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President al-Assad to Rossiya Segodnya News Agency: War is not over yet... eliminating terrorists is priority

27-34 minutes

Damascus, SANA-President Bashar al-Assad affirmed that the war against terrorism is not over a long as we have terrorists occupying some areas of our country and committing different kinds of crimes and assassinations.

The President added in an interview given to Rossiya Segodnya News Agency that the US, Turkish presence on the Syrian territory is occupation that should be eliminated.

Following is the full text of the interview;

Question 1: Mr. President, thank you very much for giving us this opportunity to have this interview at these days when we remember that five years ago the Russian assistance came to Syria. So, after five years of the Russian military operation, nowadays can you say that the war in Syria now is over?

President Assad: No, definitely not. As long as you have terrorists occupying some areas of our country and committing different kinds of crimes and assassinations and other crimes, it's not over, and I think their supervisors are keen to make it continue

for a long time. That's what we believe.

Question 2: And what moments of heroism of the Russians do you recall and keep in your heart? Which of them do you consider worth telling to your grandchildren, let's say?

President Assad: There are so many, and I remember some of them, of course. After five years of this cooperation between the Syrian and the Russian army in a vicious war, I think heroism is becoming a collective act; it's not individual, it's not only a few cases of heroism that you remember. For example, if you think about military aircraft pilots – the air force, Russian pilots kept flying over the terrorists on a daily basis, risking their lives, and you had a few aircrafts that had been shot down by the terrorists.

If you talk about the other officers, they are supporting the Syrian army not in the rear lines, but in the front lines and as a consequence you had martyrs. What I'm going to tell my grandchildren someday is not only about this heroism, but I'm also going to talk about these common values that we have in both our armies that made us brothers during this war; these noble values, faithful to their causes, defending civilians, defending the innocent. Many things to talk about in this war.

Question 3: And what moment does symbolize for you a turning point during this conflict, during this war?

President Assad: It's been now nearly ten years since the war started, so we have many turning points that I can mention, not only one. The first is in 2013 when we started liberating many areas, especially the middle of Syria, from al-Nusra. Then in 2014, it was in the other direction when ISIS appeared suddenly with American support and they occupied a very important part of Syria

and Iraq at the same time; this is when the terrorists started occupying other areas, because ISIS was able to distract the Syrian Army from fulfilling its mission in liberating the western part of Syria. Then the other turning point was when the Russians came to Syria in 2015 and we started liberating together many areas. In that stage, after the Russians came to Syria to support the Syrian Army, I'd say the turning point was to liberate the eastern part of Aleppo; this is where the liberation of other areas in Syria started from that point. It was important because of the importance of Aleppo, and because it was the beginning of the liberation – the large-scale liberation, that continued later to Damascus, to the rest of Aleppo recently, and other areas in the eastern part of Syria and the southern part. So, these are the main turning points. If you put them together, all of them are strategic and all of them changed the course of this war.

Question 4: I now will turn to some actual news, and we in Russia follow what now is happening in the region of the Armenian and Azerbaijanian conflict, and definitely Turkey plays a role there. Is it negative or positive, that is not for me to judge, but I would like to ask you about Turkey's and Erdogan's policies. So, in recent years, Turkey has been trying to maximize its international influence. We all see its presence in Libya, its intervention into Syria, territorial disputes with Greece, and the now open support to Azerbaijan. What do you think about that kind of behavior of Ankara and Erdogan personally, and should the international community pay more attention to this sort of neo-Othmanism.

President Assad: Let's be blunt and clear; Erdogan has supported terrorists in Syria, and he's been supporting terrorists in Libya, and he was the main instigator and initiator of the recent

conflict that has been going on in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia. So, I would sum his behavior as dangerous, for different reasons. First of all, because it reflects the Muslim Brotherhood behavior; Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist extremist group. Second, because he's creating war in different areas to distract his own public opinion in Turkey from focusing on his behavior inside Turkey, especially after his scandalous relations with ISIS in Syria; everybody knows that ISIS used to sell Syrian oil through Turkey under the umbrella of the American air forces and of course the involvement of the Turks in selling this oil. So, this is his goal, and this is dangerous. So, whether the international community should be aware or not, the word "international community" in reality is only a few countries: the great powers and rich countries, and let's call them the influencers on the political arena. The majority of this international community is complicit with Turkey in supporting the terrorists. So, they know what Turkey is doing, they are happy about what Turkey is doing, and Turkey is an arm for those countries in fulfilling their policies and dreams in this region. So, no, we cannot bet on the international community at all. You can bet on the international law, but it doesn't exist because there's no institution to implement the international law. So, we have to depend on ourselves in Syria and on the support of our friends.

