

# Flashback to 2001: Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to British Prime Minister Tony Blair: ‘Stop Bombing Afghan Civilians’

By [Cem Ertur](#)

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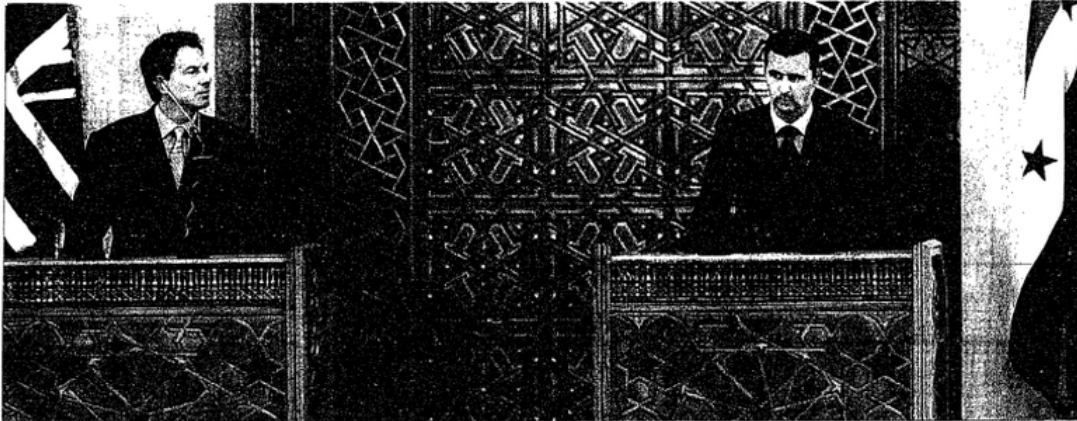
Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#), [SYRIA](#)

*Reading the transcript of a joint press conference by **Syrian President Bashar al-Assad** and **British Prime Minister Tony Blair**, which was held on the 25th day of the Anglo-American-led invasion of Afghanistan, makes it abundantly clear why another Anglo-American-led genocidal war had been launched against Syria nearly ten years later.*

Syria's Assad humiliates prime minister with attack on western double standards and Israeli 'state terrorism'



Tony Blair, in Syria to drum up support for the US-led war, listens to President Bashar al-Assad at their press conference criticise western attitudes to terrorism and the bombing of Afghanistan. Photograph: Khalid al-Hamri/Reuters

## Blair gets a public lecture on the harsh realities of the Middle East

Patrick Wintour in Riyadh

Tony Blair's drive to strengthen the anti-terrorist coalition and the Middle East peace process yesterday suffered a very public rebuff at the hands of the leader of Syria.

President Bashar al-Assad gave Mr Blair a dressing down, condemning the bombing of Afghan civilians and praising Palestinian armed groups as freedom fighters. The prime minister had to stand and listen as the Israeli was described as state terrorists and the west was accused of double standards and an inability to distinguish terrorism from self-defence.

The diplomatic rebuff came as a joint press conference in Damascus during which Mr Blair looked distinctly uneasy and pleaded for both sides to bridge their "fundamental misunderstandings".

He was forced to describe their meeting as a "rushed discussion" diplomatic speak for a row, and at one point aggressive heckle out in the audience as the

Syrian leader condemned the bombing of Afghanistan.

Mr Blair will seek to restore the momentum of his Middle East tour today when he holds talks with the Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, in Jerusalem and then with the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat.

The chasm between the west and Muslim states over the definition of terrorism and the role of Israel showed the daunting scale of Mr Blair's mission, however.

President Assad told the press conference the military action in Afghanistan was mistaken. "We cannot accept what we see every day on our television screens — the killing of innocent civilians. There are hundreds dying every day".

He condemned terrorists, he said, "but we should differentiate between combating terrorism and war. We did not say we support an international coalition for war. We are always against war".

