

Video, Transcript - BBC Interview Bashar Assad, Acknowledges 'Influence' over Lebanon

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President al-Assad Gives an Interview to the BBC

Assad Acknowledges 'Influence' over Lebanon

Syrian President Bashar Assad reiterated Damascus' denial of any involvement in the series of assassinations and assassination attempts that have hit Lebanon.

"We don't know. We are not in Lebanon," Assad told BBC radio in response to a question. "Before these assassinations, many friends of Syria were assassinated, but they were not mentioned. Who killed them?"

Assad acknowledged Syria's influence on Lebanon.

"We have good relations since we are neighbors of Lebanon," Assad said. "Therefore, it's normal to have influence."

He said, however, that this "influence is different from committing crime in Lebanon."

"Influence could be negative or positive," Assad said.

"We are suspects, while the other side, described as the anti-Syrian camp, is the beneficiary, not Syria," he protested.

"We have to work for the stability of Lebanon, since we paid a high price in Lebanon as a result of the civil war which broke out in the 70s and 80s," Assad explained.

"We support any consensus on any issue in Lebanon," he said, stressing that it is in Syria's interest to see stability prevailing over its neighboring country.

from Naharnet, Beirut, 03 Oct 07, 09:28

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&A2CF4DEF5BFB7D60C22573690028D973>

BBC Interview with Bashar Assad

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BBC asks about the recent Raid in an Interview with Bashar Assad

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Tuesday, October 02, 2007 - 10:20 PM

Full text of the interview given by HE
Dr. Bashar al-Assad
President of the Syrian Arab Republic

to

Lyce Ducet of the BBC

OCTOBER 1, 2007
Damascus

Ms Ducet: President Bashar Al-Assad welcome to this BBC interview.
President Assad: You are most welcome in Syria.

Ms Ducet: Syria and Israel are now in a state of high alert, how do you see the possibility of the war?

President Assad: Whenever you talk about non-peace and non-war situations, this means that it will end by either peace or war; you do not have a third option. We have been working on peace since the peace conference in Madrid, 1991. Of course, the situation and the atmosphere are not good as it was used to be.

Ms Ducet: It is significantly more tense now, especially in the last few weeks.

President Assad: Exactly, you are right. But that does not mean that we do not have an open window or light at the end of the tunnel; we still can work for peace in order to turn the tide in the right direction towards the peace.

Ms Ducet: Tension increased after the 6th of September when Israeli jets entered Syrian space in the north and they carried out a bombing raid that remains mysterious to this day, what did they bomb?

President Assad: They bombed buildings and constructions related to the military, but it's not used, it's under construction, so there are no people in it, there is no army, there is nothing in it and we do not know the reason, it was not clear. But for us it reflects the fundamental antipathy of Israel towards peace. That is how we see it. It does not matter what the target is.

Ms Ducet: But why would they carry out such a high risk raid if they were not going after what you call a highly valued target?

President Assad: That's what you have to ask the Israelis. We are working to achieve peace in the region. We in Syria work for peace. It was surprising for us and for the entire world, why they did they do it? Nobody knows why. What is the target? But the target is not an important target; and I think if they knew what it was they would not have done it.

Ms Ducet: But they were obviously sending a message to you. What was the message?

President Assad: I told you, because they work against peace; this is against peace. You cannot talk about peace and carry out attacks against a neighboring country. This is the only message that we got.

Ms Ducet: But at the same time the Israeli Prime Minister reassured you that he was interested in peace and even complemented you and said that he respects you and respects Syrian conduct. So, the air raid reflects something different?

President Assad: The strife that has been going on for six decades now in the region is not about personal matters to admire or respect me. It is about rights; we have our land – the Golan Heights – which is occupied and it has to go back. This is the only way to achieve peace and it is not by label or mantra or by just saying that they want peace. They have to work for peace and this attack is in the other direction.

Ms Ducet: But you know that there are so many speculations swirling about this: whether it was a suspected nuclear site set up with the help of North Korea, whether it was the North Koreans trying to dispose of some nuclear materials, whether it was an arms cache for Hizbollah in Lebanon, whether Israel was trying to test your air-defenses, all the details are swirling about. Why is it so mysterious in a region where there are so few secrets?

