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M. Mandl

President al-Assad to *Foreign Affairs Magazine*: Israel is supporting terrorist organizations in Syria

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President Bashar al-Assad gave an interview to the American magazine *Foreign Affairs* published on Monday.

Question 1: I would like to start by asking you about the war. It has now been going on for almost four years, and you know the statistics: more than two hundred thousand people have been killed, a million wounded, and more than three million Syrians have fled the country, according to the UN. Your forces have also suffered heavy casualties. The war cannot go on forever. How do you see the war ending?

President Assad: All Wars, anywhere in the world have in the past ended with a political solution because war itself is not the solution; war is one of the instruments of politics. So you end with a political solution. That's how we see it. That is the headline.

Question 2: You don't think that this war will end militarily?

President Assad: No. Any war ends with a political solution.

Question 3: Your country is increasingly divided into three mini-states, you could say: one is controlled by the government, one is controlled by ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, one is controlled by the more secular Sunni and Kurdish opposition. How will you ever put Syria back together again?

President Assad: First of all, this image is not accurate because you cannot talk about mini-states without talking about the people who live within those states. The Syrian people are still with the unity of Syria; they still support the government. The factions you refer to control some areas, but they move from one place to another; they are not stable, and there are no clear lines of separation between different forces. Sometimes they mingle with each other and they move. But the main issue is about the population. The population still supports the state regardless of whether they support it politically or not; I mean they support the state as the representative of the unity of Syria. This is what I mean by supporting the state. So as long as you have the Syrian people believing in unity, any government and any official can unify Syria. If the people are divided into two, three, or four groups, no one can unify this country. That's how we see it.

Question 4: You think that the Sunnis and the Kurds still believe in a unified Syria?

President Assad: If you go to Damascus now you can see all the different, let's say, colors of our society living together. So the divisions in Syria are not based on sectarian or ethnic grounds, and even in the Kurdish area you are talking about, we have two different colors; we have Arabs more than Kurds, so it's not about the ethnicity; it's about the factions that control certain areas militarily.

Question 5: A year ago, both the opposition and foreign governments were insisting that you step down as a precondition to talks. They no longer are. Diplomats are now looking for an interim settlement that would allow you to keep a role. Just today, the New York Times had an article that talked about increased U.S. support for the Russian and UN peace initiatives. The article refers to: "the West's quiet retreat from its demands that Syria's president step down immediately." Given this shift in the Western attitude, are you now more open to a negotiated solution to the conflict that leads to a political transition?

President Assad: From the very beginning we were open. We engaged in dialogue with every party in Syria. Party doesn't mean political party; it could be party, current, or some personality, it could be any political entity. We changed the constitution and we are open to anything. But when you want to do something, it's not about the position or about the government, it's about the Syrians; sometimes you might have a majority that doesn't belong to any side. So when you want to make a change, as long as you're talking about a national problem, every Syrian must have a say in it. When you have a dialogue, it's not between the government and the opposition; it's between the different Syrian parties and entities. That's how we look at dialogue. This is first. Second, whatever solution you want to make, at the end you should go back to the people through a referendum, because you're talking about the constitution; changing the political system, You have to go back to the Syrian people. So engaging in a dialogue is different from taking decisions, which is not done by the government or the opposition.

Question 6: So you're saying that you would not agree to any kind of political transition unless there is a referendum that supports it?

President Assad: Exactly, the people should make the decision, not anyone else.

Question 7: Does that mean there's no room for negotiations?

President Assad: No, we will go to Russia, we will go to these negotiations, but there is another question here: who do you negotiate with? As a government, we have institutions, we have an army, and we have influence, positive or negative, in any direction, at any time. Whereas the people we are going to negotiate with, who do they represent? That's the question. When you talk about the opposition, it has to have meaning. The opposition in general has to have representatives in the local administration, in the parliament, in institutions, they have to have grassroots to represent. In the current crisis, you have to ask about the opposition's influence on the ground. You have to go back to what the rebels announced publically, when they said many times that the opposition doesn't represent us, they have no influence. If you want to talk about fruitful dialogue, it's going to be between the government and those rebels. There is another point. Opposition means national, it means working for the interests of the Syrian people. It cannot be an opposition if it's a puppet of Qatar or Saudi Arabia or any Western country, including the United States, paid from the outside. It should be Syrian. We have a national opposition, I'm not excluding it, I'm not saying every opposition is not legitimate. But you have to separate the national and the puppets. Not every dialogue is fruitful.