The US and Britain have for many years been concerned

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It is inevitable, in a time of conflict, that attitudes develop, highlighted sensitively towards the potential for fifth columns... The basic of British realism is facing what is likely to prove the biggest challenge since the Saboteur Verden  
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guardian.co.uk/afghanistan

about Syria's support for armed militant groups fighting Israel — including Hezbollah, Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Mr Assad defined these groups as freedom fighters. "We, and I personally, differentiate between resistance and terrorism. Resistance is a social, religious and legal right that is safeguarded by UN resolutions."

Likening the Palestinian groups to resistance fighters seeking to liberate their lands, he argued that in Europe the great symbol of resistance had been De Gaulle. "Can anyone accuse De Gaulle of being a terrorist? No way."

He then turned his fire on Israel: "Israel is proving every day it is against peace, and the desire for peace cannot co-exist with a desire for killing. The list of assassinations cannot be an expression of a desire to bring peace and stability to the region. Israel is practising state terrorism every day."

He accused the west of reducing terrorism to the personality of Osama bin Laden. "Terrorism works as a network. It does not have a certain head, either as a person or in terms of an organisation."

The British delegation remained hopeful that Mr Assad, eager to join the international community after decades of isolation, will still use his influence to restrain the Palestinian hardliners. Mr Blair

himself said later in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: "There was a far greater understanding than might have appeared at the time."

The British recognise Mr Assad had a domestic audience to address and claimed that in private he had been more conciliatory. The British pointed to his private acceptance of the right of Israel to exist, as well as his condemnation of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Mr Blair later told friends: "I was trying to him, you have to help to renew the Middle East peace process. He was saying to me, if you want moderate Islam to defeat Islamic fundamentalism, I also need your help."

Mr Assad pointed out that

"We cannot accept what we see daily on our TV screens: the killing of innocent civilians"

Syria had been calling since 1985 for an international conference to combat terrorism, and that the west had come to the subject late — though "better late than never", he said.

Mr Blair argued that Northern Ireland showed that a peace process would work only if there was an end to violence by all sides. The two stated principles for peace in the Middle East were "Israel's right to exist, confident of its own peace and security within its borders" and a Palestinian state.

Mr Blair later flew to Saudi Arabia for talks with Crown Prince Abdullah in Riyadh. On the way to his overnight stopover in Jeddah, the Prime Minister's spokesman accepted that he had seen no direct support in Saudi Arabia for the bombing campaign. He said there had been unanimous condemnation of the terrorist attacks and the need to end terrorism. But he went on: "Of course there was discussion about the means. People come with different perspectives."

[The Guardian, 1 November 2001](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

caption: [British Prime Minister] Tony Blair, in Syria to drum up support for the US-led war [on Afghanistan], listens to [Syrian]

President Bashar al-Assad at their press conference criticise western attitudes to terrorism and the bombing of Afghanistan

### Press conference: PM and President Assad of Syria

[transcript of the joint press conference in Damascus by Syria's President Assad and British Prime Minister Tony Blair on October 31, 2001]

Number10.gov.uk (official website of the British government) via European Security & Defence website

**Editorial note:** This press conference was held 24 days after the launch of the Anglo-American-led invasion of Afghanistan.

The day after his visit to Damascus, Mr Blair [met](#) Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Jerusalem. (emphasis added)

**PRESIDENT ASSAD** (via interpreter): I am welcoming Mr Tony Blair, the Prime Minister of Britain and the accompanying delegation in Syria and I would like to indicate that it is the first visit of senior British officials at this level since the independence of Syria in the 1940s and certainly before then, decades before then, and this has many indications and many importance and many meanings and it indicates the development of the relations between Syria and Great Britain.

Despite the fact that the visit is very short the talks were very rich and we had time to discuss many issues and many topics. We agreed on many of the analyses that we discussed in the talks and there were many points of understanding and there was also some points that each undertook to the other.

