

Bashar Al Assad Interview on Political Islam, The Egyptian Crisis and Foreign Intervention

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“Syria still home for all. What is taking place in Egypt is the fall of so-called Political Islam”

President Bashar al-Assad gave an interview to Syrian al-Thawra daily. The following is the full text of the speech.

Interviewer: During this difficult time of crisis, it has often been said that Syria can accommodate everyone, but in reality it has not embraced all of its citizens. What has led us to this point?

President al-Assad: First of all, I would like to welcome you in my office. I am particularly pleased that this interview coincides with the 50th anniversary of Al-Thawra newspaper. This is a momentous occasion for every patriotic Syrian irrespective of their political affiliation.

We often view nations as a group of people occupying a certain territory; whereas in fact a nation is about a sense of belonging and of culture which both ultimately form a collective identity. With a strong sense of belonging, we can ensure a united country that includes everyone. When the colonial powers left Syria, it was not to liberate the country but to reoccupy it through other means.

One of their core strategies was to divide and conquer. By division, I do not mean redrawing national borders but rather fragmentation of identity, which is far more dangerous.

When we live in the same territory but have different identities, we are already a divided country because each group isolates itself from the rest. When this happens, it is right to say that the country does not accommodate everyone.

In this context colonialism has been successful in creating separatist groups that consider their ideologies and values as solely and legitimately representing the country and hence rejecting all other groups. This success has not happened overnight, but rather during several stages.

The first of which was the Omayyad dynasty, where identities were tampered with, chasms created and many common elements destroyed resulting in fragmentation and ultimately the collapse of the Omayyad State. The same also applies for the Abbasid caliphate in ancient history and the fall of Palestine in modern history.

The rifts we have witnessed in modern history have come with the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood and the negative role they have played after the independence of many Arab countries like Syria. They created the first split between Pan-Arabism and Islam, working

hard to form a country for Islamists and another for nationalists. These attempts continued when colonist powers in Lebanon attempted to create a country for Muslims and another for Christians. The implications of the Muslim Brotherhood have transpired, the most dangerous of which is the presence of Al Qaeda which was generously supported by the West on the back of the Islamic revolution in Iran. After this revolution, Iran emerged as a firm supporter of the Palestinian cause, the essence of Arab identity. They attempted to incite sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shiites and to damage the relationship between Arabs and Persians. After the 9/11 events and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, these rifts were extended between the takfiris and all other Muslim sects.

The more schism in a country, the less it is able to accommodate its entire people. On the contrary, Syria is still accommodating to all Syrians due to people's ability to grasp these realities and reject this strife hence preventing it from materializing. Syria remains for all Syrians as long as we can prevent these pockets of extremisms from spreading.

Interviewer: Mr President today is the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of Al-Thawra Newspaper. You first stated that what is happening in Syria is not a revolution; certainly you had a conceptual foundation behind these statements. Here let me reference the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, during his first meeting with the opposition delegation in Moscow when they introduced themselves as revolutionaries; he asked them, "If you are revolutionaries representing a revolution, why do you need the outside world?" There is a historical saying: no state in the world can endure a popular revolution. I personally entirely subscribe to this theory. What made you say that it was not a revolution from the inception?

President al-Assad: From a historical perspective, any genuine revolution is purely internal and cannot be linked externally by any means, as manifested by the Russian, French and even the Iranian revolutions. Real revolutions are intrinsic, spontaneous, and are led by intellectual and ideological elites. What occurred in Syria since the outset of the crisis was flagrant external interference. There were attempts to hide this, but it has become absolutely clear. This is evident by the fact that we continuously hear external extrinsic statements regarding what should and should not be done in Syria.

Secondly, the real revolution of 1963 - which your newspaper is named after - was a revolution that empowered the country, society and human values. It promoted science and knowledge by building thousands of schools, it brought light to the Urban and rural areas of Syria by building electricity lines and networks, it strengthened the economy by providing job opportunities according to competencies. It supported the wider foundations of society including farmers, labourers and skilled-workers. The revolution at the time built an army indoctrinated in national values that fought the fiercest of battles, it stood unwavering in those difficult circumstances and it won in the 1973 war. We are now perhaps enduring the most challenging circumstances in which the army has shown that its revolutionary foundations and ideological values are as strong as ever.

Revolutions are about building countries and societies, not about destroying them; so how can we call what is happening in Syria a revolution? Attempts to package the events on the ground as a part of a revolution have been futile from the beginning.

Interviewer: Mr President, do you not believe that there were some in the country, even a small minority, who believed in the idea of the revolution, and hence contributed to it and embraced it in the beginning?

