

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad on the "Role of Russia" in Syria War

Interview

By [Bashar al Assad](#) and [Zvezda TV Station](#)

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President Bashar al-Assad gave an interview to the Russian Zvezda TV Station, following is the full text.

Journalist: Mr. President, thank you very much for giving us this opportunity and meeting with us. We are here in Syria on the fifth anniversary of the start of Russian military operations on the territories of your country, the operation which aimed at liberating Syria from terrorism. That's why we want to discuss with you and sum up the outcomes of these events.

President Assad: You are welcome in Syria. It's my pleasure to meet you today and to give this interview to your respectable TV station.

Question 1: Mr. President, if we look back at the events which happened five years ago, how do you describe the situation which existed in Syria in 2015? Did you hope to get outside help then?

President Assad: In order to sum up the position at that time, I can say that it was very dangerous. The terrorists were advancing in different regions of Syria and occupying cities, with direct support from the United States, France, the UK, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia; in addition to the indirect support from other Western countries.

This dangerous situation in Syria was the subject of discussions between us and the Russian military and political leadership, particularly after 2014 when ISIS started operating and occupying large areas in the Syrian steppe. We were hoping, of course, to receive help for a number of reasons. First, the political position of Syria is important, and consequently any disturbance in this region will spread throughout the Middle East and also affect other regions. The struggle for Syria dates back to prehistoric times because of its importance, this is nothing new. The other reason is that the terrorism, which Syria is fighting, is the same terrorism which kidnapped the children of the Beslan school in 2004, and it is the same terrorism which attacked the Moscow theater and killed innocent people. This is a global terrorism and therefore it is in Russia's interest, first to strike at this terrorism in Syria, and second to preserve this stability which might affect other countries' interests, including Russia's own.

Question 2: If we compare the situation that existed five years ago with the situation now, what is your assessment of what Russia is doing, the role of the Ministry of Defense, and what the Russian troops are doing, operating here for the past five years on the frontline in the war on terrorism?

President Assad: There is no doubt that the Russian Army is highly advanced technically, this has been proven and has become evident during the war. It is also highly professional, in terms of identifying its goals accurately and proceeding with determination to achieve them. With regards to the Russian military personnel that we have engaged with at all levels from officers to soldiers, they have worked incessantly; for example, when the battles were fierce, Russian pilots would start their air raids at three in the morning, before sunrise, and would sometimes continue late into the night. They had no time to rest. The Russian Army has of course made sacrifices, some of its members have been martyred on Syrian territory.

The Russian Ministry of Defense – which is the umbrella under which these fighters operate – in its military and political capacity, has shown a great degree of credibility. It would have been difficult to carry out these joint military operations between our two armies, had it not been for the credibility of the Russian Defense Ministry which was made evident by their transparency, clarity and integrity in everything that we agreed and implemented together during the past five years. This sums up the impressions of many Syrian military personnel in their relations with their Russian counterparts. I would like to add a final point: The Russian people have always been proud of their army, but after all these battles, they have every right to be even prouder of its great achievements.

Question 3: Thank you very much for these words. Let's go back to the cooperation between the Russian and the Syrian armies. Since we have talked about this, the Syrian Army has also changed a lot during the past five years. What are the areas of expertise which the Syrian experts, the Syrian military, have acquired through their interaction with the Russian military and the Russian Defense Ministry?

President Assad: There is no doubt that the Russian Army possesses a wide range of expertise. This dates back to the Great Patriotic War during which it acquired military expertise in a conventional war, in addition to the expertise it acquired during the Chechen War. That was an unconventional war and similar to the one we are fighting today, in the sense that it was supported by foreign powers in order to weaken Russia and perhaps even with the objective of dividing it. It involved terrorist groups which appeared in different forms as sleeper cells; everything in the Chechen War was unconventional.

We also have a lot of experience, albeit different. Our experience in fighting terrorism dates back to the second half of the 1970s and continued into the early 1980s; it was also a fight against extremist terrorist groups. However, the war we are currently fighting is similar to the Chechen War in that it is unconventional and they are being supported by foreign powers; they are less than an army but more than sleeper cells.

