

# Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad

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## Wall Street Journal

*Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who inherited a regime that has held power for four decades, said he will push for more political reforms in his country, in a sign of how Egypt's violent revolt is forcing leaders across the region to rethink their approaches.*

*In a rare interview, Mr. Assad told The Wall Street Journal that the protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen are ushering in a "new era" in the Middle East, and that Arab rulers would need to do more to accommodate their people's rising political and economic aspirations.*

**The Wall Street Journal:** *We had a lot to ask you before, last week. And now we have even more to ask you about.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** This is the Middle East, where every week you have something new; so whatever you talk about this week will not be valuable next week. Syria is geographically and politically in the middle of the Middle East. That is why we are in contact with most of the problems forever, let us say, whether directly or indirectly.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Thank you again for seeing us. We appreciate it. Maybe we can start just with the regional situation which is all over the news. As the president of Syria, how do you see what is happening in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, and Jordan? How do you see the region changing and eventually, what does that mean for Syria itself?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** It means if you have stagnant water, you will have pollution and microbes; and because you have had this stagnation for decades, let us say, especially the last decade in spite of the vast changes that are surrounding the world and some areas in the Middle East, including Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan, because we had this stagnation we were plagued with microbes. So, what you have been seeing in this region is a kind of disease. That is how we see it.

If you want to talk about Tunisia and Egypt, we are outside of this; at the end we are not Tunisians and we are not Egyptians. We cannot be objective especially that the situation is still foggy, and not clear. It has not been settled yet. So, whatever you hear or read in this period cannot be very realistic or precise or objective. But I can talk about the region in general more than talking about Tunisia or Egypt because we are one region. We are not a copy of each other, but we have many things in common. So, I think it is about desperation. Whenever you have an uprising, it is self-evident that to say that you have anger, but this anger feeds on desperation. Desperation has two factors:

internal and external. The internal is that we are to blame, as states and as officials, and the external is that you are to blame, as great powers or what you call in the West 'the international community', while for them, the international community is made up of the United States and some few countries, but not the whole world. So, let us refer to the latter as the 'greatest powers' that have been involved in this region for decades.

As for the internal, it is about doing something that is changing; to change the society, and we have to keep up with this change, as a state and as institutions. You have to upgrade yourself with the upgrading of the society. There must be something to have this balance. This is the most important headline. Regarding the west, it is about the problems that we have in our region, i.e. the lack of peace, the invasion of Iraq, what is happening in Afghanistan and now its repercussions in Pakistan and other regions. That led to this desperation and anger. What I tell you now is only the headlines, and as for the details, maybe you have details to talk about for days if you want to continue. I am just giving you the way we look at the situation in general.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *What sort of changes? How would you define the changes that are happening?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Let us talk about what has not changed till today. Until today we have only two new things but if you want to talk about something new in our life, you have new hopes and new wars. You have a lot of people coming to the labor market without jobs and you have new wars that are creating desperation. So, one is internal and the other is external. Of course, if you want to talk about the changes internally, there must be a different kind of changes: political, economic and administrative. These are the changes that we need. But at the same time you have to upgrade the society and this does not mean to upgrade it technically by upgrading qualifications. It means to open up the minds. Actually, societies during the last three decades, especially since the eighties have become more closed due to an increase in close-mindedness that led to extremism. This current will lead to repercussions of less creativity, less development, and less openness. You cannot reform your society or institution without opening your mind. So the core issue is how to open the mind, the whole society, and this means everybody in society including everyone. I am not talking about the state or average or common people. I am talking about everybody; because when you close your mind as an official you cannot upgrade and vice versa.

This is from the inside. From the outside, what is the role of the West? It's now been twenty years since we started the peace process in 1991. What have we achieved? The simple way to answer this question is to say is it better or worse? We can for example say that it is five percent better than before we started the peace process. I can tell you frankly that it is much worse. That is why you have more desperation. This is the end result. If you talk about the approach, I always talk about taking the issue into a vicious cycle of desperation especially when you talk about peace. I am talking now about peace. You have other factors: you have negotiations, and then exaggerated hopes followed by failure; and then comes another hope and another failure. So, with time the diagram will be going down, and that is what has been happening: a little bit up and more down. This is one example about peace.

Internally, it is about the administration and the people's feeling and dignity, about the people participating in the decisions of their country. It is about another important issue. I am not talking here on behalf of the Tunisians or the Egyptians. I am talking on behalf of the Syrians. It is something we always adopt. We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance. So people do not only live on

interests; they also live on beliefs, especially in very ideological areas. Unless you understand the ideological aspect of the region, you cannot understand what is happening.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *If Syria is more aligned with its people in terms of its foreign policy, why is political reform such a challenge internally? This is something that you have been working on but people feel that there is not a lot of progress that has been made.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** We started the reform since I became a president. But the way we look at the reform is different from the way you look at it. For us, you cannot put the horses before the carriage. If you want to start, you have to start with 1, 2, 3, 4... you cannot start with 6 and then go back to one. For me, number (1) is what I have just mentioned: how to upgrade the whole society. For me as a government and institutions, the only thing to do is issuing some decrees and laws, let us say. Actually, this is not reform. Reform could start with some decrees but real reform is about how to open up the society, and how to start dialogue.

The problem with the West is that they start with political reform going towards democracy. If you want to go towards democracy, the first thing is to involve the people in decision making, not to make it. It is not my democracy as a person; it is our democracy as a society. So how do you start? You start with creating dialogue. How do you create dialogue? We did not have private media in the past; we did not have internet or private universities, we did not have banks. Everything was controlled by the state. You cannot create the democracy that you are asking about in this way. You have different ways of creating democracy.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Because the feeling is that when you do that before you open up the minds of the people, then the outcome is extremism?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** No, not because of that but because the dialogue is practice and you need to train yourself on how to make dialogue. When you do not talk, and suddenly you talk, you happen not to talk in the proper way or productive way. We are learning, but we are learning from ourselves. You do not learn from anyone in this world. When you have reform it should be national reform. You can learn, if you want, from other experiences or from some of the aspects in those experiences, but you cannot embrace the whole experience. The first thing you have to learn is how to conduct dialogue and how to make it productive. So, we started having dialogue in Syria through the media which was six or seven years ago. Today is better than six years ago, but it is not the optimal situation. We still have a long way to go because it is a process. If I was brought up in different circumstances, I have to train myself and, to be realistic, we have to wait for the next generation to bring this reform. This is first. Second, in Syria, we have a very important principle which I adopt: if you want to be transparent with your people, do not do anything cosmetic, whether to deceive your people or to get some applaud from the West. They want to criticize you, let them criticize and do not worry. Just be transparent with your people and tell them this is the reality. What you do today could be bad now but very good next year. So, the time is important for the reform depending on how much you can move forward.