The main issues that we discussed during these talks, of course we concentrated on the issue of terrorism and the peace process and the Middle East, of course. We talked quickly about the bilateral relations and we agreed to consolidate these relations through the ideas which were discussed between Syrian and British officials whether in Syria or in Britain. As for the issue of terrorism, there was a sound condemnation of what had taken place on 11 September in the United States and, I think this goes without saying, I don't think there is any country in the world that would say it agrees with terrorism. It is a principle for all countries.

**But the condemnation that Syria has announced was not only a result of what had taken place on 11 September, but it is an outcome of our principles, all the principles throughout our history in Syria, social principles, it was an outcome to our religious principles that are here in our Arab region, whether as Arabs or as Muslims or as Christians. It is a result of our suffering from terrorism, especially during the mid-1970s and the consequent period, and of course, at the same time, we differentiated - and I personally differentiated - between resistance and terrorism and between Islam and terrorism.**

**There is a difference between resistance as a social right, as a religious right, it's a legal right, and it is a right that is safeguarded through the United Nations' resolutions.**

Of course Islam and all holy religions have the same source and they were sent to people by the same God. These religions were not sent for war but they were sent for peace and for the combating of terrorism.

We talked about the root causes of terrorism and I mentioned many causes. But I mentioned particularly one important cause of terrorism and it is a reason that many citizens in the Arab or Muslim regions feel; it is a feeling of the difference and the human value between the citizen in this region and the human values of the citizen in the West. Especially as terrorism is there for a long time in Syria, since 1985, the late President Hafez Al-Assad sent Syrian senior officials to Western European countries to ask for convening an international conference to combat terrorism. So **the issue of combating terrorism is very old for Syria**, and although the combating of terrorism came quite late, it is better late than never. The important point is that combating terrorism should have started before, and **many people in the region feel there is a gulf that the Western**

**people should fill, that the human person is a human person anywhere and terrorism is terrorism anywhere, whether it is in the Middle East or Europe or in Asia and everywhere in the world.**

We spoke about combating terrorism and I said that combating terrorism should start by defining this again. We can't fight an enemy without knowing who this enemy is, what shape is he, where is he, is he North, East, West or South. We have to define our enemy first and we have to specify its appearance and its existence and then we have to analyse the reasons which brought this terrorism. Therefore, in order to combat terrorism, we have to address the root causes and not the effect. Until now only the effects of terrorism are being addressed but the root causes are not being addressed or it is at the beginning of being addressed. Addressing the root causes of terrorism, as I have said, should be first political, it should be cultural, it should be media, informative, security and intelligence addressed. And the terrorism works as a network; it doesn't have a certain head whether it is a person or an organisation. It is a network, terrorism is a network that could be found anywhere, and therefore combating terrorism and fighting its causes should come through international co-operation and not through having one side or one country that fights terrorism. Terrorism is there everywhere and therefore combating terrorism should be done by every country in the world.

We spoke about peace in the Middle East. As we say always, Syria did not change its stand towards peace. Reaching a just and comprehensive peace in the region was always our principle, despite all the difficult circumstances, despite all the setbacks that the peace process has suffered from, the Syrian stand towards peace has not changed because it is a strategic position and not a tactical position, but Israel as far as we are concerned, is proving every day that it is against this peace, and therefore the desire for peace cannot coincide with the desire for killing. The list for assassinations cannot be an expression of a desire to reach peace and stability in this region.

We also spoke in the peace process about the international consensus in the world, especially after 11 September events, about the necessity of achieving peace in the Middle Eastern region, and I said that this international consensus is a golden opportunity that might not be repeated in the future. It is an opportunity for the world, but it is to a large extent an opportunity for the American administration that could move without taking into account the domestic pressure that might influence its neutral role as co-sponsor of the peace process.