Therefore, merging the Russian and Syrian expertise in dealing with terrorism was undoubtedly very important, especially since during this time (past five years), the terrorists have developed their techniques in ways which are outside of our expertise. This means that there are lessons for both armies to learn from in dealing with terrorism. It is safe to say that militarily it was a very rich experience; and since terrorism has not ceased, there are always new lessons to learn, especially since no battle is the same. No doubt that

bringing together the vast experience and expertise of both the Syrian and Russian Armies proved to be very useful, especially for us in Syria.

Question 4: You know that in the end there are similarities between our two countries in many ways. Syria has for many centuries been at the crossroads of the interests of different countries, or let's say different powers. Russia, too, throughout its history, has fought many wars. But we have never started a war. The enemy has always come to us. Since you have touched on this subject, our country celebrates this year the 75th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War. In that war, which had a horrible impact on the Russian people, the turning point was the battle for Stalingrad, after which the offensive started westward. We were able to expel (excuse me for the expression) the fascists from our country. Can we compare that to what happened to the Syrian people, I mean the battle for liberating Aleppo, which is often described as the Syrian Stalingrad. What is the impact of liberating Aleppo on the process of liberating Syria from terrorism?

Image on the right: Russian military inspect suspected chemical weapons workshop in Aleppo, November 14, 2016 © / Ruptly



President Assad: You are asking about a very important juncture in the Syrian war - the battle for Aleppo. The comparison you are making is familiar to Syrians because Aleppo was besieged for more than two years. During most of that time it was a complete siege, and so if it was possible to bring in foodstuffs or basic necessities, it was done at a high risk through corridors that were constantly under terrorist fire with no certainty of delivery. There was no electricity, no water, no basic supplies; nevertheless, the people of Aleppo were steadfast throughout the battle.

So, I believe that the importance of the comparison lies first in the siege and also in the steadfastness of the people. When you referred to Stalingrad, you highlighted the steadfastness of the people before you mentioned the military victory; in other words, without the steadfastness of the people of Stalingrad, the Russian army wouldn't have been able to launch a great offensive. The same also applies to Syria; without the steadfastness of the people of Aleppo, it wouldn't have been possible for the Syrian Army to prepare for such a major battle.

Coincidentally, a further comparison is that in Stalingrad, the army kept moving west until the end of World War II. In Aleppo too, the army moved west; and to continue the process of liberation towards Idlib, we must also continue to move westward.

Both Aleppo and Damascus are the two largest Syrian cities, and so Aleppo has a political, economic, and military importance. There is no doubt that in terms of strategic outcomes, the battle of Aleppo was very important, regardless of the surface area or the number of

fighters. Its outcome was decisive and changed the course of the war in Syria; and therefore, I believe that militarily and politically, the situation after the battle of Aleppo, was very different to that before the battle. So, the comparison you have made is correct, after taking into account of course the difference in surface areas between the two countries.

Question 5: This battle had great dimensions for Syria, and also incurred huge losses. It played an essential role in changing the course of events. Mr. President, based on the agreement which was signed between Russia and Syria in your country, today there are two Russian military bases, Hmeimim and Tartous. In your opinion, what is the role that these two bases will play in providing security in Syria today? And what is the role that they will play in the future?

President Assad: The Russian military role in Syria – particularly the role of military bases – can be viewed from two perspectives; the first is fighting terrorism, which we call international terrorism. This will end one day or at least it will be weakened as a result of the continuing battles to eliminate it; so, what comes after this terrorism? The other perspective is related to the role of Russia in the world. Today, we live in an international jungle; we do not live under international law. The reason why we live in this jungle is that for a quarter of a century there has been no international balance. International balance requires a Russian role: politically – in international organizations, and militarily – through military bases.

How do we benefit from this situation? Syria, as a small country and like many small countries, and possibly even most countries around the world, will all benefit from this international balance. In that sense, Syria will benefit indirectly from this new balance.