Back to the stagnation factor, we need flowing water but how fast is the flow. If it is very fast, it can be destructive or you can have flood. Therefore, it should be flowing smoothly.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *From what we have seen in Tunisia and Egypt in the recent weeks, does it make you think there are some reforms you should be accelerating? And is there any concern that what is happening in Egypt could infect Syria?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** If you did not see the need for reform before what happened in Egypt and in Tunisia, it is too late to do any reform. This is first. Second, if you do it just because of what happened in Tunisia and Egypt, then it is going to be a reaction, not an action; and as long as what you are doing is a reaction you are going to fail. So, it is better to have it as a conviction because you are convinced of it, and this is something we talk about in every interview and every meeting. We always say that we need reform but what kind of reform. This is first. Second, if you want to make a comparison between what is happening in Egypt and Syria, you have to look from a different point: why is Syria stable, although we have more difficult conditions? Egypt has been supported financially by the United States, while we are under embargo by most countries of the world. We have growth although we do not have many of the basic needs for the people. Despite all that, the people do not go into an uprising. So it is not only about the needs and not only about the reform. It is about the ideology, the beliefs and the cause that you have. There is a difference between having a cause and having a vacuum. So, as I said, we have many things in common but at the same time we have some different things.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *So somehow they should be able to move faster, wouldn't they?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Exactly and what is happening is the opposite. They tell you move faster and at the same time they impose an embargo! Part of moving faster is technical. Part of the problem is how to upgrade your administration because at the end everything in society will be related to the administration such as the laws, the judicial system and other technical issues. Unless you do this for a better economy and better performance, people will not be satisfied, and the most important point in any reform is the institutions. You cannot have democracy without the institutions. You cannot have a democracy that is built on the moods of self-interested people. So, the beginning is dialogue and the institutions.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Would you say that some of the reforms here were impaired by the War on Iraq. Because you came in when the period was starting to become very difficult and now that period seems to come to a close with Lebanon as well.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Definitely, and I will tell you how. I just mentioned open-mindedness and close-mindedness. You cannot have reform while you are closing your mind. Of course you are going to be active, not passive because you are not going to wait for the mind to open by itself. You have to do something active in order to counter this current. But when you have wars, you will have desperation, and you will have tension; and when you have tension you will be introvert not extrovert; and you cannot create or develop. Therefore, reform has to be based on opening your mind and opening the mind does not come from decrees or laws. It comes from a whole set of circumstances, which if you do not have, anything you do will be not productive or will be counter-productive.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Do you have a timeframe for moving in that direction?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** That depends on whether you are the only captain in that ship. We are not the only captain. I just mentioned how we were affected by the situation in Iraq or in Lebanon. There are many things that we wanted to do in 2005 we are planning to do in the year 2012, seven years later! It is not realistic to have a timeframe because you are not living in situation where you can control the events. I just started by saying that every week we have something new. So, you cannot predict what is going to happen next year. Of course, you always put a timetable but you rarely could implement that timetable.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Do you think that we are heading into a totally new era with new powers such as Turkey and Syria?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** It is a new era, but it did not start now. That is my point. It started with the Iranian revolution, but this is the problem. We always forget. We do not have memory. We forgot that something happened in Iran in

1979 and then because nothing similar happened after that we forgot. But it is the same era; this is a revolution against whoever wants to oppose the belief of the people. As I said, I am an outsider now; I cannot talk about what is happening internally and I want to be precise and objective. But this is not the beginning of the era. Maybe in the Arab world it is, but Iran is part of our region. It is on the border with Iraq. You had an uprising in Iraq in 1991 against Saddam. But it was oppressed with the support of the United States especially in the south. They prevented him from oppressing the Kurds but allowed him to oppress the people in the south, the Shi'ites at that time.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Do you think in this era and what it involves the USA will have a much less influence?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** In this era we had Iran, the uprising in Palestine, the Intifada, in 1987, and then you had it in 1993. Now you have it in the Arab world. So it is all the same concept: anger and desperation. In Palestine, it was desperation against Oslo and before Oslo because they had no rights. Now it is against what is happening in the Arab world. What is new is that it is happening inside independent countries in the Arab world. It is something new but I would not call it a 'new era' because it is not a new era but it is something new that will change many things, at least in the way we think as governments and as officials regarding our people. This is the most important point, and the other thing that is going to change is the way the West and the great powers will look at our region and the way they will look at our states and our officials. Do you want something just to appease you, or you want something to appease the people? That is the question. Which one would you choose? This is the question that the West should answer as soon as possible in order to know how to deal with its interests in the region. So this is the most important thing for us, namely the way the West would look at the situation and what lessons they are going to learn.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And do you think that the West or the US will have less influence or less inability to dictate because of these changes?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** This is the first time to hear the word 'dictate' from the West because we are called 'dictators,' and a 'dictator' should dictate. The answer is yes, because you dictate through officials, through governments, but you cannot dictate through the people. And as long as the people have a major say in the future, then you are going to have the minor say in the United States, and not only in the United States but anyone who wants to influence the region from the outside.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Can you move towards Lebanon? Are you pleased with the construction of the new government and do you think Lebanon now was set for some stability after a rough patch, as we say?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** what pleases me is that this transition between the two governments happened smoothly because we were worried and we expressed our worry before during the last few weeks about the situation in Lebanon; so the most important point is that this transition happened smoothly. Now the second transition cannot happen before you form this government and the question is what government it is going to be? Is it a national unity government? This question is very important because we are talking about a divided country, not a stable government. So, without a national unity government, it does not matter what majority or minority you have. This means nothing because if you have one side taking over the other side, this means a conflict, and in Lebanon for three hundred years it was very easy to have a conflict that could evolve into a fully-blown civil war. Until this moment everything is going fine. So, we hope that during this week they are going to form a national unity government and this is the aim of the Prime Minister. So, I think the situation is more towards the better or towards being assured that things are moving normally and smoothly without any conflict.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Are you still concerned that the tribunal or execution at the tribunal will impact this? What is Syria's position on the tribunal going forward?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** The issue of the tribunal is an agreement between Lebanon and the United Nations, not between Syria and the United Nations. So from the very beginning we said when the assassination happened that we were going to cooperate with the investigation committee in order to help them with any information they needed, and it was clear in every report that Syria was cooperative. After they finished the investigation, they moved to the tribunal. The tribunal is a legal thing, it is an agreement, and, as we said, we are not part of this agreement. So, legally, we do not have anything to do with the tribunal. But regarding Lebanon, that depends on the tribunal and whether it is going to be professional, it is going to find the truth, or it is going to be another tool for politics. That is the question because now they are talking about accusing some people without evidence. How can you accuse anyone without having any evidence that they are involved or complicit? They said they suspect some people who were close to the region, some people who used the telephone, and things like this, i.e. theories. But we do not have any concrete evidence.