We did not differentiate in our talk (inaudible) that peace and terrorism. **Some people linked the issue of the Middle East to terrorism directly and it is understood as if the Middle East is a source of terrorism, and this is not correct.** Despite our point of view as Arabs, because **Israel is practising the state terrorism regularly and this is definite**, but the Middle Eastern region often influences activating terrorism, because terrorists always need a cover. This cover could be a national issue, it could be a pan-national issue, it could be a social issue, and therefore closing the hot areas in the world will deprive these terrorists of the cover they always seek.

Of course we — and the last point I would like to say about peace is that **in Syria we cannot see with one eye as some people see. We cannot separate the issue of terrorism that we see every day and we live every day that Israel is practising against the Palestinians. We cannot separate between this kind of terrorism and the terrorism that is taking place in the world, and we can't really look with one eye.** Some people see with one eye, some people see with closed eyes and we cannot, we look at the issues with wide-open eyes in order to see what has taken place, and in order to see things from a very realistic perspective.

And therefore no one can say small details can see small details without seeing the big issues, and the closer issues. **People in the Arab region, and in the Muslim world cannot see the international terrorism without seeing Israeli terrorism, and therefore addressing this kind of terrorism is one.**

Some people say that achieving peace will make a big step for combating terrorism, this is correct. But also combating terrorism in Israel would help to reach (5 second break in audio) highly appreciate what I have heard from Mr Prime Minister, because of his high appreciation and his great respect to Islam as a religion, and his high respect to the Muslim people in Britain. I am going to leave the floor to Mr Prime Minister to address you.

**PRIME MINISTER BLAIR:** Mr President, first of all can I thank you for hosting me here in Syria, and say how much I welcome the talks that we have had this morning and I know we will continue later.

And as you said right at the very outset this is candid dialogue. But it is a dialogue I would like to think could be pursued by us both as people trying to reach an understanding of each other's perspectives. And trying to work together as partners for the greater good of the wider world.

And there are two main issues obviously that we discussed. The first was the attacks of the 11 September in the United States of America. And I very much welcomed the strong statement of condemnation that you have made to me, and repeated again now Mr President. I think that is important that the entire world knows that the world community is united in condemning what happened on the 11 September as an atrocity.

The second thing is that that attack was carried out by extremists who do not represent in any way, shape or form, the true faith or voice of Islam. And your strong statement to that effect is also most welcome.

I believe it is important therefore that we send out a very clear message and signal that there is a strong international coalition against terrorism. And in Syria, and indeed the countries in this entire region are united as part of that coalition.

In respect of the Middle East peace process, whatever the differences of perspective, we both understand the importance of restarting the Middle East peace process properly, of getting back to a situation in which differences are resolved by a process of talking and dialogue. And that in that regard violence from whatever quarter is equally unhelpful, and what we require is the space and the time to get people talking together again.

And the objective that we seek, and I believe again this is shared by you, and shared by people in this region, is a situation where Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side in peace together. That is in the end the only possible long-term solution.

So Mr President I thank you for inviting me here today, I have very much welcomed the talks together. I know that for you as you were saying to me earlier, there is a relationship not just between Britain and Syria that is part of our history, but a personal relationship for you, since you have lived and worked in Britain.

And I hope that the candid dialogue that we have begun today can strengthen over time. Because there are huge differences in understanding between West and Islam, between west and the Arab world.

And yet if one can come out of the terrible events of the 11 September, it is an attempt to bridge that gulf of misunderstanding, and create the right circumstances for partnership in the future, and I believe that that is possible.

And so I hope that the dialogue we have begun today can continue over time, so that we achieve the objectives we both want to achieve. Which is an end to terrorism in all its forms, wherever it exists, and a proper and lasting peace and solution for the province of the Middle East. Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Could I ask (inaudible) if they discussed the current action in Afghanistan during their talks? Whether any pledges, promises, guarantees, anything of that nature were sought by President Assad, and given or not by Prime Minister Blair.

**PRIME MINISTER BLAIR:** Well of course we have discussed the current situation in Afghanistan. And I think that the most important thing to emphasise is that people accept that what happened on the 11 September was wrong, and that it is necessary for the international community to act.