Therefore, we shouldn't have a narrow view of the Russian presence to only fighting terrorism, because the time frame of the base, or the agreement, is 45 years. Terrorism will not continue to exist for 45 years, so what comes after terrorism? There is an important Russian role necessary for international balance in which military presence in different parts of the world plays an essential part. Of course, when the West abandons the use of military force to create problems around the world, Russia might not need these bases, but for now, Russia and the world need the balance that I have mentioned.

Question 6: Mr. President, let's talk about those who constantly violate and ignore international law, and you know who I'm talking about. You are the elected President of the Syrian Arab Republic. You led the war on terrorism. The law is on your side, and the people are behind you; nevertheless, we constantly hear some Western leaders making bad statements such as: "Assad must leave." We remember very well how Barack Obama talked about this. Unfortunately, the same is being repeated now by Donald Trump. Recently, a book was published in the United States, Fear: Trump in the White House, by famous American journalist Bob Woodward, in which he states that in 2017, after the missile attack on Syria, Trump wanted to assassinate you, and I quote: "Let's kill him! Let's go in. Let's kill the lot of them." How do you comment on that? What did you do? Why do they demonize you?

President Assad: First of all, regarding the statements which always call for the removal of the president: The United States is used to having presidents – let's say, as American agents, in the sense that it appoints them – and consequently it tells them: now you stay. And when their role comes to an end, it tells them: go. They are used to that. I am not one of those (presidents), and consequently all the statements they make do not concern us at

all. They do not bother us, and we do not care about them. This is an American discourse directed at the Americans themselves.

Question 7: Aren't you vexed by the West's disregard for its relationship with you, which can sometimes be rude?



President Assad: No, no, because it is less important than warranting one's concern about it and I'll tell you why. If we look at Trump's recent statements quoted in the book you mentioned, they are neither surprising nor new. The American policy since the Cold War, and even since the end of World War II up until today, is a policy of hegemony, of coup d'états, of assassinations and wars. So, this is normal, Trump hasn't said anything new.

On the contrary, we have to recognize that Trump has an important merit, which is exposing the American regime. For us, it was already exposed, but it was hiding behind some pretty masks - like democracy, human rights, and other similar things. Trump is frank. He says, "this is what we do." So even if Trump doesn't say it, we must know that it is part of their policy and part of their thinking. The United States does not accept partners in the world, and consequently does not accept independent states, including in the West. The West is a satellite of the United States, not its partner. They are not independent. The Americans do not accept an independent individual or an independent state. They do not even accept Russia, which is a superpower, to be independent. They do not accept you even in history; they even deny your role in eliminating Nazism, as if Russia had no role in that.

So, if they haven't accepted Russia in the past, why would they accept it in the present? And if they haven't accepted the large Russian state as independent, would they accept Syria, a smaller country, as an independent state? This is the problem with the Americans: they do not accept any individual who acts in the best interest of his country, any individual who respects himself, or maintains an independent national decision.

Question 8: Yes, this is another similarity between our two countries. Well, can we talk about the process of granting amnesty to members of the armed groups. How is the process of reconciliation between the opponents going? In July, parliamentary elections were held in which the ruling coalition won. We congratulate you on that, but it is clear that the problem of the opposition is still there.

I still remember when the Geneva talks were conducted, representatives of the government and the opposition were brought into the meeting halls from different doors, so that they do not fight among themselves. How is this process going now? What is new about the constitutional committee? What is the role of the international mediators in this process? The role of the United Nations? What is the role of Russia? And whom do you personally

trust in this process?

President Assad: Concerning the negotiations, Russia and Iran play an important role in supporting these negotiations and moving them forward in order to try and achieve something, albeit partially – because the negotiations will take a long time. But let's be frank. When we talk about another party which we call "the opposition" – and you have opposition in your country – a prerequisite of the opposition is that it should be patriotic, and it should come from within the Russian people and represent at least part of them. However, when you, as a Russian citizen, know that this opposition, or this individual, is linked to a foreign intelligence agency, you do not call them opposition, because opposition is linked to patriotism.

