

President Bashar al-Assad's speech at swearing in 2nd Term offers Talks with Israel

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President Bashar al-Assad's speech at the Peoples Assembly following the oath-taking for a new constitutional term of office

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Mr Speaker of the People's Assembly,

Ladies and gentlemen members of the Assembly,

Sisters and brothers,

Speaking to you on this national day while embarking on a new phase of our national process, I am overwhelmed by different feelings which have been growing inside me since the people has chosen, seven years ago, to make me its leader. These feelings have become my most valued resource which inspires my every action, responsibility or decision. I feel love, appreciation, pride, and gratitude towards a great country and a proud people, towards my larger Syrian family who have engulfed me with a flood of noble emotions and provided me with power and will in difficult times.

My vow to the people of our beloved country was to meet their expectations when they chose me, to assume this greatest of responsibilities and assimilate the ethics it involves. My vow was to return the people's love and support by more determined work in order to realize their aspirations, to return their trust and loyalty by lifting performance and action to the status our people deserve, to return their steadfastness and resolve with more giving and by doing my best in order to protect their interests and the interests of the country.

Your expressions of love, while taking part in the referendum for a new constitutional mandate, your expressions of support manifested in your various activities in schools, universities, villages and cities, your places of residence and work, in Syria and in countries of expatriation, have been extremely significant indicators of the sublime emotional relationship that connects us in Syria, an expression of the people's will to continue to pursue our national and pan-Arab doctrine, an embodiment of this giant national unity which is impossible to break and which has been our real support in everything we have done or achieved. These expressions carried clear messages to everyone that this people still cherishes the one nation enterprise, which involves the nation's renaissance and independence; and that this people remains the actual supporter of all those who embrace these ideas and embody this enterprise. For that reason, this people equally rejects trends which involve submission and surrender, on the one hand, and closed mindedness and static mentality on the other, and rejects attempts of division and fragmentation no matter what attractive names they are given.

Sisters and brothers, during the past few years a lively relationship full of patriotic and human meanings has developed between us. Through this relationship you have known me closely in different stances and positions. It has embodied a real case of the people coming together with one of its own, one who has carried the people's concerns, expressed its desires and exchanged with it forms of love and belonging.

I have worked during those years to enhance constructive values in my relationship with the people by rejecting the feeling of the man of authority in favour of the feeling of the man of responsibility, and by enhancing the image of the citizen before the image of the president in order to realize the concept of the responsible citizen and the official who feels and behaves as a citizen. Any success in that regard should be attributed to you, a vibrant and genuine people who understood the relationship between citizenship and responsibility.

Through this relationship, I have developed an unshakable conviction that what protects Syria and its stability is not its material capacities and resources, important as they are, but the rich moral heritage with its different aspects and values, particularly those related to pan-Arab aspects and the political stances inspired by these values which achieve the largest degree of the people's consensus. For stances to be as such, they have to originate from the people's ideas and aspirations, its principles and convictions. They should express its concerns and interests. All this should be based on a correct reading of this people, because such a successful reading means a correct reading of reality and constitutes the way for success for any official charged with carrying out any national task.

Our people has proven, at the historical junctures which we have gone through, to have a genuine sense and a sharp

insight regarding the important events we have faced, which enabled it to distinguish the substantial from the contingent and what is genuine from what is fake.

That is why it is no accident that this steadfast country should continue to be safe and sound amidst this turbulent ocean of a region. Neither is it an accident that it should continue to enjoy the highest degree of harmony and stability amidst these mighty waves of international conflicts which threaten to submerge the region in a state of absolute chaos. This country continues to fight its battles with great honour and dignity in order to maintain the progress and independence of the Arab nation at whatever cost.

Dear sisters and brothers,

We have faced, during the past few years, tough challenges which have put pressure on our resources and consumed a great part of our time and effort. Those challenges came at the time that we have embarked on a wide-scale multi-dimensional development process which in its turn required the mobilization of energies and resources and the most efficient use of time. However, in as much as those challenges occupied us psychologically and mentally and mobilized our capabilities and forces, they made us tougher and more capable to confront. This would not have happened with this degree of confidence and steadfastness without the solidity which our society has acquired during the past decades and which added to its historical characteristics deep national and pan-Arab awareness and the far-sighted vision which was my main stay of support and compass which has guided me in every decision I have taken.

Our aim, in every step we have made or will make, is to strengthen the state, for a strong state means development and stability. And the state can only be strong through the strength of its citizens, a condition derived from their sense of citizenship and based on their participation and their shouldering responsibilities each from his or her position. Citizenship and participation are not complete without knowing our duties in as much as we know our rights, and our responsibilities towards others in as much as we know others' responsibilities towards us.

Consequently, the principle I started from, in the internal reform process which we have adopted, was to engage every citizen as a major actor in the process. To that end, I made sure that my relationship with the people was based on solid grounds of clarity and transparency so that the main elements we build our policies on are made accessible to everyone. The same applies to the justifications of our decisions and the impediments which obstruct their implementation.

I have always respected the people by being clear and honest with them based on my conviction that achieving anything depends on a composite of factors and considerations, on top of which is popular support for the intended decision. Our success in that regard depends on consistently providing the citizens with correct information so that they are aware of what is going on and is conditional on continued frank dialogue with them in order to reach common understandings which constitute the basis of the development process.

An extensive dialogue coincided with the beginning of the development process about the concepts and foundations of this development, the speed required for achieving it, the national priorities within its framework and other elements of the discussion guided by great aspirations by the people to make great achievements in record time.