In Lebanon, in such a sectarian country, in a sectarian situation with tension, this indictment, which is not realistic because I do not think in any civilized country you indict anyone without any concrete evidence, will create conflict. The only guarantee in this case is the role of the government. If the Lebanese government refuses that indictment because of the lack of evidence, you will not have any problem because at the end everything will be based on evidence. And whether in Syria or Lebanon, we always say whoever is involved or complicit in this crime should be held accountable like any other crime. So, it is about the evidence and it depends, as I said, on the government.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Could you dwell on this because it seemed like Syria and Saudi Arabia, basically yourself and King Abdulla, have had some agreement for Lebanon and then the King went to the US and that seemed to be the end of it. That is the perception we had but is there anything you could tell us about what the agreement was and why in the end it did not happen. Is it because of what the Americans told King Abdullah when he was in New York? But whatever it was agreed on did not happen.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Since the tribunal, part of the Lebanese said why to have an international tribunal? Why not to have a Lebanese tribunal? And that is realistic and logical. If you want to have a national tribunal that does not have the capability to deal with some complicated crime, why do not you have experts from the outside, with the help of some countries, with the help of the United Nations, it does not matter. So, they were against having an international tribunal anyway. Some said why do not you have an Arab tribunal, instead? So, you have different points of view. Some people were convinced that it was a politicized tribunal, and the leaks, which were different from WikiLeaks and which were called 'the truth leaks' in Lebanon about the recordings of some people who wanted to make fake evidence and fake witnesses are very clear now. Therefore, there was a lot of fuss about this tribunal and about the credibility and professionalism of this tribunal.

Because we thought that this tribunal was going to create problems, we said let us find a solution. We have two parties: the first party which is the opposition said we do not need this tribunal at all; let us make a Lebanese tribunal and we do not accept any international tribunal. The second party said it is OK but if we will accept this we have internal conditions, requirements, and something in return regarding the administration. I do not have them on my mind now; they are small details. But this was the deal, and we were very close to reach the final agreement when King Abdullah called and said it does not seem to be working because one party was not ready. Because he was talking with the interphone, we did not talk in details. Of course, we have good relations with King Abdullah but I have not met with him yet or with his son Prince Abdul 'Azeez who was assigned to do this job. Now they just

moved to Morocco, I think, and he is coming very soon to Syria. So, it has been three weeks now and until this moment we do not know what happened exactly. We need to meet with them in order to find out what happened and why one party was not ready. Who is the person responsible we do not know!

**The Wall Street Journal:** *On Syria's position on the tribunal, do you believe it is a credible tribunal now? What is your feeling towards this tribunal?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Ex-Prime Minister, Sa'd al-Hariri, said that there were false witnesses. He acknowledged it formally. And the leaks recently during the last few weeks proved without any doubt the way they tried to form this. Normally, if you have a tribunal that is based on fake evidence what would you do? You change everything, you start from the very beginning, you verify what you have! How are you going to continue with the same information that made you base your indictment on something fake? This is a very simple question. I am not a lawyer, you are not a lawyer, but it is a simple truth. Of course, if the tribunal does not deal with this reality, it is not credible. It cannot be credible, besides being politicized. It is the same whether it is under pressure or because they are not professional! I do not think they are not being professional; they have the best judges. Therefore, they could be politicized, and they have to deal with this situation to prove that they are credible.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *On Lebanon, I am sure you heard from John Kerry and others about Syria's military link with Hezbollah. I have seen the interview between Charlie Rose and you. It kind of disavowed that there are strategic weapons going from Syria into Lebanon. Is there a concern, with all these allegations, that if there is a conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, Syria will be dragged in as in 2006? Is that a real threat?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Let me go back to the problem with the United States. In the United States, they always talk about subtitles, about chapters in a book without taking the main title of the book. They talk about a subtitle in a chapter and if you ask them about the headline, the main title, they say they do not know. We have to talk about the titles. We cannot follow a cherry-picking approach. Once we talk about Hezbollah, once we talk about Hamas, once we talk about armament, and once we talk about smuggling! If you want to talk about a situation, whether it is true or not, the question is why do you have these issues, or these factors, or subtitles? Because you have a lack of peace. So, what we always advise every American and European official is do not waste your time talking about these things, whether you like, you do not like, you condemn, or you support! It is not about labels; it is about realities and facts. Let us deal with the facts. As long as you do not have peace, you will have everything that you do not like. So, it is better to deal with the peace process and then all the other things will be settled normally; because when you have peace in this region, why to talk about armament, and if you do not talk about armament, why to talk about smuggling? And then of course you do not have to talk about any faction who wants to fight Israel or any other one.

Therefore, talking about these things does not exempt you from talking about the peace process. That is the question. You can talk for years about supporting or not supporting, but that does not change the reality? That is the question. The American officials should spend their time, not talking about 'labels' such as 'terrorist, bad, isolation, etc.' at the end, the reality has not changed; it has been moving according to its normal pace and course.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *So, you are saying that Syria is not involved in any weapon transfer between you and Lebanon?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** If you look at Gaza, it is surrounded by Egypt and Israel, and both are against Hamas and both are making a real embargo, and still they can have everything!

**The Wall Street Journal:** *But Hezbollah is the main thing?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Hezbollah is not under embargo; they have the sea from one side, they have Syria, and Syria has Iraq on part of its borders. You cannot stop them smuggling, even if you want. Sometimes they want you to be complicit and sometimes they want you to be the police. What if you want to be neither? We want to be neither. We are focusing on the peace. When you have the main issue moving forward, everything else will move forward. If you want to talk about the tree, you have to talk about the trunk. You cannot have branches without a trunk; so why to talk about brunches and forget the trunk? Let us talk about the trunk.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Where do you see the peace process? Does it seem to you dead?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** No, it is not dead because you do not have any other option. If you want to talk about a 'dead peace process,' this means everybody should prepare for the next war, and this is something that is not in our interest or in the interest of the region. And I think that Israel learned the lesson of 2006: a super power in the Middle East could not defeat a small faction, with all the armament that they can have. Technology is changing, beliefs are changing, and tactics have changed a lot. Everything is changing. But despite that, we have to believe that only peace can help us. That is why we are optimistic and this is the only way that makes us work for peace.

