

Bashar al-Assad Interview: “Eighty Countries Support the Terrorists in Syria”

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Global Research, February 21, 2016

[El Pais](#) 20 February 2016

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

Theme: [Terrorism](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

EL PAÍS interviews the Syrian leader at a crucial juncture in the conflict in the country

El Pais Introduction

Next month marks five years since the uprisings that plunged Syria into one of the bloodiest wars that can be remembered in the history of the Middle East. At least 260,000 people have died in the conflict, according to the United Nations. Five million have sought refuge abroad. Europe has taken in a million of them, in what is one of [the worst humanitarian crises](#) of the last century. Three thousand people have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean in the past year.

Bashar al-Assad, who became president of the country following the death of his father in 2000, soon lost control of a good part of the country in the conflict, as large cities such as Homs and Aleppo fell into the hands of the rebel militias. He has recently managed to recover these opposition strongholds and his army has launched an offensive to cut off the rebels' access and supply routes from Turkey, supported by Russian aerial bombardments, which have proved decisive since they began in September.

The Syrian president on Saturday received EL PAÍS in a Damascus residence amid heavy security measures. He gives this interview at a time when he is now talking about retaking the entire country and winning the war, just four days before peace talks are due to be renewed in Geneva and with it not yet known whether a ceasefire announced by the United States and Russia on February 12 will have an effect after the deadline to implement it expired on Friday without success. He says that his next mission is to pursue Islamic State (ISIS) in the heart of its operations, in its self-proclaimed capital in Raqqa.

The embargo is not on the Syrian government, it is against the Syrian people”

The Syrian president tells the refugees that they can return to the country without fear of reprisals and accuses the Islamist governments of Qatar and Turkey of having promoted the war in Syria – a stage on which, he admits, not only the interests of a state are being measured, but also those of an entire region, with Saudi Arabia and Iran as powers in the conflict.

Question. This week you have allowed humanitarian aid to go into seven besieged areas. Some claim there are at least 486,000 people living in those areas, some for even more than three years. Why did this happen so late in the conflict?

Answer. Actually, it hasn't happened recently; it's been there since the beginning of the crisis. We never placed an embargo on any region in Syria. There's a difference between an embargo and the army surrounding a certain area because of the militants, and that's natural in such a security case or military case. But the problem with those areas is that the militants themselves took the food and the basic needs of those people, the people there, and gave it to their militants or sold it to the people at very high prices. As a government, we never prevented any area from having assistance, including the areas under the control of ISIS, like Raqqa in the north that's been under their control, and before that the Al-Nusra Front [the local branch of Al Qaeda], for nearly three years now. We've been sending them all the salaries for the retired people, all the salaries for the employees today, and we send them vaccines for the children.

Q. So, food and salaries even still go into Raqqa and other ISIS strongholds?

A. Exactly. So, if we send it to Raqqa, which is under the control of ISIS, because we think as a government that we are responsible for every Syrian person, how can we not do it in other areas? That's not realistic, that's a contradiction. So, that's why I said it's not recently; we never stopped allowing the assistance or food.

Q. It will continue to happen?

A. Exactly.

Q. A truce was announced by Russia and the United States. Is the Syrian government willing to respect the cessation of military operations in Syria?

In wars you always have civilians and innocent people who are going to pay the price

A. Definitely, and we announced that we're ready, but it's not only about announcing, because maybe the other party will announce the same. It's about what you are going to do on the ground. A ceasefire is about - if you want to say ceasefire, it's not the correct word, because a ceasefire is between two armies or two countries - it's better to say cessation of hostility, or, let's say, stopping the operations. It's about, first of all, stopping the fire, but it's also about other complimentary and more important factors, preventing the terrorists from using the ceasefire or the cessation of hostility to improve their position. It's about preventing other countries, especially Turkey, from sending more recruits, more terrorists, more armaments, or any kind of logistical support to those terrorists. There is a United Nations resolution, or Security Council resolution, regarding this point that's not implemented. If we don't provide all these requirements for the ceasefire, it will be against the stability; it's going to make more chaos in Syria, it may lead to a de facto division of the country. That's why if we want to use the ceasefire, it is positive providing these factors.