Question 5: So, more about this conflict. There were reports that some terrorists from the groups that were fighting previously in Syria are now being transferred to this conflict zone between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Can you confirm that? Do you have any information about fighters going from Syria to...?





President Assad: We definitely can confirm it, not because we have evidence, but sometimes if you don't have evidence you have indicators. Turkey used terrorists coming from different countries in Syria. They used the same method in Libya; they used Syrian terrorists in Libya, maybe with other nationalities. So, it's self-evident and very probable that they are using that method in Nagorno-Karabakh, because as I said earlier, they are the ones who started this problem, this conflict; they encouraged this conflict. They want to achieve something and they're going to use the same method. So, we can say for sure that they've been using Syrian and other nationalities of terrorists in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Question 6: Let's turn now to the relations between our countries, Russia and Syria. Are there any plans for your contacts or meetings with President Putin?

President Assad: We have regular contact, mainly over the phone, whenever something new happens or whenever there is a need for these conversations. Of course, we're going to talk in the future, we're going to meet in the future, but that depends on the political situation regarding Syria. And as you know now because of the Coronavirus the whole world is paralyzed, so in the near future I think the conversation will be on the phone.

Question 7: And will you raise the question of the new credits for Syria? For new loans?

President Assad: In our economic situation, it's very important to seek loans, but at the same time, you shouldn't take this step without being able to pay back the loan. Otherwise it's going to be a burden, and it's going to be a debt. So, it has two aspects.

Talking about loans is in our minds, and we discussed it with our Russian counterparts, but we have to prepare for such a step before taking it seriously, or practically, let's say.

Question 8: Recently, the delegation from Russia came, and Vice Prime Minister Borisov was here. Is now Syria interested in buying anti-aircraft systems like S-400 or demanding for additional S-300?

President Assad: Actually, we started a plan for upgrading our army two years ago, and it's self-evident that we're going to do this upgrade in cooperation with the Russian Ministry of Defense, because for decades now, our army depends fully on Russian armaments. But there are priorities, it's not necessarily the missiles, maybe you have other priorities now regarding the conflict on the ground. So, there's a full-scale plan, but we have to move according to these priorities. Usually we don't talk about the details of our military plans, but in general, as I said, it's upgrading the army in every aspect of the military field.

Question 9: You definitely follow the presidential campaign in the United States. And do you hope that the new US President, regardless of the name of the winner, will review sanctions policies towards Syria?

President Assad: We don't usually expect presidents in the American elections, we only expect CEOs; because you have a board, this board is made of the lobbies and the big corporates like banks and armaments and oil, etc. So, what you have is a CEO,

and this CEO doesn't have the right or the authority to review; he has to implement. And that's what happened to Trump when he became president after the elections –

Journalist: He used to be CEO for many years before.

President Assad: Exactly! And he is a CEO anyway. He wanted to follow or pursue his own policy, and he was about to pay the price – you remember the impeachment issue. He had to swallow every word he said before the elections. So, that's why I said you don't expect a president, you only expect a CEO. If you want to talk about changing the policy, you have one board – the same board will not change its policy. The CEO will change but the board is still the same, so don't expect anything.

Question 10: Who are this board? Who are these people?

President Assad: As I said, this board is made up of the lobbies, so they implement whatever they want, and they control the Congress and the others, and the media, etc. So, there's an alliance between those different self-vested interest corporations in the US.

Question 11: So, Trump pledged to withdraw American troops from Syria but he failed to do that. Now he's been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Do you think if he manages to bring American troops home, is he going to be awarded that Nobel Peace Prize?

President Assad: He's nominated?

Journalism: He is nominated.

President Assad: I didn't know about this. If you want to talk about nomination for peace, peace is not only about withdrawing

your troops; it's a step, it's a good step, and it's a necessary step. But peace is about your policy, it's about your behavior. It means to stop occupying land, to stop toppling governments just because they are not with you, to stop creating chaos in different areas of the world. Peace is to follow the international law and to support the United Nations Charter, etc. This is peace, this is when you deserve the Nobel Peace Prize. Obama had this prize; he had just been elected and he hadn't done anything. The only achievement he had at that time maybe, was that he moved from his house to the White House, and he was given a Nobel Prize. So, they would give it to Trump for something similar. I don't know what is it, but definitely not peace.