President al-Assad: Exactly, and this leads us back to the question of identity. What you are depicting happened for one of two reasons, both of which bear extremism. Either because there are some who completely abandoned their identity and embraced a “Western Dream” even with all its flaws or there are those who went in exactly the opposite direction and abandoned their identity and embraced religious extremism, which is inherently more dangerous and potent. Both trends are inflammatory. Without a doubt there are numerous aspects of western civilization and advancements that we should benefit from, but to be dazzled by the West and to drop our own identity, this would just be another category of extremism.

Our original Arab identity represents the amalgamation of civilizations of thousands of years and is hence built on moderation in all aspects: social, cultural, political and religious. When this identity is being torn in any of the two directions I mentioned, the result will be these foci of extremism you mentioned. This is my greatest concern; extremism in following the West is as destructive to our identity as religious extremism and they both lead to turbulence, which is what we are witnessing in Syria and other countries. This is not exclusive to Syria, but perhaps the element of external interference in Syria was stronger than in other countries.

Interviewer: Nonetheless Mr President, do you agree that the concepts and forms of revolutions have changed significantly from previous examples such as the Russian or French Revolution? Is it not possible to consider what is happening in Syria a revolution according to different concepts? Is it necessary for all revolutions in history to follow the same methods and paths?

President al-Assad: Everything in the world changes however, there are fundamental human principles that should remain constant. Religions do not change, although they deal with change. Principles do not change, however mechanisms need to be adjusted to keep up with time.

If for the sake of argument we are to accept the notion that the concept of revolutions change, which would then make what is happening in Syria a revolution, we should then accept that the Israeli acts against Palestinians constitute an Israeli revolution against Palestinian oppression, or that the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan was a revolution. To accept the fact that conditions and circumstances are perpetuated or altered should not mean that principles are fundamentally undermined.

The West and all its propaganda have always attempted to realign the facts upside down to serve their agenda. Rights become wrongs and wrongs become rights that then legitimize their political practices. If they do that, it doesn’t mean that we should sleepwalk with them.

Interviewer: Despite this, Mr President, some outside Syria and even inside Syria have called it – and still do – a revolution. This is a real controversy that needs clarification.

President al-Assad: To correct your question, even the western media and statements by western officials hostile to Syria could not ignore that it was not a revolution. The term “revolution’s is no longer used. They have now shifted towards discussing terrorism, adopting the American notion of differentiating between ‘good terrorists’ and ‘bad terrorists.’ So if those hostile to Syria have been able to see that this is not a revolution, it is only natural that most Syrians would be able to see this too.

There are of course those who refuse to see the reality because it serves their own agendas. Some embrace the same doctrines as the terrorists – the takfiri extremist ideology, so it is expected that they would believe this to be a revolution. There are others who suffer from ignorance and lack of judgement, who see through their eyes yet have a mental blackout. These groups bear little significance and are gradually shrinking. In any case, we are not significantly concerned by external factors because the events are more relevant to those inside who directly influence the events. The Syrian people are the ones fighting this battle and they are the ones persevering.

Interviewer: With regards to the external factors, it is well known that there are foreign fighters in Syria, possibly up to tens of thousands according to Western estimates. Mr President, why has Syria turned into a land for Jihad, and how has that transpired in such a short period of time?

President al-Assad: Syria has not turned into a land for Jihad. Jihad usually denotes benevolence; it is about construction, development, defending the country and the messages advocated in religion relating to virtuousness, justice and equality. What is happening in Syria is the complete opposite to the concept of jihad; Syria has turned into a land for terrorism.

This is due to several reasons. Chaos is a fertile environment for terrorism to breed. When the state was weakened in Afghanistan, terrorism flourished. The same happened in Iraq after the invasion. As they attempted to weaken Syria, the ensuing chaos transformed into terrorism.

Additionally, there are countries supporting terrorism in Syria in order to erode its historic characteristics of strength and immunity. These characteristics have always been evident in the international arena through our stances and nationally through our culture and intellectual thought. This attempted erosion is targeting our national unity, our infrastructure, our economy and the services that the state has always provided. Those who are hostile to Syria would happily watch its destruction, even in the long run. Another reason for western countries to support terrorism in Syria is their belief that these terrorist groups, which have been a security threat to them for decades, can be killed in Syria, hence shifting the battleground away from their own countries and destroying Syria in the process.

Interviewer: However, Mr President, not all those fighting in Syria are foreign fighters. We have seen a Syrian eating the heart of another Syrian. What has driven us to this phase?