Question 8: Does that mean you would not want to meet with opposition forces that are backed by outside countries?

President Assad: We are going to meet with everyone. We don't have conditions.

Journalist: No conditions?

President Assad: No conditions.

Journalist: You would meet with everyone?

President Assad: Yes, we're going to meet with everyone. But you have to ask each one of them: who do you represent? That's what I mean.

Question 9: If I'm correct, the deputy of UN representative Staffan de Mistura is in Syria now. They're proposing as an interim measure a ceasefire and a freeze in Aleppo. Would you agree to that?

President Assad: Yes, of course. We implemented that before de Mistura was assigned to his mission. We implemented it in another city called Homs, another big city. We implemented it on smaller scales in different, let's say, suburbs, villages, and so on, and it succeeded. So, the idea is very good, but it depends on the details. De Mistura came to Syria with headlines. We agreed upon certain headlines, and now we are waiting for him to bring a detailed plan or schedule – A to Z plan – let's say. We are discussing this with his deputy.

Question 10: In the past, you insisted as a precondition for a ceasefire that the rebels lay down their weapons first, which obviously from their perspective was a non-starter. Is that still your precondition?

President Assad: We choose different scenarios or different reconciliations. In some areas, we allowed them to leave inhabited areas in order to prevent casualties among civilians. They left these areas with their armaments. In other areas, they give up their armaments and they left. It depends on what they offer and what you offer.

Question 11: I'm not clear on your answer. Would you insist that they lay down their weapons?

President Assad: No, no. That's not what I mean. In some areas, they left the area with their armaments.

Question 12: Are you optimistic about the Moscow talks?

President Assad: What is going on in Moscow is not negotiations about the solution; it's only preparations for the conference.

Journalist: So, talks about talks?

President Assad: Exactly, how to prepare for the talks. So, when you start talking about the conference, what are the principles of the conference? I'll go back to the same point. Let me be frank: some of the groups are puppets, as I said, of other countries. They have to implement that agenda, and I know that many countries, like France for example, do not have any interest in making that conference succeed. So they will give them orders to make them fail. You have other personalities who only represent themselves, they don't represent anyone in Syria. Some of them never lived in Syria and they know nothing about the country. Of course, you have some other personalities who work for the national interest. So when you talk about the opposition as one entity, who's going to have influence on the other? That is the question. It's not clear yet. So, optimism would be an exaggeration. I wouldn't say I'm pessimistic, I would say we have hope, in every action.

Question 13: It seems that in recent days the Americans have become more supportive of the Moscow talks. Initially, they were not. Yesterday, Secretary of State Kerry said something to suggest that the U.S. hopes that the talks go forward and that they are successful.

President Assad: They always say things, but it's about what they're going to do. And you know there's mistrust between the Syrians and the U.S. So just wait till we see what will happen at the conference.

Question 14: So, what do you see as the best way to strike a deal between all of the different parties in Syria?

President Assad: It's to deal directly with the rebels, but you have two different kinds of rebels. Now, the majority are al Qaeda, which is ISIS and al-Nusra, with other similar factions that belong to al Qaeda but are smaller. Now, what's left, what Obama called a "fantasy" the moderate opposition. It's not an opposition, they are rebels. Most of them joined al Qaeda, and some of them rejoined the army recently. During the last week, a lot of them left those groups and came to the army.

Question 15: Are these former defectors who came back?

President Assad: Yes, they came back to the army. They said, we don't want to fight anymore. So what's left of those is very little. At the end, can you negotiate with al Qaeda, and others? They are not ready to negotiate, they have their own plan. The reconciliation that we started and Mr. de Mistura is going to continue is the practical solution on the ground. This is the first point. Second, you have to implement the Security Council resolution No. 2170 on al-Nusra and ISIS which was issued a few months ago, and this resolution is very clear about preventing anyone from supporting these factions militarily, financially, or logistically, yet this is what Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are still doing. If it's not implemented, we cannot talk about a real solution because there will be obstacles. So this is how we can start. Third, the Western countries should remove the umbrella, still referred to by some of supporting the moderate opposition. They know we have mainly al Qaeda, ISIS and al Nusra.