With regards to what is happening in the negotiations, there is a party supported by the Syrian government because it represents its views. However, there is another party which has been chosen by Turkey, which is not a Syrian party. Turkey, and those countries behind it, like the United States and others, have no interest in reaching any genuine results in the deliberations of the committee. They are seeking to weaken and dismantle the state; this is exactly what has happened in other regions where the United States interferes and imposes a constitution that leads to unrest and chaos instead of stability.

This is something we do not accept and we will not negotiate over things which undermine Syria's stability. That's why if we really want the negotiations to produce results, all those individuals need to take their cue from what the Syrian people, in their different sections and political affiliations, want. I believe that the coming rounds of negotiations will show this more clearly. If the dialogue is Syrian-Syrian, it will succeed. But as long as there is foreign interference, the negotiations cannot succeed.

Question 9: If you don't mind, I would like to ask you a number of personal questions which have to do with the past in one way or another. Can you please tell us if you have thought, throughout all the horrible events that you and your country have experienced throughout the war, that you are hanging between life and death? Have you thought about that at any point in time?

President Assad: If you had come to Damascus before 2018, for instance, we would have been sitting here with shells falling around us from time to time. Death was a probability for any citizen, anyone walking in the street or riding a bus, in their car, going to work or going anywhere. They could have been hit by shells that could have caused death or injury. That was a probability during the war. But I think that humans, by nature, are capable of adapting to this situation, in any country or any place in the world. That's why life carried on in Damascus, and I personally went to work every day, never stopped at any time, even under the shelling. There was no other choice. One cannot hide; otherwise the terrorists would have achieved their objectives. Our strength is that life continued. That's why I think that with the passing of time, you stop thinking about it. Maybe, it becomes part of your subconscious mind, but not part of your daily thinking; it becomes something you get used to.

Question 10: Looking at your life today, as president of a state leading the fight against terrorism, is that the life you dreamt of at a certain point in time when you had a different type of life?

President Assad: This terrorism we are experiencing today has been attacking us since the

1950s. At every stage, it developed its techniques. In the 1950s it created chaos but it wasn't armed, in the 1960s it started to become armed. In the 1970s and 80s it became organized, and today this same terrorism has developed its tactics and gained political support, with backing from countries and banks.

Our fate with terrorism has existed even before I, and most Syrians, were born and therefore it should always remain in our minds. Even if we defeat this terrorism, we should always think that it could come back. For the simple reason that first and foremost, it is not about individuals in as much as it is about ideology; as long as the West continues to take reference from its colonial past and continues to think of hegemony, it is inevitable that it will continue to bring this terrorism back to life in other forms. We must think realistically that even if it was eliminated, it could appear later in different forms. That's why the battle for us, is against terrorist ideology before it is a battle against terrorists as individuals; when this ideology is eliminated, the West and Syria's enemies, will no longer have the tools to resurrect it.

Journalist: Do you think so?

President Assad: I do think so, because the West will not change in the foreseeable future. And also, because the intellectual war is more difficult than a military war and it takes longer to rehabilitate and equip new generations with the right kind of thinking: with non-extremist thought, non-fanatic thought, with open-mindedness. Just as this terrorist ideology has been developed since the 1960s; it took 50 years to reach the stage we are at. It does not appear and spread throughout the world overnight. Hundreds of billions have been spent to establish it and the West has been supporting it since the days of British rule, even before the American presence. They have supported religious extremism since the beginning of the 20th century; so, fighting it needs time.

Journalist: We hope for the best, and that with the help of God, and with open-mindedness, we will win together. Mr. President, thank you for meeting with us, and for the time that you have taken to answer our questions. Allow us to wish you and your family good health and well-being, and to wish Syria peace and prosperity. Thank you.

President Assad: Thank you; and I would like to take this opportunity to send my regards, through your programme, to the families of the Russian fighters in Syria. As I mentioned at the beginning, the Russian people are proud of what their army has achieved in Syria, but these families certainly have the right to be even prouder, than any other citizen, of the great achievements made by their sons in Syria; they have not only protected the Syrian people, but they have also protected their own families and their Russian compatriots.

Once again, you're welcome in Syria, and thank you.

Journalist: Thank you very much for these kind words.

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