There were different views and diverging proposals. That was natural because everyone of us thinks that it is their responsibility to make a contribution on this or that of our national issues when they think they have the capacity to do so. We encouraged that process because we thought it would enrich our development experience and would take it to wider horizons. Regardless of the realism or idealism of certain ideas and whether other ideas were logical or illogical; and regardless of the fact that looking at things from the outside is different from being at the centre of events, and the fact that proposing an idea is not the same as taking a decision or being responsible for implementing it, I used to see in this discussion a manifestation of the liveliness of our people and a direct support for the reform process, so that the social arena became a broad forum for dialogue and for exchanging ideas on development.

But if development depended basically on the will and vision of the state official, and on the performance of decision makers in the state - individuals and institutions - this means that the development process cannot jump over the reality in which we live, or ignore the facts which surround it, particularly in relation to the context of our historical development and the social and cultural condition, and the prevailing perceptions in our society which constitute the foundations on which any development is based. Here, talking about the accomplishment of any reform or development becomes dependent to a great extent on changing or maintaining these foundations. Changing these foundations also depends on the extent of our desire and capability to separate the useful from the not so useful elements and to strengthen the positive components which can push the development process forward and at the same time preserve the stability and internal security of our society. All of this, as it is well known, comes within the framework of a difficult and complicated process which requires a long time, a great effort, and first and foremost the appropriate tools.

All these considerations were clear in our minds while embarking on our reform project taking into account a number of priorities which we have ranked according to their vitality, urgency for our people, on the one hand, and their importance in enhancing our capabilities on the other. They were also ranked according to the possibility to achieve progress in them as quickly as possible while obstacles impeding progress in other areas are being overcome. So, we have adopted three

criteria for prioritizing.

The first clear priority, which emerged from our continued communication with our people, was related to living conditions. That is why we awarded this aspect our greatest attention, and made decisions to increase wages and salaries whenever it was possible to do that. And we shall continue to do so according to a carefully studied approach.

Of course, there is always talk about the issue of salaries, particularly at this stage of having the elections and the constitutional oath. I do not like us to connect this issue to certain occasions. It is actually the right of every citizen to think of improving his or her living conditions; and the right of every government employee to think of an increase in his or her salary. It is, at the same time, the state's duty to think everyday of improving the salaries of its employees.

In the past, we missed no opportunity to do that when there was a certain amount of money that could be allocated for this purpose on a sustainable basis. So, we increased salaries at different rates, according to available resources. When such an amount was not available, we used to give amounts in the form of bonuses, without there being a particular occasion. The objective was to provide those with limited income with a partial assistance, particularly in times of festivities or at the beginning of the school year. We shall continue to do so. In order not to say that we are thinking of such a thing now, I say that we think of it every day. A few days ago, I was talking to the prime minister about this issue to see the available resources. But certainly, when there are available amounts of money, we shall do that, because this is in the interest of the citizens and the state at the same time.

There has also been a lot of discussion or dialogue about the social market economy; and most of the discussion emerged from what we read. There are, of course, theories, ideas and academic research about that. But as far as we are concerned, as a state, our only concern is our people's interests. In other words, no term or method can be imposed on us. We decide what terms we want and what forms these terms should take. You remember, when there was a socialist bloc, there were huge differences between eastern and western socialist systems. Even within the eastern bloc, there were differences between different socialist types.

So, when somebody comes to us and says, "this is the dictionary, and the definition here is different from what you are doing," we say, you have to excuse us, this is what we want, and these are our interests." So, any discussion about any term we use in any area should be based on our experience and our vision.

We take from other experiences. There are certainly many common things, but there are always details which differ from one country to another and which we have to take into account. This is what we are doing; that is why there should be no confusion, and discussions should remain within the institutions which identify our interests. Then we arrive at the term on which there is the greatest degree of consensus and which achieves our interests without any other interpretations.

Our strategic decision was to build the solid foundations of our national economy in a manner that makes an impact on its different aspects in order to be able to improve the citizens' living standards in a serious and sustainable manner while preserving and enhancing the gains made by wide sectors of our society. That is why we have taken a number of crucial decisions and measures which constitute a real turning point in our economic development.

The starting point for all of this was providing the appropriate political, intellectual and legislative environment; hence political decisions were made and prepared the appropriate setting for the required economic changes and opened a wide space for a new dynamism for the national economy.

We have adopted the concept of the social-market economy, which will open new and wide vistas for individual initiative and will make market mechanisms the defining factor within a framework of the state's leadership of the development process, its management of economic activity and its preparation of a motivating organizational environment, while maintaining its role as guardian of the rights of the poorer sections of society. This implies the achievement of social justice, combating poverty and unemployment and enhancing social security networks.

At the forefront of the tasks which faced us was the necessity of bridging the gap between the requirements of the reform process and existing legislation, or the lack of legislation, which used to constitute a great hurdle for the development of the economy.

We have passed hundreds of laws and decisions which constituted a wide leap forward, provided the legal base of the desired reform and enabled reform to reach different areas of economic activity and change the whole economic, financial and monetary landscape. The Basic Monetary Law was passed, the Credit and Monetary Board was created with a mandate to manage monetary policy, public banks were restructured and the role of the Central Bank was enhanced, public finance was developed, tax management was improved, customs duties were modified, the exchange rate and import finance were simplified.

