

# Syria President al-Assad Interview: “We Focus Today on Getting Rid of Terrorists and their Ideology”

"We can make Syria much better than before the crisis"

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*President Bashar al-Assad has given an interview to the Italian Rai News 24 TV channel in which he stressed Syria's commitment to the international agreement on the prohibition of chemical weapons and its determination to go ahead with the political solution and halting violence.*

*The following is the full text of the interview:*

Rai News: Mr. President, thanks for having us here. It's a very important moment, because the UN Security Council just approved with unanimity a resolution asking Syria to eliminate completely its chemical weapons. Are you going to comply with this?

President al-Assad: Actually, we joined the international agreement for preventing the use and acquirement of chemical weapons before that resolution came to light. The main part of the Russian initiative is based on our will to do so. So, it's not the resolution. Actually, it's about our will. Of course, we have the will, because in 2003 we had a proposal in the United Nations Security Council, to get rid of those weapons in the Middle East, to have a chemical weapons free zone in the Middle East. So, of course we have to comply; this is our history: to comply with every treaty we sign.

Rai News: So, with no limit to any extent?

President al-Assad: According to every chapter in the agreement. We don't have any reservations. That's why we decided to join the agreement.

Rai News: How do you think you will organize this kind of dismantling, which is very complicated?

President al-Assad: This question should be directed to the organization itself. Of course our role is to offer the data and to facilitate their procedures, which is available so far. But I think it's about the technical side or aspect of the implementation, about how to reach those places, especially when you have terrorists who could put any obstacle, and about how to dismantle and get rid of those materials.

Rai News: Let me just speculate on this. It means you're going to help them and protect them. Because now security is a very important issue here in Syria.

President al-Assad: Of course. That's self-evident, yes.

Rai News: Let's go forward, Mr. President, trying to understand what's going on in Syria in the next few days, weeks and months, because now the attack which was very close a few weeks ago looks to be a little more distant. How are you going to work in this time? What is your personal roadmap?

President al-Assad: I'm sorry, for what?

Rai News: For political activities. I mean, how do you think you're going to use this time?

President al-Assad: Since the beginning of the crisis, we said political activity or solution, whatever you call it, is a very important part of the crisis. But when you have terrorism, you cannot expect the political solution to solve everything. In spite of that, you have to continue the political action, but there's no process yet. It's about the Syrians meeting around the table, discussing the political system that they want, the future of Syria, and whatever they agree upon, you'll have a referendum in order to have the endorsement of the Syrian people regarding whatever part of the future of Syria, whether it's the constitution, or laws, or whatever. That's what we've been doing since the beginning of the crisis, and this is the same action that we're going to continue with in the meantime.

*We discuss with every party of opposition but not armed groups*

Rai News: We'll go back later to the beginning of the crisis, but let us stay for a second on this. It means you're going to discuss with the opposition as well? Even with the armed opposition?

President al-Assad: No, when they are armed you don't call them opposition, you call them terrorists. Opposition is a political entity, is a political program, is a political vision; this is opposition. If you have arms and destroy and kill and assassinate, this is not opposition. This is what you call terrorism all over the world and in every other country. So, we can discuss with every party in the opposition. Regarding the militants, if they give up their arms, we'll be ready to discuss with them anything like any other citizen.

Rai News: So, we arrive close to Geneva 2, the peace talks, because Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the UN, said that it's very likely in November there will be a second Geneva meeting. Are you planning to attend it personally?

President al-Assad: That depends on the framework of the Geneva meeting. So far, that conference is not clear: what kind of conference, who's going to attend, what the criteria are for this conference. So, we have to be ready as government, but we cannot decide who's going to head the delegation until we have, let's say, the framework, the clear framework and the criteria.

Rai News: So, let me just ask you: which kind of framework would convince you to go there?

President al-Assad: As I said, any political party could attend that conference, but we cannot discuss, for example, al-Qaeda and its offshoots and organizations that are affiliated to al-Qaeda, for example, terrorists. We cannot negotiate with the people who ask for foreign intervention and military intervention in Syria.

Rai News: May I just name Qatar and Saudi Arabia?

President al-Assad: Let me be frank with you; they are client states, so I'm talking about states now. If you want to talk about states, they are client states; their master is the United States. We all know that. So, if the United States is attending, this is the main partner, and the others are accessories. If you want to talk about Syrian parties, regardless of their names, I'm talking about their behavior during the crisis. That's what we can discuss - their behavior.