Question 16: Would you be prepared to take any confidence-building measures in advance of the talks? For example, prisoner exchanges, or ending the use of barrel bombs, or releasing political prisoners, in order to build confidence on the other side that you're willing to negotiate in good faith?

President Assad: It's not a personal relationship; it's about mechanisms. In politics, you only talk about mechanisms. You don't have to trust someone to do something. If you have a clear mechanism, you can reach a result. That is what the people want. So the question is, what is the mechanism that we can put in place? This takes us back to the same question: who are they, what do they represent, what's their influence, what is the point of building trust with people with no influence?

Journalist: When two parties come together, it's often very useful for one party to show the other that it's really interested in making progress by taking steps unilaterally to try and bring down the temperature. The measures that I described would have that effect.

President Assad: You have something concrete, and that is reconciliation. People gave up their armaments, we gave them amnesty, they live normal lives. It is a real example. So this is a measure of confidence. On the other hand, what is the relation between that opposition and the prisoners? There's no relation. They are not their prisoners anyway. So it is completely a different issue.

Question 17: So, have you offered amnesty to fighters?

President Assad: Yes, of course, and we did it many times.

Question 18: How many, do you have numbers?

President Assad: I don't have the precise numbers, but it's thousands, not hundreds, thousands of militants.

Question 19: And are you prepared to say to the entire opposition that if you lay down your weapons, you will be safe?

President Assad: Yes, I said it publically in one of my speeches.

Question 20: And how can you guarantee their safety? Because they have reasons to distrust your government.

President Assad: You cannot, but at the end, let's say that if more than 50 percent succeed, more than 50 percent in such circumstances would be a success. So, that's how. Nothing is absolute. You have to expect some negative aspects, but they are not the major aspects.

Question 21: Let me change the subject slightly. Hezbollah, Iran's Quds force and Iranian-trained Shiite militias are all now playing significant roles in the fight against rebels here in Syria. Given this involvement, are you worried about Iran's influence over the country? After all, Iraq or even Lebanon shows that once a foreign military power becomes established in a country, it can be very difficult to ask them to leave again.

President Assad: Iran is an important country in this region, and it was influential before the crisis. It's influence is not related to the crisis, it's related to its role, its political position in general. When you talk about influence, various factors make a particular country influential. In the Middle East, in our region, you have the same society, the same ideology, many similar things, the same tribes, going across borders. So those factors are crossing the borders. If you have influence on one factor, your influence will be crossing the border. This is part of our nature. It's not related to the conflict. Of course, when there is conflict and anarchy, another country will be more influential in your country. When you don't have the will to have a sovereign country, you will have that influence. Now, the answer to your question is, Iran doesn't have any ambitions in Syria, and as a country, as Syria, we would never allow any country to have influence our sovereignty. We don't accept and the Iranians don't want it either. We allow cooperation. But if you allowed any country to have influence, why not allow the Americans to have influence in Syria? That's the problem with the Americans and with the West: they want to have influence without cooperation.

Question 22: Let me just push you a little bit further. Last week, a commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, of their airspace command, Haji Zadeh, said in an interview that Iran's Supreme Leader has ordered his forces to build and operate missile plants in Syria. That suggests that Iran is playing a greater role and doing it on its own.

President Assad: No, playing a role through cooperation is different from playing a role through hegemony.

Question 23: So everything that Iran is doing...?

President Assad: Of course, in full cooperation with the Syrian government, and that's always the case.

Question 24: Now Iran is one thing to deal with because it's a country. But you also have militias which are sub-state actors, and therefore more complicated. One problem with working with these groups is that, unlike a government, they may not be willing to cooperate and it's not always clear who to talk to. Are you worried about your ability to control these forces and to rein them in if you need to? And, a related question, this week Israel attacked Hezbollah forces in the Golan, and the Israelis suggest that they attacked them because Hezbollah was planning an attack on Israel from Syrian territory. Doesn't this also highlight the danger of allowing militias with their own agendas, not necessarily your agenda, to come into the war?

President Assad: Do you mean Syrian, or any other militias in general?

Journalist: I mean especially Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shi'a militias.