Now we are acting in Afghanistan, we have set out our objectives there very, very clearly. And I think that the desire of everyone is to make sure that we bring that action to a successful conclusion as swiftly as possible. That is our desire I think that is the desire of all people in this region and elsewhere.

**PRESIDENT ASSAD** (via interpreter): As far as we are concerned in Syria we (inaudible) appreciate that **we announced our stand right from the beginning. A very clear stand that we condemn terrorism, and with an international coalition for combating terrorism. But we should differentiate between combating terrorism, and between war.**

**We did not say we support an international coalition for launching a war, we are always against war, it is a point of principle, because wars have always a negative effect on societies.** And we believe that combating terrorism cannot be done through war, but it can be done through political cultural intelligence cooperation amongst relevant countries.

And therefore, at least **we do not like to see more wars taking place in the world, because we have suffered from many wars, especially as we see some civilians, innocent civilians falling every day.**

**QUESTION:** And Mr Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the American President George Bush, and your Excellency have announced your support to establishing a Palestinian, independent Palestinian state to establish the ability in the region. How do you see the execution of the (inaudible) in the light of the dangerous (inaudible) of pulling down houses, expanding settlements, and ignore all international requests, including your request, and the request of the American administration.

**PRIME MINISTER BLAIR:** What is necessary if we are going to restart the peace process in the Middle East is that two things happen. First of all we have got to agree what the fixed points of principle are. And those fixed points of principle to my mind are that Israel is entitled to exist, has its right to exist, and be confident of its own peace and security within its own borders.

And secondly that alongside the state of Israeli there is a Palestinian state where there is justice and equality for people. Now I believe that based on that, based on the United Nations resolutions, it is possible to restart a proper process that can achieve those aims.

The second thing however that is necessary, as well as agreement on those fixed points of principle, is that we have an end to violence of all sorts, in order to give space and time for a peace process to

begin again. Because whilst violence is continuing, of whatever nature, it is difficult for the political process to work, and if I can say to you, certainly to borrow from the process of peace in Northern Ireland, which, in a very different context, has some similarities in terms of divided communities and great bitterness and hostility, it is vital, in order for the political process to work, that violence ends, of all types, because it is the people of violence that want to displace the political process, and what I would like to see is, based on those six points of principle, based on the United Nations Resolution, a peace process begin again that allows us to take back control of the situation for politics and not for violence.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask the Prime Minister whether you did discuss the situation of the terrorist groups which the Americans believe were operating in this country, whether you asked the President to restrain them, and may I ask the President whether you are prepared to take action against those groups, in particular the one that has claimed responsibility for the recent assassination in Israel?

**PRIME MINISTER BLAIR:** First of all, if I can say that, as I just made clear a moment or two ago, it is our belief that all groups involved in violence must cease their activities, so that the political process is given a chance to work. Now, there are going to be differences in perspective and views about the issue, both of the Middle East peace process, about the action that we take in respect of Afghanistan. But what I think is important is to recognise that unless we can bring about the situation in which the violence really does cease in the Middle East and the political process begin to work, then it is very difficult to see how we are going to get a just, negotiated solution to the problems that we face, and as I say, whatever the differences in perspective are – and we said it was a candid dialogue – whatever the differences in perspective, I think that is accepted by both of us. We both want to see a situation where the violence ends and ends completely, on all sides, so that the peace process can get started again.