President al-Assad: Often when discussing the Syrian crisis, I start by defining it as a crisis of morals, before discussing extremism, takfiri ideology and external intervention. All of these could never conceivably penetrate our society if it was protected by strong morals. A moral crisis paves the way for foreign interference in our internal affairs, it paves the way for people to be controlled by money and hatred and it paves the way for mercenaries who have lost their national and patriotic principles. When you lose your moral compass, you lose your humanity and turn into another creature, not even into an animal. Animals do not eat their brothers' flesh out of hatred; they do so out of hunger. When you lose your morals and your principles, you lose the real value of religion. Religions came to reinforce humanity and cannot by any means be the pretext to behead humans and eat human flesh. When we lose the righteousness of religion, as is happening with some of these groups, religion becomes a mere façade. Religion would never instruct human beings to commit such acts.

Interviewer: When you refer to “eating brother’s flesh out of hatred” does this imply an instinct of hatred?

President al-Assad: Contrary to correct social and religious beliefs that are built on reason, distorted beliefs make humans hostile to others when they differ in doctrine. Hatred, not instinct, makes humans lose their sanity and drives them to behead others and eat human flesh. Human instinct is based on virtue as opposed to hostility. Weak morals and principles, and distorted beliefs are what drive humans away from sanity.

Interviewer: Mr President going back to your definition of jihad in its true meaning, we find unfortunately that the more prevalent form is based on fighting and killing. What can be done about this?

President al-Assad: The solution is to seek guidance from the Quran where the clear words of God resonate. Islam is a religion of mercy and forgiveness; the word “mercy” is cited tens of times in the Quran. Islam came to promote human values, enshrine mercy and love, and prevent killing. Did the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) not say in the Hadith al-Sharif: “The demise of the universe is easier for God to condone than the wrongful killing of a believer?” The Quran and the Hadith are both clear in promoting love, forgiveness, justice and humanity. Those who claim to emulate the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) should remember his behaviour as a human being before and after he became a prophet, they will find that his message was primarily based on human morals and principals.

I would like to pose a question to you and your readers: do these Wahabis and Takfiris and their acts resemble in any shape or form our great Prophet’s conduct throughout his life, either before or after he became a prophet? During my meetings with clerics in Syria and the Levant, I have often said that the Prophet Muhammad’s life should be studied in greater depth at all levels, by clerics and students alike, because the Prophet did not only convey the words of God, he embodied their meaning and practiced what he preached. If we go back to the Quran, the Hadith and the life and conduct of the Prophet, we will see the complete opposite of what these terrorists are practicing.

Interviewer: Who is responsible for this call to return to the Quran and the Prophet’s conduct?

President al-Assad: When a criminal, a thief or an extremist emerges from the fold of society, it is a collective social responsibility led by the government since it is responsible for overseeing all aspects, including religion. The government shares this responsibility with various religious institutions, including the Ministry of Religious Endowments, religious schools and institutes including those that have recently been licensed. These bodies are responsible for ensuring that our religious scholars are qualified to promote the correct religious ideology and focus on its essence rather than on the extremism that has infiltrated areas of our public life.

Interviewer: Some argue that the government carries the greatest responsibility in the sense that this extremist religious environment grew before the eyes of the authorities. They cite examples of religious schools that are not subject to oversight and do not have the proper curricula, or the building of mosques to avoid paying taxes.

President al-Assad: I have heard this many times during various meetings with people in the current crisis, that the government should not have encouraged these religious schools and

that we are now seeing the consequences of this policy. This is unequivocally incorrect. In fact quite the contrary, throughout the crisis we have not had a single incident caused by any of the official religious bodies. More importantly, they have understood the genuine reasons behind the crisis and have worked effectively to contain it.

In a previous interview, I discussed the role of religious clerics. As for religious institutions, they have not produced any form of chaos or contributed to spreading sectarianism. The majority of those who emanated from mosques at the beginning chanting “Allah Akbar” did so to incite chaos and hatred whilst knowing nothing of religion. Others attended mosques to protest and chant “Allah Akbar” but in reality they did not know how to pray.

On the other hand, the religious institutions have existed for decades and they have been empowered and supported as far back as the 1980’s during the Muslim Brotherhood crisis. The crisis at that time highlighted the importance of nurturing religious belief correctly since many Syrians were misled due to misguided religious awareness. The Muslim Brotherhood exploited these weaknesses in religious clerics and in society propagating themselves as strengthening religion in society against an “atheist” state fighting religion. Consequently, and based on the above, I believe that on the backdrop of this crisis, we need to embrace religion and religious institutions, and certainly not the opposite.

Interviewer: Mr President, decades ago sectarian strife afflicted Lebanon as it did in Iraq following the American invasion. Did we not realize that this would inevitably come to us? What have we done to confront it?

