

Interview with Syrian President Bashar al Assad, 31 October 2019

The Syrian President is interviewed by Al-Ikhabariya and Al-Sourya TV, 31 October 2019



Journalist: Hello and welcome to this special interview with the President of the Syrian Arab Republic, His Excellency Dr Bashar al-Assad. Thank you for receiving us Mr President. Your last interview with Syrian media was several years ago and therefore we have a lot of questions. We will begin with political questions and then move into internal issues.

President Assad: You are welcome, and as always let us speak with full openness.

Journalist: Mr President, thank you very much for receiving us. Since the political issues are pressing at the moment we will start with politics, Mr President. The United States announced a few days ago that the leader of the terrorist organization ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed. And it thanked Russia, Syria, Iraq, the Turks and the Kurds for helping kill Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Trump thanked Syria, but we have not heard any comment from Damascus. What is your take on Trump thanking Syria? Did Syria really take part in this operation?

President Assad: Absolutely not, we heard about this only through the media. Maybe, the reason behind including a number of countries as participants in this operation is to give it credibility so these countries will feel not embarrassed, but have the desire to be that they are part of a “great” operation, as the Americans have tried to portray it. And in this way, they are credited with fighting terrorism. We do not need such credit. We are the ones fighting terrorism. We have no relations and have had no contact with any American institutions.

More importantly, we do not really know whether the operation did actually take place or not. No aircraft were detected on radar screens. Why were the remains of Baghdadi not shown? This is the same scenario that was followed with Bin Laden. If there are going to use different pretexts in order not to show the remains, let us recall how President Saddam Husain was captured and how the whole operation was shown from A to Z; they showed pictures and video clips after they captured him. The same happened when they killed his sons several months later; they showed the bodies. So, why did they hide everything about the Bin Laden operation and now also the Baghdadi operation? This is part of the tricks played by the Americans. That is why we should not believe everything they say unless they come up with evidence. American politicians are actually guilty until proven innocent, not the other way around.

Journalist: Mr President, if Baghdadi has actually been killed, does it mean the end of his organization, or is it as usual that there will be new leaders and new organizations which are being prepared for the moment when the cards of their predecessors have been burned out?

President Assad: First, Baghdadi represents ISIS, and ISIS represents a type of doctrine, which is the extremist Wahhabi doctrine. This type of thought is more than two centuries old. As long as this thought is alive and has not receded, this means that the death of Baghdadi, or even the death of ISIS as a whole, will have no effect on this extremist thought.

Regarding Baghdadi as an individual, it is well-known that he was in American prisons in Iraq, and that they let him out in order to play this role. So, he is someone who could be replaced at any moment. Was he really killed? Was he killed but through a different method, in a very ordinary way? Was he kidnapped? Was he hidden? Or was he removed and given a facelift? God only knows. American politics are no different from Hollywood; it relies on the imagination. Not even science fiction, just mere imagination. So, you can take American politics and see it in Hollywood or else you can bring Hollywood and see it through American politics. I believe the whole thing regarding this operation is a trick. Baghdadi will be recreated under a different name, a different individual, or ISIS in its entirety might be reproduced as needed under a different name but with the same thought and the same purpose. The director of the whole scenario is the same, the Americans.

Journalist: Questions have been raised about the Russian-Turkish agreement, particularly the item related to maintaining the status quo in the region which was subject to the Turkish aggression, Tal Abyadh and Ras al-Ain with a depth of thirty-two kilometers. What some people understood from this was that it legitimized the Turkish occupation, particularly that the agreement did not include any Syrian role within these areas which were discussed in the agreement. What is your response to that?

President Assad: First, the Russian principles have been clear throughout this war and even before the Russian base that started supporting the Syrian army in 2015. These principles are based on international law, Syrian sovereignty and Syria's territorial integrity. This has not changed, neither before, nor after, nor with changing circumstances. However, Russian policy deals with the realities on the ground. These realities on the ground have achieved two things; the withdrawal of armed groups from the north to the south in coordination with the Syrian Army, and as such the advance of the Syrian Army to the north, to the area not occupied by the Turks. These two elements are positive, but they do not cancel out the negative aspects of the Turkish presence until they are driven out one way or another. This agreement is a temporary one, not permanent. If we take for example the de-escalation areas at a certain period of time, some people believed that they were permanent and that they will give terrorists the right to remain in their areas indefinitely. The fact was that it was an opportunity to protect civilians, and also to talk to the terrorists with the objective of driving them out later. So, we have to distinguish between ultimate or strategic goals on the one hand, and tactical approaches on the other.

In the short term, it is a good agreement – and let me explain why; the Turkish incursion, not only reflects Turkey's territorial greed but also expresses American desire. The Russian relationship with Turkey is positive because it reigns in Turkish aspirations. On the other hand, it outmaneuvers the American game in the north. Let me explain this. The recent German proposal which was immediately supported by NATO – and the Germans would not make this except on behalf of the Americans, NATO is the same thing as America. The proposal talked about restoring security to this region under international auspices. This means that the area would be outside the control of the Syrian state and thus making separation a reality on the ground. Through this agreement, the Russians reigned in the Turks, outmaneuvered the Americans and aborted the call for internationalization which was proposed by the Germans. That is why this agreement is a positive step. It does not achieve everything, in the sense that it will not pressure the Turks to leave immediately. However, it limits the damage and paves the way for the liberation of this region in the future, or the immediate future, as we hope.

Intervention: God willing

Journalist: Since you described the agreement as temporary, but Turkey, as we have known it, does not abide by agreements. Consequently, the question is what if Turkey continued to occupy the areas which it has controlled as a result of its recent aggression? You said repeatedly that the Syrian state will use every possible means to defend itself. But practically, did not the Russian-Turkish agreement prevent the ability to try and use such means?

President Assad: Let us take another example, which is Idlib. There is an agreement through the Astana Process that the Turks will leave. The Turks did not abide by this agreement, but we are liberating Idlib. There was a delay for a year; the political process, the political dialogue, and various attempts were given an opportunity to drive the terrorists out. All possibilities were exhausted. In the end, we liberated areas

gradually through military operations. The same will apply in the northern region after exhausting all political options.

We must remember that Erdogan aimed, from the beginning of the war, to create a problem between the Syrian people and the Turkish people, to make it an enemy, which will happen through a military clash. At the beginning of the war, the Turkish Army supported the Syrian Army and cooperated with us to the greatest possible extent, until Erdogan's coup against the Army. Therefore, we must continue in this direction, and ensure that Turkey does not become an enemy state. Erdogan and his group are enemies, because he leads these policies, but until now most of the political forces in Turkey are against Erdogan's policies. So, we must ensure not to turn Turkey into an enemy, and here comes the role of friends – the Russian role and the Iranian role.