On the question of legislation, at the beginning of my first constitutional term, there was a great enthusiasm to pass a large number of laws. Later, people started asking, why these laws are passed but not implemented; and why the president is passing these laws which are not implemented. At a later stage, people started saying that the president

should not pass laws if they were not going to be enforced. My answer was, no, I am working in a different way. We cannot ask people to walk a road which is not there. We have first to build the road, then we ask them to walk. The road might remain vacant for one or two years, but we abort the efforts of anyone trying to obstruct reform. They no longer have the pretext that the necessary legislation does not exist for this work to commence. So, we shall continue to pass new laws as long as we feel we need them.

Of course speed has its negative aspects. But in order not to wait until we have studied all these negative aspects, and consequently we delay action for years, we thought we should pass the laws despite certain gaps which we might not often see in the beginning. But when we feel there is a gap, we must amend the law immediately. That was the dynamism of passing laws.

We also added an important element in order to avoid these pitfalls and what was said in the beginning about the laws not being enforced. There are many reasons why they were not enforced. Some of these reasons have to do with the language or the form of the law, and sometimes they have to do with the executive instructions. What we did was two fold:

In the first phase we consulted with all the stakeholders concerned with the law: economic actors concerning economic laws, industrial actors concerning industrial laws, farmers when the law has to do with agriculture, and so on. Perhaps this mechanism is not complete yet, but we have certainly started it several years ago and we must develop it to make it more effective. This reduces the number of gaps which might appear later.

We noticed later that even when the law is improved, still it is not implemented. We used to hear things about problems in the executive instructions. We noticed that sometimes executive instructions are copies of the laws, while the purpose of these instructions is to translate the law into an action plan that could be implemented on the ground. Now, who is more capable of discussing these executive instructions? They are those responsible for implementing them, from the minister down, may be managers and directors, may be more junior staff. That is why we started asking for the executive instructions to be made in discussion with these people, because a lot of the criticism of executive instructions used to come from such staff.

So, there are so many things which we must do to develop these mechanisms in a manner which enables us to speed up the process of passing laws without having a large number of the gaps which we usually encounter.

There were laws and decisions which provided for the creation on the ground of banks, insurance companies and the stock exchange. Most economic sectors were opened before private enterprises and reform measures gave an important impetus to investment in different areas. Many decisions were made to develop the public sector and address its production, management and financial issues with the objective of ridding it of the impediments which limit its capacity to compete. There are new steps which will be taken in the near future in order to rectify the conditions of industrial public sector. The coming into force of the Basic Financial Law at the beginning of 2008 will be an important turning point for the public sector in general.

We have set up a number of industrial cities and free zones which have succeeded in hosting promising investments. We have achieved tangible progress in the fields of infrastructure, mother and child care, popular and youth housing. We have started to build large projects in energy generation, transport, irrigation, and land reclamation. One of our priorities will be to provide the agricultural sector with the requirements of growth and to fend off negative impacts from this sector because of its vitality to the Syrian economy and its importance to our food sufficiency and national security.

I point out here a number of figures and indicators which reflect what we have achieved during the past period.

The oath speech does not usually include such indicators, but we have noticed that most of us, even those working for the state, do not know these figures.

Economic growth rose to 5.1% in 2006; and if we take out the oil sector, the figure will rise to between 6.5% and 7%. These figures are not Syrian figures, they are calculated by the IMF I think, so they are objective and are not meant to market anything, or cannot be suspected for trying to portray things better than they are. So, this is a good figure considering the circumstances we have gone through. In fact it is less than we aspire for, but higher than expected, considering the circumstances. Some people watching television now might say, "this figure did reflect on me as a citizen. That is right, and that is why we have to ask ourselves another question: the figure is good, but what impact does it have? In the phase we have gone through, which is a period of transition, in addition to circumstances which were hostile to development, we have in the beginning to look for figures. But since we were able to achieve such figures in such circumstances, this means that we have a solid economy. We can activate it more. The problem is that such figures reflected only on a certain number of individuals and certain sections of society. The greater challenge is how to widen the impact of the figures so that they affect the largest number of people or the largest sections of Syrian society. This is our challenge for the future, and this needs many more laws, mechanisms, ideas, and much more creativity on the part of the Syrian society as a whole.

The general state budget was increased to SP 588 billion at a rate of 113% compared with 2000.

Salaries and wages in the public sector rose at more than 125%, although the state provides more than SP 750 million everyday in fuel subsidies, which shows the extent to which the state is trying to improve the living conditions of the citizens. To that end we are doing our best, although the road is still long before us.

In the field of health, 45 new public hospitals have been put in operation, with an increase rate of 80%. 350 new health centres and 30 private hospitals were also opened.

Large foreign debts were settled and the debt share of GDP dropped from 160% in 2000 to less than 8%, from \$20 billion to \$3 billion, and Syria has become one of the world's least indebted nations.

Investments rose by twelve fold from the year 2001, and Syrian exports rose to more than SP 505 billion.

In the field of administrative reform, efforts have been made to initiate structural developments in the government and government work, and also in the procedures related to citizens' transactions and the reduction of red tape. Work, evaluation and assessment mechanisms have been activated and objective recruitment standards have been adopted. I say efforts have been made, not that we made achievements, but that was the trend.

We have made great strides in developing our educational system by approving an integrated plan which aims at developing the different dimensions of the educational process, addressing weaknesses, improving outputs, introducing quality changes to the curricula and providing the educational sector with the necessary material and human resources. In this framework, free obligatory education was extended to nine years. Information technology and its instruments have been made widely accessible to all. During the past seven years, and in the field of education, more than 2,500 new schools, over 32,000 school classes have been put in operation, and over 70,000 teaching staff have been recruited.

