interfering in Syria, the dialogue is happening between two sides: one which believes in interference in other states' affairs, i.e. America and the West, and the other seeks to prevent such an intervention, prevent hegemony and violation of Security Council's resolutions and UN Charter, i.e. Russia, the BRICS countries and a large number of other countries. It is not true that this dialogue is about intervention. They are not discussing the nature of the political system in Syria, or the identity of the next president, or how to solve the problem of terrorism in Syria. They are discussing the principle of the independence of the Syrian people's decisions. That is why I believe that this dialogue is in the interest of Syria and the interest of the peoples of the world. When there is a strong power with allies defending the independence of peoples, this is in the interest of all of us, in the interest of the sovereignty and independence, which we have been so proud of for decades.

Question 25: Mr. President, do you know the substance of the negotiations between the Russians and the Americans?

The Russians and Americans are continuing contacts between us and the Russians

President Assad: Yes, there are continuing contacts between us and the Russians. They talk to us about all the details concerning the Syrian situation, including anything raised with the Russians by any other country, or any discussion between them and those countries, whether they were allies, opponents or enemies. There is complete transparency in this relationship.

Question 26: Going back to the negotiations with the opposition, in your interview with the

Russian media you said that you are looking forward to Moscow 3. Now, there have been two discussions or meetings in Moscow and also in Geneva. I attended the Geneva meetings and saw that the opposition was divided and incongruent. In your opinion, can you reach a serious agreement with such an incongruent opposition?

We will reach no result if Geneva 3,4...or 10 continue with the same mechanism is in Geneva 1, 2

President Assad: No, if work is done using the same mechanisms, i.e. opposition groups formed in the West and in regional countries hostile to Syria which have been part of the bloodshed like Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Turkey, such an opposition cannot but implement the agendas of those countries. The simple question is: do these countries seek a solution for the situation in Syria or achieve stability? These countries are hostile to the Syrian people. They created the problem, and consequently, for them Geneva 1 and Geneva2 were merely a stage through which they wanted to achieve through politics what they could not achieve on the ground through terrorist acts. That is the objective.

Moscow conference's mechanism is different

If Geneva 3, 4, and 10 continue with the same mechanism, i.e. for us to talk to individuals who are agents of other countries, we will certainly not reach any result. This is self-evident. We reach a result only when we conduct a dialogue, as Syrians, with each other. Hence the importance of the Moscow conference, because its mechanism is different. It includes different groups from inside and outside Syria. There are individuals who are agents of foreign, Arab or regional countries, independent individuals and patriotic individuals. The Geneva conference was based on one provision of the Geneva communique, which is the interim governing body, which we categorically reject. They wanted the Geneva conference to discuss only this point and to impose this provision on the Syrian government, or the Syrian state or the Syrian people.

The Moscow conference discusses everything. It discusses the whole of the Geneva communique which includes clear provisions like Syria's independence, territorial integrity and the Syrian-Syrian dialogue. Everything in the Geneva communique contradicts the interim governing body provision. When we reach a consensus as Syrians in the Moscow conference, any other conference, or any other dialogue will be bound by the consensus that we will reach in Moscow. That is why we said that Moscow 3 is essential for the success of Geneva 3.

Question 27: There are many initiatives for solving the Syrian crisis, including the Russian initiative, the de Mistura initiative and the recent initiative made by the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. What is your assessment of this last initiative?

President Assad: When Mr. Zarif visited us a few months ago, the visit was on the background of proposing ideas for an Iranian initiative. Before the visit, the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced the basic principles for this initiative, principles with which we totally agree. But as you know, the success or failure of any political action is bound to be linked to the many details which might be included in such an action. When Mr. Zarif visited, we discussed with him all these details, and the meetings continued later between officials in both foreign ministries in order to come out with the final draft of this initiative. What has changed during this period was the announcement of President Putin's initiative, particularly in his speech in the Collective Security Treaty Organization's Collective Security Council in

which he identified basically his perception of the initiative, especially in relation to fighting terrorism.