But going back to your question, where is the peace process now? If you want to talk about the whole peace process, a comprehensive one, you have three main parties: the Syrian party, which is an Arab party, the Israeli party, and the arbiter or the mediators. As for me as Syria, I can still see that I have the support of my people, which means that I have a large latitude to move in that regard. But moving, in that regard, does not mean to move in any direction. You cannot tell me take the bus and go with you without knowing where I am meant to go. We do not drive in a foggy weather. This is Syria. That is why we avoid this vicious cycle and that is why we still have support. We have desperation especially regarding the peace process because we always say no to anything which is not methodical. When it is methodical, we will be ready to move right away and this evening. It does not need preparation.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And the initiative with the Turks you felt was organized and was working?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Exactly, I will tell you about it now but the other party is the Israeli party. In the Arab party, I talked about Syria because as for the Palestinians, you know they have division; and without reconciliation they cannot have peace. But it is more complicated and I do not see any hope because the Israelis and even the Americans were not methodical and were not realistic in the way they dealt with the peace process during the year 2010. So, they made the situation worse and today it is more difficult to start or to resume the negotiations.

As for the Israeli party, everybody knows about this government. It is a right-wing government. It is based on the coalition between different parties including Lieberman Party, which is called Yisrael Beiteinu, which is very right-wing. He himself said publically that as long as he is a minister he will not allow the peace with Syria to move forward, and I do not know what he said about the Palestinians. He is extremely right-wing and every American and European official acknowledged this truth. With this government, some say it is very difficult to achieve peace and some say it is impossible to achieve peace.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *So you are somewhere in that range.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Exactly. The other party is the arbiter which two years ago was a mediator, not an arbiter. A mediator is someone who can communicate points of view, such as the Turks; whereas the arbiter should be more active and not passive, which is the role of the United States. The role of the US is very important because it is the greatest power; it has a special relation with Israel and it has weight to be the guarantor of the peace process when you sign the treaty. But actually when you sign the treaty, it is the very beginning of the peace where you want to



make the peace; because this is only a treaty, and not the real peace. Peace is when you have normal relations, when you bury the hatchet and when people can deal with each other. This needs lots of steps and a lot of support. At that time, the arbiter should perhaps have a more important role than during the negotiations.

The problem with most of the officials we have from the US during previous administrations, whether they have good or bad intentions, is that they knew very little about this region. That is why they need the support of others. They need a complementary role. This role could be European or today the Turks. Actually I am elaborating because you can take whatever you want. But if you want to go back to our methodology, it has been twenty years. Why did we not achieve peace? We were not methodical. We did not talk about the terms of reference, the main titles: land, peace and after that 'land for peace.' But which land and which peace? We did not define. And because we did not define, we could play games during the negotiations.

What we said now is that it is better to define these terms in Turkey, to define the land, and to define the security. Defining is not doing everything; it is talking about the main points. For example, defining the withdrawal line is to set six points, to agree on disputed six points. Defining security is to talk about six principles. Then when you have this reference you move to direct negotiations where you need the arbiter. In these direct negotiations, you cannot play games, if you want because it is very well defined, we have a very clear frame, and Israel cannot play games, and the arbiter cannot spoil it even with good intentions. What happened in the nineties is that some US officials thought they were doing something good but actually they spoiled it because they were emotional and hasty. They wanted to help Israel with good intentions but actually they spoiled the whole process. So, with this part of the indirect negotiations you set the definition of the reference. So, today we do not have this reference, we have a right-wing government, the arbiter is moving. President Obama is sending his team of Mitchel and his assistant who have been shuttling between Syria and Israel. Even a few days ago they were here. They are trying to deal with this difficult situation. But till this moment there is no response from the Israelis.

They are trying to deal with this difficult situation, but till this moment there is no positive response from the Israelis. So what is happening is positive but just virtually positive, nothing concrete yet. So to be very precise, this is the situation of the peace process today.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And you get no messages from the Israelis? I know Mr. Hoenlein met with you recently. He did not carry any messages?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** He brought a positive atmosphere. But again, I told him we always depend on reality. We understand the signal, but it is not like a satellite and a receiver to talk about signal. It is not like a computer to talk about virtual issues. We are living with reality and with facts; nothing in reality happened till today, nothing concrete, nothing about land, nothing about the withdrawal line. This is where you start the peace process. You occupy the land, you want to withdraw, but to which line? It should be to the line that you crossed 40 years ago.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *If some of these details start to come through conceptually though, you think it is possible now for the Syrian track to start moving forward with a little more momentum even within the current comprehensive peace framework... I mean the Palestinian track is quite troubled at the moment...?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** You mean if there is something positive on our track.....?