President al-Assad: Certainly, had we not feared this we would not have taken a strong stance against western policies that promoted this anarchy. We staunchly rejected the war on Iraq despite the serious American threats and great incentives at the time. We took this position not only because in principle we are against any aggression on Arab or friendly countries, but also because we were aware of the disastrous consequences that would follow.

Similarly we expressed concerns over the war on Afghanistan, especially during my meetings with American officials after 9/11. They expected us to be pleased that they would be attacking terrorists, especially since Syria from 1985 had repeatedly called for a clear definition of terrorism and the need to form an international alliance against it. This was not taken seriously at the time since terrorism had not yet struck within their borders. I have consistently warned American officials that the war on Afghanistan would promote and spread terrorism. Terrorism is like cancer, when you deal with the consequences rather than the root cause, it will only spread faster. Therefore, terrorism has to be rooted out and not just attacked. This cannot be achieved through war alone, but by education, culture, human interaction and prosperity. They did not pay attention to our concerns and we are still suffering from the consequences of Afghanistan. Again, in Iraq we warned that the situation would develop into sectarian tension and head towards partition, which we are slowly seeing. When we got involved in Lebanon in 1976 it was to protect Lebanon and also to safeguard Syria since that war had consequences on us from day one.

Therefore in answer to your question, we saw the dynamics you mentioned emerging, we stood against them and we intervened when it was warranted. However, you cannot completely isolate yourself from your neighbourhood. We endeavoured to prevent the events in Iraq from affecting Syria. It was possible to delay it but it was not possible to prevent it completely. Since 2004, some extremist elements started to emerge and ferment

in Syria which at the beginning were non-Syrians and sadly with time a considerable part of them are now Syrian.

Interviewer: There were attempts before and during the crisis to draw Syria into this sectarian tension. More than two years into the crisis, they have been utilizing the example of Hezbollah to bolster the notion that it came to defend a certain sect. What is your view on this?

President al-Assad: They have used all methods in this region: direct and indirect occupation, threats, intimidation, as well attempts to breach our national security and culture. They have tried everything and Syria continues to be a source of hindrance to their objectives. Recent events in Arab countries were seen as an opportunity to strike Syria and undermine and weaken the axis of resistance in the region. The core of their objective now is redefine who is an enemy and who is an ally; Israel becomes the invisible enemy, even an ally for some, whilst the resistance becomes the enemy. Instead of representing a movement and an actor against Israeli occupation, the attempt is to project the resistance as the enemy, transforming it from a resistance movement to sectarian movement. This has not transpired and will not transpire. The Syrian people are not so easily misled or fooled. For us, the resistance and all our allies, our aims are clear and our route well defined. Regardless of what they propagate, we will achieve our goals in terms of our resistance and our internal wellbeing. We shall do this in our own way and without hesitation. Regardless of what they say, we will always act according to what is best for Syria.

Interviewer: Did we require fighters from Hezbollah?

President al-Assad: This is not the first time I have been asked this question and my answer is clear: the Syrian Army is fighting in several parts of the country, had we needed external support we would have been able to attain it. However, what happened in Al-Qseir is linked more to the resistance movement than the internal crisis in Syria. Al-Qseir is not as strategically important as they portrayed it to be.



Interviewer: But in the West it was portrayed as the mother of all battles?

President al-Assad: Precisely, that's because it has a bearing both on the internal crisis in Syria and on the resistance since it is a border town which is the back garden of the resistance. The resistance cannot be strong without an element of strategic depth to it, which is in Syria. Thus the area bears geo-strategic importance in the connection between Syria and Lebanon and specifically the resistance. That is the fundamental reason why the resistance had to join the battle because it affects them as much as it affects Syria. Their involvement was necessary and we were completely transparent about this. We will not hesitate to do it again or shy away from it. However, if we needed the resistance as they tried to portray, why did we need it in Al-Qseir but not in Damascus, Aleppo or other key areas? We have a strong army that is supported by large number of National Defence Forces.

Interviewer: Mr President, despite what you have said, there are some in the opposition, most notably those who are outside Syria, who insist that a sectarian struggle is the core issue and that the government has engineered it to augment its own benefits.

President al-Assad: If the government creates sectarian strife in Syria, it would then be

leading the country towards division. Our battles across all of Syria are principally to safeguard the country's demographic diversity and unity, which essentially discredits this notion. Sectarian strife conspicuously negates the interest of the government. The government has an interest in keeping Syria united, strong and prosperous. A sectarian approach would result in us losing the battle not winning it. A government would be ignorant to adopt such a strategy and the Syrian government is certainly not. If a government works for the best interests of the nation, it does its best to ensure society's unity and consequently ensures its own strength.