Syrian-Iranian discussion continues, with Putin's initiative taken into account

Now, the discussion continues between us and our Iranian brothers at the foreign ministry in order to take into account this important change, so that it becomes not necessarily part of the Iranian initiative, but to make the initiative compatible with these important and positive changes on the Syrian arena, and probably on the Syrian-Iraqi arena. That is why I say that this initiative is very important and necessary, particularly after signing the Iranian nuclear deal, and with European officials starting to communicate with Iran. We believe that the Iranian role has become important for us in Syria through this initiative. Of course, when it is complete the details are integrated, it will be announced.

Question 28: We heard recently that a Chinese warship arrived in Lattakia and that a Russian warship also arrived in the Lattakia port on board of which there are two thousand Russian soldiers with advanced equipment. Military operations and airstrikes against terrorists have started. Why have they come now and got involved in the conflict, and what will the results be?

China does not take part militarily in fighting terrorism, It supports the Russian efforts

President Assad: Concerning China, it does not take part militarily in fighting terrorism. It has announced a clear position. It supports the Russian role and the Russian efforts in this regard, and supports President Putin's initiative concerning fighting terrorism, which includes the recent Russian presence in Syria and which has started operations recently. As to the Russian aircraft carrier, Russia has a presence in Syrian airports, and there is no need for an aircraft carrier. When operations started in Syria recently, the Russian Defense Ministry announced officially the start of these operations. So, everything is clear and public, and there is nothing hidden. Russia announced that these operations are in the form of airstrikes, but without any land operations as the media tried to depict. The military assistance comes exclusively within this framework.

Question 29: Mr. President, do the military personnel have a specific frame of reference in Syria?

Plans within Russian operation drawn by Syrian and Russian officers

President Assad: As for the timeframe, it has not been set yet. This depends on the development of events. But if you mean the plans and details of these plans, yes, the plans have been drawn in cooperation between Syrian and Russian officers a while ago when preparations started for the reception for Russian forces in Syria.

Question 30: Going back to cooperation relations between Iran, Hezbollah and Syria, these three parties enjoy strategic relations in the region. Do you believe that these relations can stand up to Zionist American plans?

Independence situation in the region wouldn't have been the same without Iran-Hezbollah-Syria relation

President Assad: I believe that without this relation, which you described as strategic, which dates back for decades, the situation in the region would not have been the same in terms

of independence. At least, there would not have been an independent state, or independent government and consequently an independent people. This axis distinguishes itself by defending its rights and adhering to independence. There is no doubt that it is capable of doing so, because it was able to do so in the past. God willing it will be able to defeat terrorism which is a new instrument for subjugating the region. It will certainly be able to do that. Once again, I say that there are no other options for this region if it wanted to be independent and to prosper and develop. What enabled you scientifically to make your achievements in the nuclear field was independence. Without independence, Iran would not have been able to achieve this. It would not have been allowed to reach this level. So, independence is the foundation of development, the foundation of prosperity in all development areas: economically, culturally, intellectually and in all other areas without any exception. So we should maintain this relationship, consolidate and develop it.

Question 31: What are the impacts which will be made by the nuclear agreement between Iran and the West on the political equations in the region in your opinion?

President Assad: It has a tremendous impact, not in the way some people see it in terms of Iran's technical, scientific or political capabilities. It has a great and extensive impact on all developing countries, because Iran is a developing country which has broken the knowledge blockade imposed on developing countries in order for the West to monopolize knowledge in certain areas, particularly that oil resources are being exhausted, and the future becoming dependent on nuclear energy.

If Iran is stronger, Syria will be stronger, and vice versa

All what has been said about this issue concerning the nuclear bomb was merely an illusion and fake marketing on the part of the West, because the real nuclear bombs they fear are the brains which now exist in Iran. This is the challenge. Iran is a developing country that provided a model. It emerged from a destructive war that lasted eight years, but the people were united and provided patriotic models. It provided a model of independence and that is why it achieved this result. This is the model which worries the West, and it is the model which concerns us as a developing country, as a country which maintains a strong relationship with us.