Q. So, there will be still some fighting even though there's this ceasefire, at least against some of the armed groups?

A. Yes, of course, like ISIS, like Al-Nusra, and other organizations or terrorist groups that belong to Al Qaeda. Now, Syria and Russia have announced four names: Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam [Army of Islam] and Al-Nusra and ISIS.

Q. Your forces have surrounded Aleppo. It's one of the big strongholds of the opposition.

When do you expect to fully regain control of that city?

A. Actually, we are in the middle of the city, so, yes, a large part of the city is under the control of the government, and most of the inhabitants of the other parts emigrated from the militants-controlled area to the government-controlled area, so it's not about recapturing the city. Actually, it's about closing the roads between Turkey and between the terrorist groups. That is the aim of the battles in Aleppo now, and we succeeded recently, we could close the main roads. Of course, it's not a complete seal, let's say, between Aleppo and Turkey, but it makes the relation between Turkey and the terrorists much more difficult. That's why Turkey has been shelling the Kurds recently, for that reason.

Q. What comes after Aleppo? Is the Syrian Army even willing to go into Raqqa, the so-called capital of ISIS?

A. In principle, we should go everywhere, but now we are fighting on more than 10 fronts in Syria. Recently, we advanced towards Raqqa, but we're still far from it. So, as a principle, yes, we are moving to Raqqa and other areas, but the timing depends on the results of different battles now, so we cannot tell the timing exactly.



Bashar al-Assad during the interview in Damascus on Saturday. SYRIAN PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

Q. Russia has started an aggressive campaign of aerial bombings here in key opposition strongholds. This has been a turning point in the conflict. Some claim that you have the upper hand now. Do you think you could have made it without foreign help?

A. Definitely the Russian and the Iranian support were essential for our army to make this advancement. To say that we couldn't have made it is a hypothetical question, because it's an "if," so nobody knows the real answer of the "if." But we definitely need that help for a simple reason: because more than 80 countries supported those terrorists in different ways,

some of them directly with money, with logistical support, with armaments, with recruitments. Some other countries supported them politically, in different international forums. Syria is a small country. We could fight, but in the end, there's unlimited support and recruitment for those terrorists. You definitely need international support. But, again, this is a hypothetical question I cannot answer.

Q. Regarding these Russian aerial bombings, are you concerned about civilian casualties? On Monday, there was a bombing in a hospital and 50 people were killed. The United States has claimed that the Russians caused it.

A. Some other officials in the United States said they don't know who did it, that's what they said later. These contradictory statements are common in the United States, but no one has any proof about who did it and how it happened. But regarding the casualties, of course this is a problem in every war. Of course I feel very sad for every innocent civilian who dies in our conflict, but this is war. Every war is bad, you don't have a good war, because you always have civilians, and you have innocent people who are going to pay the price.

Q. So, how do you explain to your people, to the Syrians, that there is a foreign army carrying out operations here that can cause civilian casualties?

A. No, no. We don't have any evidence that the Russians attacked any civilian targets. They are very precise in their targets and they always attack, every day, the bases or the targets of the terrorists. Actually, it's the Americans who did this, who killed many civilians in the northeastern part of Syria, not the Russians. Not a single incident has happened regarding the civilians so far, because they don't attack in the cities; they attack mainly in the rural areas.

We expect Spain to convey our political point of view regarding our conflict to the EU

Q. Talking about foreign armies, how would you react if Turkey and Saudi Arabia follow through with their statements that they plan on sending troops here to allegedly fight the Islamic State?

A. As you said, allegedly. But if it happens, we're going to deal with them like we deal with the terrorists. We're going to defend our country. This is aggression. They don't have any right to interfere, politically or militarily, in Syria. This is a breach of international law, and as Syrian citizens, the only option we have is to fight and defend.

Q. Turkey has started bombing from their territory into Syria.

A. Exactly, and before that bombing, Turkey was sending the terrorists, it's the same, the same goal, the same effect, in different ways. So, Turkey has been involved in Syria since the very beginning.

Q. Saudi Arabia tried to unify the opposition in a conference in Riyadh. Some people linked to Al Qaeda were present in those meetings. Do you recognize any of the rebel groups as a legitimate party with whom you can negotiate in the whole opposition?