In higher education, many new public, private, virtual and open universities have been put in operation, in addition to a large number of faculties in different governorates. A number of specialized study centres have also been created. Over 50 faculties have been created, an additional 100,000 thousand students have been admitted, and eight private universities have been opened while others are in the process of being opened.

Our major thrust after this great expansion is to improve the quality of higher education and set up the standards to insure that, in addition to improving the conditions of scientific research, continuing to build scientific and technological capacities, enriching national intellectual resources by adopting an effective policy for science, technology and creation.

On the level of training, many public and private institutes have been created, most notably the Higher Institute for Public Administration and the Higher Institute for Business Management. Tremendous efforts have been made for the development of and investment in human resources. International expertise was recruited to assist in this process. We are trying to achieve more in this regard so that continuing training and skill acquisition become a major pillar in our government plans.

On the political level, we have taken a number of steps for the development of the political structure by developing our democratic experience towards widening political participation, and giving the opportunity to all national energies to contribute to national building. The charter of the National Progressive Front was developed and its work activated, the field was widely opened for the NPF parties to play their roles in building the state. These parties started publishing their own newspapers and opened branches in the governorates. New parties have also joined the NPF and enriched its experience.

The decision taken by the 10th regional conference of the Baath party constituted a starting point towards activating the people's and government's performance, particularly in relation to its recommendations to widen political participation, pass the media law and combat corruption. These steps in the field of political development, important as they are, remain less than our aspirations. Numerous circumstances hindered some of the political developments which we wanted to achieve. Our supreme objective, amidst the chaos certain parties have been exporting to our region - and which surrounds us now - was to preserve the safety and security of our citizens and maintain the stability our people enjoys. These are not only vital requirements for any society, but the main pillars of national sovereignty, dignity, prosperity and development.

We definitely have the will to develop our political experience based on our conviction that we should make it possible for all to play their roles and enrich the atmosphere of freedom and democracy. We strongly believe that democracy is not one sided, it is an integrated set of aspects which must be developed together in a manner that responds to the people's characteristics and needs. It is not an objective by itself, it is rather an instrument for development and prosperity. This instrument needs careful preparation and needs the appropriate circumstances which could realize this objective. Without these requirements it loses its substance as a building instrument. This is what we have been trying to achieve.

We are looking forward to the achievement of a number of developments in the next phase, which we find extremely

important in consolidating our national structure. At the forefront of these measures comes the passing of a political party law which enhances political participation and democratic life, and creating a Shura council which will contribute to the legislative process and enlarge the decision making circle. We are in the process of developing the local administration law towards more decentralization and in a manner that insures the participation of local communities in the things which concern them, heightens the sense responsibility and insures effectiveness and efficiency of drawing and implementing plans. We are also trying to find an objective solution to the 1962 census which a number of circumstances have prevented us from concluding.

There was an elaborate discussion of the issue of political development. The major step for us was the 10th regional conference. You remember the conference and the recommendations it made. The conference was at the beginning of the ferocious attack against Syria at that time. That attack changed our priorities. But there is another aspect we should know concerning the mechanism of development. There is the principle which we declare, and there is the principle when we implement it, be it a law, a decision or any other mechanism.

When we set a principle, it does not mean that we will implement it tomorrow, because the principle needs certain circumstances until it is transformed into action, and become implementable with the benefits we hope to achieve from it. I'll give an example from the economy: the bank law. The bank law was passed but not implemented until two years later. Why did we pass it while knowing that we are unable to implement it? Because not passing it means that the state is not serious in its reform policies. We consider it a major part of the reform process, and that is why we passed it. As to implementation, it has a technical aspect. There were certain circumstances, as Syrian, Arab and foreign experts thought. They came out with different and contradictory ideas, but most of them said, "you cannot start private banks before certain development measures are taken, mainly concerning the Central Bank". In fact we could not wait all the period they asked for until we carry out the whole reform process, otherwise we would have waited for many more years. We started private banks. Some thought it was an adventure at the time, but the adventure was a success.

Many of the things we have adopted as principles remained without implementation for a while until we prepare the appropriate conditions. The same applies to the political aspects of the conference's resolutions. However, there were two factors: first, we needed to prepare the appropriate conditions; second, we needed to overcome the critical circumstances we were going through. At that time we started talking about national dialogue, about the nature of the party law we would have. A committee was set up to study it. But frankly — and I am always frank with you, as I said in the beginning — we did not even have the time to discuss any idea concerning the party law or concerning any other idea. And although at a certain stage the priority was the economy, we did not have the time to follow up on the economic situation. We were fighting a battle of destiny; and we had to win that battle. We had no choice.

Of course this year, 2007, is highly critical. We are in the second half of the year, and there are a few months remaining. This year, and maybe a few months of this year will be crucial to the destiny and future of the region, and maybe the whole world. Some people would tell us that we say that internal reform has nothing to do with the outside world. We say it has nothing to do with the outside world in terms of substance. We determine the content we want through national dialogue, but the timing is connected to the political circumstances, first in terms of the time available, and second the extent to which we are affected by circumstances which might or might not happen, we do not know. We are not isolated. We do not live on an island. We are influenced by whatever is happening around us. We are influenced by Iraq, by Lebanon, by Palestine and by other things which might be farther. The impact of these things also determines the direction we move in. So, as to political reform we do not make leaps. We will carry out gradual steps, and we will examine every experience at the right time. When we see gaps, we stop, review, postpone and change direction. This is the normal process. We have a thousand perception of one political reform. No one should think that this type of reform is the only type suitable for our national work, and any other reform is not acceptable; or we should arrive at a certain stage within a year, while we think we should reach it in several years. This remains the difference; but I stress that we will continue moving in this direction, particularly next year when the whole picture will become clearer.