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Could your side move forward even though the Palestinian side cannot move forward?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** This is a very very important question, because many people do not understand the difference between peace and a peace treaty. And we always talk about comprehensive peace, because if you want to have real peace with normal relations between people, you need to have comprehensive peace, because in Syria we have 500 thousand Palestinians, and in Lebanon you have another half a million Palestinians. They have all their rights in Syria except for the voting right, as they are not citizens, but they have every other right...they are in the government...they are everywhere in Syria, they are part and parcel of this society. So people are sympathetic to them, and if you do not find a solution with them, you cannot have real peace. You can have a peace treaty. If I have everything I need as Syria, I cannot say no to the treaty, I am going to sign it. But what are we going to look for?...a treaty?... a meeting between the officials?...an embassy surrounded by police that nobody dares to deal with? People do not deal with each other and they hate each other? Rather we need to have normal relations. Peace for us is to have normal relations, like between Syria and any other country in the world. So having peace treaty only with Syria could be only one step, but cannot be peace. That is why comprehensive peace is very important. This is the real solution.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *But you can see it as an interim step within a broader movement?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** We can say this in two ways: it could be an interim step in order to achieve the other one in the sense that it should support the other step. And we can look at it in a different way: if you have peace with Syria, why do you need it with the Palestinians? This is how the Israelis could think. And this will not create stability then, because you have about 5 million Palestinians outside Palestine, and now they still have hope that they are going to be part of this peace. But if you say to them "sorry I have achieved everything I want in this treaty, I am not concerned about you anymore; they will lose hope and resort to desperation, and there is going to be a bomb either against us or against peace on the borders. So again if you do not reach comprehensive peace, you will not achieve stability. So let's look at it in the negative way in order to make it comprehensive. If you look at it in the positive way- that we are going to make peace with you and it is going to be one step- but what if not? This is only possibility, and for me I think it is more probable to be the negative outcome. That is why it is better to seek comprehensive peace from the beginning. That does not mean, however, that that the two tracks should be moving forward in sync, but at least they should move in parallel.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Can you give us a sense just how close the Syrians and the Israelis were under Olmert ... because I was in Turkey last week and heard about it?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** I was going to speak about that. I was actually on the phone with PM Erdogan, and Olmert was in the other room where they had dinner together, and he has been shuttling, going back to Olmert and giving the handset to his advisor at the time Oglu (the minister of foreign affairs today). And it was about the line of withdrawal. He said that the line of withdrawal should be based on the six points that Syria mentioned. I said no, these points are on the line. Then he came back saying "the line will depend on those points". And I said what does it mean "depend" and "based"? these are very loose words. It is on the line. So he told Erdogan "ok; let me think, it is difficult for me, I'll think about it back in Israel and will let you know". That was four days before attacking Gaza. After that Syria, and especially Turkey, went crazy because Olmert deceived them. He told them "I am going back to Israel to think about how to solve this peace issue", but he went to war instead and killed one thousand five hundred Palestinians. That is how close we were. Indeed we were very close to form this paper I talked about, we were very close to defining the reference that would be given to the U.S. and tell them "this is your means to manage the next negotiation"; the direct negotiations I mean. But it all went in a different way.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *How do you view relations with the United States? We have read that Ambassador Ford is here now, so it seems the U.S. is engaged in a way that was not happening under the Bush administration, but we still have the sanctions problem. So maybe you can define how you see it developing.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** The new thing since Obama came to office is that there is no more dictation from the U.S. and they are ready to listen. This is very important as a basis for any relation with any country, especially in a country like Syria which does not accept any dictates from the outside. But the other question here is that it has been now two years since President Obama came to power, so what happened in reality? Actually nothing has changed in reality, even with regard to the bilateral relations, because what we have been doing for the last two years is just signals from Syria towards the U.S. and from the U.S. towards Syria. But how can we translate those signals into reality. So far we cannot, for a simple reason. It is not because of President Obama, I think he is genuine as a person, and he believes in whatever he says. But in the end you have internal politics in the US; you have the Congress, you have many other institutions, whether before or after the elections, it was not a big difference for our situation. Those institutions do not see sometimes the interests of the US, at least in our region, in a very realistic way. That is why if you look at the situation in Iraq, in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, there is no success in the U.S. policy. Part of the desperation we have in the region is related to the policy of the US, and people are becoming against the US. That is what you asked about at the very beginning. So what is happening is good but it is not building anything concrete on the ground yet.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Probably they would say "but we would like to hear a change in Syria's behavior towards Hamas and Hezbollah" and in some sense it is not that promising, is it?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** This is dictation. There is nothing called behavior, as states we depend on our interest, and not on our behavior. Maybe you have a bad behavior and I do not like it, but this doesn't mean anything, your behavior is your behavior, and my behavior is my behavior. It is about interest. Let's put our interests on the table and see what we have in common. If you want to talk about stability in Iraq, I am the one who is interested in having stability in Iraq more than the U.S. because it is my neighborhood. If I do not help Iraq to have stability, I am shooting myself in the foot. Second, if they say they need peace in the Middle East, I am the one who is interested in having peace because then I will have prosperity, openness and a flourishing economy. Are you talking about fighting extremism? Then we have been fighting extremism since the 50's not 60's and 70's, and in the 80's we had a strong conflict with them while Ronald Reagan was describing them as holy fighters, but we were talking about them as terrorists. So I am the one who has the interest. And if you want to talk about common interests we have a lot of common interests in my region, I may not have interests in Eastern Asia, for example, because I am not a great power. But I have interests in my region and if you want to talk about your interests in my region, we have common interests let's talk about these interests. And I believe the majority of things are of common interests. And few things will be, not conflict of interests, but rather conflict of viewpoints, which is not a big problem. So you can look at the situation the way you want, you can build your relation with me according to this difference, or you build it according to this common interest. It is a matter of how you look at it.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And you feel it has been hung up on what you consider as little things, not focusing on the big things?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** yes, because they focus on the details forgetting about the main issue, which is the lack of peace. Our point of view is that you cannot deal with these details without dealing with the big issue. And the problem we had with the Bush administration is that they talk about this goal and I talk about the same goal, but while I want to reach that goal from the east they want to go from the west, and they want me to come from the west

as well. But I want to reach that from the east, this is my way, we have different ways but to the same goal. We cannot be a copy of any country in our way, and that is normal and natural.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Do you think this shift in Egypt will impact the peace process? You would think the Israelis might think it must, I mean considering what Egypt has been. I do not know whether it will be for the good or for the worst. But it seems like it will have an impact.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** If you want to answer that question, you have to make the pillar of your question as "what is the role of Egypt in the peace process?" that is my question. They signed a peace treaty; they are not part of our track. And regarding the Palestinian issue you want to start from the reconciliation, it has been three years now and they could not achieve the reconciliation in Egypt. So if I want to answer your question, I should ask first: what is the role of Egypt in the peace process? For me, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians are responsible for this peace process, and nobody else, no other country is responsible, if they want to support they can do but you cannot talk about a main role. That is how I see it.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And do you think Syria has got a role to play in that? I mean some of them are in the Palestinian authority, and particularly in the Palestinian factions...how do you help?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** You have to help but if they do not have the will to have reconciliation, we cannot do anything. They have to have the will and I think one party has the will at least. I say both parties expressed their will but we were not involved directly in that situation because Egypt was not involved, but at the end if you want to be involved, it is a Palestinian not Syrian or Egyptian role. You can support. Israel can support if it wants to facilitate the situation not do the opposite. The United States can facilitate; any one can facilitate that role.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *the situation seems to be a long way from being sorted out as you can see?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Yes, nothing happened. For the last three years there is the same situation, sometimes it could be worse. It is worse actually if they do not go for reconciliation because there is no concrete stability on the ground. If you are going to be a mediator or arbitrator you have to be in the middle between the two sides; you cannot take sides only with one party.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *I know that part of your sessions has been with Senator Mitchell and others on easing the sanctions, has that happened? Has there been any improvement from the U.S. side?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** No, nothing happened. Of course they say that Syria has opened the American school in Damascus, but we cannot talk about bilateral relations regarding these small things. As I said it is just signals, nothing more.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *I know that people in the Congress and in the U.S. keep asking about Syria's relationship with Iran and can U.S.-Syrian relations improve while Syria has such a close strategic partnership with Iran? And how do you describe your relation with Iran and whether the two can happen at the same time?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Yes. It is going back to the basic concepts of their policy. There is a concept in physics: when you have two glasses of water and a tube between them, when the water rises in one cup it will go down in the other and vice versa; I do not have it in politics. So, my relation with the United States should go up and with Iran it should go down! Also, what about Syria and Turkey? We do not have this principle or this rule or this concept in politics. You can improve your relations with ten countries in parallel. That is the main principle in politics that you have to improve your relations with every country and not to make it worse with any country, especially in an area where we need a big country like Iran. It is a big country, it is important, it is geo-politically an important country; nobody can overlook Iran whether you like it or not, this is the first point. The second point is about the methodology of their thinking. They asked that question to many officials and they asked me. I told them: tell me