Question 12: So, Trump acknowledged recently that he intended to eliminate you personally, and that the Pentagon Chief Mattis persuaded him not to do so. Did you know about that at that time, and were some measures undertaken to prevent it?

President Assad: Assassination is American modus operandi, that's what they do all the time, for decades, everywhere, in different areas in this world, this is not something new. So, you have to keep it in your mind that this kind of plan has always existed for different reasons. We have to expect this in our situation in Syria, with this conflict, with the Americans, they occupy our land, and they are supporting the terrorists. It's expected; even if you don't have any information, it should be self-evident. How do you prevent it? It's not about the incident per se – it's not about this plan regarding this person or this president, it's about the behavior. Nothing will deter the United States from committing these kinds of vicious actions or acts unless there's an international balance where the United States cannot get away

with its crimes. Otherwise, it's going to continue these kinds of acts in different areas, and nothing would stop it.

Question 13: And were there any other attempts on you during your presidency?

President Assad: I didn't hear of any attempt, but as I said, it's self-evident that you have many attempts, or maybe, plans to be more precise. I mean, let's say, were they active or on hold? Nobody knows.

Question 14: Now I turn back to the situation in Syria, and will you run for presidency in the year 2021?

President Assad: It's still early to talk about it because we still have a few months. I can take this decision at the beginning of next year.

Question 15: Interesting. And have you congratulated Mr. Alexander Lukashenko with his inauguration in Belarus, and do you probably see similarities between political technologies that were used by the UK and the US to support Belarusian opposition, and those methods that were used against Syria and against the Syrian state in information war?

President Assad: I did send a congratulation letter to President Lukashenko and that's normal. With regards to what's happening in Belarus: regardless of the similarities between the two countries – Syria and Belarus – or the differences, regardless of whether you have a real conflict or an artificial one in a country, the West – as long as it hasn't changed its hegemonic policy around the world – is going to interfere anywhere in the world. If you have a real problem in your country, whether it's small or big, it's going to interfere. And if it's domestic, they're going to make it international

just to interfere and meddle in your affairs. If you don't have problems, they're going to do their best to create problems and to make them international again in order to meddle in your affairs. This is their policy.

So, it's not about what's happening in Belarus. Like any other country, Syria, Belarus, your country, every country has their own problems. Does the West have the right to interfere or not? That's what we have to oppose. So, going back to your question, yes, it's the same behavior, it's the same strategy, it's the same tactics.

The only difference is the branding of the products, different headlines. They use certain headlines for Russia, others for Venezuela, another one for Syria, and so on. So, it's not about Belarus; it's about the behavior of the West and it's about their strategy for the future, because they think with the rise of Russia, with the rise of China, with the rise of other powers around the world, this is an existential threat for them, so the only way to oppose or to face this threat is by creating chaos around the world.

Question 16: So, you have already mentioned the Coronavirus and it affected all humankind. Was someone from the government infected, or maybe you personally?

President Assad: Thank God, no. And I don't think anyone from our government has been infected.

Question 17: That's good news. And would you personally like to take the Russian vaccine?

President Assad: Of course, in these circumstances anyone would love to be vaccinated against this dangerous virus. But I think it's not available for the international market yet, but we're going to discuss it with the Russian authority when it's available

internationally to have vaccines for the Syrian market. It's very important.

Journalist: Yes, and Russians have already suggested that it can be available for our international partners...

President Assad: They said in November it could be available.

Question 18: So, you will be asking for the Russian vaccine?

President Assad: Yes, definitely, it's a necessity at these times.

Question 19: And in what amount?

President Assad: That depends on how much is available and we have to discuss the amount that we need with the health authority in Syria.

Question 20: So, you are going to have negotiations in detail with the Russian authorities.

President Assad: Definitely, of course. Everybody in Syria is asking about the Russian vaccine and when it's going to be available.

Question 21: Now, on the backdrop of the pandemic outbreak, does the public demand to change the constitution still exist? Because Coronavirus created a new paradigm in the world, and certainly in politics. So, the problems and the Geneva talks cast doubts on the question whether the need to change the constitution still exists. What do you think about that?

President Assad: No, there's no relation between the Coronavirus and the constitution. We changed the constitution in 2012 and now we are discussing the constitution in the Geneva talks. We had a round of negotiations nearly one month ago. So,

the Coronavirus delayed those rounds, but it didn't stop them.