**PRESIDENT ASSAD (via interpreter):** I would like to give a comment about this question. Of course the issue of the Middle East issue is for the countries concerned and one of the first countries who are concerned and we are more capable to decide the nature of the organisations and the people who are in the region. As I said in the beginning, **resisting occupation is an international right nobody can deny, and therefore we have many organisations, many people who support the liberation and who support the resistance fighters who seek to liberate their lands. The act of resistance is very different from the act of terrorism. As I said, we differentiate. In the west you have one example in France, for example, one of the most important personalities or one of the symbols is President de Gaulle, who fought for liberating the French land. Can any one of you accuse President de Gaulle of being a terrorist? No way, because what President de Gaulle did is the same thing that's being done by the resistance fighters in this region, and therefore it's the same measure that should be applied.**

**QUESTION:** Mr Prime Minister Tony Blair, the peace process was started ten years ago and peace has not been achieved at a time when violence was not there in the region, and the peace was not achieved due to the Israeli policies. Is there any initiative or intention by the Europeans or by international community to restart the peace process (inaudible) according to the United Nations Resolution and the land for peace principles (inaudible) for the region's (inaudible)?

**PRIME MINISTER BLAIR:** Well of course there's an intention to do that. It's precisely what we want to achieve. We want the process to begin again so that there is the possibility, through dialogue, of resolving the issues in the Middle East. But in order for that to happen, what is important is that there is an end to all forms of violence, where there is restraint, an end to violence, and the opportunity then to get people to talk about the issues, and over the last ten years, as you know,

there have been many, many attempts to get the peace process moving ahead. Now those attempts have not yet succeeded, but my message to people in whatever part of the region I will be over the next couple of days is there is no alternative. When all the killing and the bloodshed stops, people will have to come back and try and resolve their differences through dialogue. There is no alternative to that, just as there is no realistic alternative to a situation where the right of Israel to exist, confident in its own security, and the right of the Palestinians to their own state, is accepted as the basic principles of that dialogue.

Now I believe that can happen, but it needs the space and the time, as I say, to do it and even before the 11 September — sometimes I know in this part of the world it has been said that people like myself and President Bush were only interested in the issue of the peace process in the Middle East once the 11 September had occurred. This is not true. When I met President Arafat a few days ago in London, that was my eleventh meeting with him. Before the 11 September we already had the Tenet (?) Plan, the Mitchell Plan; as you know the Americans were preparing a new process in order to try and restore some momentum to the Middle East peace process. So we have, right from the very beginning, understood the importance of this issue, but we need the help of everybody, of all countries in this region, in order to get it done, and the single most important thing that will allow us to get it done is an end to violence from whatever quarter, in whatever form.

**QUESTION:** It seems that the focus now is to implement the Mitchell Plan and the Tenet Plan to cement the shaky ceasefire between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Do you think that's a good start? Is it enough of a start? And would you, at some point, encourage what you perceive as legitimate resistance to halt their attacks to give the Mitchell Plan a chance?

**PRESIDENT ASSAD (via interpreter):** We have our perspective about the Mitchell Report. We did not participate in it and Syria was not consulted about it, but the failure of many attempts did not take into account the necessary requirements for the peace (inaudible) including the rights of the Palestinian people, and the people in the region have proven that our perspective, our point of view, was correct, so the right thing is that the ceasefire, agreement for a ceasefire, but it is not the terms of reference for a peace process. The terms of reference for a peace process is the Security Council Resolution and the Madrid terms of reference. When we speak about initiatives regardless of the names of these initiatives, or when we speak about negotiations, all these are the means, but the important thing is justice; justice is peace.

We have to put one rule for the elements and for the objective, in order to achieve this objective. When we want to say — or let us assume that there's an initiative, and the Palestinian citizen is going to ask, "What is the objective of this initiative? Is it to stop violence?" Stopping violence is perhaps necessary to reach peace, but it is not everything; the more important thing is what this citizen is going to achieve, what are the rights he is going to achieve when the peace process ends, when — any initiative depends on United Nations Resolutions, on Madrid terms of reference, and so directing the peace process, or the co-sponsor should be neutral, should be an honest broker, and this is what was not achieved during the last ten years, and that's why peace has failed, and that's why all the attempts have failed. If you don't have the right way to conduct the peace process through the means and through the objectives we are going to meet in press conferences with other senior officials ten years from now to speak about launching a peace process.