Journalist: Picking up on this idea, Mr President, the actions taken by the Turks recently, and by Erdogan, in particular, like Turkishization, building universities, imposing the use of certain languages. These are actions taken by someone who is not thinking of leaving – just a follow up on your idea, since you said that they will leave sooner or later. What about these actions?

President Assad: If he was thinking of getting out, he would have left Idlib. You might say that there is no Turkish army, in the technical sense in Idlib. But we are in one arena, the whole Syrian arena is one – a single theatre of operations. From the furthest point in the south to the furthest point in the north Turkey is the American proxy in this war, and everywhere we have fought we have been fighting this proxy. So, when he does not leave after we exhaust every possible means, there won't be any other choice but war, this is self-evident. I am saying that in the near future we must give room to the political process in its various forms. If it does not yield results then this is an enemy and you go to war against it; there is no other choice.

Journalist: Nevertheless, some people said that the American withdrawal from northern Syria, after which came the Turkish aggression, and then the Russian-Turkish agreement. All of that came within an American-Russian-Turkish agreement. What do you say to that?

President Assad: This was meant to show that Russia accepted the Turkish incursion, or that Russia wanted to turn a blind eye in the fact that. In fact, it is not true. For over a year, the Russians were concerned about the seriousness of such a proposition. We all knew that the Turkish proposition was serious, but it was shackled by American orders or desires. Some people might criticize the Russians for this outcome, due to their position at the United Nations. As I said a short while ago, the Russians deal with realities on the ground, consequently, they try to ensure that all political conditions are in place in order to pave the way for their departure from Syria and limit the damage by the Turks or reign in the Turkish recalcitrance aimed at inflicting more damage and occupying more land. But the Russians were certainly not part of this agreement – Russian agreements are always public. The Russian-Turkish agreement was announced immediately, with all its items; the agreement between us and the Kurds, with Russian mediation and support was also made public right from the very beginning. There is no hidden agenda in Russian policies, which gives us assurances.

Journalist: But the American-Turkish meetings are not announced. You said repeatedly that Erdogan's objective, or creating the buffer zone, was Erdogan's main objective from day one of the war on Syria. President Obama refused to accept this buffer zone, while today we are seeing certain actions on the ground. Does this mean that Obama was better than Trump?

President Assad: We should not bet on any American President. First, when Erdogan says that he decided to make an incursion or that they told the Americans, he is trying to project Turkey as a super power or to pretend that he makes his own decisions; all these are theatrics shared between him and the Americans. In the beginning, nobody was allowed to interfere, because the Americans and the West believed that demonstrations will spread out and decide the outcome. The demonstrations did not spread as they wanted, so they shifted towards using weapons. When weapons did not decide the outcome, they moved towards the terrorist extremist organizations with their crazy ideology in order to decide the outcome militarily. They were not able to. Here came the role of ISIS in the summer of 2014 in order to disperse the efforts of the Syrian Arab Army, which it was able to do, at which point came the Russian intervention. When all bets on the field failed, it was necessary for Turkey to interfere and turn the tables; this is their role.

As for Trump, you might ask me a question and I give you an answer that might sound strange. I say that he is the best American President, not because his policies are good, but because he is the most transparent president. All American presidents perpetrate all kinds of political atrocities and all crimes and yet still win the Nobel Prize and project themselves as defenders of human rights and noble and unique American values, or Western values in general. The reality is that they are a group of criminals who represent the interests of American lobbies, i.e. the large oil and arms companies, and others. Trump talks transparently, saying that what we want is oil. This is the reality of American policy, at least since WWII. We want to get rid of such and such a person or we want to offer a service in return for money. This is the reality of American policy. What more do we need than a transparent opponent? That is why the difference is in form only, while the reality is the same.

Journalist: the leader of the dissolved Syrian Democratic Forces, Mazloum Abdi, made statements to the media in which he said that Trump promised them that before withdrawal he will contact the Russians to find a solution to the Kurdish question by making an agreement with the Russians and the Syrian state to give the Kurds an opportunity to defend themselves. Was there really such an agreement, and what is the fate of non-border regions in the Syrian Jazeera, the regions which were under the control of the armed militias called SDF? Have these regions been handed over to the Syrian state, and if so in what way? Is it only in the military sense; or ultimately has the return of the Syrian institutions to these regions taken place?

President Assad: Do you mean an American-Kurdish agreement?

Journalist: The Americans promised the Kurds to find a solution to their cause by influencing the Russians to reach an understanding with the Syrian state to give them an opportunity to defend themselves.

President Assad: Regardless of whether contact has been made or not, as I said before what ever the Americans say has no credibility, whether they say that to an enemy or a friend, the result is the same – it is unreliable. That is why we do not waste our time on things like this. The only Russian agreement with the Kurds was what we talked about in terms of a Russian role in reaching an agreement with Kurdish groups – we should not say with the Kurds, because this is inaccurate and we cannot talk about one segment – the groups which call themselves SDF with the Syrian Army to be deployed. Of course, the Syrian Army cannot be deployed only to carry out purely security or military acts. The deployment of the Syrian Army is an expression of the presence of the Syrian state, which means the presence of all the services which should be provided by the state. This agreement was concluded, and we reached most regions but not completely. There are still obstacles. We intervene because we have direct and old relations – before the Turkish incursion – with these groups. Sometimes they respond, in other places they don't. But certainly, the Syrian Arab Army will reach these areas simultaneously with full public services, which means the return of full state authority. I want to reiterate, that this should take place gradually. Second, the situation will not return as before. There are facts on the ground which need to be addressed, and this will take time. There are new facts related to people on the ground which took place when the state was absent. There are armed groups; we do not expect them to hand over their weapons immediately. Our policy should be gradual and rational, and should take the facts into account. But the ultimate goal is to return to the situation as it used to be previously which is the full control of the state.

Journalist: After everything that happened: they targeted the Syrian state, Syrian citizens, the Syrian Arab Army. Throughout the war years, they played a bad role and were American proxies, after all this, are we as Syrians able to live with the Kurds once again?

President Assad: To be accurate, this issue is raised repeatedly, and sometimes in private gatherings. And I know that part of your role is to repeat what you hear, regardless of personal conviction. What happened during this war is a distortion of concepts; to say that this group has a certain characteristic, negative or positive, is neither objective nor rational. It is also unpatriotic. Among the Kurds there were people who were American agents or proxies. This is true, but among the Arabs there were similar cases in the Jazeera area and in other areas in Syria. This applies to most segments of Syrian society. The mistake which was made was that this action was made by a group of Kurds who made themselves representatives, not only of the Kurds, but of the Arabs and others segments of society in al-Jazeera region. The Americans, through their support with weapons and money – of course the money is not American, it comes from some gulf

Arab states – helped establish the authority of these groups over all segments of the society, leading us to believe that those in the area were all Kurds. So, we are actually dealing with the various Kurdish parties. As for the Kurds themselves, most of them had good relations with the Syrian state, and they were always in contact with us and proposed genuine patriotic ideas. In some of the areas we entered, the reaction of the Kurds was no less positive, or less joyful and happy than the reaction of other people there. So, this evaluation is not accurate. Yes, very simply, we can live once again with each other. If the answer were no, it means that Syria will never be stable again.