Rai News: Since the situation on the ground is very complicated, could you also accept the idea of some international forces, like interposition on the ground, to try to stabilize in a way the situation?

President al-Assad: It doesn't work, because we're not talking about two countries fighting each other, like, for example, Syria and Israel, where you have a frontline, a clear frontline, where you can have the United Nations forces on both sides of the borders or the frontier, let's say, or the armistice line. It's completely different. You are talking about gangs; they could exist everywhere in Syria, within any city, where you don't have a frontier or clear lines. So, even if you want to suppose that you can accept that idea - which is not acceptable for us - but if you want to accept it, where can you position those troops? No-one can draw a map. You need a clear map. There is no clear map. There are gangs coming from everywhere, and they are terrorists who should be fought, not isolated from the Syrian troops.

*We support any country that would like to help the Syrians*

Rai News: We were talking about Geneva 2, and I was thinking about Europe and the role of Italy in this kind of process. Do you see any role for Italy in this?

President al-Assad: Again, let me be very bold here, very blunt. If we want to discuss the role of Italy, we should see it in the light of the European role. Is Italy independent from the European role? If not, who's leading the European role? And, we have to discuss the relation between the European role and the American. Is Europe independent from the American policies today? I heard from many European officials that they are convinced about what we are saying, but they cannot announce it. This is not the first time, not only during this crisis. So, any role should be looked at in the light of two things: the credibility of that role, and second, the relation between the individual or the country or the government, let's say, with the different parties. Now, our reality today is that most of the European countries adopted the American, let's say, practice in dealing with different countries since George Bush came to his position more than ten years ago. When they have a problem or disagreement with any other country, they cut off all kinds of relations. So, if you want to play a role, how can you play a role where you don't have relations? How can you build credibility when you don't have relations? Regarding the credibility, how can you talk about the credibility of any European country now when they talk about humanitarian aid and at the same time they establish the worst embargo we've ever seen since the existence of Syria after the independence? Many things have to be discussed before asking for a role. We welcome any role. We support any country that would like to help the Syrians in their endeavor, but we cannot just ask for a role without having the foundation of that role. So, to be frank, most of the European countries today, they don't have the ability to play that role because they don't have the different factors that could make them succeed and could make them efficient and effective in playing that role.

*We trust the Iranians and they, like the Syrians and many other countries, don't trust the Americans*

Rai News: But things look to change quite quickly these days, because just this phone call between President Obama and Iranian President Rouhani, and so it looks like the balance in the region in some way is changing. Isn't it going to affect in some way what is happening in Syria?

President al-Assad: I think it's going to affect positively for many reasons. First of all, Iran is our ally. Second, because we trust the Iranians. Third, because the Iranians, like the Syrians, like many countries in the world, don't trust the Americans, and I think many of the American allies don't trust the American administrations. So, for the Iranians to move closer to the Americans is not just a naïve move; it's a well-studied step that's based on the experience of the Iranians with the United States since the revolution in 1979. But if the Americans are honest about this rapprochement, I think the results will be positive regarding the different issues, not only the Syrian crisis, including every problem in the region.



Rai News: You know that in the day of the crisis and I mentioned the attack was so close. An important action was taken by Papa Francesco, Pope Francis, against the war. And now, speaking to the Christian minority here, they are all very scared. What is going to be your attitude towards minorities like Christians in the next few years?

*The crisis is not only a regional issue but should be international issue especially for Italy and the Vatican*

President al-Assad: Syria is a melting pot. It existed like this, like it is today because it is a melting pot with multifarious cultures for centuries, before Christianity and after Christianity, before Islam and after Islam. If you have any change, dramatic change, in the demographic and social fabric of the Syrian society, you're going to have a big problem in the future regarding the future of Syria. I don't know what kind of problem, because it's more complicated than anyone would think, and that will affect the other countries in the region. So, Syria is a secular country and the Syrian society is a secular society. Secular means to deal with every citizen, regardless of their religion, sect and ethnicity. So, I think technically these minorities in Syria, especially Christians, in light of what is happening recently – burning churches, attacking Christian villages, expelling Christians from their houses and homes – in light of this, dealing with this crisis is not a Syrian issue, it's not only a regional issue, it should be an international issue, especially for Italy and for the Vatican.

*Syrian Army didn't use chemical weapons at all, we have every evidence that the armed groups have used them*

Rai News: So, Mr. President, these have been very complicated weeks. The escalation has started with the infamous 21st August attack. Can we go back to that allegation about the chemical attack; which is your version, because you were speaking about having different evidence. UN inspectors are here working, can you help us understanding your version about this?