President Assad: It was not mysterious. We said everything in the media.

Ms Ducet: But it is mysterious because from Washington all the way to Tel-Aviv there is a news blackout, unprecedented for this region. So everyone says there must be something that happened and only you - there are only a few people, maybe you can count on one hand - who know exactly what happened, and you are one of them?

President Assad: This propaganda reminds us about what happened before the war in Iraq when they showed all the

concrete evidence that Iraq has nuclear programmes or WMD programmes which turned out not to exist at all. So, about the propaganda, we do not have to waste our time about propaganda, because it is the same story. As to the reason, only the Israelis know what it is.

Ms Ducet: Are you going to retaliate?

President Assad: Retaliate does not mean missile for missile and bomb for bomb. We have our means to retaliate, maybe politically, maybe in other ways. So we have the right to retaliate in using different means, but if we wanted to retaliate militarily this means that we are going to work according to the Israeli agenda, which is something we do not look for. That does not mean we squander any opportunity for peace in the near future, something we do not want to see happening.

Ms Ducet: Israel used the option of an air raid, what about Syria? Do you keep military options on the table? Everywhere I go in the region, when I speak to Arab or Israeli leaders, they tell me that Syria has been re-arming since the war ended last year in Lebanon, getting better missiles, better air-defenses, strengthening its defenses along the Golan Heights, leading to suspicion that you are planning a military strike?

President Assad: It is always an option. That is why you have the army to defend your territory. We do not build the army to make any aggression but to defend our country, and this is normal, especially after the war on Lebanon last year when we saw the Israelis wreck havoc in the Lebanese cities, in Beirut and in southern Lebanon where they killed civilians. It is very normal and self-evident that we are going to prepare ourselves for that, so it is an option.

Ms Ducet: So to those who say they are worried that Syria could carry out a military strike you say it is possible?

President Assad: It is possible, but we do not say that this is our option. We did not say that this is the option we are going to adopt now. We said we have many different means. That depends on which is more effective, which option achieves our interests. It is not only about the military option. This is one of the options, but we keep it. This is the last option. It should not be the first anyway if you want to talk about peace, it should not be the first option.

Ms Ducet: But in the present context where, although you do not seem to accept that, Israel has said it sent you a message, Washington says it sent you a message, they say you got the message; so what do you say back to them, what is your message back to them?

President Assad: I do not know if they see into my mind if I got the message or not.

Ms Ducet: Only you know that.

President Assad: No, they know what the message they want to send, they have to announce it.

Mr. Ducet: They did quite dramatically.

President Assad: They did not tell me directly what their message is. Again, I would say the only message that we got is that the Israelis do not want peace. This is the only message. If we say that this is an aggressive state, this is something we know for a long time; so this is nothing new.

Ms Ducet: So you deny that you are working with North Korea on any kind of nuclear cooperation?

President Assad: We have a relation with North Korea and this is not something in secret. We have a relation with them but to have a construction, if you have, like they say you mean the nuclear, we are not interested in any nuclear activity. So far even peaceful reactor we do not even mention peaceful reactor for electricity or for any peaceful use in Syria. Talking about a strategic project like this, you do not have any protection, any air-defence, any people and then the aircraft attack that reactor and there is no radiations, no emergency plans. This is impossible. This is only a building, a construction, and they attacked this construction, nothing happened. So, it is not nuclear at all; these are only false claims.

Ms Ducet: So has this put off the agenda for now any hopes of a resumption of official peace talks with Israel?

President Assad: For the meantime yes, unless they change their behavior.

Ms Ducet: How would you describe the state of tension now, how high is it?

President Assad: It is definitely high. It is high, how high we do not have a measure to say how high. It is dangerous, the situation is dangerous but we have to work to reverse it. We do not have to keep it high anyway if we want to talk about peace, although we do not see peace on the horizon, but we have to keep working for it, otherwise nobody knows where

the region is going to.