Journalist: But what is the problem with the Kurds, even before the war? Where does the problem with them lie?

President Assad: Although we stood with these groups for decades, and we could have paid the price in 1998 through a military clash with Turkey because of them, we stood with them based on the cultural rights of these groups or of this segment of Syrian society. What do they accuse the Syrian state of? They accuse it of being Chauvinistic, and sometimes they accuse the Ba'th Party of being a Chauvinistic party although the census conducted in 1962 was not under the Ba'th Party, because it was not in power at the time. They accuse us of depriving this group of their cultural rights. Let us presume that what they say is correct. Can I, as an individual, be open and close-minded at the same time? I cannot. Can the state be open or tolerant and intolerant and close-minded at the same time? It cannot. If we take an example of the latest group which joined the Syrian fabric, the Armenians. The Armenians have been a patriotic group par excellence. This was proven without a shadow of doubt during the war. At the same time, this group has its own societies, its own churches and more sensitively, it has its own schools. And if you attend any Armenian celebration, a wedding, or any other event – and I used to attend such events because I used to have friends among them previously – they sing their traditional songs but afterwards they sing national, politically-inclined songs. Is there any form of freedom that exceeds this? The Syrian Armenians are the least, among other Armenians of the world, dissolved in society. They have integrated, but not dissolved into Syrian society. They have maintained all their characteristics. Why should we be open here and unopen with others? The reason is that there are separatist propositions. There are maps showing a Syrian Kurdistan as part of a larger Kurdistan. Now, it is our right to defend our territorial integrity and to be wary of separatist propositions. But we do not have a problem with Syrian diversity. On the contrary, Syrian diversity is rich and beautiful which translates into strength. We do not have an adverse view of this; but richness and diversity are one thing and separating and fragmenting the country is something else, something contrary. That is the problem.

Journalist: Just to pick up on this idea, Mr President, living with each other. In your answer, you said that we must ultimately live with each other. The problem here is not only with the Kurdish component. There were groups of the population who lived in different areas outside the control of the Syrian state for years. What about those? What is the state's plan to reintegrate them under the idea of living together, particularly the children among them, because with children we are talking about Syria's future generation? What is the plan for these people?

President Assad: Actually, the problem is primarily with children and then with young people in the second instance. There are several issues, one of which is that this generation does not know the meaning of the state and the rule of law. They have not lived under the state, they have lived under armed groups. But the worst and most dangerous impact is on the children, who in some areas have not learned the Arabic language, and others who have learned wrong concepts – extremist concepts or concepts against the state or the homeland and other concepts which were proposed from outside Syria and taught to them in formal school curricula. This was the subject of discussion during the past few weeks, particularly during the past few days, because the deployment of the Syrian Army in large areas in the northern regions highlighted this problem on a large scale. Currently ministries, particularly the Ministry of Education and also the Ministries of Defence and the Interior are studying this issue. I believe there will be a statement and a solution proposed shortly, albeit general in the first phase which will be followed by administrative measures in order to assimilate these people within the system of the Syrian state. For instance, who will enroll in the Syrian Army, who will enroll in the police, who will enroll in schools? Somebody who is twelve years old: how will they integrate into the Syrian school system if they know nothing of the curriculum? The same applies to those who are in primary schools. I believe the solution is to assimilate all within the national system, but there should be special measures in order to reintegrate them into this system, and I believe in the next few days we will have a final picture of this.

Journalist: returning to politics, and to the United States, in particular, President Donald Trump announced his intention to keep a limited number of his troops in Syria while redeploying some of them on the Jordanian borders and on the borders of the Israeli enemy, while some of them will protect the oil fields. What is your position in this regard, and how will the Syrian state respond to this illegitimate presence?

President Assad: Regardless of these statements, the reality is that the Americans are occupiers, whether they are in the east, the north or the south, the result is the same. Once again, we should not be concerned with his statements, but rather deal with the reality. When we are finished with the areas according to our military priorities and we reach an area in which the Americans are present, I am not going to indulge in heroics and say that we will send the army to face the Americans. We are talking about a super power. Do we have the capabilities to do that? I believe that this is clear for us as Syrians. Do we choose resistance? If there is resistance, the fate of the Americans will be similar to their fate in Iraq. But the concept of resistance needs a popular state of mind that is the opposite of being agents and proxies, a patriotic popular state which carries out acts of resistance. The natural role of the state in this case is to provide all the necessary conditions and necessary support to any popular resistance against the occupier. If we put to one side the colonial and commercial American mentality which promotes the colonization of certain areas for money, oil and other resources, we must not forget that the main agents which brought the Americans, the Turks and others to this region are Syrians acting as agents of foreigners – Syrian traitors. Dealing with all the other cases is just dealing with the symptoms, while we should be addressing the causes. We should be dealing with those Syrians and try to reformulate the patriotic state of the Syrian society – to restore patriotism, restore the unity of opinion and ensure that there are no Syrian traitors. To ensure that all Syrians are patriots, and that treason is no longer a matter of opinion, a mere difference over a political issue. We should all be united against occupation. When we reach this state, I assure you that the Americans will leave on their own accord because they will have no opportunity to remain in Syria; although America is a superpower, it will not be able to remain in Syria. This is something we saw in Lebanon at a certain point and in Iraq at a later stage. I think this is the right solution.

Journalist: Last week, you made a tour of the front lines in Idlib with which you surprised the Syrians and the world. Addressing the soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army, you said that the battle is in the east, but Idlib is an advanced outpost of the enemy in the west which aims at dispersing the forces of the Syrian Army. Some saw the visit as the go-ahead sign, or the zero hour for the coming battle of Idlib. Is it so?

President Assad: No, there was no link between my visit and the zero hour. First, I conduct tours every so often to the areas which are considered hot spots and dangerous, because these heroes are carrying out the most difficult of tasks, and it is natural for me to think of visiting them. This has been common practice for me; the visit to Idlib in particular was because the world perhaps believed that the whole Syria question is summed up in what is happening in the north, and the issue has now become a Turkish Army incursion into Syrian territory, and forgetting that all those fighting in Idlib are actually part of the Turkish Army, even though they are called al-Qaeda, Ahrar al-Sham and other names. I assure you that those fighters are closer to Erdogan's heart than the Turkish Army itself. We should not forget this, because politically and in relation to Turkey in particular, the main battle is Idlib because it is linked to the battle in the north-eastern region or the Jazeera region. This is the reason – I wanted to stress that what is happening in the Jazeera region, despite its importance and despite the wide area of operations does not distract us from the significance of Idlib in the overall battle.