A. You mean the rebels who are fighting on the ground?

Q. Yes.

A. No. Legally and constitutionally, everyone who can hold machine guns against the people and against the government is a terrorist, in your country, in my country, in every country in the world. You cannot say they are legitimate. They could be legitimate when they give up their armaments and join the political process. This is the only way in every country to rebuild your country or to change whatever you want to change, whether the constitution or the laws or the government, everything, you can do it, but through political process, not through armaments.

Q. So, all those who are fighting, you deem them terrorists?

A. Unless they announce that they are ready to join the political process. Then we will not have any problem with them.

The refugees can come back without any action being taken against them by the government

Q. So those people who have been fighting, who take away their ideals or their intentions, if they lay down arms, can they come back?

A. We'll give them amnesty, and that happened, it has happened during the last two years, and it's accelerating recently. Many of them give up their arms and some of them have joined the Syrian Army now and they are fighting ISIS with the Syrian Army, and they get the support of the Syrian Army and the Russian airplanes.

Q. So if, as you just stated, those who have taken up arms against the government here are all terrorists, with whom are you exactly negotiating in Geneva?

A. I'm talking about the recent Geneva, Geneva III, that failed. It was supposed to be a mixture of the people who are trained in Saudi Arabia, a mixture of terrorists and extremists or their supporters, and some of them Al Qaeda, and the other, let's say, independent or other opposition who live outside or inside Syria. So, we can negotiate with those Syrians, with those patriotic Syrians who are related to their country, but we cannot negotiate with the terrorists - that's why it failed.

Q. What about those opposition activist leaders who have been imprisoned since before the conflict in 2011?

A. All of them left prison a long time ago, and most of them are in the opposition.

Q. All of them?

A. All of them. We don't have any of them. Before 2010, all of them left. Including some of them who were terrorists, but they were sentenced for a few years, let's say five or whatever, and when the crisis started, they joined the terrorist groups again.

Q. You have proof of that?

A. Yeah, of course. One of them was the one who was killed, Zahran Alloush; he was imprisoned for several years, because he was Al Qaeda-affiliated. When the crisis started, he formed his own terrorist group, and this group is one of those four that I mentioned that we consider terrorist groups.

I don't care about being in power. For me, if the Syrian people want me to be in

power, I will be

Q. Some claim that there are 35,000 foreign jihadists. Four thousand came from Europe. The Spanish government has stated that [there are some 300 who hold a Spanish passport](#). What will happen to these people if the Syrian Army captures them?

A. The Spanish?

Q. In general, the foreign jihadists.

A. First of all, we are dealing with them like any other terrorist. When you deal with them as terrorists on a legal basis, there's no distinguishing between the nationalities, but if you want to talk about, let's say, sending them to their countries, or extraditing them to their governments, it should be through relations between the institutions in the two countries.

Q. Regarding this, what do you think attracts so many foreigners into Syria right now?

A. Mainly the support they've been sent. It's active, not passive, it's actually active from the outside. Saudi Arabia is the main financier of those terrorists. They put them in airplanes, send them to Turkey, and through Turkey to Syria. The other attractive factor is the chaos; when you have chaos, this is very fertile soil for the terrorists. The third factor, the ideology, because they belong to Al Qaeda, this area, in our religious culture, in the Islamic culture, has a special place after Mecca and the other holy places and Jerusalem. They think that this is where they can come and create their own state. Of course, they're going to expand later to other places, but the thought is that they can come and fight and die for God and for Islam. For them, this is jihad.

Q. Regarding what would happen if the Syrian government claimed control of all the territory. Would you start a political process? Would you be willing to go to elections again?

A. The natural thing, first of all, is to form a government, a national unity government where every political party can join if they have the will. This government should prepare for the new constitution, because if you want to talk about the future of Syria, because if you want to discuss with different parties how to solve the problem, the internal problem - now I'm excluding the external support of terrorists - you need to discuss the constitution; you want to change it, you want to keep it, you want to change the whole political system, that depends on the constitution. Of course, the Syrian people should vote for that constitution. After the constitution, according to the new constitution, you should have early elections, I mean parliamentary elections. Some mention presidential elections. If the Syrian people or the different parties want to have elections, it will happen. Ultimately, solving the political aspect of the problem has nothing to do with my personal opinion.