Interviewer: Frankly speaking Mr President, there are western accusations that when the protests erupted you subtly signalled to the minorities that they are under threat which drove them to support you. This notion renders you responsible for the schism in Syrian society?

President al-Assad: If there was any truth to this claim then we would have plunged into a civil war and the state would have collapsed. If for the sake of argument we apply the logic of minorities and majorities in Syria – which we completely reject, no minorities can protect the state. The government is maintained by the majority, not necessarily an ethnic, religious or sectarian majority, but by a popular majority.

Our country and our people have persevered because it is the majority that has supported the government and not the minority; this majority constitutes all sects in Syria. These notions of minorities and majorities are purely Western. How did they divide up Syria under the colonial French occupation? They divided it into sectarian based regions: an Alawite state, a Druze state, Damascus, Aleppo etc. Ninety years ago, our ancestors were vigilant and alert to the dangers of such a plan, it is inconceivable that today we less aware or vigilant. Such an attempt is predestined to fail exactly like it failed all those years ago, even when they tried to print new currency. This particular scenario would never transpire in Syria unless the takfiri or Muslim Brotherhood ideology prevails, which would lead to a division empirically similar to the fate of other Arab countries.

Interviewer: But these accusations that the government created a sectarian struggle, are not only from those bearing an extremist ideology but also from intellectuals who claim to be secularists.

President al-Assad: This is regrettably true. Most of the sectarian discourse today is not only by takfiri extremists, but also by those who claim to be secular. There are two groups that advocate sectarianism: the first regard themselves as secular – we have repeatedly stated that secularism is not against religions but rather a form of freedom of confession. The other group are ignorant people who claim to be religious without understanding the essence of religion.

The common element between the first group, which claims to be cultured and secular, and the second – which claims to understand the true essence of religion is ignorance; ignorance of religion leads to sectarianism. In this instance, I am not referring to religious doctrine, which is based on intellectual thought. The old religious scholars provided us with intellectual schools of thoughts that enriched our understanding of religion and religious practice, but did not promote sectarianism. What is important is that the majority of believers who understand the true essence of religion do not promote sectarianism, because they know as we do that sectarianism is the exact opposite of religion. Those who maintain a poor knowledge of religions adopt the concept of sectarianism parallel to those who boast

about secularism without comprehending its true meaning or the true meaning of religion.

Interviewer: Taking into consideration these distorted concepts and perverse practices in our society from beheading and slaughtering to sectarianism and fragmentation, are we beginning to see the defeat of Arab Nationalism to the hands of fanaticism and takfiri ideology?

President al-Assad: Arab identity is endangered by three factors: firstly, an absolute deviation towards the West, secondly, the inclination towards extremism and thirdly, the performance of successive Arab governments which has led some to shift away from the core of Arab nationalism. These three deadly threats have dealt severe blows to Pan-Arabism, but Arab nationalism is still alive and this can be felt in the popular mood. Pan-Arabism will not collapse because it is deeply rooted in our Arab identity.

Interviewer: Mr President, since the inception of the crisis, there have been calls from Turkey to specifically engage with the Muslim Brotherhood, while Syria has categorically rejected dealing with them as a political entity. The Syrian government announced its intention to attend the Geneva talks with no pre-conditions. Will we talk to the Muslim Brotherhood?

President al-Assad: We deal with all parties. In fact, we engaged with the Muslim Brotherhood after they were defeated in Syria in 1982. We believe that dialogue is the method to direct parties onto the right track and national position. If we are to discuss Islam, they should refer back to the correct Islam for all Syrians.

This dialogue has never stopped, and there have been several attempts, but every time we realize that the Muslim Brotherhood have not abandoned their hypocrisy. Their main concern remains power and ruling rather than religion or the interests of the country. We engage with them as individuals and not as a political party, since our constitution and legislations ban political parties based on religious ideology.

This should not be understood as being anti-religion; on the contrary, we support religion. Religion is a calling, a higher calling to teach the word of God and should be elevated to a much higher level than ruling people's daily lives. Religion is for all humanity and not exclusive to a certain group; it has a higher purpose than the details and nuances of our human lives which encompass wrongdoings, sins, perversities and whims. Religion should not be reduced to a political party. Religion augments moral values, which in turn reinforces politics, parties, the economy and prosperity. It is for these reasons that we do not recognise them as a political party. In terms of their practice, they are terrorists who killed thousands of Syrians under the same leadership that still exists outside Syria - we do not forget this.

So we will engage in dialogue with all parties relying on our existing knowledge of their real ideology and knowing that it is extremely unlikely they will - after close to a century of adopting their ideology - suddenly change and become moderate Muslims with national values.