**PRIME MINISTER BLAIR:** I'd like to just respond to that if I might, for a moment. Sorry, let me just respond to that for a moment please. I think the President said something that is very important there, that the Tenet and the Mitchell plans are valid plans in order to bring about a different security situation and end the violence. But I agree that is the first step, it is not the end of the process. What must then happen is that we resolve the actual issues that are outstanding. And I



think that what he said there too, in respect of the UN resolutions and the Madrid conclusions is also important. And I hope very much there will come a point in time when Syria is able to resume negotiations also with Israel in order to get the outstanding issues between them sorted out.

So I agree with the fact that the end to violence is the context in which the key issues can be resolved. It's not the resolution of the issues themselves. So we've got to end the violence and then go on to resolve those key issues. And I think that if there is agreement on that and if there is an agreement, as I say, on those two fixed points of reference – on Israel and on the Palestinian state – I think that we could start to make a great deal more progress. Sorry, sir.

**QUESTION:** Mr Prime Minister, Tony Blair, many Arabs and Moslems feel a kind of frustration and oppression and injustice because of the non-implementation of Israel into the United Nations resolution and because of the double standards. Do you, Mr Prime Minister, have a plan, especially the European Union, to address this issue – this very sensitive issue — and which really is the source of tension in the region? Thank you.

**PRIME MINISTER BLAIR:** Well, first of all, I want to say this very directly to public opinion here – and we should never forget, coming from my country, that public opinion in your country may be in a different place from public opinion in Britain or Europe or the United States of America – but I hope whatever part of the world we're in we can agree on this: what happened on 11 September cannot be excused and neither can those that carried out the 11 September attack, in which, I may say, thousands of innocent people — Christians, Jews, Moslems, people of no faith at all — died. That cannot be excused on the basis of any court and, as the President said a moment or two ago, there are always people — the extremists always want to use a cause as cover for the extremist acts that they carry out.

Now, it is also important — so I hope that condemnation is accepted by everyone and that no one should think that the people that carried out the 11 September attack represent, in any shape or form, true Arab or Moslem opinion. And that's an important statement. But of course we understand that there is legitimate concern about the breakdown of the Middle East Peace Process and a desire to get that started again. And we understand that and what you have got to understand from us is that we know there is a serious issue here that must be resolved. And we are willing to put all our energy and ability into trying to resolve it.

Now it's not for me to come here and issue plans and so on but it is for me to come here and say to people very clearly, "We want to try and resolve this issue. We want to get the Middle East Peace Process started again. Give us the opportunity of doing that by making sure that the conditions in which people can talk again, and of which dialogue is the way forward, can be created." And that's why I say to you that the violence from whatever quarter has to end. And I understand the different perspectives there will be between Syria and Britain or between Syria, obviously, and Israel. There will be fundamental differences of perspectives. But we both, in the end, know there is no alternative but to us sitting down and working out these differences, not by violence or by terrorism of whatever form but by partnership and by trying to resolve the issues constructively. And I think that can happen. And one of the reasons for us coming here – and I say this to you again, absolutely openly – it is difficult because of the history and the differences to come here, to have a press conference such as this but I happen to believe that if anything good can come out of the terrible events of the 11 September, it is an attempt to find new understanding and a new way forward to resolve the differences that we have. Now maybe we won't be able to but let's at least try. And let's at least try doing so, understanding the perspective from which the other person comes.

Okay? Yeah, I don't mind. Yeah — I can take another one, if you want. Well, this lady here. I should

say this is the generosity of the president that is allowing this! (laughter)

**QUESTION:** Mr Prime Minister, I was very interested in what you said about the military action in Afghanistan. Are you now requesting, British Prime Minister, to stop the military action and would you go so far as to define it, in a way, as a form of terrorism?