Journalist: You say, Mr President, that there is no link between your visit to Idlib and the zero hour but is there a link between your visit to Idlib and the meeting which took place on the same day between Turkey and Russia?

President Assad: Actually, when I was there, I had forgotten completely that a summit was being held on the same day. I did not remember that. I knew that a summit would be taking place and that it would be on Tuesday but...

Journalist: But your statements gave the impression that it was a preemptive rejection or something against the meeting.

President Assad: That is true.

Journalist: Or against this meeting.

President Assad: Some articles and comments even said that there was a feeling of anger against the summit, and that the summit was against us. The fact is that I was not angry, and my statements against Erdogan are continuous. I said that he was a thief, and from the first days he started stealing everything related to Syria. So, he is a thief. I was not calling him names; I was describing him. This is an adjective and this description is true. What do you call somebody who steals factories, crops and finally land? A benefactor? He is a thief, there is no other name. Previously in my speech before the People's Assembly, I said that he is a political thug. He exercises this political thuggery on the largest scale. He lies to everyone, blackmails everyone. He is a hypocrite and publicly so. We are not inventing an epithet; he declares himself through his true attributes. So, I only described him

As to the agreement, as I said a while ago, we believe that Russian involvement anywhere is in our interest, because our principles are the same and our battle is one. So, Russian involvement will certainly have positive results and we started to see a part of that. Contrary to what you said, we were happy with this summit, and we are happy with the Russian-Turkish relationship in general, contrary to what some people believe, that the Russians are appeasing the Turks. It does not matter whether the Russians are appeasing the Turks or not or whether they are playing a tactical game with them. What is important is the strategy. That is why I can say that there is no link at all between my statements and the summit.

Journalist: Remaining with Idlib, but from a different perspective, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, and in an interview with a newspaper about the situation in Idlib, described it as complicated, and I'll mention the points he made: he called for a solution which guarantees the security of civilians. He also talked about the presence of terrorist organizations and the importance of avoiding an all-out military campaign which, in his opinion, will, far from solving the problem, have a serious humanitarian consequence. What do you think of what he said, and will the operation be postponed or stopped because of international pressure or based on Pedersen's remarks?

President Assad: If Pedersen has the means or the capacity to solve the problem without an all-out military operation, it will be good. Why does he not solve the problem? If he has a clear plan, we have no objection. It is very simple. He can visit Turkey and tell the Turks to convince the terrorists, or ask Turkey to separate the civilians from the militants. Let the civilians stay in one area and the militants in another. It would be even easier if he could identify who is a militant and who is not. Fighting terrorism is not achieved by theorizing, making rhetorical statements or by preaching. As for postponing, had we waited for an international decision – and by international decision I mean American, British, French and those who stand with them – we would not have liberated any region in Syria since the first days of the war. These pressures have no impact. Sometimes we factor in certain political circumstances; as I said, we give political action an opportunity so that there is no pretext, but when all these opportunities are exhausted, military action becomes necessary in order to save civilians, because I cannot save civilians when they are under the control of the militants. Western logic is an intentionally and maliciously up-side-down logic. It says that the military operation should be stopped in order to protect civilians, whilst for them the presence of civilians under the authority of terrorists constitutes a form of protection for the civilians. The opposite is actually true. The military intervention aims at protecting the civilians, by leaving civilians under the authority of terrorists you extend a service to terrorists and take part in killing civilians.

Journalist: You are not waiting for an international decision but are you waiting for a Russian one? Can the Russians delay the beginning of the military operation? We saw earlier that military operations were stopped in Idlib, to the extent that some people said that the Russians put pressure every time to stop the operations as a result of special understandings with the Turks. Is that true?

President Assad: "Pressure" is not the right word. We, the Russians and the Iranians are involved in the same military battle and the same political battle. We are always in talks with each other to determine the circumstances which allow for an operation to go ahead. On several occasions, we agreed on a specific timing for a certain operation, which was later postponed because of military or political developments. This dialogue is normal. There are issues we see on the internal arena, and there are issues seen by Iran on the

regional arena and there are those issues seen by the Russians on the international arena. We have an integrated approach based on dialogue. In the past month, I have held five meetings with Russian and Iranian officials, so less than a week apart. Between each two meetings there were military and political developments such that what had been agreed in the first meeting was then changed or modified in the second, third and fourth meetings and the last of which was yesterday. The fast pace of developments makes it necessary sometimes to postpone operations. On the other hand, we have contacts with civilians in those areas. We really try hard to make it possible for civilians to move from those areas into our areas in order to save lives; moreover, if a political solution was possible, and sometimes we succeeded in finding such a solution, it would save the lives of Syrian soldiers, which is a priority that we should not ignore. So, there are many elements, which are difficult to go into now, which affect this decision and postpone it; it is not a matter of pressure. The Russians are as enthusiastic about fighting terrorism as we are, otherwise why would they send their fighter jets? The timing depends on dialogue.

Journalist: But President Putin announced the end of major military operations in Syria. Would Russia be with us in Idlib? Would it take part in the military operation?

President Assad: Russia was with us in liberating Khan Skeikhoon and its environs; announcing an end to military operations does not mean an end to fighting terrorism. Indeed, the major battles have almost finished, because most areas either surrender voluntarily or are subject to limited operations. The Khan Sheikhoon operation might look on the map as a major battle, but there was in fact a collapse on the part of the militants. So, maybe this is what was meant by the end of the major operations. Their statements that Idlib should return under the control of the Syrian state and their determination to strike at terrorism have not changed.

Journalist: Remaining in Idlib and on the same point, because there is a lot being said about this. Concerning the terrorists in Idlib, and they are the same terrorists Pedersen talked about, how are they going to be handled? Are they going to be deported? There have been cases like this before: terrorists being deported from different regions in Syria to Idlib. Now, terrorists are in Idlib. Would the Turks accept the terrorists to be deported to Turkey, or how are they going to be dealt with?

President Assad: If Turkey does not accept that, it is Turkey's problem and it does not concern us. We are going to deal with them in the same way we have in the past. Some might ask: in the past there were areas to which terrorists were permitted to retreat to, but now there is no other place to which terrorists might be sent from Idlib. So, where should they go? If they do not go to Turkey, they have two options: either return to the Syrian state and resolve their issues or face war. There is no other choice, neither for us nor for them. These are the two only options.

Journalist: Some media outlets have circulated leaks about meetings with the Turks. Is that true, on what level, and what was the outcome of those meetings, if they had taken place?

President Assad: All those meetings were held between security officers but at different levels. Few meetings, probably two or three, were held in Kasab inside the Syrian borders or close to the joint borders, and one or more meetings were held in Russia. I do not recall the number exactly, because they took place in the space of the past two years. But there have been no real results. At least we had expected to reach a solution concerning the withdrawal agreed upon in Astana for fifteen kilometers west and north in the de-escalation zone in Idlib. It did not happen.