As I mentioned earlier though, we have engaged with individuals within the Brotherhood and they have returned to Syria. They maintain their religious beliefs, which we respect, and have contributed to building the country rather than destroying it. As I have said before, the potential outcome of any dialogue will be subject to a public referendum, which will ensure that the electorate will decide what is right for the country.

Interviewer: Regarding the Muslim Brotherhood, how are you following the unfolding events in Egypt? What is your view of the situation?

President al-Assad: What is happening in Egypt is essentially the fall of political Islam; the type of governing system which the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to advocate regionally. I reiterate that religion should not be deprecated into a particular political practice. Religious preaching should be an independent process, kept away from the specific dynamics and intricacies of political manoeuvring.

This experience has failed quickly because it was founded on a flawed basis. Our perception of the Muslim Brotherhood extends broadly to developments in Egypt. Using religion for politics or a certain political party is inevitably destined to fail anywhere in the world.

Interviewer: Is it that the Muslim Brotherhood deceived the Egyptian people or have the Egyptians suddenly woken up to the reality of the Muslim Brotherhood?

President al-Assad: Countries such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria are strategically located and deeply ingrained in the history of the region and have been for thousands of years. Consequently, the peoples of these lands have a rich reservoir of knowledge, awareness, culture and human civilization, which make them immune to deceitful narratives. As the saying goes: you can deceive some people some of the time, but you cannot deceive everybody all of the time. This especially applies to the Egyptians who represent a civilization of thousands of years and a unique Arab nationalist ideology. What happened a year ago was an untestable consequence of the previous ruling party, now the picture has emerged clearer to the Egyptians, and the performance of the Muslim Brotherhood unveiled the lies they expounded at the start of the revolution. The Egyptians are an ancient people and they were able to quickly discover the reality for what it was.

Interviewer: And in record time.

President al-Assad: Yes, thanks to the Muslim Brotherhood!

Interviewer: Is it fair to say that the Muslim Brotherhood's experience at governing has failed?

President al-Assad: We envisaged its failure before it even started. This type of governance is destined to fail since it is incompatible with human nature. The Muslim Brotherhood adopts hypocrisy and aims in reality to create schism in the Arab world. They were the first to raise the sectarian strife in Syria in the 70's. At that time, sectarianism was not common discourse or phenomenon in Syria. Their objective is to create conflicts, however this is not resonant in societies that have a high level of public awareness, which is why we knew they would fail.

Interviewer: Some suggest that part of what is occurring in Egypt now is due to the decision taken to sever relationships with Syria. Reuters quoted a military source stating that the army began to change its stance following Morsi's statements during his meeting with the Syrian opposition.

President al-Assad: I do not wish to speak on behalf of the Egyptians people, but I can tell you that when Muhammad Morsi severed relationships with Syria a few weeks ago, there were attempts by the Egyptians to reach a compromise. Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem revealed these details in his recent press conference. This implies that not everybody in the

Egyptian government endorsed Morsi's decision because it was effectively an incorrect decision. This was further echoed by criticism of the decision from Egyptian intellectuals and journalists who highlighted the strategic and historic nature of the relationship between the two countries.

The Pharaohs were aware of the strategic importance of military and political relations between Syria and Egypt, hence their battle of Kadesh (near Al-Qseir now) against the Hittites in 1380. The Hittites in Anatolia also realised the importance of their relationships with Syria. The Pharaohs realised that Syria represents Egypt's strategic depth. The battle ended with no victor, culminating in one of the oldest agreements known to history between the Hittites and the Pharaohs in 1280. Whilst the Pharaohs were aware of the importance of Syria to them then, how could a person living in the 21st century not understand it today? It is shameful ignorance.

Interviewer: We have discussed the dialogue, done the groundwork, initiated the political process and taken some concrete steps, even clarified our position on the Geneva conference. To a large extent all of these measures are part of a wider political process. I would like to touch upon the humanitarian aspect: tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Some have asked, Mr President, how can we reconcile both internally and externally?

President al-Assad: Internally speaking - and this is the most important for me - we mistakenly put all our eggs in the same basket. There are those who have killed, those who have vandalised but did not kill, there are those who carried arms but did not kill and those who facilitated the killing of others. So there are many different roles. In all instances that did not result in killing, the state can be lenient on the condition that offenders return to normal civilian life. In the instances of proven homicide, this is tied to the wishes of the victims' families and the state cannot act on their behalf. However I have heard a significant number of families of martyrs, saying: "if our son's or brother's blood leads to a resolution of the problem then we are ready to forgive." We must all learn from these families who have lost their children and their loved ones.