Ultimately, the Geneva negotiations are a political game, it's not what the public – the Syrians, are focused on. The Syrian people are not thinking about the constitution, nobody is talking about it. Their concerns are regarding the reforms we need to enact and the policies we need to change to ensure their needs are met. This is what we are discussing at the moment and where our concerns are, and where the government is focusing its efforts.

Question 22: So, you say that the Geneva talks should continue, and the constitution on the agenda, and still there should be more discussions?

President Assad: Yes, of course. We started and we're going to continue in the next few weeks.

Question 23: Will Syria decide to conduct a trial against the White Helmets, and do you think that there should be a sort of international investigation on their activities, probably under the UN umbrella?

President Assad: When there is a crime, you don't take the knife or the weapon to trial, you send the criminal to trial. In this case, the White Helmets are just the tools or the means – the weapon that's been used for terrorism. They were created by the United Kingdom, supported by the United States and of course France and other Western countries, and used directly by Turkey. All these regimes are the real father and mother of the White Helmets, so they have to be held accountable even before the White Helmets themselves. Now, the question is do we have international laws to pursue such procedures? No, we don't. Otherwise, the United States wouldn't get away with its crimes in

Iraq for example, in Yemen, or in different areas. Not only the United States, but also France, the UK and different countries, and the US in Syria. But you don't have these institutions that could implement such laws, as I mentioned earlier. So, no, we have to focus more on the perpetrators, the real perpetrators, the real supervisors. They are the Western countries and their puppets in the region.

Question 24: But should probably any step be undertaken concretely toward the White Helmets? Because they are still active?

President Assad: Yes, of course, they are criminals. I'm not saying anything different. Before they were the White Helmets, they were al-Nusra; there are videos and images of all those criminals, so they have to be tried in Syria. But when you talk about the White Helmets as an institution, it's made by the West. So, they are criminals as individuals, but the White Helmets is a Western institution – an extremist terrorist organization – based on al-Nusra organization.

Question 25: You say that the presence of the US and Turkish army in Syria is illegal. What will you do to stop it?

President Assad: It is an occupation and, in this situation, we have to do two things: the first is to eliminate the excuse that they've been using for this occupation, which is the terrorists – in this case ISIS. Most of the world now knows that ISIS was created by the Americans and is supported by them; they give them their missions, like any American troops. You have to eliminate the excuse, so, eliminating the terrorists in Syria is priority number one for us. After that, if they, the Americans and the Turks, don't leave,

the natural thing that will happen is popular resistance. This is the only way; they won't leave through discussion or through international law since it doesn't exist. So, you don't have any other means but resistance and this is what happened in Iraq.

What made the Americans withdraw in 2007? It was because of the popular resistance in Iraq.

Question 26: So, what do you think about the agreement between the US and the Syrian Kurds in terms of extracting oil? And will you undertake any measures against it?

President Assad: This is robbery, and the only way to stop this robbery is to liberate your land. If you don't liberate it, no measure will stop them from doing this because they are thieves, and you cannot stop a thief unless you put him in prison or you deter him somehow by isolating him from the area where he can commit his robbery. So, the same thing has to be done with those thieves.

They have to be expelled from this region; this is the only way. And the Syrian government should control every part of Syria, so the situation will return to normal.

Question 27: How do you assess the situation in Idlib? How is Syria going to resolve the problem of expelling terrorists from there, and how many of them fight now there, how many terrorists, to your assessment?

President Assad: Since 2013, we adopted a certain, let's say, methodology in dealing with these areas where the terrorists control mainly the civilians or the cities. We give them the chance to give up their armaments and in return they are granted amnesty from the government; that has succeeded in many areas in Syria. But if they don't seek reconciliation, we have to attack militarily,

and that's what happened in every area we have liberated since 2013. This methodology applies to the areas where there were national reconciliations and the fighters were Syrian. However, Idlib is a different case; most of the foreigners in Syria are concentrated in Idlib, so they either go to Turkey – this is where they came from, or came through, or they go back to their countries or they die in Syria.

Question 28: In Europe?

President Assad: Mainly in Europe. Some of them came from Russia, from Arab countries, from so many countries around the world. All those Jihadist extremists wanted to come and fight in Syria.