As to our political priorities, as I said in the beginning, the priority is the economy because of the needs of the Syrian people, but what is the value of the economy if there was no stability? What happened in the past few years, the security situation and the fact that there were a number of terrorist attacks, attempts at foreign intervention and pressure on Syria, all that made stability our top priority, because without stability there is no economy. Without meeting the people's basic needs: health, food and security what is the significance of political development? Our priorities have to be clear. Nevertheless, the concept of prioritizing does not mean that we arrange things as first, second, third, and so on. We work in parallel, but we concentrate our efforts on the things most urgently needed by the people. So, we are not going to stop the process of political reform, but it will not be our priority under the circumstances we have gone through. We hope circumstances will be better next year and we could make a good start, particularly that the Syrian people have proved that despite the difficulty of passing information to them in light of this ferocious media offensive against their minds, they showed great awareness and understanding. And we must say, as a family, we have a problem in providing the necessary information. Nevertheless Syrians were able to do that and to preserve their stability. This means that the Syrian people are prepared for a wide-ranging process of political development. But the process of discussion has to take the necessary time until we arrive at a formula which wins the consensus of the Syrian people. We should not adopt a formula which leads to division.

As to the 1962 census, many Syrians did not have sufficient knowledge on the subject. What is the substance of this issue and the other issues proposed? I visited al-Hasaka governorate in August 2002 and met representatives of the community there. All of them without exception talked about this issue. I told them, "we have no problem, we will start working on it." That was the time when the United States was preparing to invade Iraq. We were in the Security Council and at the heart of the battle. The issue was not a priority. It was four decades old. We started moving slowly, the Iraq war happened, and there were different circumstances which stopped many things concerning internal reform. In 2004 the riots in al-Qamishli governorate happened, and we did not exactly know the background of the riots, because some people took advantage of the events for non-patriotic purposes. But it became clear later that the events were mere riots and there were no non-patriotic motives behind them, although some people took advantage of them. Nevertheless, the issue stopped to be reconsidered on the backdrop of the events. We restarted the process last year on the government's initiative since the events have gone and it was shown that there were no non-patriotic implications. But there were still attempts to take advantage of the situation.

There is the 1962 census issue, which has to do with the fact that the Syrian nationality was given to members of a family and not to other members of the same family, although they are entitled to it. There is also those who are not registered in the civil register. At that time they were considered part of the same problem. Those are people of different nationalities living in Syria but do not exist on Syrian records, which means that it is a different issue. There were those who mixed the 1962 census issue with the non-registered persons issue. There were also persons of different nationalities, mostly Kurds, who came to Syria from Turkey or Iraq for economic, political, security or other causes. We have nothing to do with this issue. We are talking about the census. Recently work was completed on the technical aspects of the law. Where did we stop? We stopped because we wanted to prevent others from taking advantage of the issue. We wanted all those concerned with the issue to know that we are dealing only with the 1962 census issue. We did not want to shift from that issue so that they come again and say we have the problem of 2007 census, so that after forty years you have another problem of people who were not given the nationality.

I am saying this because there are those who are exploiting this issue with European organizations and with the delegations we meet and who raise this issue with us. It is very clear that there are those who are taking advantage of that. We want the law to be passed after we have agreed that it is the final national solution. Any attempt after settling the census issue will be considered an attempt to shake the stability of the country. Consultations are still going on, and when we finish, the law is there, and it is a simple issue, and I think there is consensus in Syria that it should be settled.

I wanted to give you an idea about how we are thinking on this issue.

On the media law, the subject has been raised many times. There is a recent proposal by the Ministry of Information on the need to amend the media law. I heard many complaints from journalists and others and that they are not happy with the existing law. There could be proposals from the Ministry of Information in this regard which could be studied by the People's Assembly, and the law could be passed. I think these are the main issues.

The Shura council is another subject. It is much wider and needs wider discussions. We still do not have concrete ideas. There are other experiences, and the concept has to be arrived at through cooperation with all state institutions. And there should be a national dialogue on the role of such a council, and the role of the People's Assembly. How we widen participation without creating any overlapping or conflict in authorities. It should support the work of the People's Assembly not the reverse. Any way, as I said there are many other experiences and we can learn from them.

Sisters and brothers,

What I have mentioned in relation to the actions and decisions we have taken is part of what has been achieved during the past few years which were full of work and achievement, the impacts of which are abundantly clear on the ground in terms of developments which covered the different aspects of services and our economic and social life. In total they have provided us with the solid base for improving our people's living conditions, fortified our national stability, consolidated our capacities for steadfastness and confrontation, and formed the solid grounds on which we have based our national decisions which aim at protecting our independence and sovereignty. Most importantly, what has been achieved is the starting point towards the future.

These achievements do not make us overlook what has not been achieved; and what we have implemented does not convince us that we have done all what we have planned for. There are things which we could not achieve because of the events which have surrounded us, the challenges which required quick and urgent responses and difficulties which we did not have the subjective and objective capacities to overcome. Some of these circumstances are related to the extreme pressures put on our country and attempts to interfere in our domestic affairs with the objective of breaking our will and pushing us to abandon our rights and principles. This made us rearrange a number of our priorities and mobilize a large amount of our resources to confront. Our people bore the brunt of these circumstances and provided patiently and determinedly everything they have in order to maintain their country's honour and dignity.