Forgiveness is essential in solving national crises, provided it is done at a popular level rather than at an official level in order to ensure its sustainability. It is a sign of strength and patriotism when we can put our national public interests above our own personal interests; this concept needs to be adopted by everybody. Like most other families, my family has been affected by the crisis, we have lost loved ones, but ultimately, similar to any other family, we need to put the interests of the country ahead of our personal loss. This needs to be applied both internally and externally.

The external side is more political. Foreign policy is not based on emotions but national interests. There are principles and interests and they are inextricably intertwined. It is unscrupulous for your principles to be against your interests, either your interests are wrong or your principles. Here, forgiveness is viewed positively as a humane and religious value. When forgiveness serves the relationships with a certain country, and therefore the interests of Syrians, there is no reason not to forgive, since the central focus of the state is the interest of its people. This is what we have done; we have received many politicians and met with several countries that were hostile to us. Our primary aim was always the unequivocal interest of the Syrian people.

Interviewer: Mr President, Syrians today have two primary concerns: one is the prevalence of terrorism and bloodshed on the streets, targeting state institutions, factories and other

key locations. The second concern is the increasing cost of living. With regards to the economy, the unprecedented rise in the dollar exchange rate and the disastrous consequences? What do you say to the Syrian citizen on issues relating to the economy?

President al-Assad: In order to give an objective assessment, one has to start from the fundamentals. Firstly, for a citizen to be well off, the economy has to be healthy which requires stability and security. The economy can never flourish in turbulent times and in the absence of security.

Therefore our security threats are directly affecting us irrespective of the performance of any government with the best experts. Secondly, we know that certain countries tried to strike Syria, first through the idea of the revolution - which failed because people didn't embrace it, and then they tried through supporting terrorism - which also failed because it was countered by the armed forces and local communities. Since they failed in both of those areas, their third attempt was the economy to ensure the greatest suffering against Syrians who supported their country. If we take into account these factors, it is inevitable that there is a heavy price to pay. In these circumstances, the best we can do is to limit the damage, either by dealing with the profiteers of the crisis or with the mistakes of officials.

We have to identify policies that are suitable for the present time and circumstance. Some make the mistake of assessing current policies and government performance in the same manner as before the crisis. This is unrealistic. We are in a completely different situation. It is unfeasible to continue in the same level of consumption as before, since this creates pressure on the economy and most significantly the Syrian pound. We need to change our lifestyle in order to alleviate the pressure and adapt to the circumstances until we can reach a solution based on restoring full security. We have to understand that our economic hardships will not ease until we can restore our stability.

This crisis has affected all Syrians irrespective of their political affiliations; even those who initially supported the alleged 'revolution' were struck by increased poverty, which was the catalyst for them to realize that they were losing out. It is unfortunate that there was a limited foci that only started to think objectively after they were struck by poverty. However, we must all collaborate to combat terrorism in order to restore the economy to its former strength.

We must identify the beneficiaries of the crisis and deal with them accordingly. It is paramount that the public cooperates with the state and refrain from relying on others to solve the problem. This is a real problem in our society; everyone relies on somebody else to solve their problems.

Similarly, unless our public officials collaborate with each other and with our citizens the hardship will only increase. We must all take the initiative and innovate in finding the best possible economic solutions to deal with these turbulent circumstances; this is where we must be creative in our solutions otherwise the crisis will force choices upon us. Again, the sooner we fight terrorism, the quicker the economy will recover stronger than before because we are a vibrant and intelligent people. We are a country with an indigenous civilization that was not imported from abroad. Regardless of the difficulties in the past, we built our country with our own money and expertise. Therefore, once we restore security, we can at the very minimum re-boost our economy to its former status.

Interviewer: What are the facts behind the oil and gas resources in the Syrian territorial

waters, which have been documented and reported by a number of research centres and experts?

President al-Assad: This is correct, whether in our territorial waters or on Syrian soil. Initial studies have reported large gas reserves especially in the sea. We have seen this stretching from Egypt through Palestine along the coast. It is also reported that these resources are richer in the north. There is a notion that one of the reasons behind the crisis was these gas reserves and the fact that they should not be at the disposal of state opposed to Israeli and American policies. This has never been discussed directly with us, but from a logical perspective it cannot be ignored. It is still early to say.

Interviewer: I would like to discuss living conditions from a different angle. The government has increased salaries twice during the crisis. The first pay rise was expected and some thought that it was needed but the second was surprising and unforeseen to some especially since the government was able to accommodate this increase in the current conditions. Despite the difficulties there is hope in what comes after the crisis. Have we taken steps towards this? What are the plans for the future?