Journalist: So, you confirm that there have been meetings with the Turkish side, but that was before the agreement...

President Assad: Of course, there were tripartite meetings with Russian mediation and Russian presence. We insisted on the Russian presence because we do not trust the Turks, so that there are witnesses.

Journalist: not bilateral meetings?

President Assad: No, trilateral meetings.

Journalist: Trilateral, with the Russians present? Was that before the last Russian-Turkish meeting?

President Assad: Of course.

Journalist: Are you prepared today to sit with the Turks after the aggression and after the agreement?

President Assad: If you are asking me how would I feel if I, personally, had to shake hands with a person from the Erdogan group, or someone of similar leanings or who represents his ideology – I would not be honoured by such a meeting and I would feel disgusted. But we have to put our personal feelings aside when there is a national interest at stake. If a meeting would achieve results, I would say that everything done in the national interest should be done. This is the responsibility of the state. I do not expect a meeting to produce any results unless circumstances change for the Turks. And because the Erdogan-type Turks are opportunists and belong to an opportunist organization and an opportunist ideology, they will produce results according to changing circumstances, when they are under pressure, depending on their internal or external circumstances or maybe their failure in Syria. Then, they might produce results.

Journalist: The sensitive question in this regard is: the Turks are occupiers, so if I am willing, or if I have the chance, or if I believe that I might meet the Turks, the Turks are occupiers, exactly like Israelis, so it would be possible to meet the Israelis. This is a sensitive issue, but it is being raised.

President Assad: It was actually raised when we started these meetings: how can we meet occupiers in Afrin or other areas, even if there are not occupiers, they support terrorism; they are enemies in the national sense. The difference between them and Israel is that we do not recognize the legitimacy of its existence as a state. We don't recognize the existence of the Israeli people. There is no Israeli people except the one that existed for several centuries BC, now they are a diaspora who came and occupied land and evicted its people. While the Turkish people exist, and they are a neighbouring people, and we have a common history, regardless of whether this history is good or bad or in between; that is irrelevant. Turkey exists as a state and it is a neighbouring state. The Alexandretta issue is different from the situation in which a people without land replace a land and a people; the comparison is not valid. Even when we negotiated with Israel in the 1990s, we did not recognize it. We negotiated in order to achieve peace. If this was achieved and the rights were returned, we would recognize it; as I said, the comparison is invalid. Turkey will continue to exist and the Turks should remain a brotherly people. Erdogan was betting at the beginning to mobilize the Turkish people behind him in order to create hostility with the Syrian people, and consequently be given a free hand. We have to be careful not to look at things in the same way. I stress again that some people, not the political forces, but within the Turkish Army and security institutions are against Erdogan. This was the reason behind our drive to meet them.

Furthermore, and this was the subject of discussion with our Russian and Iranian friends – who said that yes, we are defending you, but in the end, you are the owners of the cause. This is true, the land is ours, and the cause is ours and so we have a duty to carry out by meeting them directly, even if we do not expect results. Maybe there will come a day when we can achieve results, particularly with changing circumstances inside Turkey, in the world and within Syria.

Journalist: Concerning Israel, some people describe it as the absent present in the events in Syria, the greatest beneficiary of what happened in Syria. Indeed, it is more comfortable now than in any other time before in comparison with weakening Syria, Hizbollah and Iran, as analysts say.

President Assad: It is the always-present. It has never been absent. It might be absent in terms of language, because we fight its proxies, agents, flunkies or tools, in different ways, some military some political. They are all tools serving Israel directly or through the Americans. Since the battle on the ground is with these forces, it is normal that the terminology describes these forces and not Israel. Israel is in fact a main partner in what is happening, and as an enemy state, that is expected. Will it stand by and watch? No. it will be proactive, and more effective in order to strike at Syria, the Syrian people, the Syrian homeland and everything related to Syria.

Journalist: Benefiting practically from what happened?

President Assad: This is self-evident. Even if we do not discuss it, it is one of our national givens in Syria.

Journalist: After all the aggressions carried out by the Israeli enemy on Syria, we have never seen an Arab position, and the Arab League has never moved. When the Turkish aggression started, the Arab League met at the level of Foreign Ministers. The first impressions were good, and the final communique was described as positive. In return, we have not heard a statement from the Syrian state.

President Assad: Do you recall when Syria's membership in the Arab League was frozen? Did we issue a statement? We did not. So, if we did not issue a statement as a result of Syria's departure from the Arab League, why would we issue one when they started discussing Syria's return to the Arab League? I think the implications of my answer are clear for all those who want to understand. I do not think that your viewers believe that raising this issue merits more than the few sentences I have just said.

Journalist: True. If we move to pure politics concerning the constitutional committee. What is your explanation of the criticism made by the other side to this committee, although it has been one of their demands for years?

President Assad: Very simply, they believed that we would reject the formation of this committee, and maybe they were shocked that we were able to form it, because they used to raise obstacles and blame the Syrian government. We dealt with these obstacles in a specific diplomatic manner, not making concession on fundamental issues, but on some issues which we consider related to form. They were shocked in the end, and that is why they launched a severe attack on it. That is what happened, in brief.

Journalist: The Syrian state made no concessions under Russian or Iranian pressure?

President Assad: No. Had we made real concessions, they would not have attacked it. They would have praised the formation of the committee. Their attack shows that we have not made any concessions and no concessions can be made. The constitutional committee and the outcomes it might produce later would be used as a launching pad to attack and strike at the structure of the Syrian state. This is what the West has been planning for years, and we know this. That is why it was not an option to concede on fundamentals and particular stances related to Syria's interest. There were other details which were insignificant, like the fact that they camouflaged themselves under the umbrella of the so-called moderate opposition. In many instances, they proposed names affiliated to al-Nusra Front, which we rejected because of this affiliation.

Journalist: Terrorists?

President Assad: They are terrorists. In the end we agreed to a number of those, which might have come as a surprise. We determined that the result would be the same regardless: the same background, the same affiliation, the same master.

Journalist: True

President Assad: And decision maker, and so the signal for the decision would be from the same source. So, what difference does it make?

Journalist: Puppets, no more.

President Assad: Exactly. We agreed. This is only an example. There are many other details, but this is what surprised them. We have not made any concession on fundamental issues.

Journalist: Pedersen talked about meetings of the constitutional committee in Geneva saying that it would open the door to reaching a comprehensive solution to the Syrian crisis, and in his view, that solution includes holding parliamentary and presidential elections under the supervision of the United Nations and in accordance with Security Council Resolution 2254. He also talked about ensuring the participation of Syrian expatriates. Would you accept international supervision on parliamentary and presidential elections? And is this issue within the preview of this committee? And who has the right to vote, practically?