On the other hand, you and we are strategic allies; so if Iran is stronger, Syria will be stronger, and vice versa. From another perspective, had Iran abandoned its rights in the nuclear file, that concession would have been used as the new standard which will be applied to other countries, regardless of the legitimate international right of all countries to obtain nuclear energy. In the future, Syria or any other similar country might need nuclear energy. What Iran has won by its steadfastness and through the intelligence of its negotiators will be applied to all these other countries in the future. What you won, we have won as a developing country. That is why this is a very important aspect.

The final aspect is that related to the crisis. Acknowledging the real weight of Iran and its regional role will give it an opportunity to use its increasing influence to persuade the West that their policies are wrong. Of course, I do not pin, nor do you I believe, great hopes on the West changing its colonialist world view and moving in the right direction, but any effort made by Iran must have its impact. This impact, even if it were limited, would accumulate in time in order to mitigate the damage inflicted on our country by the colonialist West, practically now in relation to the situation in Syria and through your renewed relation with the European countries.

Question 32: Mr. President, as you know Iranian strategic relations have their roots in ancient history, and these relations have been strengthened and developed based on mutual regional interests. Can we have your take on the areas around which these mutual interests revolve?

President Assad: As I said a short while ago in the area of the independence of national decision making which covers all the other areas. When we are independent, we cooperate first politically, economically and militarily. Of course, we have been able to achieve the best in cooperating politically during the past three and a half decades, since the success of the Iranian Revolution. But I believe that we have not done enough economically, despite the conditions in which Syria lives. I believe this is an important area, and this is what I discussed with Iranian officials. The crisis itself might be an opportunity, particularly in light of the Western sanctions against Syria, for economic relations to develop between us and Iran. There are also military relations which are old and go back to the same period. They are advanced relations and we cooperate in detail with Iran on military issues. So, it is a comprehensive cooperation in all areas, but as I said, priority is given to the independence of decision-making in the region and preventing more countries from falling under Western hegemony.

Question 33: Mr. President, how do you see the role of his eminence, the Supreme Leader, in achieving stability in Syria and enabling the Syrian people to defend themselves against terrorism?

President Assad: First, the relationship between his eminence, the Supreme Leader, and me is a brotherly relationship despite the difference in years between us. It is a genuine brotherly relationship. He is possessed with special attributes in terms of clarity and adherence to principles. These are the things you look for in any politician; and I believe these are the attributes which are in harmony with Iranian policies and the Iranian people's adherence to principles. They provided a new model in the possibility for states to maintain their principles and interests at the same time based on principles and not on short term political tactics or opportunistic political tactics.

This is what his eminence, the Supreme Leader, provided during the Syrian crisis. I'm also talking about Iranian policies before that; because the current policy is a continuation of the policies of Imam Khomeini who also embodied the adherence to principles. This has been the shape of Iranian policies since the revolution, with one difference only: the fact that they developed continuously to meet the needs of the times. They are based on the same principles but they always have more developed manifestations. In fact Iran's support to Syria is based on a popular position now; but his eminence, the Supreme Leader, has an essential role through his directives to Iranian institutions; and we are familiar with the details of these directives in terms of the mechanisms of supporting the Syrian institutions in order to support Syria in her ferocious war against terrorism and the countries which support it.

Question 34: How do you define or explain to us this Iranian position in support of the Syrian people during this crisis?

The Iranians are principled and have been loyal to Syria

President Assad: It can be summarized in two words: First, what I said about adherence to principles. The Iranian people are principled. And the second word is loyalty, for the Iranian

people have been loyal to Syria which supported Iran when it went through war for eight years. That war had the same objectives which they want to achieve in Syria today, but in a different form, using different tools and under different international circumstances. The Iranian people and leadership have not forgotten Syria's position at that time. When most countries of the world tried impose sanctions against Iran, Syria was, I don't want to say the only state, but one of the few states which stood by Iran, but it was the clearest in its position.