Ms Ducet: You repeatedly have said that you would like to have direct talks with Israel on a peace deal, including giving back the Golan Heights occupied in 1967 war, and Israel has repeatedly said that it is always ready for unconditional talks, so what is stopping you?

President Assad: Talking about the negotiations needs more than one party; it needs a third party, which should be an impartial arbiter, but it does not exist. The United States, especially this administration, is not interested in peace. It is impossible to move towards peace and to achieve something without the United States; that is what stopped it. This is first. Second, you have a weak government in Israel, and weak governments can launch war; they cannot make peace. While in Syria we still have the public support to go towards peace, and we do not have any problem. So, we have to see what can be done with the other party to talk about direct negotiations.

Ms Ducet: George Bush said on June 7 to the Israeli Prime Minister: You do not need me to negotiate with Syria; go ahead on your own. For you that meant that talks are off?

President Assad: Yes exactly, because without a third party you cannot achieve peace, because of different circumstances and many accumulations through the last few decades; it is not that easy to say just go and talk directly.

Ms Ducet: But the Israelis and the Americans say why should they talk peace to Syria while you are giving exile to Khaled Mashaal, the leader of Hamas, standing with Iran and arming Hezbollah, and unless you end those ties they say there cannot be any peace-talks with Syria for peace?

President Assad: We did not invite Hamas to Syria; they were expelled from their country and we did not invite them. It is normal for them to be here. Hezbollah represents a large section of the Lebanese and we have normal relations with the Lebanese people, and it is normal to have relations with them and to support their cause. This is not related to being against peace. This is not logical; it is devoid of logic.

Ms Ducet: But you know that this is the key demand for Washington and you have to shift direction in your alliances if you would like genuinely to make peace in this region?

President Assad: This argument is devoid of logic, and there is no relation between this and that. Otherwise, I will say that the Israelis are killing Palestinians everyday; why to go to peace with them? How do they talk about peace and they kill Palestinians and they killed Lebanese last year. We do not kill anyone; we politically support any party, organization or country which has a just cause; this has been our position forever.

Ms Ducet: Is Syria going to go along to the Middle East conference planned it seems for November to bring together Israelis, Palestinians, other Arab nations and important players in the region?

President Assad: I think we do not have a lot of opportunities to squander, because the more opportunities you lose, the more peace is going to be difficult. I mean this conference or any conference is going to be an opportunity, but it should be purposeful and substantive. I do not see where the purpose and what the substance of this conference is, what are they going to talk about, what are the criteria, what are the methods and means? Everything is not clear. If you want to prepare for a conference like this, you have to see what happened before in the Madrid Conference in 1991 when there was shuttling by the American officials between the different countries for nearly ten months. They did not go to any party this time. So what kind of conference is this one? It needs more clarification for Syria to take a decision.

Ms Ducet: If the Palestinians said that substantive issues; the final status issues of a peace deal are on the table, would Syria go?

President Assad: But it is not about the Palestinians and Palestinian territory; it is about the Syrian occupied territory, the Golan Heights. So, if they do not talk about the Syrian occupied territory, there will be no way for Syria to go there.

Ms Ducet: But it is not about Syria in this conference. It is first and foremost about an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal?

President Assad: It should be about comprehensive peace and Syria is part of this comprehensive peace. Without that we would not go.

Ms Ducet: So, most probably you are not going?

President Assad: If the criteria of this conference do not meet our needs and achieve our interests, we will not go.

Ms Ducet: What is your message to George Bush now?

President Assad: About what?

Ms Ducet: About how he should be dealing with Syria?

President Assad: I would only say to anyone who dealt …

Ms Ducet: Well that's George Bush yes, if you want him to help you make peace with Israel, and since you are worried about the Middle East conference he is organizing?

President Assad: I will only tell them that their approach towards Syria, the previous approach towards Syria was futile, and you have to seek another approach which is dialogue and taking our interests into consideration. That is the only message we want, it is about our interests.

Ms Ducet: Well, Condoleezza Rice says I think we have not seen anything in Syrian behavior to this point that suggests Syria is doing anything but acting in a destabilizing way in the Middle East, and that is why they say they do not want to talk to you right now?