President Assad: For him to say that this committee prepares the ground for a comprehensive solution, this is not true. It provides part of the solution, maybe. We do not know where the committee will end-up, but by saying this he ignores the presence of the terrorists. A constitutional committee while the terrorists are still there will solve the problem – how? This is impossible; it is rejected. The solution starts by striking at terrorism in Syria. It starts by stopping external interference in Syria. Any Syrian-Syrian dialogue complements, contributes and plays a certain role, but it does not replace the first and second elements. I am saying this in order not to leave part of the statement as if we have agreed to it.

As to the other part of the question, if he believes that Resolution 2254 gives the authority to any party, international or otherwise, to supervise the elections, this means that they are returning to the era of the mandate. I would like to recall that the first part of the resolution refers to Syria's sovereignty, which is expressed by the Syrian state alone and no one else. The elections that will be held will be under the supervision of the Syrian state from A to Z. If we want to invite any other party – an international body, certain states, organizations, societies, individuals or personalities, it will still be under the supervision of the Syrian state and under the sovereignty of the Syrian state. The constitutional committee has nothing to do with the elections it is only tasked with the constitution. If they believe that they will return to the days of the mandate, then that would only be in their dreams.

Journalist: Again, on Pedersen's statements, he said that the mere acceptance to form the constitutional committee is an implied acceptance of the other side and constitutes a joined commitment before the Syrian people to try and agree, under the auspices of the United Nations, on the constitutional arrangements for Syria. Some people objected to this implied acceptance of the other side by the committee, since it does not represent the Syrian people and is not elected by the Syrian people. What is your response to that?

President Assad: All your questions are valid, at least from a legal perspective. First, let us identify the first party and the second; some people believe the first party is the Syrian state or the Syrian government. No, this is not the case, the first party represents the viewpoint of the Syrian government, however the Syrian government is not part of these negotiations nor of these discussions.

Journalist: The first party is supported by the Syrian government.

President Assad: Exactly. The government supports this party because we believe that we share the same viewpoint. They are people who belong to the same political climate of the Syrian government. This does not imply that the government is part of the negotiations. Legally, we are not a part of the constitutional committee and this does not imply the government's recognition of any party; this issue is should be clear. So, he is referring to a side which represents the viewpoint of the Syrian government. Here we have to question: what does he mean by "implied acceptance," what is it we are accepting?

The first party initially accepted to be part of Sochi and to sit down with the second party in Sochi; it later accepted to set up a constitutional committee and discuss ideas regarding the constitution. Accepting to sit down with them, does not imply that we accept their nature. The first party exists in Syria, lives in Syria, belongs to all segments of the Syrian people; similarly, there is a state which has the same viewpoint, is elected by the Syrian people and enjoys the support of the majority of people. The second party is appointed by whom? It is appointed by Turkey. Why was the formation of the constitutional committee delayed? For a whole year, we have been negotiating with Turkey via the state-guarantors, Russia and Iran. The second party was not appointed by any Syrian side; a few represent the terrorists and the majority represent the states which imposed them; it is exclusively Turkey, and of course those standing in the background, the Americans and others. And there is the other party, which, as I said, represents the terrorists. So, what is it I am accepting? I accept the terrorist to be a patriot, or I accept those appointed by others, or I accept agents to be patriots. Let us speak frankly. Why should we lie and speak diplomatically? The reality is that there is a patriotic party dealing with a party which is an agent and a terrorist, its as simple as that. But in order to be diplomatic and to not anger everyone, I will call it a Syrian-Syrian dialogue, but only in terms of an identity card, passport and nationality. But as for belonging, that is a different discussion, to which we all know the answer too aside from the diplomatic discourse.

Journalist: Pedersen considered that the launch of the work of the committee is actually a return to Geneva. Have we returned to Geneva after four years? And what about Sochi and Astana?

President Assad: No, we have returned to Geneva only geographically, whereas politically, we are part of Sochi, and everything that is happening has its frame of reference as Sochi and is a continuation of it. There is no Geneva, it is not part of this process. The fact that the UN is represented and participates in Sochi gives it an international dimension, which is necessary; but it does not mean that Geneva undercuts Sochi. There is no Geneva.

Journalist: Could Pedersen's statements, all the statements we have reviewed here, aim at preempting the work of the committee, or are they completely outside the context of its work? And concerning the constitution, in particular, is what is happening a complete change of the constitution, a discussion on the constitution, or the amendment of some provisions of the constitution?

President Assad: There will be an attempt to direct the work of the committee in a certain direction. This is for sure, and we are fully aware of this and won't allow it. That is why everything announced outside the committee has no value; it is absolute zero, as simple as that. Therefore, we should not waste our time on such statements or give it any importance. What is the second point?

Journalist: About the nature of the committee's work: is it discussing the provisions of the constitution, amending some provisions or a complete change of the constitution?

President Assad: This constitutes a large part of the discussion on setting up the constitutional committee: shall we amend the constitution or have a new constitution? Our position was that when we amend a provision of the constitution and put it to a referendum, it becomes a new constitution. So, there is no real difference between amending the constitution or having a new one, because there is nothing to define the new constitution, a completely new constitution. This is all theoretical and has no real meaning. What concerns us is that everything produced by the meetings of this committee and is in line with national interest – even if it is a new constitution from A to Z, we shall approve. And if there is an amendment of a single provision in the constitution, which is against national interest, we would oppose it. So, in order not to waste our time in such sophistry, we should focus on the implications. We are fully aware of the game they are going to play. They aim to weaken the state and transform it into a state which cannot be controlled from within and, consequently is controlled from the outside. The game is clear, as is happening in neighboring countries which we don't need to mention. This is not going to happen; but they will try and we will not accept. This is the summary of months of future dialogue, and maybe longer, I don't know. Of course, I mean future dialogue.

Journalist: We discussed at length the constitutional committee and all the statements made about it. I will move to the issue which people are waiting for: talking about the internal situation in Syria, since we are talking about attempts to influence, what matters is the internal situation. During the war years, the Syrian's suffered from high prices, lack of production, shortage of job opportunities, many consequences of terrorism, the sanctions, and the difficult military situation over large parts of the Syrian territory. The natural outcome was a deterioration in the living conditions of Syrian families. But now, conditions on the ground militarily have improved, most of the land has returned to the control of the Syrian state. What about the living conditions? Are there signs of an improvement of this situation, or will the situation remain as it is until all Syrian territory is liberated?

President Assad: If the cause was only due to the situation on the ground, terrorism, etc., then yes, it is better to wait. But this does not make sense. As you know, some people tend to blame everything on the security situation and whilst there is no doubt that it has a great impact, but it is not absolute. This answers the last part of the question. Do we wait? No, because if we were to wait, even if the situation on the ground changed, living conditions would not improve. Living conditions will not improve unless we move, very simply, as a state and as a society on all levels. Liberating some areas might have an impact on the economic situation if these areas were employed and integrated into the development and economic cycle in Syria.