President Assad: It's natural to say that only the institutions of the government, of the state, let's say, are the guarantee for stability and order. Any other factor that would play a role in parallel with the government could be positive, could be good in certain circumstances, but it will always have side effects, negative side effects. That is a natural thing. And having militias who support the government is a side effect of the war. You have it, but you're going to try to control this side effect. So, to have the way, if you ask any Syrian about that, he will give you a similar answer. Nobody will feel more comfortable than if they are dealing with government institutions, including the army and the police and so on. But talking about what happened in Quneitra is something completely different. Never has an operation against Israel happened through the Golan Heights since the ceasefire in 1974. It has never happened. So, for Israel to allege that there was a plan for an operation, that's a far cry from reality, just an excuse, because they wanted to assassinate somebody from Hezbollah.

Question 25: But the Israelis have been very careful since the war began to not get involved except when they felt when their interests were directly threatened.

President Assad: That's not true, because they've been attacking Syria now for nearly two years, without any reason.

Journalist: But in each case, they say it's because Hezbollah was being given weapons from Iran through Syria.

President Assad: They attacked army positions. What is the relation between Hezbollah and the army?

Journalist: Those were cases where the army accidentally shelled-

President Assad: Those are false allegations.

Question 26: So what do you think Israel's agenda is?

President Assad: They are supporting the rebels in Syria. It's very clear. Because whenever we make advances in some place, they attack in order to undermine the army. It's very clear. That's

why some in Syria joke, how can you say that al Qaeda doesn't have an air force? They have the Israeli air force.

Question 27: To return to my question about militias, do you feel confident that you'll be able to control them when this war end, because after all, any government, to have effective sovereignty, has to have what's called a monopoly of force, and that's very hard when you have these independent armed groups running around.

President Assad: That's self-evident, the state cannot fulfill its commitment to society if it's not the only master of order.

Journalist: But you see in Iraq how hard that is, because it is now very difficult for the government to control all these Shia militia which were empowered during the war.

President Assad: There's a very important reason in Iraq: it's because Paul Bremmer didn't create a constitution for the state; he created one for factions. Whereas in Syria why did the army stand fast for four years in spite of this embargo, this war, tens of countries around the world attacking Syria and supporting the rebels? Because it has a real constitution, a real, secular constitution. That is the reason. In Iraq, it is sectarian. When you talk about a sectarian constitution, it's not a constitution.

Question 28: But what will you do about these militias when the war ends?

President Assad: Things should go back to normal like before the war.

Question 29: And you're confident-?

President Assad: Yes, we don't have any other option. That is the role of the government. This is self-evident.

Question 30: What impact are falling oil prices having on the war in Syria? After all, your two closest allies and supporters, Iran and Russia, are very dependent on oil prices and they have suffered tremendous damage to their budgets in recent months as the price of oil has fallen. Do you worry about their ability to continue helping you?

President Assad: No, because they don't give us money, so it has no effect on Syria. Even if they are going to help us, it would be in the forms of loans We're like any other country, Sometimes we pay, sometimes we take loans.

Journalist: But their military support costs them money, and if they have less money to pay for their own militaries, won't that become a problem?

President Assad: No, because when you pay for armaments or any other goods, you don't have a problem.

Question 31: So you're saying everything you're getting from the Russians and Iranians...?

President Assad: So far we haven't seen any changes, so what the influence is on them, I cannot answer.

Question 32: You've said in past interviews that you and your government have made mistakes in the course of the war. What are those mistakes? Is there anything that you regret?

President Assad: Every government, every person, makes mistakes, so that's again self-evident, it's a given. But if you want to talk about political mistakes, you have to ask yourself, what are the major decisions that you took since the crisis started? We took three main decisions: first of all, to be open to all dialogue. Second, we changed the constitution and the law according to what many in the opposition were saying, allegedly, that this is the reason of the crisis. Third, we took the decision to defend our country, to defend our self, to fight terrorists. So I don't think those three decisions can be described as wrong or mistakes. If you want to talk about practice, any official in any place can make mistakes, but there's a difference between practice mistakes and policy mistakes.

Question 33: Can you describe some of the practical mistakes?

President Assad: I would have to go back to officials on the ground, there's nothing in my mind. I would rather talk about policies.

Question 34: Do you feel there have been any policy mistakes that you're responsible for?

President Assad: I mentioned the major decisions.

Journalist: But you said those are not mistakes.