Question 29: So, now this area is under the, let's say, the supervision and the common operations by Russians, by Turks, sometimes by Americans. Do you see that this cooperation is efficient, and how this experience can be used in the future?

President Assad: No, I don't think it's efficient for a simple reason: if it was efficient, we wouldn't have gone to war recently in many areas in Aleppo and Idlib. Because the Turkish regime was supposed to convince the terrorists in that area to withdraw and pave the way for the Syrian Army and the Syrian government and institutions to take control, but they didn't. Every time they give the same commitment; they haven't fulfilled any of their promises or commitments. So, no, I wouldn't say this cooperation was effective, but let's see. They still have another chance to withdraw the terrorists north of the M4 in Idlib. This is their latest commitment in agreement with the Russian side, but they haven't fulfilled it yet. So, let's wait and see.

Question 30: Do you consider the possibility of negotiations with Israel in terms of, you know, stopping the hostile activities? And is it possible that in the future Syria will establish diplomatic relations with Israel, as several Arab countries did recently?

President Assad: Our position is very clear since the beginning of peace talks in the nineties, so nearly three decades ago, when we said peace for Syria is about rights. Our right is our land. We can only have normal relations with Israel when we have our land back. It's very simple. So, it is possible when Israel is ready and Israel is not ready. It has never been ready; we've never seen any official in the Israeli regime who is ready to move one step towards peace. So, theoretically yes, but practically, so far, the answer is no.

Question 31: So, this news from other Arab countries who have established recently, I thought probably can be an impetus for Syria and Israel to start negotiations, but as I understand there are no negotiations between your countries underway at the time.

President Assad: No, there is none, nothing at all.

Question 32: You have already mentioned the enforcement of your armed forces. What are the obstacles for it? Do you see any obstacles for enforcing your armed forces?

President Assad: When you talk about big projects, you always have obstacles, but you can overcome these obstacles; nothing is impossible. Sometimes it could be financial, sometimes it could be about priorities, sometimes it could be about the situation on the ground. This is the only obstacle. Otherwise, no, we don't have any obstacles. We are moving forward in that regard, but it takes time. It's a matter of time, nothing more.

Question 33: Some international players say that Iranian withdrawal from Syria is a precondition for economic restoration of the country and cooperation with the Syrian government, of the Western governments and probably the businesses. Will Syria agree with this condition, and will it ask Iran to withdraw, if ever?

President Assad: First of all, we don't have Iranian troops and that's very clear. They support Syria, they send their military experts, they work with our troops on the ground, they exist with the Syrian Army. But let's take one practical example: nearly a year ago, the Americans told the Russians to "convince the Iranians that they should be 80 kilometers away from the border with the Golan Heights" that is occupied by the Israelis. Although there were no Iranian troops, the Iranians were very flexible, they said "ok, no Iranian personnel will be south of that line" and the Americans said that if we can agree upon this, we are going to withdraw from the occupied eastern part of Syria on the borders with Iraq called al-Tanf. Nothing happened, they didn't withdraw. So, the Iranian issue is a pretext for occupying Syrian land and supporting terrorists. It's used as a mask to cover their real intentions. The only way for them to implement what they are saying is when Syria becomes a puppet state to the United States. That's what they want, nothing else. Everything else they talk about is just lies, false flag allegations. So, I don't think there's any real solution with the Americans as long as they don't want to change their behavior.

Question 34: And the last question: is there anything that you are proud of, and anything that you are sorry for doing or not doing?

President Assad: During the war?

Journalist: During your presidency.

President Assad: You have to differentiate between the policies and between the implementation. In terms of policies, from the very beginning we have said we're going to listen to the Syrian people and that's why we reformed the constitution in 2012. We have said we're going to fight the terrorists and we are still doing that after ten years. We have said that we have to preserve our independence – national independence and that's what we are fighting for, and we have to make alliance with our friends. So, regarding these policies, I think we were right. Not trusting the West? We were right on many fronts. In terms of implementation, it's about the tactics, it's about many things that you may say were wrong. For example: were the reconciliations wrong? Because in some areas those people who had amnesty, didn't go back to the rule of law. So, you can say this is wrong, but in reality, those reconciliations were very important steps. I don't think that in the policies we were wrong. You have many mistakes regarding the implementation anywhere and sometimes on a daily basis.

Journalist: Ok, Mr. President, our time is running out, so again, thanks a lot for this frank and lengthy interview.

President Assad: Thank you. Thank you for coming to Syria.

Journalist: Thank you very much.