Journalist: Areas in which there are resources in particular.

President Assad: There might be resources, or it might be a tourist area. Currently there is no tourism, so this area will not have an impact on the economic situation, but an agricultural area like the northern regions,

this is essential; today we import some of the things which we used to export and because they are imported in a round-about way in order to circumvent the sanctions, we are paying more for them. If we take Aleppo for instance, it is the heart of Syrian industry, and with Damascus they are the centre of the Syrian economy. So, areas are different but if we liberate areas without taking the necessary measures to invigorate the economy, things will not improve. So, as a state, we need to accelerate the rebuilding of infrastructure – like restoring electricity and other utilities, and the role of state institutions, in order to facilitate the return of the productivity cycle. Here I am not referring to major industries and large projects. Even before the war, we had the view that large projects are important but they are not the solution. For a country like Syria, the strength of its economy lies in small and medium-sized enterprises. It is these enterprises, the grocery store or the barber's shop, that will help invigorate the economy. The problem is that some people wait; they say that let us wait to see what happens. If we are to wait, then we should not expect to see the signs that you referred to. Are there signs? Yes, of course, there are improvements, there are industries which have emerged, workshops that have returned to work. The number of people who have returned to the country is higher than the development of the economy, and consequently some might say these improvements are intangible, this is correct. The challenge now is to integrate these people into the economic cycle. The answer to the question: (can we do it?) of course, we can. We should not say that circumstances prevent us, no; we have some laziness, we have some dependencies and sometimes we do not have the vision of how to move. And by we, I mean all of us as a society, as a state and as citizens. The state is responsible to provide the necessary conditions and the infrastructure, but it cannot open all the shops, workshops, and industries.

Journalist: If we can, why do we not see a real response by the government to your continued directives to the ministers to deal transparently with the citizens. Why is this indifference and improvisation in the work of government institutions and the absence of any planning or a preemptive alternative, as some people say, some people who hold the government responsible directly for squandering the blood of the martyrs and the wounded and the sacrifices of the Syrians.

President Assad: First, if we want to address government institutions, and in order to be objective, I cannot talk about them collectively; there are those ministries that are working, while there is laziness and inefficiency in others. Within ministries, there are institutions which are functioning properly and others which are not fulfilling their duties. So, if we want to talk objectively, we need to identify specific sectors in order to distinguish between them; any generalities do not properly reflect reality. In our own private discussions, we can talk in general terms – the state is not functioning, the government is not functioning etc., but I am an official and I cannot but speak in a scientific, objective and tangible manner. In reality, there are cases of negligence and there is the opposite. If I look at the positive aspects, if all the institutions are not working, where are we getting salaries from? How do students go to school? There are martyrs in the education and electricity sectors. Electricity plants were targeted and then problems solved and solutions found. Despite the difficulties due to the sanctions, we are able to provide basic commodities like oil, wheat and others. So, there is work being done. Of course, you will tell me that it is only normal for talk about pain. This is natural and I do not expect people to refer to the positives. It is human nature to talk about pain. When I am healthy, I do not talk about being in good health every day, but when I'm sick, I will talk about my illness; again, this is only natural. But in order to evaluate properly the situation we should consider all angles. As to the negatives, the challenge lies in distinguishing between causes related to the crisis and the war and causes related to our dereliction? When people criticize the state, they speak as if there is no war. Similarly, when an official speaks, they often blame everything on the war; the challenge is how to separate the two. This is what we are doing now. When we had the gasoline and diesel crisis, the problem was indeed caused by the sanctions and our ability to provide these resources. The problem is that the state itself is under sanction, so it cannot import. It imports using other channels, which I won't divulge, to source these resources. Most of the time we succeed, but other times we do not; these latter cases are beyond our control. As for electricity, the plants and infrastructure are continuously targeted, do we hold the officials responsible for the terrorist rockets? We need to be objective about certain issues, for example we were able to reclaim some gas wells, which improved the electricity situation, but the needs of the returnees and the workshops which have reopened are much larger than the electricity we were able to restore. We need to see all these issues. So, we are able to produce, but we go back to the same question: how do we distinguish between dereliction and valid causes. This is what we should be considering, but we are not discussing the situation from this perspective. At the level of the state, we are trying to reach these results, and we have been able to reach them in relation to dereliction. Officials who do not fulfill their duties should be removed; dereliction should not be given an opportunity to continue. There is also the issue of corruption. Dereliction

of duty is one thing and corruption is something else. The outcome may be the same sometimes, but here I am referring to an official who is not corrupt but is either unable to carry out their duty or does not have a clear vision. When it becomes apparent that they do not have either of these qualities, then they should leave immediately.

Journalist: On this subject of having a clear vision, if we talk about the rate of exchange for the dollar, it is logical that during the war the exchange rate increases if not as a result of the war itself, as a result of the embargo and the economic sanctions on our country, but recently rises are incomprehensible and affect the details of the daily life. What is your explanation of this incomprehensible rise?

President Assad: As I said some issues are self-evident, first, sanctions have an impact on state revenues in dollars or hard currency in general. This affects the exchange rate, which in turn affects prices. State revenues have also receded as a result of fewer exports and the lack of tourism; no tourists will visit a country during a war. Countries that we depend on for exports are contributing to the sanctions in one way or another. Nonetheless, we have managed to identify unofficial channels for exports, which has contributed to the inflow some hard currency. There is also the speculation game, some of which happens inside Syria and some of which happens outside; additionally, there is speculation on social media, which we get dragged into.

The most dangerous of these factors is the psychological. When we hear that the Syrian pound has dropped, we rush to buy dollars. We believe in this way that we have saved money by turning our pounds into dollars, but as a consequence, the exchange rate drops in a severe and accelerated manner and consequently prices rise significantly; what citizens have saved by converting pounds to dollars they have lost due to higher prices. There are many aspects to this issue. Now, can the state intervene? Yes it can, but with limited revenues and tremendous demand – due to higher prices of basic commodities like wheat, oil, fuel and others, there is a trade off between exhausting dollars on speculation or spending on basic needs. If dollars are exhausted, this will mean we will have no wheat and oil; this is our reality. Our revenues are not what they used to be and as such our priorities have been on focused on arms and ammunition and squeezing what we can in order to provide the necessary weapons.

Journalist: Are there no measures that the state can take to control the rate of the exchange?