"If Turkey or Saudi Arabia send troops, we're going to deal with them like we deal with the terrorists"

Q. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

A. The most important thing is how I see my country, because I'm part of my country. So, in 10 years, if I can save Syria as president - but that doesn't mean I'm still going to be president in 10 years. I'm just talking about my vision of the 10 years. If Syria is safe and sound, and I'm the one who saved his country - that's my job now, that's my duty. So that's how I see myself regarding the position, I'm talking about myself as a Syrian citizen.

Q. Would you still like to be in power in 10 years?

A. That's not my aim. I don't care about being in power. For me, if the Syrian people want me to be in power, I will be. If they don't want me, I can do nothing, I mean, I cannot help my country, so I have to leave right away.

Q. Let me read from a United Nations Human Rights Council report that was published on February 3, and it said "detainees held by the government were beaten to death or died as a result of injuries sustained due to torture." They say war crimes have also been committed. What do you have to say to this?

A. That's based on what the Qataris made about a year ago or more, when they forged a report made of unverified pictures of injured people and unverified sources and sent it to the United Nations, and this is part of the propaganda against Syria. That's the problem with the West and propaganda; they use unverified information to accuse Syria and to blame it and then to take action against it.

Q. The whole world was shocked by the image of little Alan Kurdi, the Syrian refugee, three years old, who was washed ashore dead on a Turkish beach. How did you feel when you saw that?

A. This is one of the saddest parts of the Syrian conflict; to have people leaving their country for different reasons. But beside the feeling, the question for us as officials that has been asked by the Syrian people: what are we going to do? What action has been taken either to allow those refugees to come back to their country or not to leave at all? You have two reasons here. The first one that we have to deal with, of course, is the terrorism, because those terrorists not only threaten people, but those terrorists deprive the people of the basic needs of their lives. The second reason is the embargo that has been implemented on Syria by the West, mainly the United States, of course, that caused more difficulties for the people to live here, especially in the health sector. So, we need to deal with these reasons in order to prevent this tragedy from being dragged on for a long time.

Q. You mentioned that some of those refugees are running away from ISIS, but some of them also claim that they are running away from the government, or from the campaigns of the government in some areas in Syria.

A. I can give you the contradicting facts that you can see while you are in Syria: that the majority of the people who live in the area controlled by the terrorists have emigrated to the area under the control of the government. So, if they want to flee from the government, why do they come to the government? This is not real. But at the same time, whenever there is a battle, shooting, a fight between the government and the terrorists in a certain area, it is natural for the majority of the population to leave that area to go to another area, but that doesn't mean they escaped from the government. Some of the families who emigrated to the government-controlled areas are the families of the fighters themselves.

We have advanced towards Raqqa, but we're still far from it

Q. Almost five million refugees have fled Syria according to international counts. One million have crossed into Europe. What guarantees do those people have that they can come back freely without fear of any reprisals?

A. No, of course they can come. It is their right to come back, unless somebody is a terrorist

or killer. Some of them, and I think a good number of them, are government supporters who didn't leave because they're afraid of the government, but, as I said, because of the standards of living that have deteriorated drastically during the last few years. So, of course they can come back without any action being taken against them by the government. We want people to come back to Syria.

Q. What can the Syrian government do to stop that flow of refugees that has caused so many people to drown in the Mediterranean Sea. What can be done?

A. As I said, it is not only about Syria, it's about the rest of the world. First of all, Europe should lift the embargo on the Syrian people; they don't have an embargo on the Syrian government, it is against the Syrian people. Second, Turkey should stop sending terrorists to Syria. Third, as a government, we have to fight the terrorists, definitely, and we have to keep the living moving forward by any means in order to allow the Syrians to stay in their country. This is the only way that we could bring those people back or convince them to come back to their country. And I'm sure the majority of them want to come back to Syria. But, as I said, in the end you need to have the basic or minimum requirements for living.

Q. When you came to power, you promised democratic reforms; those times came to be known as the Damascus Spring. Some people claim that if those reforms had come faster, a lot of lives would have been spared. Other people claim, mainly the opposition, and also the United States, that if you had stepped down, a lot of lives would have been saved. What do you have to say to that?