President al-Assad: Since we have been affected most by the destruction, the most vital part of the Syrian economy will be reconstruction. We have started to layout plans and where possible started implementation, though the security situation has hindered this. The necessary legislation has been passed, but again implementation requires better security conditions to facilitate the rebuilding process and ensure workers can operate freely.

Another important point you mentioned was the pay rise. For a country in the situation we are in to be able to continue to pay salaries and provide services – albeit of a lower quality than before, is a huge achievement. There are positive elements to gauge, however our aims are bigger and I believe we can collaborate collectively to achieve these.

Interviewer: Some attribute the responsibility of border control to the government, which contributed ultimately to the current economic situation and the absence of state control over markets and prices for instance. Were we taken by surprise in the crisis or was it caused by negligence from the relevant government bodies?

President al-Assad: Certainly there were deficiencies with regards to the performance of certain state institutions before the crisis, which I regularly mentioned, including corruption, negligence, procrastination and the challenge of finding the right and suitable people. The crisis has unveiled and perpetuated these defects, which is not surprising. However it is not realistic to assess the role of the government and its influence without taking into consideration the extrinsic orientations of the crisis, the crisis is not confined to strictly internal issues of corruption, chaos, and lack of security or the presence of gangs as is the case for other countries. Our situation is completely different as we are facing an external war manifested by internal tools and the government is defending the country. So it would be inaccurate to evaluate it in the same way.

The presence of the state, its influence and power is judged by whether the government has changed its principles. The Syrian government has not changed its principles, neither internally nor externally. Our position towards the resistance movement has not changed, our position on Palestine is the same, we remain committed towards the larger sections of society – labourers and farmers, we continue to pay salaries and provide public services despite the widespread destruction, we have launched new projects and have planned for

others; all of this has been achieved within our own means. Therefore our government is not absent but rather in a state of war.

Interviewer: Our state institutions are being vandalised and destroyed. Some perceive that these manifestations are the beginning of the collapse of the Syrian state.

President al-Assad: Their objective was to destroy our infrastructure, undermine our security, drain our economy and create chaos that would all lead to a failed state; none of this has materialised. Day to day life continues, albeit with greater challenges. The economy is still functioning despite severe difficulties, which nobody expected us to withstand. Personal safety is a big issue, but workers, employees and business people still go to work. The Syrian people have proven that they have enormous energy and resilience. After explosions, once the casualties have been evacuated and the debris cleared, daily life continues. We haven't seen this in Syria before and we didn't know this about ourselves. People go to work despite the risks of a terrorist attacks, suicide bombings or mortar shelling. They go to work and about their daily business with a strong belief in fate and therefore never fall into a state of despair.

All countermeasures have been deployed against us including the use of economic, military and psychological warfare. The only thing they have not tried is direct intervention, which is beyond their means for various reasons; as I have said before, starting a war is different to ending it. No one can end a war, and no one knows where it will end. This has critical and dangerous bearings, which is why there is a lot of reluctance on the part of many countries. If we have overcome all of these stages with a high level of public awareness and solidarity; there is nothing we should fear. That's why I am not worried.

Interviewer: So, Mr President, you are optimistic?

President al-Assad: If I was not optimistic I would not have been able to endure the difficulties alongside the Syrian people, and if the Syrian people lacked a profound optimism they would not have persevered. Despair is the beginning and essence of defeat and defeat is primarily psychological.

I often meet people and sense their optimism. They all say that the crisis is coming to an end, God willing. They go on to say "Syria is protected by God" or "we have no fears". They repeat what the martyred Dr Bouti used to say and his belief that the end of the crisis is near.

There is a genuine belief, from a spiritual and national perspective that the crisis will come to an end. Without optimism there is no faith; without faith there is no optimism.

Interviewer: Mr President, in conclusion, our newspaper is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary since releasing its first issue. May I ask you on this occasion to address a few words to my colleagues at the paper? They have been exemplary in their dedication and hard work. There is a printing worker I know who is not driven by political ambitions but by his sense of patriotism and belonging to this institution. This is what keeps him commuting to and from work after midnight, stopping at numerous checkpoints and risking his life.

President al-Assad: The example of your colleague applies to all those working in our national media, and proves the resilience of the Syrian people. Please convey my warm regards to all your staff especially since your newspaper is one of the oldest national papers

in Syria. Its fiftieth anniversary corresponds with the 8th of March Revolution which I mentioned earlier with all the benefits it brought to the Syrian people for decades.

Today this anniversary comes as we live another real revolution; not their so-called 'revolution' but the real revolution of our people and army against terrorists. I hope that this anniversary will mark a new beginning for the newspaper so that its name will, in the future, symbolize not one revolution, but two: the revolution of 1963 and the revolution of 2013.

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