President Assad: To defend the country from terrorism? If I wanted to say that it's a mistake, then to be correct would be to support the terrorists.

Journalist: I'm just wondering if there's anything you did that you wish in retrospect you had done differently.

President Assad: Regarding these three main decisions, they were correct, and I am confident about this.

Question 35: In terms of lower-level practical mistakes, are people being held accountable, say, for human rights abuses, for the excessive use of force, or the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, those kinds of things?

President Assad: Yes. Some people were detained because they breached the law in that regard, and that happens of course in such circumstances.

Journalist: In terms of their treatment of civilians or protestors, is that what you're referring to?

President Assad: Yes, during the protests at the very beginning, yes.

Question 36: Since the U.S. began its air campaign against the Islamic State, Syria and the U.S. have become strange kinds of partners and are effectively cooperating in that aspect of the fight. Do you see the potential for increased cooperation with the U.S.?

President Assad: The potential is definitely always there, because we've been talking about or asking for international cooperation against terrorism for 30 years, but this potential needs will. The question that we have is, how much will does the United States have to really fight terrorism on the ground? So far, we haven't seen anything concrete in spite of the attacks on ISIS in northern Syria. There's nothing concrete. What we've seen so far is just, let's say, window dressing, nothing real. Since the beginning of these attacks, ISIS has gained more land in Syria and Iraq.

Question 37: What about the airstrikes on Kobani? Those have been effective in slowing ISIS.

President Assad: Kobani is a small city, with about 50,000 inhabitants. It's been more than three months since the beginning of the attacks, and they haven't finished. The Same areas, With the al Qaeda factions occupying them, the Syrian Army liberated in less than three weeks. It means they're not serious about fighting terrorism.

Question 38: So are you saying you want a greater U.S. involvement in the war against ISIS?

President Assad: It's not about greater involvement by the military, because it's not only about the military, it's about politics, it's about how much the United States wants to influence the Turks, because if the terrorists can withstand the airstrikes for this period, it means that the Turks keep sending them armaments and money. Did the United States put any pressure on Turkey to stop the support of al Qaeda? They didn't, they haven't. So, it's not only about military involvement. This is first. Second, if you want to talk about the military involvement, American officials publically acknowledge that without troops on the ground, they cannot achieve anything concrete. Which troops on the grounds are you depending on?

Question 39: So are you suggesting there should be U.S. troops on the ground?

President Assad: Not U.S. troops. I'm talking about the principle, the military principle, I'm not saying American troops. If you want to say I want to make war on terrorism, you have to have troops on the ground. The question you have to ask the Americans is: which troops are you going to depend on? Definitely, it has to be Syrian troops. This is our land, this is our country. We are responsible. We don't ask for American troops at all.

Question 40: So, what would you like to see from the United States? You mentioned more pressure on Turkey ...

President Assad: Pressure on Turkey, pressure on Saudi Arabia, pressure on Qatar to stop supporting the rebels. Second, to make legal cooperation with Syria and start by asking permission from our government to carry out such attacks. They didn't, so it's illegal.

Question 41: I'm sorry, I'm not clear on that point. You want them to make legal...?

President Assad: Of course, if you want to make any kind of action in another country, you ask their permission.

Question 42: I see. So, a formal agreement between Washington and Damascus to allow for airstrikes?

President Assad: The format we can discuss later, but you start with permission. Is it an agreement, is it a treaty? That's another issue.

Question 43: And would you be willing to take steps to make cooperation easier with Washington?

President Assad: With any country that is serious about fighting terrorism, we are ready to make cooperation, if they're serious.

Question 44: What steps would you be prepared to make to show Washington that you're willing to cooperate?

President Assad: I think they are the ones who have to show the will. We are already fighting on the ground, we don't have to show that.

Question 45: The U.S. is currently training 5,000 Syrian fighters who are scheduled to enter Syria in May. Now, U.S. General John Allen has been very careful to say that these troops will not be directed at the Syrian government, but will be focused on ISIS alone. What will you do when these troops enter the country? Will you allow them to enter? Will you attack them?

President Assad: Any troops that don't work in cooperation with the Syrian Army are illegal and should be fought. That's very clear.

Question 46: Even if this brings you into conflict with the U.S.?