about your methodology? We do not have a file in Syria called the Syrian-Iranian file, so to close that file or to put it in the drawer or to forget about it. We have files for issues not countries; we have the peace file and we have the extremism file. If we are going to talk about my relation with any country, including the United States, it should be related to these files. What is your position regarding the peace process? Do you support me or you are against me? What is your position regarding my politics towards Iraq, regarding the unity of Iraq, regarding the secularism in Iraq? If you are against me, I will be against you. So, I could be in a good relation with you in one aspect, or one cause, or one issue and not in a good relation in another issue. That is how we look at things. So, if they want to talk about Iran in one file regarding the nuclear issue, I am not part of it. So, whether I have good relations or bad relations with Iran that is their own nuclear file and they are going to continue with that file according to their national interest. Syria is not part of it, so you cannot do anything. I am talking about Lebanon: I have an interest in Lebanon because it is my neighbour. What is your policy in Lebanon? Are you going to support my relation with Lebanon, are you going to support the unity, are you going to support the less sectarianism in Lebanon? Things like this. So, that depends on how every country will deal with me according to every file. So, you cannot talk about Iran as Iran because you have different issues and in every issue we have different point of views: very close, contradicting or divergence. This is how we look at things, so you have to talk to me in the same way, in the same algorithm in the United States to understand me and to understand you. Tell me about Iran, about every file, because they talk about this, and I told them this because when I started the negotiations in Turkey, the Iranian, although they were talking about Ahmadinejad, about wiping Israel out of the map, but actually they publically, twice, made statements supporting Syria; that means that they support peace. The same when we talk about Hezbollah and Hamas that is how we think. They have not told me about the meaning of the relation between Syria and Iran regarding each file.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Well, the principle you talked about does in the whole with any other issue like Hezbollah where Iran clearly as it is interested in Hezbollah and continues to support Hezbollah. But the United States is against that and Syria finds itself in the middle.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** First of all, many countries support Hezbollah secretly or publically, it is not about Iran. Second, the issue of Hezbollah is related to the peace; this is a wrong approach, it is not related to Iran. If you want to deal with Hezbollah and to deal with Hamas and even Syria, I said when you want to deal with the peace issue, if we have a peace what will happen to those parties? That is how you make it. You cannot only talk about the relation with Iran as abstract or in the abstract; this is not realistic. That is why I said: tell me what it is. What does Iran mean? Is it bad? Okay. Israel is bad, so how are you going to make peace with Israel. If it is bad, I am not going to meet with Israel; this is the logic that you are using. If I want to make peace with Israel and I do not like the US, I will put a condition that if I want to make peace, you will not have good relations with the US, is it logical? It is not logical. So, if they do not like Iran, this does not mean that you do not have to deal with it.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *but concerning whether rightly or wrongly that Syria has evolved from being perceived as an ideological supporter to Hezbollah from that increasingly added the perceptions are again rightly or wrongly that Syria is being perceived as militarily supporter of Hezbollah and that created a very dangerous situation where larger conflict would start Syria to act immediately to drag in anyway?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Actually, because they wanted Syria to be the police. I told them why to be the police, why you want me to be the police for Israel as long as Israel does not move forward towards the peace. We are not going to be the police for Israel that is very clear to be very frank. You do not have to be complicit because if you are not a police, everybody in this region...

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Because they will see you as a smuggling agent because anything comes in there will be smuggling?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Normally I cannot control my border with Iraq for example. I am having smuggling of armaments from Iraq; this is a normal situation in the region as long as you do not have stability in the region, you will have this sort of thing. Smuggling is something normal and nobody can control it even if you put an army on the borders you cannot control it. So, again deal with the main issue, the peace process, this is where we can solve everything at once; you do not have to deal with every small problem, and it is like mercury you cannot catch it.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Can I ask a broader question? I know the big issue in this region from Iran to Syria to Israel is of a region free of WMDs; nuclear free zone. On the one hand, I know Syria and other countries have been very interested in pushing Israelis to sign the NPT under international auspices and that does not happen, but at the same time is in a little bit of a conflict with IAEA over allegations that Syria has this kind of covered pursued nuclear technology. Can you talk about those and how to get to a nuclear free zone and beat your conflict with the IAEA and if there is a way to have a resolution over their accusations?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** We were a member of the Security Council for two years, 2002 and 2003, and there was a Syrian draft at that time regarding freeing the Middle East from WMDs and of course who opposed that? The Bush administration, because it included Israel, and actually it is still there, and I think they gave it a blue form, I mean it is not activated. This is our point of view: that it has been a region of conflict for centuries not decades. Regarding the IAEA, Israel attacked this site and we said this is a military site. Of course at the beginning they did not say it is a nuclear site. They waited for eight months and after we rebuilt the site, they said it was a nuclear site. They should be punishing the United States and Israel, especially the United States: why did you wait eight months to say it is nuclear, this is the first point. The second point is what happened with IAEA. They asked us to send experts; and because we were very confident we told them you can come, and they came and took samples and went to Vienna I think, and then they said that they discovered some particles of radiations, and you know if you had a nuclear plant, you would not allow anyone in the world to come if you want to keep it secret, this is first. Second, they said Israel attacked a nuclear site under construction and before it started working. If it is under construction, and before it started working, how could you have these particles? Where did they come from? Because you do not bring the materials to the site till it is working, it is ready, is that true? This is second. Third, how can they destroy a site without having casualties, without having any emergency plans, because it is supposed to be nuclear? What about radiations? Everybody could go there now, it is open and you can cross beside it. So, it is clear to everyone that it was not nuclear, but the question is: why they waited for eight months? Because when you wait eight months and we rebuilt the site, it is easy for you to say it was, you understand that?