President Assad: I do not think that we created the war in Iraq to talk about destabilizing the Middle East; we did not create the problem in Lebanon recently, we did not meddle in the affairs of different countries to create the instability or to sow instability. This is first. Second, we do not have any interest in sowing instability in the region because we are going to pay the price. We have strong interests in having a stable region and that is what we are working for. So, we do not take these statements into consideration.

Ms Ducet: Some people say that you are just waiting and biding your time until president Bush finishes his second term. You do not expect anything from him?

President Assad: No, because we do not bet on any President or administration. We are betting on policy. But again, as I have said many times that we have lost hope with this administration. We do not think that they will work for peace. We do not think that they have learned anything from their experience and failure in Iraq. That is why, so if you call it buying time or whatever it is something subjective, but this is the reality.

Ms Ducet: For Washington, the number one issue, as you know, is Iraq. They maintain that you were more cooperative but still not cooperative enough. Let me just quote what ambassador Ryan Croker said to Congress in September, which you might have heard, that Syria's role has been problematic, you did host a meeting of the border security working groups, interdicted some foreign terrorists in transit to Iraq, but on the other hand, suicide bombers continue to cross the borders from Syria to murder Iraqi civilians?

President Assad: Again this is against our interests, because if you have chaos in Iraq we will have chaos in Syria. We are already paying the price of the chaos in Iraq. You know about the refugees in Syria; we have about 1.5 million. So we are paying the price. What is the goal of Syria in ignoring those people or those terrorists who cross the borders as they claim? Actually, the problem is political. Whenever you do not have a real political process in Iraq, you will have this chaos, and you will have the fertile ground for the terrorists. These are the issues.

Ms Ducet: Do you accept the report that there are foreign fighters crossing your borders going to Iraq?

President Assad: Any country cannot seal its borders as the Americans say. And they said they cannot control their borders with Mexico. This is the major or the greatest power in the world; it cannot control its borders. So any country cannot control its borders. But if you have smuggling, you do not know about it. It is illegal and you do not know about it. This is to be expected anywhere in the world. But if they have any information, they should send out this information, if they have any concrete information. But they only have allegations.

Ms Ducet: They say, and I quote the pentagon in September, this network it is funneling about 50-80 suicide bombers passing from Syria into Iraq.

President Assad: If they knew they crossed the Syrian borders, this means they know who they are. This is just theoretical.

Ms Ducet: But what do you say to them? Do you say I want to do more, but I cannot do more, because I do not have the resources. It is not a question of political will? Because they say you want to keep some of these foreign fighters here along with other groups to maintain your political options if you like, your ability to exercise influence in your neighboring countries?

President Assad: It is self-evident that you want to control your borders. Any country wants that. So if I want to do more, it is for my interests. We are not working for their interests. They have to know that. We have an interest in controlling our borders and we told them and many Europeans about the whole borders with Lebanon and Iraq and we said that we want to control it and any help will be welcomed. But, talking about sealing the borders, this is something not logical and

not realistic.

Ms Ducet: Are you also working to try to prevent that kind of chaos in Lebanon? People say that Syria can do a lot more to bring about a stable solution for Lebanon which has been deadlocked many years as you know between the pro-Syrian and the Anti-Syrian coalitions?

President Assad: Definitely we have to work for the stability in Lebanon because again we paid a high price in Lebanon in the past because of the civil war in the 1970s and the 1980s, and we have to support the consensus in Lebanon. This is our position today; we support any consensus in Lebanon about any issue and we have interest in having a stable Lebanon.

Ms Ducet: Since Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in February 2005, seven prominent Lebanese including 4 members of parliament were murdered. All of them were described as anti-Syrian. You have denied being involved. If you are not involved, who would it be?

President Assad: But before that many pro-Syrians were killed and they did not mention that, so who killed them?

Ms Ducet: But who is killing the anti-Syrians?

President Assad: We do not know. We are not in Lebanon any way.

Ms Ducet: But you have influence there, a great deal of influence. Your ally Hezbollah there is playing a prominent role?