President al-Assad: Let me tell in you in brief. First, let's start by saying the Syrian Army didn't use it at all. It never arranged to use chemical weapons during the crisis, and we have

every evidence that the gangs have used this.

Now, why the Syrian Army didn't use it? Logically and realistically, you don't use it when you're in advancement. The army was advancing. Why to use it? You didn't use it for two and a half years while you had many difficult situations in different areas in Syria, you had much more terrorists facing you in other places more than Damascus. Why didn't we use it? Why only in that place?

Second, the story now, or the American narrative; we invited the delegation to come to Syria, which is responsible for investigating the use of chemical weapons, before that incident, and the day they arrived, the second day, the Syrian Army used chemical weapons. Is that plausible? You cannot believe this story. Why, when we invited the delegation to come in March, why did the Americans put obstacles, and why did they accept that recently before the incident, and when they arrived, the attack happened? You cannot use it in a city where you can have tens of thousands of casualties including the army. The most important thing is that nobody verified the veracity of the videos and the photos, no-one, because in many places, the same pictures of the same children were used in different photos in different places, and you can find those pictures on the internet, they've been circulating on the internet.

On the other side, we have complete evidence, like the materials, containers that the terrorists used, we have the confessions of some of the terrorists that conveyed chemical materials from neighboring countries, and you have the indication that the interest of whoever committed this crime wasn't the Syrian Army; it was the terrorists. So, that's the whole story.

Rai News: Is there even the slightest chance or possibility that someone inside your circle or the army did it against your permission, against you, and then maybe see him defect in a few months? It's a very complicated crisis, so we're allowed to use speculations.

President al-Assad: It's a weapon of mass destruction, it's chemical. It's like if you say that somebody in a nuclear country wanted to use nuclear weapons without the authority of his master. You cannot believe this. This is a very naïve story. This could be a children's story. It's not a grenade ;you put it in your pocket and throw it on everyone. The process of using the chemical weapons if you have a war with any enemy and if you want to use it is very complicated, it's under strict procedure because it's complicated technically first of all to activate the material itself. This is first. Second, not a single unit in the Syrian Army has chemical weapons anyway; you have specialized units, and if you want to use it, these specialized units should join the army in order to use the chemical weapons. So, again, this is a children's narrative.

*We dealt with the situation from the beginning according to the constitution*

Rai News: So, since we're going back in time, let's go to the beginning of the crisis. At the time, you acted in a tough way against any sign of opposition. Do you have any kind of regret of the way everything began?

President al-Assad: We have to define the word "tough" because we dealt with the situation according to the constitution. It's like, if you say, the Americans sent the army to Los Angeles in 1995. Do you call it tough, or do you call it that they sent the army to fight the rebels? So, according to the constitution we should have fought the terrorists, because from

the very first week, we had many victims from the army and the police, from the very first few weeks. So, that's normal, what we did, according to the constitution. This is the job of the government. If you talk about mistakes committed on the ground that could happen anywhere in the world. In the UK a few years ago, they shot a Brazilian guy by mistake, so that could happen anywhere. So, policy is different from the practice in many places in the world.

Rai News: But, just remaining on the political field, don't you think that you had the chance to do something more at the time? Like doing something more, maybe change, even politicians sometimes can admit some mistakes.

President al-Assad: Even if you want to look at your mistakes when you do it, and every human will do mistakes every day, that's normal, but how can you judge your mistake? After the end of the event, not during the event. So, we are still in the middle of the crisis. You can judge that at the end of the crisis. This is where we can revise our action, this is where the people can criticize us on, let's say, objective and methodical basis, not in an arbitrary way.

Rai News: Did you ever think to leave the power for the sake of your country? Did you ever consider the chance to leave your country just if the exchange was peace and stability for your people?

President al-Assad: It depends on the "if." If my quitting of my position would make the situation better, the answer would be very simply, without reluctance, yes. But there is the other question; would the situation be better? So, for me as president, so far, I have to be in my position because when you have a storm, you don't give up your position. You don't quit your position and leave your country in the middle of the storm. Your mission is to take your country to the shore, not to abandon the ship and the Syrian people.

Rai News: What would be the scenario in which you could decide that it's the right way for your ship to go to the shore, and then you decide to do something else?