President Assad: Of course, there are. If you compare our situation with other countries in our region, when the dollar exchange rate is affected, you find that it increases multiple times in a matter of days. So, it is a miracle that the exchange rate, which was in the upper forties or fifties before the war, is still around six hundred nine years on. This does not make sense; the pound was expected to collapse at the end of 2012. Had it not been for particular methods, which unfortunately I cannot divulge due to their covert nature, the pound would have collapsed. Let me give you an example: one factor which people are not aware of, is that the liberation of an area does not necessarily serve the Syrian Pound, because by liberating an area, we are removing its access to dollars which were paid to the terrorists to cover their needs and expenses. This is one of the tools we benefited from. I mean that things are not absolute, and we cannot say that terrorists were serving us in this regard. Not every positive step has a positive impact. That is why I am saying that the issue is complicated. Some experts say that there is a process of drying the region up of dollars and the whole region is paying the price of the dollar. But notice the difference between us and neighbouring countries. The Turkish Lira, for instance, lost about two percent of its value in the last few days; yesterday I believe, due to a decision taken by the American Congress. Countries are totally subject to these fluctuations. Despite our circumstances, we do not succumb entirely – we suffer, we defend, we fight all the whilst having a war waged against us. Whereas these other countries do not have a war waged against them, yet they can barely support their currency, and moreover, the currency is supported by external financial and political measures. So, there are challenges but once again the solution is not difficult. The solution is not the dollar game, but an economic game. If we go back to your first question and start to look at the economic cycle as being the foundation, we realise that getting involved in speculation does not play to our favour. If we are able to get the economic cycle moving, then we can create more tools for the monetary authorities and for society to improve the economic conditions and reduce dependency on the dollar. Small or medium-sized industries help us reduce our dependency on importing materials and hence reduce the pressure on the Syrian Pound. We have many tools which we can use, but the speculation game is not the solution. This is what I believe.

Journalist: So, I understand from what your excellency said that these policies or measures might take a longer time to produce results, but they are more effective and successful.

President Assad: What I want to say in answer to all economic questions is that the solution is there. There are those who say that when I present all these factors, it is because we do not have a solution. No, solutions do exist and are not impossible and what we have done proves that they are not impossible; but this does not mean that we have done our best. This is the starting point and this requires an economic dialogue, I am presenting the larger headlines that we are capable of achieving. Actually, the dollar, the economy and the living conditions are all part of one cycle. They are not separate parts. The solution lies in accelerating state services and facilities to push projects forward and this is what we are doing; we are waiting for a response, because there is a lot of pressure on foreign investors not to invest in Syria.

Journalist: And the solution also lies in fighting corruption. There is a lot of talk about that now. There is talk about a wide-ranging campaign which included a number of business men and officials who are suspected of corruption. Is that true, Mr President? Is this campaign part of the measures taken to combat corruption, and would it include other individuals?

President Assad: That is true, but it is not a campaign, because the word “campaign” gives the impression that we have just started, because a campaign has a beginning and an end, and is temporary. This is not true, for either we used to accept corruption and suddenly we don’t accept it any longer, or we did not acknowledge it. No, it is visible, and the beginning is now over three years old. Why? Because at the start of the war the internal situation was not a priority at all. We used to think of providing our basic needs, just to live, but there was process of tearing up the state and the homeland by terrorists and, on a larger scale, by the corrupt. That was the problem. The country cannot stand it and the state cannot stand it.

Journalist: We just wanted to stay alive.

President Assad: In the first years. Afterwards when the tearing up increased, we returned to fighting corruption which we had started before, but the circumstances were different before the war, and priorities were different. Now fighting corruption was given priority because of the economic conditions we are living and because this reservoir, which is the state, is punctured in many places, so any revenues going into it were syphoned out and so we were not able to benefit from them. Where did we start? We started with the military establishment. No state starts accountability at the heart of the military establishment during a war; this institution is sacred. However, because it is sacred especially during the war, and because it stands for discipline, this establishment does not allow itself to be, at the same time, be a symbol of corruption. So, accountability started in the military establishment and many high-ranking officers were put in jail with other officers at different levels. Those who were proven innocent were released and there are those who are still being tried up till now and after many years; so, there was no favouritism. The question was raised: is it possible while the military establishment is involved in a war. We said that the military establishment is fighting terrorism and fighting corruption. It fights everything, and because it is the military establishment it should be at the forefront in everything. The same process was also followed in the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Telecommunications. Many institutions were involved. But, the issue was raised because there are aspects of society, personalities and institutions which are the subject of people’s attentions, in the spotlight of society, the issue was given prominence, while in actual fact, there is nothing new. As to accountability, it is an ongoing process. In answer to your question, yes, it is ongoing.

Journalist: Are we going to see other individuals brought to account?

President Assad: As long as there is corruption, fighting it we will continue. That’s for sure. In these circumstances and in other circumstance. This is part of developing the state. We cannot talk about developing the state in terms of administration and other aspects without fighting corruption. This is self-evident.

Journalist: there are those who floated the idea that the state needed money, or that our allies asked the state to pay for debts, so the state appropriated money from merchants, in a vengeful way, to the extent that some people described it as Ritz Carlton Syria. How do you comment on this?

President Assad: They always describe Syria as a regime. They do not say a state. Their objective by saying so is to make us appear as a gang, a junta, etc. Whereas the state has basic principles, a constitution, regulations, clear controls. We are a state, not a sheikhdom as is the case in some countries. The state has a constitution and a law. The first thing in the constitution, or one of its most important provisions, is the protection of private property. We cannot tell somebody, under any title, we take this property. There are many appropriations of properties belonging to terrorists, which have been appropriated temporarily, but they have not become state property, because there is no court decision, although these individuals are terrorists, there is still a need for a court decision. It doesn't mean that this property goes automatically to the state. It needs a court decision. In this framework, the state cannot say, under any title, "you are corrupt, so give me your money." This is at odds with the basic principles of the state.

Journalist: These are measures taken on legal grounds.

President Assad: Of course. There are many cases which people confuse. There was a meeting between a group of business men and state officials in order to support the Syrian Pound when it started to drop quickly because of the state of fear and anxiety. Otherwise, there was no economic cause for the collapse of the Syrian pound. They were asked to help state institutions, particularly the Central Bank, and they did it. This does not mean that they made donations to the state, they contributed hard currencies and took Syrian Pounds in return. Nobody offers the state anything for free.

Journalist: Just moving the economy.

President Assad: Yes, in a certain way and according to a certain agreed plan. They did it and it gave quick results. There is also corruption fighting which you asked about a short while ago. There are officials and individuals in the private sector, because corruption is done in partnership. In the private sector, all those who squandered state money were asked to return it because the objective is to get the money without necessarily being vindictive, before we prosecute and go the courts for years. And we don't know if the courts would be able to return all the money or not. There are documents. Are you prepared to return state money? Many of them expressed a willingness to do so. So, there are aspects to the issue included in your question.

Journalist: But why was the issue promoted, or people understood sometimes the reasons you mentioned to mean that prosecution or accountability targeted business men only, but we have not heard about officials. We heard only about merchants or business men.

Transcript from al Masdar News, original post here:

<https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-president-gives-rare-in-depth-interview-full-transcript/>