President Assad: Without cooperation with Syrian troops, they are illegal, and are puppets of another country, so they are going to be fought like any other illegal militia fighting against the Syrian Army. But that brings another question, about those troops. Obama said that they are a fantasy. How did fantasy become reality?

Journalist: I think with kind of training program.

President Assad: But you can't make extremism moderate.

Journalist: There are still some moderate members of the opposition. They are weaker and weaker all the time, but I think the U.S. government is trying very carefully to ensure that the fighters it trains are not radicals.

President Assad: But the question is why is the moderate opposition – if you call them opposition, we call them rebels – why are they weaker and weaker? They are still weaker because of developments in the Syrian crisis. Bringing 5,000 from the outside will make most of them defect and join ISIS and other groups which is what happened during the last year. So that's why I said it's still illusory. It is not the 5,000 that are illusory, but the idea itself.

Question 47: Part of what makes Washington so reluctant to cooperate with you more formally are the allegations of serious human rights abuses by your government. These allegations aren't just from the U.S. government, they are also from the UN Human Rights Commission, the Independent Special Investigative Commission of the UN. You are familiar with these allegations, I'm sure. They include denying access for relief groups to refugee camps, indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, photo evidence provided by the defector code-named Cesar who made a presentation to the U.S. Congress showing terrible torture and abuse in Syrian prisons. Are you prepared to take action on these issues in order to make cooperation with the U.S. easier?

President Assad: The funny thing about this administration is that it's the first one in history to build its evaluation and later decisions on social media. We call it a social media administration, which is not politics. None of these allegations you mentioned are concrete, all of them are allegations. You can bring photos from anyone and say this is torture. Who took the pictures? Who is he? Nobody knows. There is no verification of any of this evidence, so it's all allegations without evidence.

Journalist: But Cesar's photos have been looked at by independent European investigators.

President Assad: No, no. It's funded by Qatar, and they say it's an anonymous source. So nothing is clear or proven. The pictures are not clear which person they show. They're just pictures of a head, for example, with some skulls. Who said this is done by the government, not by the rebels? Who said this is a Syrian victim, not someone else? For example, photos published at the beginning of the crisis were from Iraq and Yemen. Second, the United States in particular and the West in general are in no position to talk about human rights. They are responsible for most of the killings in the region, especially the United States after getting into Iraq, and the UK after invading Libya, and the situation in Yemen, and what happened in Egypt in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and terrorism in Tunisia. All these problems happened because of the United States. They were the first ones to trample international law and Security Council resolutions, not us.

Journalist: That may or may not be true, but those are separate issues, and that does not absolve your government of responsibility.

President Assad: No, no. The United States accused, so we have to answer that part. I'm not saying if there's any human rights breach or infringement, the government has no responsibility. That is another issue. The second part of your question is about the allegations, they're still allegations. If you want me to answer, I have to answer about something that is concrete, proved, and verified.

Question 48: Are you prepared to categorically deny that there's torture and abuse of prisoners in Syria?

President Assad: If there's any unbiased and fair way to verify all those allegations, of course we are ready. That would be in our interest.

Question 49: What impact would a U.S.-Iran nuclear deal have on Syria?

President Assad: Nothing, because the crisis here was never part of the negotiations, and Iran refused to make it such, and that is correct because there is no link between the two.

Journalist: But many in the U.S. anticipate that if Iran and the U.S. strike a deal, it will make cooperation between the two countries much easier. People therefore wonder if Iran might decide to reduce its support for Syria as a favor to the U.S. government.

President Assad: We have never had any positive information about such a thing, never. I cannot discuss something which I don't have any information about.

Question 50: Describe whether you think the war is going well from the government's perspective. Independent analysts have suggested that your government currently controls 45 to 50 percent of the territory of Syria.

President Assad: First of all, if you want to describe the arena, it's not a war between two countries, between two armies where you have an incursion and you lost some territory that you want to regain. It's not like this. We're talking about rebels that infiltrate areas inhabited by civilians. You have Syrian terrorists that support foreign terrorists to come and hide among civilians, they launch what you call guerrilla attacks. That is the shape of this war, so you cannot look at it as being about territory. Second, wherever the Syrian Army has wanted to go, it has succeeded, but the Syrian army cannot have a presence on every kilometer of Syrian territory. That's impossible. We made some advances in the past two years. But if you want to ask me "is it going well," I say that every war is bad, because you always lose, you always have destruction in a war. The main question is what have we won in this war? What we won in this war is that the Syrian people have rejected the terrorists, the Syrian people support their government more, the Syrian people support their army more. Before talking about winning territory, talk about winning the hearts and minds and the support of the Syrian people. That's what we have won. What's left is logistical, it's technical. That is a matter of time. The war is moving in a positive way, but that doesn't mean you're not losing on the national level, because you lose lives, you lose infrastructure, the war itself has very bad social effects.