President Assad: Of course we have influence and we have good relations; we are a neighboring country to Lebanon and of course we have influence and this is normal, but having an influence is different from committing crimes in Lebanon. We never said that we do not have influence in Lebanon, but we have positive influence and you can have negative and bad influence; this is not in our interest. What did we get from killing those people? That is the question which should be asked. Even if we want to accuse Syria, the question should be: did Syria get any benefit from that? Actually no. the opposite is happening; we are accused and the people who are described as anti-Syrian get the benefit from that not Syria.

Ms Ducet: Your father, President Hafiz al-Assad, passed away without getting back the Golan Heights that you lost in 1967 war; do you think you will get it back in your lifetime as part of a peace deal with Israel?

President Assad: Definitely we will have it back. There is no other choice. We are not going to give it up. Some day we are going to get it back.

Ms Ducet: But it is not going to happen in the coming few years?

President Assad: Not with this American Administration.

Ms Ducet: Or with this Israeli one?

President Assad: It depends more on the American administration and American policy more than the Israeli one.

Ms Ducet: But you have to deal with Israel, they say that you use the Americans as an excuse?

President Assad: But from our experience through the last 16 or 17 years, since the peace process started, the main factor is the American Administration and they can apply pressure on all parties and they can play an active role in that regard.

Ms Ducet: Some people wonder why President Bashar al-Assad does not do more to try to repair his relations with Washington, when it matters so much to most important issue for you, which is to get the Golan Heights back, and yet your closest ally is Iran which pushes you into a corner and creates more isolation for you?

President Assad: Actually, we tried hard for many years, but they always turned a deaf ear not only to Syria but even to their allies who were disappointed because of the reaction towards the peace issue, Iraq, Palestine and even towards the issue of terrorism. They turned a deaf ear. It is not true that we did not try; we tried hard and it is very normal that you have to try to keep good relations with the major power in the world; it is not wise not to look for bad relations with it.

Ms Ducet: Was this a source of regret for you? I mean you want to be at the top table, you want to be involved in the major decisions in the region, but you are isolated from your Sunni Arab neighbors, and you are isolated from the major powers? This is not in Syria's interest?

President Assad: No, they cannot isolate Syria. Isolating Syria does not mean that you do not have visitors or that they

do not talk to you; isolating Syria means that Syria is not active in any issue. Can they solve any problem without Syria? That is the question that they have to answer. If the answer is yes, they would not say that we have to play a better role or to show different behavior. If we are not important and isolated, they would not care about Syria. So, they cannot isolate Syria. It is a matter of time and substance because in substance they cannot isolate Syria.

Ms Ducet: But could you make major political concessions to change your foreign policy approach?

President Assad: We are not going to haggle over our right and interests and this should be clear; we are not going to work for the others' interests; we work first for our interests, and if there are common interests, we will welcome making cooperation with any country in the world. That is what they have to know. To make concessions, what do they mean by concessions?

Ms Ducet: Cutting your ties with these militant groups that seem to be part of the problem and not part of the solution like Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, who are all in Syria?

President Assad: All these issues are related to the peace process. If you have peace, you would not have any problem. It is all related to peace, and if you have comprehensive peace, you will not have problems with Hezbollah, Hamas, Jihad, Syria, Iran or any other party in the region.

Ms Ducet: It is a tough job for someone who has been trained as an ophthalmologist?

President Assad: Definitely, not because of being an ophthalmologist but because the reality is tough.

Ms Ducet: Tougher than you expected?

President Assad: No, I have been here since I was born. It is not related to the profession. Actually, if you want to take it as a profession, then being a politician is the profession of every Middle Eastern person today.

Ms Ducet: You finished one term and started the second; it is very disappointing that you have not achieved as much as you may have wished in this neighborhood and in the region?

President Assad: Of course it is disappointing; you always have rosy dreams when you come to your job, to achieve lot of things in your mind, but reality is different.

Ms Ducet: Mr. President Bashar Al-Assad, thank you very much.

President Assad: Thank you.
A.N.Idelbi

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