Some of these difficulties are related to us and to our internal factors. At the forefront of these difficulties comes the existing administrative structure which has not developed sufficiently to assimilate the required tasks, and the lack of staff

required to carry out these tasks effectively and efficiently. One of the major problems we faced was the weakness of institutional work, the lack of a methodology for such work, the overlapping of responsibilities and a receding sense of incentive for some people to carry out what is required of them. In addition to all that, there is a lack of clarity in certain laws and decisions which were passed hastily without being sufficiently and adequately studied, and sometimes these are not implemented in a serious and responsible manner. Statistics and data bases are also weak which has an impact on the accuracy of performance and projection analysis. The weakness also applies to review and assessment mechanisms. On top of all that came the accelerating population growth which weighs heavily on us and on our plans. Here we return to the figure 5.1%. We cannot talk about such figures without knowing the population growth, because a large part of this figure is swallowed by population growth. The state cannot do anything about this. This is a social issue. There should be social awareness of the importance of population growth within acceptable limits, so that economic growth is real and not merely a matter of figures.

We also had to think carefully of the prevalent cultural structure, the mentality which controls the behaviour of some of us and the negative traditions which do not encourage creativity and taking the initiative and do not promote respecting the values of collective work and the team spirit. This leads to an absence of the culture of work for many people, which obstructed professional and mental involvement in the modernizing project we are implementing.

Despite all that, we have the determination to address all gaps and overcome all the weaknesses which characterized certain aspects of our performance. We have great ambitions to achieve development and prosperity in the different aspects of our life. That is why we started the major steps of our development project at the beginning of 2006; I mean the 10th five year plan which we are doing our best to implement through the involvement of all social sections and national institutions. It is a comprehensive development strategy and includes a gradual reform programme. It expresses our national development vision for all aspects of life and work in our society. It brings together the economic, social, scientific, cultural and other areas. That is why it is important to clarify these policies on all levels so that our progress will be clear to all, and so that the total of our collective performance is coordinated towards the achievement of our development objectives.

We have wide ranging tasks for the future which require an intensification of all capacities to complete them and to make them the foundations of our national work for the future. At the forefront of these tasks is giving the greatest care and attention to our young generation by protecting them materially and morally, thinking about their academic and professional future and making the question of unemployment our top priority in the coming period. In parallel to the great openness we have embarked on in Syria, we have to take care of their upbringing, cultivation and education and inculcating them with genuine Arab characteristics so that our openness remains positive and constructive.

Our second task should be completing the process of insuring the appropriate conditions for the promotion and diversification of investment and directing it towards the promising sectors in our country and removing all bureaucratic hurdles which might hinder that, particularly that we have updated the laws which regulate investment and have provided all facilities. It was encouraging that despite the unstable regional circumstances, investment projects approved under Investment Law in 2006 were worth SP 470 billion and those approved for tourist investment were worth about SP 100 billion.

It is important to adopt regional planning in our development policies in order to drive our future projects in the right direction by drawing out a clear economic, social, educational and investment map. This should take into account our needs, on the one hand, and the functional tasks of the country's regions, on the other. This should also be placed within the framework of achieving a balanced and equitable development in line with administrative decentralization in our current plans, and in a manner that insures comprehensive development sufficiency in every region and governorate, and integrate and harmonize them with other regions and governorates in the country.

Administrative development is the first step towards an economic development in the country. That is why pursuing the process of administrative development, computerization, dissemination of the right administrative culture, giving training the needed attention, establishing the criteria for transparency and competence should be top on our priority list.

In addition to the obstacles I mentioned at the beginning, we have to take into account that we are shifting from one approach to another with the same staff who got used to a certain way of doing things. And there was not sufficient training on the new approach.

The other aspect is that administrative reform, or management in general, is a science in itself, and we have great weaknesses in this field. There are not sufficient expertise to develop a whole country. What we did was that we contacted a number of world renowned companies which have experience in developing companies and countries, and I remember meeting representatives of such a company a few years back. In the beginning they were enthusiastic to start a large-scale administrative development process in Syria. A month later they sent us a letter saying that the American Administration prevented them from carrying out any development in Syria.

Of course there were other companies which did not come to Syria for the same reasons. So, there are sanctions against us even in the field of development and reform. Nevertheless, there are the experiences of other countries which we

have started to consult; but we have not done anything tangible yet. We might start that soon. These countries have carried out similar programmes in the East, and Malaysia is one of them. When you try to bring a highly developed experience, foreign experts might not be able to customize the experience to our own conditions. But there are countries which used to have conditions similar to ours, then carried out programmes which brought them to conditions we want to reach. These countries might be more capable of giving more objective proposals in the field of administrative development. This is what we are trying to do.

Talking about administrative development leads us to talking about corruption which is the centre of people's attention in our country, because of its direct and indirect impact on social life and because it turned into an impediment for reform. Despite of what is being said about its volume and dimensions, the differing views on it, and despite the efforts made to reduce and combat it, we still need effective mechanisms to combat corruption. Punishing corrupt individuals is an important mechanism, but it is not sufficient; that is why administrative development and the wider use of modern technology are complementary mechanisms.

In the past seven years, we talked a lot about corruption, and there were many proposals. But I would like to put the corruption under discussion into three main categories. First, a real example of fighting corruption: corruption at the upper levels of government, if we do not say it is non-existent, we can say that it was combated satisfactorily. And I think Syrians realize that.

There is another case which we might describe as illusionary, where corruption cannot be identified accurately. During the past seven years there was more freedom in terms of expression and criticism. The media started to talk more about corruption, and that is how it was given a larger volume.