Question 51: Do you think you will eventually defeat the rebels militarily?

President Assad: If they don't have external support, and supply and recruitment of new terrorists within Syria, there will be no problem defeating them. Even today we don't have a problem militarily. The problem is that they still have this continuous supply, mainly from Turkey.

Question 52: So, Turkey seems to be the neighbor that you're most concerned about?

President Assad: Exactly, logistically, and about terrorist financing from Saudi Arabia and Qatar but through Turkey.

Question 53: Do you blame Erdogan personally? This is a man you once had a fairly good relationship with.

President Assad: Exactly, because he belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, which is the base of al Qaeda because it was the first political Islamic organization that promoted violent political Islam in the early 20th century. He belongs strongly and is a staunch believer in these values, he's very fanatical, and that's why he still supports ISIS. He is personally responsible for what happened.

Question 54: Do you see any other potential partners in the region? For example, General al-Sisi in Egypt?

President Assad: I wouldn't talk about him personally, but as long as Egypt and the Egyptian army and the government are fighting the same kind of terrorists as in Iraq, of course, we can consider these countries eligible to cooperate with in fighting the same enemy.

Question 55: Two final questions, if I may. Can you imagine a scenario in which Syria returns to the status quo as it was before the fighting started almost four years ago?

President Assad: In what sense?

Journalist: In the sense that Syria is whole again, it is not divided, it controls its borders, it starts to rebuild, and it is at peace and a predominantly secular country.

President Assad: If you look at a military map now, the Syrian Army exists in every corner. Not every place; by every corner I mean north, south, east, west, and between. If you didn't believe in a unified Syria, that Syria can go back to its previous position, you wouldn't send the army there, as a government. If you don't believe in this as a people, you would have seen people in Syria isolated in different ghettos, people isolated in different ghettos based on ethnic and sectarian or religious identity. As long as this is not the situation, the people live with each other, the army is everywhere, the army is made up of every color of Syrian society, or the Syrian fabric. This means that we all believe Syria should go back to the way it was. We don't have any other option, because if it doesn't go back to its previous position, that will affect every surrounding country. It's one fabric, it's a domino effect that will have influence from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Question 56: If you were able to deliver a message to President Obama today, what would it be?

President Assad: I think the normal thing that you ask any official in the world is to work for the interests of his people. And the question I would ask any American is: what do you get from

supporting terrorists in our country, in our region? What did you get from supporting the Muslim Brotherhood a few years ago in Egypt and other countries? What did you get from supporting someone like Erdogan? One of the officials from your country asked me seven years ago in Syria at the end of a meeting: how do you think we can solve the problem in Afghanistan? I told him, you have to be able to deal with officials who are not puppets, who can tell you “no.” So, for the United States only looking for puppet officials and client states is not how you can serve the interests of your country. You are the greatest power in the world now, you have many things to disseminate around the world: knowledge, innovation, IT with its positive repercussions. How can you be the best in these fields yet the worst in the political field? This is a contradiction. That is what I think the American people should analyze and question. Why do you fail in every war? You can create war, you can create problems, but you cannot solve any problem. Twenty years of the peace process in Palestine and Israel and you cannot do anything with this in spite of the fact that you are a great country.

Question 57: But in the context of Syria, what would a better policy look like?

President Assad: One that preserves stability in the Middle East. Syria is the heart of the Middle East. Everybody knows that. If the Middle East is sick, the whole world will be unstable. In 1991, when we started the peace process, we had a lot of hope. Now, after over 20 years, things are not at square one; they're much below that square. So the policy should be to help peace in the region, to fight terrorism, to promote secularism, to support this area economically, to help upgrade the mind and society like you did in your country. That is the supposed mission of the United States, not to launch wars. Launching war doesn't make you a great power.