**PRESIDENT ASSAD (via interpreter):** We are not asking for anything and we are not a party to it in order to ask for putting an end to it but we have a perspective, we have a point of view, a general point of view about this war and about any other war. The history of Syria stretches for 6,000 years, 4,000 years before Christ, and the Assyrians were great fighters and that then since that time until now, there is a defence of Syrian territory. But there was — that **Syria was never an aggressor or an occupier of any other country or killing of any innocent citizens. This is a principle, a Syrian principle. But, at the same time, we cannot accept what we see every day on television screens, killing the innocent civilians [in Afghanistan]. There are hundreds now who are dying every day. I don't think anybody in the West accepts or agrees to that.**

**QUESTION:** (Several inaudible words) Mr Prime Minister, some voices in Europe after 11 September are asking for closing the frontier in the way of Arabs and Moslems. How do you see these races called and what are you doing towards them?

**PRIME MINISTER BLAIR:** Well, as you probably know, just as Syria has some 2 million Christians, we have many, many Moslems in Britain. Millions of Moslems live in Europe and we defend, absolutely and totally, their rights to exist free from racism or stigmatising of any kind at all. There are many, many Moslems indeed, who live in the United States of America and I think what is important is that one of the common values that we should stand for in the aftermath of the 11 September is a complete rejection of all forms of racism, of religious intolerance, of discrimination against people, whatever their race or religion or creed.

Just to say, in respect of the action in Afghanistan, we understand as well the issue and opinion here about the nature of the action we take but I would just like to say this to you: the action that we take is designed, in so far as we possibly can, to minimise civilian casualties. The action that was taken on the 11 September was action designed to maximise the number of civilian casualties. So whatever the differences again of perspective there, we too want to see this action brought to an end as swiftly as possible but it can be done at any point in time that the Taliban regime and the al-Qaida network shut down the network of terror there.

**PRESIDENT ASSAD (via interpreter):** We thank you very much and, as I said to Mr Prime Minister at the end of our meeting, however bloody the picture might be, we can extract some light out of it if we enjoin (?) the will (?) and the media can participate in that directly and in a helpful way, particularly in the West, so we would like the media in the West to play a very effective role in this crisis. Thank you very much. \_\_\_\_\_

“[British Prime Minister Tony Blair] has not only embarrassed himself, but he has also made life difficult for moderate Arab leaders like President Mubarak of Egypt. [...] I think the decision to have a public press conference in Damascus was extremely ill-advised, because the outcome was entirely predictable. You cannot have a public press conference with [Syrian] President Assad in Damascus without him using it as an opportunity to attack Britain and to attack the West. London must have known in advance. They should have conducted these matters as they did in Saudi Arabia, as a much more private session.”[Former British Defence Minister (1992–1995) and Foreign Minister (1995–1997) Malcolm Rifkind, 2 November 2001]

source: [Rifkind attacks Blair's 'unwise' mission to the Middle East](#), Daily Telegraph, 3 November 2001

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### **Flashback to 2003:**

“[W]e have maintained the understanding that in bad days the two allies need to act shoulder-to-shoulder. Turkey has indeed been alongside the United States in nearly every major military conflict, from Korea to the Gulf War, from Bosnia to Somalia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. (\*)

Based on an urgent U.S. request on March 19, [2003] we reapplied to the National Assembly [i.e. Turkey's parliament] to get authorization for the opening of Turkish air space to the coalition forces led by the U.S. The Assembly approved this request on March 20, the day the war began in Iraq. Turkish airspace was made available to the coalition forces on the very next day.”[Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, [My Country Is Your Faithful Ally and Friend](#) , Wall Street Journal, 31 March 2003.Mr Erdogan's article was published 11 days after the launch of the Anglo-American-led invasion of Iraq.]

(\*) Mr Erdogan refers to Turkey's participation in U.S.-led wars against Korea (1950), Iraq (1991-), Bosnia (1994), Somalia (1993), Serbia (1999) and Afghanistan (2001-)

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