*I should obey whatever the Syrian people want*

President al-Assad: The first part, two things. As I said earlier, the political dialogue is very important to discuss the future of Syria and the political system. The second one is to stop the violence by stopping the smuggling and sending the terrorist form outside Syria, stopping the financial support, stopping sending them armaments and every logistical support, because if we don't succeed here, we cannot in the political part of solving the problem. Second, after solving this problem, regarding me, my position, the only way is the ballot box, because this is where the Syrian people can tell whoever they want. And for me, I should obey whatever the Syrian people want. There's no other way in any country. I mean, it's not the decision of any group in Syria; it's the decision of every Syrian citizen.

Rai News: Are you going to be in the elections of 2014?

President al-Assad: Before the elections right away, if I feel that the Syrian people want me to be in that position, I will run. If not, I will not.

*Bad ideologies invaded the region, including Syria*

Rai News: Mr. President, I do remember the beginning of your presidency, and you were

looked to as a symbol of hope for Syria, because everybody knew that you knew the world, and you came here to give it a more modern and open society. Young people, intellectuals were looking at you in this way. Then, something happened in between. Do you think there's a chance you could do something so dramatically different to be seen again in that position, and not in the one in which you're seen in the very last days?

President al-Assad: You have to talk about the internal factors and the external factors, because you are part of a very complicated region in the world, so we'll be affected, and there's daily interaction with our periphery. The internal factor which is that when you talk about reform, it's not the reform of the president or the government; the government and the president should lead the reform, because it's about the whole society, because it's a matter of culture. It's not only laws and constitution. The laws and constitution are means for change, but the real change happens by the people themselves. So, according to our reality, when you talk about thousands of years of civilization, you are talking about mores, and customs, and traditions, and ethos, and folkways, and different things that are related to every society, and our society is very complicated because of this multifarious culture that we've had. So, it was moving forward. You cannot say that we didn't say anything. Some people say that it was false, some people say that it was too slow; this is subjective. Each one sees it in his own way. But in the end, no-one can say that we are in our position, because we moved forward, could be slowly, but surely. This is the first part.

Second, you have to talk about external obstacles. When I became president, two months later, the Intifada in Palestine started that influenced every country in the Arab world. The peace process actually had failed just a few months before I became president, and there was a stalemate. Third, eleventh of September happened, and we had to pay the price, one of the countries that had to pay the price. They invaded Afghanistan; we were against. They invaded Iraq; we were against. And after 2003, after the invasion of Iraq, Syria had to pay the price, and there was an embargo by the Europeans and the West, and so on. There was only an artificial period of conciliation, let's say between Syria - which could be not the very precise word - but kind of rapprochement between Syria and the West and especially Europeans between 2008 and 2011. Why artificial? Because it was under the supervision of the Americans; it wasn't genuine, because they weren't independent. And now we have the crisis. When we talk about reform, especially when we talk about dramatic reform, you need a different atmosphere. You have to be comfortable economically, politically and ideologically. Don't forget in that regard one of the external and internal factors at the same time is the invasion of the bad ideologies to the region, including Syria, and I mean the ideology of al-Qaeda that invaded many communities in our region, including part of the Syrian society. You cannot talk about reform and democracy while the ideologies are single-minded ideologies that don't accept any other one, because democracy, real democracy, is about accepting the others. Start by accepting the other, first of all, especially in a diverse society. So, I can say that we are still having the same will to move forward in that regard according to our reality. So, the scope of the reform will be limited by our reality.

*The only option that's left for us is to defend our country*

Rai News: Very last question; if now the major threat looks to be over or a little lessened, what would you tell your people in terms of promise and pattern?

President al-Assad: I think the only thing that I can say now is one option that's left for us; which is to defend our country. So, first of all, we have to focus on getting rid of the terrorists, their terrorism and their ideology. Second, even if we get over this crisis, we have

so many things to manage after the crisis, the leftover of this crisis, especially the ideological, the psychological and the social consequences on this society, so we have a lot of work. But, I can say with confidence that we can make Syria much better than before the crisis.

Rai News: Even with reforms?

President al-Assad: Yeah, of course. We need the reform. Without reform, we cannot. The reform is a very part of what I'm talking about. Actually, it's the major axis of making Syria better, that's for sure, but doesn't mean to be the hope in that regard of foreign countries or foreign people; I could be the hope of the Syrians, not any other one.

Rai News: I wish you all the best. Thank you very much, Mr. President. Thank you for your time and for hosting us here.

President al-Assad: Thank you for coming to Syria.

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