Today, whenever we meet any Iranian individuals they talk about Syria's role at that time. Today, Iran pays back loyalty with loyalty, truthfulness and transparency. On the other hand, the Iranian people have a certain vision and a certain methodology which actually led you to the nuclear deal. When you see things clearly, enemies and opponents cannot deceive you. This vision for the region in general, including Syria, and including Iran's future and also the future of the region is very important for the stability which we seek in the coming decades.

These characteristics are very important, and I talked a short while ago about patriotism, about the patriotic model provided by the Iranian people. I cite a simple example: when they started their attempts to stir unrest in Iran, it was the first country in which they wanted to implement the regional model through the 2008 elections. I met a number of European officials who told me that the Iranian state will fall soon. Of course they say "regime" and not "state", because they do not recognize our states or peoples. I used to say no, these movements will fail. And Iran, the Iranian society, people and state were able to isolate this limited attempt, and all other attempts failed. Unfortunately, this succeeded in other countries of the region. These are patriotic models: the Iranians uniting around the nuclear file despite the different political currents in Iran. There are national issues around which you unite. I believe that all these attributes represent the Iranian people.

Question 35: Recently, there was a human disaster in Mina. The Saud clan government evaded stating the truth and tried not to uncover the facts. How do you describe this irresponsible Saudi behavior?

The Hajj is not a Saudi event, it is a Muslim and global event

President Assad: First of all, I offer my sincere condolences to the Iranian people for this human catastrophe. The chaos we saw in managing the Hajj rituals isn't the first. Far from the political aspect, there is a difference between having the holy sites within the sovereignty of a state and dealing with these sites as if they were their personal possession. This is a painful incident for many countries of the world which lost their citizens in the incident. At the same time the Saudis have prevented the Syrians from making the Hajj for the past four years for purely political reasons, which is very dangerous. That is why the issue of how to manage the Hajj and who manages it started to be discussed throughout the Muslim world. The Hajj is not a Saudi event, it is a Muslim and global event. I believe that this issue needs to be discussed seriously at the level of the Muslim states.

Question 36: Once again, we go back to internal Syrian affairs. The opposition calls for you to step down. If you believe that stepping down will restore security and stability to Syria, what would you do?

President Assad: This is decided only by the people. That is why I say to them: if you believe that you are right why don't you convince the Syrian people, and the Syrian people will

decide, through their institutions or the elections, who the president should be. There were elections last year. Where were you? What did you do? What is your impact on the street? Nothing. Their impact is nothing. Every person who lends his decisions to another country is despised by the Syrian people, and his influence will be zero. He becomes a mere talking head in the media. All those who believe in such a proposition should take part in the elections and try to prove their viewpoints. We have no objection. As for me personally, I say once again that if my departure is the solution, I will never hesitate to do that.

Question 37: This interview will be translated into a number of languages and many members of your opposition will watch this. What is your message to them?

The real opposition is that which belongs to the people

President Assad: The real opposition is that which belongs to the people. If any person is convinced that he opposes the government, we tell him to speak out for the concerns of the Syrian citizens. If you speak out for the concerns, aspirations and desires of this citizen and act in his best interest, he will consider you his representative, and you will have a role in your country whether others wanted that or not. No one can stand against the people. But don't call yourself a member of the opposition if you are an agent for another country. To be in opposition means to be patriotic. There is no unpatriotic opposition. Any unpatriotic individual is not a member of the opposition, he is a foreign agent.

Question 38: what is your message to the leaders of the countries which oppose you?

President Assad: I ask them to tell their people the truth one day. They always say the truth after they leave politics, because they act for their electoral interests. I tell them briefly: work for your national not electoral interests. Supporting terrorism is not only aimed against our peoples but against yours as well. This terrorism has started to bite back. What you have seen so far is only the beginning or "the tip of the iceberg".

Journalist: Thank you very much for availing us of this opportunity to talk with you. If there is any other points you want to make, please go ahead.

President Assad: Thank you for coming to Syria; and I would like to send, through you, to the brotherly Iranian people my best greetings and all my love. The main part of the history that will be written in Syria after victory, God willing, will be dedicated to Iran's support to Syria in all economic, political, and military fields. Thank you once more.

Journalist: Thank you very much, Mr. President.

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