The third area of corruption is where the economy expanded. When the economy expands, interests expand, money movement expands, contact between government and money expands without having strong mechanisms for fighting corruption. Here corruption expands. This is inevitable unless we develop mechanisms to fight it.

As I said earlier, punishment is necessary, but it remains a temporary solution and will not lead to the desired results for a simple reason, that in most cases there is no evidence. We referred a number of cases to court, and corruption was not proved although many people were convinced that there was corruption. So punishment, although necessary, remains insufficient.

Furthermore, corruption develops itself. It is intelligent and usually develops at a faster pace than government mechanisms, even if the government is developing quickly. So, what is the actual solution? The actual solution comes through management. When we have serious management, computerization, selection mechanisms, evaluation mechanisms it works. It is not sufficient to have selection mechanisms. Sometimes we select someone because he or she is good. After a while we discover that they are corrupt. So, evaluation is more important than selection.

If all these mechanisms are available, they would yield the desired results. Then, even if a corrupt person was employed by the state, he will not be able to get involved in corrupt dealing or to corrupt others. That is why management is so important. What we are doing in fighting corruption and the cases of punishment are temporary and have not given the results we want. At the same time, we must ask a question we do not usually ask: Haven't these corrupt people been brought up in families? Education and upbringing are of crucial importance. Corruption is a moral issue that we as a society must see, not only as a state. The parents might be good, but they might not provide solid upbringing. It is not enough to raise children on certain moral values that children are committed to in the beginning and then go astray. We want parents to give their children solid patriotic and moral upbringing. We see people who live in a corrupt environment, and yet they are honest. This is what we want. So, this is a social problem as well. It is not enough to wait for government action. Of course this is long term action. I am not talking about treatment, because quick treatment is a function of the state. We have to focus on the schools. We have to think how to integrate these concepts and other concepts like collective work, because we tend to work as individuals.

When we talk about comprehensive mechanisms for combating corruption that should include improving control mechanisms, developing the media and promoting societal participation so that this issue can be addressed by the whole of society, particularly that corruption is a moral and educational problem in the first place.

We should pay continuous and effective attention to legal modernization; for legal stability is the foundation of stability and justice in society. It is the crucial element for a strong and sound development. Its modernization should include the organization of the judiciary, like selecting judges and giving them first-class training and protecting them. It should also include the restructuring of judicial work and management in a manner that achieves effectiveness and transparency, reduces red tape and the piling of cases, creating new courts and legal institutions to cover all communities; insuring diversity and specialization; modernizing administrative courts and commercial courts; computerizing the legal process in terms of procedures and data. These are mere landmarks in this process.

The Arabic language, which expresses our history, culture and identity, should be awarded all our care and protection. It should continue to live in our curricula, media and education as a living being which grows, develops and prospers. It

should be awarded the status it deserves at the heart of our national identity. It should continue to be able to integrate into the scientific development and knowledge in the age of globalization and information in order to become one of the tools of modernization and a strong shield in the confrontation with attempts of alienation and distortion faced by our culture.

We in Syria have given the Arabic language all our attention; and it has occupied, from an early stage, a prominent role in our cultural life. Today, we are required to complete our efforts to uphold it, particularly at this stage when our national existence is targeted by attempts to obscure its identity and its components. Adhering to the Arabic language is synonymous to adhering to this existence itself.

We have to remember that our support for learning foreign languages in order to meet the requirements of learning, civilizational communications with others is not an alternative for the Arabic language but an extra incentive to empower and improve its status.

And here the confusion occurs. I am interested in developing my foreign language skills, and I speak a number of languages fluently. I don't have a problem. But at the same time, I care about the Arabic language. The first question I ask after each speech is about the grammatical errors I have made before I ask about the content of the speech. We have to continue to focus on this subject.

In every speech I forget a number of ideas, but I am not saddened by that. But if I find that I have made a number of grammatical errors I feel ashamed. I asked the Vice-president, Dr Najah al-Attar, a few months ago to tackle this issue. She started holding meeting within and outside the government in order to draw a general framework. We have seen that because of the internet and the satellite TV stations, the Arabic language is getting weaker. When the Arabic language becomes weaker, it becomes easy for other links with the country, the nation and with religion to become weaker.

Anyway, the Minister of Education is with us, and we drew his attention to this issue last week so that the appropriate measures can be taken before the beginning of the school year.

We are all required to work for a more active role for women and for enabling them to be active participants in all fields; for the development, openness and progress of society is strongly linked to the rights women actually enjoy and their participation in the life of their country.

I say actually, not only in terms of the quotas in the People's Assembly or the trade unions or other bodies. We want women to get involved using their own capabilities and to convince others with the major roles they can play. This is an issue which has to do with society's development. We cannot talk about developing women without developing society, because women are members of this society.

Anyway, these are mere title. If we want to speak about all the internal issues, we would speak for days. What I want to say is that what we have done was satisfactory because of the circumstances. A person can walk for a thousand meters on a level road, while we had to go those thousand meters climbing in such circumstances. And we were able to arrive in the end. But we need to know that what we have achieved is the easier part. As I said in the beginning, the priorities we addressed were those on which there was national consensus and because we had the material and human resources to achieve them. But certainly there are other issues we have not raised. With the same mechanisms and the same circumstances we can achieve more development, but I believe that in a short period of time we are going to reach a certain limit. All the pillars I talked about, or the five-year plan would not be achievable if we do not start with other mechanisms and with more development, more hard work, more dialogue, more serious thinking about the issues which might be problematic — and there are many of those. We might arrive at a stage where there could be conflict between two sections of society or two groups. How can we arrive at a solution? So far we have not started to address these tough issues. That is why I believe the next phase needs more efforts. The thing I want to stress about the repeated talk about the role of the state in relation to social groups, the receding role of the state, the weakness of the role of the state, lifting subsidies, or preparing to do that is either misleading, rumors or indicates lack of knowledge. In one case only we might cancel the role of the state or lift the subsidies: if the Security Council takes a resolution under chapter 7, only then... You should not be surprised if a day comes when they say that supporting the poor is a form of supporting terrorism.