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Yes.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Because if they believed it was nuclear, they should have done that without the attacking. If they want to create a problem for Syria, they could tell the IAEA: look we have the satellite images, go to Syria and Syria will be cornered. What to do, we have a site, we are going to allow them and they are going to see the site as it is. So, they destroyed it and they waited for Syria to build it, and then they said it was a nuclear site. Now "was" how can you prove "was". Now, this is the convoluted issue, the complicated issue they created and how to prove it? So, as long as you cannot prove it was, then this means it "was"...

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And definitely it was not?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Definitely it was not. From the course of events, it was not because if you attack it, how was it, where are the materials? We do not have it; the experts went there and you have normal live there, how could you

have radiations after the attack and you do not have any emergency plans? They have the satellite and its pictures every day and they can tell. The only thing that we did is that we took the debris and removed it somewhere else and rebuilt the site. We did not clean and you cannot clean if you want to clean the radiations; they say it stays for one hundred years or forever I do not know. So, this is not realistic, they know this. The other issue of the IAEA is not related to, what we call a small experimental reactor, of course under the supervision of the IAEA and they come from time to time to Syria to check and they checked this time and discovered materials which they say are illegal and we are still discussing this with them and we do not know about it because we have a phosphate factory and we have yellow cakes as a result and some of our expert scientists made some experiments and the funny thing is that those experiments were published in journals; these experiments are not a secret and they said this is a breach. Okay, but this is public and it was published in a journal; it is not a secret. So, there was this kind of conflict and they want to find a link between this first site and the second site, but this one is different from that.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And do you think that this issue with the IAEA can be resolved?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Yes, I think now we are discussing with them. Most of the issues are technical and legal actually.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Will you allow whatever inspection that is needed, whatever the IAEA wants to do or are you still negotiating with them?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** No, actually there is cooperation between Syria and the IAEA regarding the normal things like this reactor and this yellow cake, it does not see it every six months or a year, we have rules, but this time they asked Syria to sign the additional protocol that they can come any time. No, we are not going to sign.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Anytime, anywhere?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** No, we are not going to sign. We can only follow the NPT that we are signatory to and we do not have any problem. Nobody will accept to sign it; this is something about sovereignty: to come any time to check anything under the title of checking nuclear activities, you can check anything. We have many secret things like any other country and nobody will allow them...

**The Wall Street Journal:** *You feel that will be misused?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** It will definitely be misused...

**The Wall Street Journal:** *I just want to know a point from the very beginning because you were saying that changes in the region started in the Islamic Revolution in 1979 in Iran, and then at the same time you did simply know that what has been happening in recent weeks suggested there was a new era in the Arab world itself, I just want to confirm that you see that there is a new era emerging which no one sees exactly what it will be but that is just your perception, that is, we are in some sort of a new era with people themselves are going to have more voice, and United States and other countries who see in these countries like, you know, Egypt, Jordan, they could push their policies through. That era is coming to a kind of an end. How do you see it?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** I would not say an end because at the end I do not obey the United States, but I would like to have good relations with the United States, I would like to make dialogue and dialogue means interacting; it does not mean to say no, no, no. I do not want to be influenced by you. We have to be influenced by each other. So, let us be moderate and realistic. No, I do not think everybody must cut his relation with anyone with this great power, but I think it is about two things whether positive or negative. The positive one: is it going to be a new era towards more chaos or towards more institutionalization? That is the question. So, that is why I said at the very beginning it is still foggy; we cannot understand the reasons until we see the end and the end is not clear yet.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And does that carry a lesson for Syria as you look out for that?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** For everyone; of course you cannot say you do not get a lesson.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And the lesson is it to move faster or slower?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** The good thing about Syria is that many things that I talked about as analysis, something we can adopt, but how much can you be away from your people, that is the question, whether regarding internal issues or whether regarding external issues. I have relations and I am receiving many officials from the United States and I am talking about cooperation but they do not blame me because I am not a puppet.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *So, you feel in the short term you do not really have to because you are under the sight of your people, but in the longer term issue is building institutions and sort of slow building reform rather than more rapid...*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Exactly, because even if you want to talk about democracy and participation, it should be through the institutions. So, expand this participation through improving and upgrading these institutions.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Certainly, many people who would say no, the lesson should be much faster political reform, much more rapid representation of people, and improving human rights?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** I do not think it is about time, it is about the hope, because if I say that in five years time or ten years time may be, if the situation is going to be better, people are patient in our region. The problem is if you tell them I do not see any light at the end of the tunnel, this is the problem. So, it is not about being faster or slower. I think faster could be good but it could be bad; faster could mean more side-effects, slower could not be good but could mean less side-effects. So, each one has advantages and disadvantages. We have to be realistic; both are good.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Do you feel like you are moving in the right pace?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** You have to move. That is why I said as long as you have flowing water you do not have stagnation and you do not have pollution. So, flowing fast or slowly: each one has advantages. That is how we should look at it more than saying how fast. I do not think the question is how fast? Is it moving or not, that is the question.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And you put the issue of human rights into these institutions?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Yes. Of course it should be part of it but at the end human rights is about how...when I talk about society, how each society understands the issue of human rights according to its own traditions, because you are talking about ideological region, you are talking about thousands of years of traditions; you cannot do anything regarding the charter of the United Nation, it should be regarding the charter of this culture. That is why you need this debate; it is not something you bring. You need national dialogue and you need to understand that in this region you have – I would not talk about polarization – so much diversity. Sometimes you have two different cultures living in the same place. So, it is not one culture; you have so many cultures.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *I think you can point that you are moving in a national dialogue, is it a national dialogue, what are the three things you would point to first, what is it that is moving in Syria?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** That depends on the priorities. Let us say the priority should be based on two factors: the first factor where you can move faster, the second factor is which is more urgent? Which is more urgent for the people? When I became president it was the economy because wherever you go you have poverty and the situation is getting worse day by day and we have five years of drought and this is the fifth year where we do not have enough water. So, we will have less wheat; we used to export wheat and cotton every year but this year we have problems. We will have immigration. This year, three million Syrians out of 22 million Syrians will be affected by the drought. So, this is our priority now.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Right, because the economy can be moved faster...*