A. The question is: what is the relation between what you have mentioned and Qatar sending money and then sending armaments and supporting terrorists directly? What is the relation? What is the relation between that and the role of Turkey in supporting terrorists? What is the relation between that and the existence of ISIS and Al-Nusra coming to Syria? So, the link is not correct. If you want to change the president or the prime minister or any system in your country, in any other country, you only have the political process to move through. You cannot use armaments. It is not an excuse to have armaments to say that I want to change the system or I want democracy. Democracy wouldn't happen through armaments. And the experience of the United States in Iraq is still telling. The same in Yemen. President Saleh left because of the same allegations. What happened in Yemen? Is it better? That is not correct. There is no relation. We can achieve democracy through dialogue, but at the same time through the upgrading of the society towards the democracy, because democracy is not only the constitution or the president or laws and so on. These are tools or means to achieve it. But the real democracy, as a base, should be based on the society itself. How can we accept each other? This is a melting pot area; you have different ethnicities, different sects, different religions. How can they accept each other? When they accept each other, they can accept each other politically and this is where you can have real democracy. So, it is not about the president. They tried to personalize the problem just to show that it is a very simple problem: remove the president and everything will be fine. No one can accept it.

We can negotiate with the patriotic Syrians, but we cannot negotiate with the terrorists

Q. In these five years since the conflict started, do you think as you see the country now, with many heritage sites destroyed, a lot of lives lost, that you would have done anything differently?

A. In general, if we want to talk about the principles, from the very beginning we said that we're going to fight terrorism and we're going to make dialogue. We open dialogue with everyone except the terrorist groups. And we allowed the terrorists at the same time, we opened the door for them, if they want to lay down their armaments to go back to their normal life to be offered with full amnesty. So, that's the principle of the whole solution. Now, five years later, I cannot say that was proved to be wrong, and I do not think that we are going to change those principles. Implementing the policy is different sometimes, because it depends on different officials, different institutions, different people, individuals. Anyone could make mistakes, and that would happen. So, if you want to change something, if you can change those mistakes that have been made in different places, that's what I could have done, if I turn back the clock.

Q. So, from your perspective, from the very beginning you labeled those protests that were in Daraa and Damascus as terrorism, as infiltrated by foreign powers. How do you view those first demonstrations against the government?

A. At the very beginning, you had a mixture of demonstrators. First of all, Qatar paid those demonstrators in order to put them on Al Jazeera and then to convince the international public opinion that people are revolting against the president. The highest number of those were 140,000 demonstrators all over Syria, which is nothing, as a number, that's why we weren't worried. So, they infiltrated them with militants to shoot at the police and to shoot at the demonstrators, so you have more revolts. When they failed, they moved to send the tools to support the terrorists. But do we have demonstrators who demonstrated honestly, who wanted change? Of course we have, of course, but not all of them, you cannot say all of them, and I cannot say all of them are terrorists.

Q. You visited Spain twice. Both Presidents José María Aznar and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero visited Syria while in office. How have the relations been with Spain ever since?

A. Spain is against any adventurist solution in Syria. This is something we appreciate. They didn't support any military action against Syria, they said that's going to make it more complicated. They didn't talk about deposing the president or interfering in our national affairs. They said everything should happen through a political solution or political process. This is very good. But at the same time, Spain is part of the EU, of the European Union. That makes Spain restrained by the decision of that union. We expect Spain to play that role, to convey the same message and its political point of view regarding our conflict to the EU.

Q. And in Latin America, where have you had the most support, do you feel?

A. Generally, and that's strange, and maybe sometimes unfortunately, that those countries very far away from Syria have a much more realistic vision about what is happening in Syria than the Europeans, who are much closer. We are considered the backyard of Europe. I'm talking about the formal and official level, and about the popular level. They know much more, and they support Syria politically in every international forum, and they haven't changed their position since the very beginning of the crisis.

Q. Brazil has one of the biggest Syrian communities abroad. How have relations been with the government of Brazil?

A. We have natural relations with them, we have natural relations with Argentina, with Venezuela, with Cuba, with all those Latin countries we have normal relations. It hasn't been

affected by the crisis, and they understand more and more, and they support Syria more and more. This contradicts with the European position.

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