Sisters and brothers,

The tragic events engulfing our region and our peoples have become part of the daily scene, particularly in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. We are convinced that the international community lacks the will for the implementation of its resolutions and for shouldering its responsibilities when it comes to our rights and causes, because there are big powers which control its fate to the extent that this community no longer exists in the sense we understand and which is guaranteed by international law. These powers have turned it into a public relations community based on a great degree of deception and misleading where things are portrayed outside their natural context and where the media machine distorts facts and confuses people so that they forget their rights.

Since there is no international community which brings everyone under its fold, there are no international policies that provide conditions of justice and respect in relations among states. The world's superpower lacks a reasonable and fair vision, while some effective European countries have tended to make an automatic link between their policies and the policies of the United States towards our region and the world.

Despite the numerous discussions we conducted with these countries at the conclusion of which we arrived at similar perceptions of certain positions and events, despite the fact that these countries realize the reality of the conditions in the region, and despite the fact that they were introduced to a number of ideas which can help in finding solutions to the region's problems, they still lack the initiative to put these ideas into action.

We talked about political developments in the last speech, and there is nothing new. But there are certain things which are useful to know: details which show us existing international politics. When we say there is no international politics based on justice and respect, it is the reality. For instance, an official visits us and talks about certain issues in the meeting, and he is fully convinced. Then he addresses the media and says something different, because the statement is prepared in advance. He is not interested in dialogue. He did not come for dialogue. They come to pass messages not for dialogue. We discuss things with them, they are convinced on the personal level, but when they speak publicly, they say the things which they are asked to say by their government or by a different government which wanted them to do so.

The other aspect in international politics which we have started to hear is this: more than one foreign official sends a message saying I want to come to Syria, but if I come what are you going to offer me? So, we have to give him spoils so that he can go back as a hero who was able to win things from Syria. We answer: you come for dialogue, we have nothing else to offer but dialogue. We do not have consolation prizes to give anyone. I also give you an idea about contradictions in international politics. You hear from time to time about a statement by the Security Council calling on Syria not to interfere in a certain issue, the group of eight meet and call on Syria not to interfere in another issue. Then you will be surprised to know that all the Western officials who visited us recently came to put pressure on us to interfere, the exact opposite of what we hear in the statements. We say to them: "that's strange. We decided to comply by your statements, why don't you comply by them? We decided not to interfere." They put pressure on us. When we say we don't want, they tell the media that Syria is obstructive. So, Syria is required to play a role. They know that Syria has a role to play, but it is required to play it against its own interests and against the interests of the peoples of the countries concerned. At the same time they accuse Syria of being weak. If it is weak, then why all this pressure? Nobody cares for a weak country. Just a puff from the great powers and it is marginalized. It is unreasonable that we are a weak country and at the same time they ask us to play a role. There is no logical connection between these things.

I remember that last year an official visited me and gave a list of demands from the United States that included solutions to all the problems of the Middle East. I said, I have no objection to do this provided you give us a permanent seat in the Security Council, because we are a superpower and we didn't realize that." I am giving you these details because we cannot say them in the media. But knowing these details, you can while watching television or reading newspapers, read what is behind the news and what is between the lines. As I said earlier the Syrian people has the capacity to understand these things. Providing these details enables them to communicate better with their government in relation to the political stances we take.

There was recently some talk about Israel's intention to resume the peace process on the Syrian track. We once again stress our adherence to our positions and that we are prepared for just and comprehensive peace in accordance with international legitimacy as a prelude to the establishment of security and stability in the region. In case the Israeli side expressed clear and unambivalent commitment to this, we support the resumption of negotiations in order to achieve the main principle which regulated the process from the beginning, I mean land for peace, in a manner that guarantees the return of the whole of the Golan. The Israelis must remember that real and viable peace is better than all the other forms which do not last, and that its cost is hundreds of times less than the cost of occupation and aggression which will not last.

Between the last speech and this one few things emerged. We explained our position towards secret negotiations. We still have the same position. We received more delegations who came to speak about the same subject. They come with messages from the Israeli prime minister that he wants peace. Some of those used to be fierce supporters of Israel, even during the war, as one of them told me. And most of them are Jewish Americans or come from other countries. Of course we explained to them that Arab Jews are different from Zionists, etc. I am saying this so that this is not taken out of context in the speech. But they are enthusiastic for the peace process. They said literally, "we used to support Israel, even during the war, but now we realized that Israel has no other option but peace." We said, that is great, since we see this change, this intensive effort during the past ten months on the part of people who used to support Israel. This is positive. But our position remains constant. We do not support secret negotiations for the reasons I mentioned earlier. There is no reason why we should hide things from the Syrian people. But the Israeli officials are required to declare their desire for peace officially and clearly. To say that they will not negotiate with Syria and then send us secret messages is unacceptable. Then, first, we need a clear and serious declaration. Second, they should provide guarantees about the return o

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