**Bashar al-Assad:** But after 11th of September, which is one year after I became president, and then at the beginning of 2002 you have the invasion of Afghanistan, then later the invasion of Iraq, then the whole chaos that has been created and extremism because of this wrong policy, my first priority became the stability even before food. So, you change the priorities according to the circumstances. So, security becomes first; how can you stabilize your country, how can you prevent your society from extremism, how can you fight terrorism because you have sleeping cells everywhere in this region. Second, economy, this is the second urgent priority. Third, we can have everything else. So, reform in politics is important but it is not as important and urgent as the people waking every day and they want to eat, to have good health, to send their children to good schools. That is what they want. I want to feel safe in my own country. That is my goal.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *You have a reasonably stable situation as ever gets in the Middle East, your economic program is moving, so there is then a sort of political reform and human rights issues will come to the fore soon?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Of course, we are moving, we did it, but I am talking about the priorities; it does not mean subsequently, I am talking in parallel but which one faster and which one you focus on more. For example, local administration reform is very important before the law. We put it as priority number one because this is where people can elect; now they can elect their municipalities, but we wanted to reform this law to be more democratic, more efficient because people in every place they first deal with their municipalities. So, this is number one. Actually, we postponed it because of the conflict. We took the decision in 2005 in one of the conferences of our party. At that time the conflict started by France, Britain, the United States and others trying to destabilize Syria. We said: okay, let us forget about it; we have something new. Now, we are very serious in finishing this. The second one is about civil society; we need to improve the civil society. Now, we are finalizing the law of the civil society. We have been discussing this law now for two years, why? Because we went to every place from the west till the east to see what is the best model we can use, and actually after we finalized it, many people in the civil society gave their comments and said we have to change it. Now, we are changing it.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *These are the two things you would likely to see this year?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Not this year. I do not know if we can make it for the local administration this year because for example we took five years to change the labor law because we have strong unions in Syria. They opposed and businessmen opposed and we took five years to finalize it last year. It was not easy; it went to parliament and there were a lot of debates about it. I expect for the local administration law to happen at the end of this year. The one for the civil society was supposed to be finished last year but because we wanted to make more deliberations with different parties, we said Okay let us postpone it till next year.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And basically it allows NGOs and other organizations a greater role?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** We have less than 2000 NGOs in Syria, but we want to make it more efficient law to have more NGOs, less bureaucracy and things like this.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *You postponed it till next year, did you mean from 2010 till 2011?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Actually, it is supposed to be in December. So, when we talk about next year it is one month or two.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *It is alright. So, the year to do it is this year now?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Actually, it was supposed to be last year, now may be we finish next month. Now, we are at the beginning of February. Sometimes, it is not about the time because many people want to participate and this is good, and sometimes we say let us postpone it because when you have many people participating in this, they will support it. If you do it with less participation, they will attack it. So, it is better to have consensus; this is very

important for stability. This is one of the very important principles; the more consensus you have about everything, the more stable and smooth you can move forward and this means that you will be heavier and thus slower but more stable. That is how we see it.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Is there any change on the media side? I know you talked about that.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** We are talking now about a new look for the media and of course we removed some of the punishments because sometimes we do major things and sometimes we do patching as a temporal thing till we get the new look. So, we do not want to stop; we are very dynamic in Syria. We do small things, but when you have a clear vision we do something big, major law to change everything. Sometimes we do not have this vision regarding an issue – the difference between the media and a website or new sites. That is why I postponed it – the publishing law. It is not yet clear to us what is the difference<sup>4</sup> between publishing, e.trade, etc.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And your 5 year plan is quite ambitious. Do you think you can achieve those economic growth figures with sanctions and everything? 6-7% a year?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** It is 5%. But it is not about the numbers anyway, because we tried the numbers, we always have better numbers in very different circumstances especially regarding Syria, it is about how to make it inclusive; it is not inclusive because it doesn't have good administration. We improve the administration, but it is not as good as it should be to make this number inclusive.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Which means jobs basically?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** Yes, exactly, because now at the very beginning we have few people getting these numbers, and this is normal at the beginning. we talk about millions and millions, we have few hundred who get the benefit more than others, in the past it used to be less, much less. Now how we make it inclusive that is the challenge, and you cannot make it inclusive if you do not develop the administration. but we have to take into consideration that sixty percent of our society is peasantry, so almost sixty percent of our economy will depend on water. So, when you have less water you will have less growth. You know I was a doctor before, and I remember in 1992, one of my friends who graduated from the medicine schools and went to an agricultural area where he lived, he came to visit me, I asked him "how is your work", he said "not good because there is no rain", I said "how come?, you are a doctor.." he said "because there is no rain so many people postponed even their operations for next year. So you can imagine how much water can influence every aspect of our economy. So four years of drought have influenced our economy dramatically. That is why it is difficult to say that I am having clear plan in everything. As you see there are many complicated factors which influence you.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *And you would say your greatest economic partner right now is Turkey. I mean it seems that Turkey is a model of investment.*

**Bashar al-Assad:** It is the model because we have the same society and similar traditions. It is a model, at the end you do not have full model to take as a whole, only some aspects, because at the end the West used to support Turkey, now the West is against Turkey they have more technology, we do not have technology, we do not talk about the reform you talk about technology also. There is no reform without high qualifications. Our universities were under embargo, so how can I have the best human resources? They have better human resources. At the end you have to see the whole course of events, the whole context. We cannot take it as today; today Turkey and today Syria, it is not today.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Is that the worst part of the sanctions for the U.S.; is it the technology?*

**Bashar al-Assad:** No not technology actually, worse, I have one of my friends who worked in the U.S. for 12 years, he has a medical lab, and he cannot import the basic material for the lab. That influences the life of the people

if you don't have the right calibrator for lab analysis, for example. This means that you are giving wrong results to people. You diagnose somebody with cancer while he doesn't have cancer. What did the people do to the United States to deserve this? And regarding the airplanes, what is the relation between politics and people dying because of airplane accidents .But from the other side, we are the fastest growing internet user in the Middle East. And this is because of the nature of the Syrians; they are very open generally at society, they want to learn, and they are successful, we have expatriates all over the world, we have been in contact with the rest of the world for a hundred and fifty years at least, more than any other country in the Middle East, we have expatriates more than any other one. The Palestinian refugees are five millions; while the Syrian expatriates, the minimum that we know about, is 10 million which is double the number, and some people say that we have 18 millions expatriates. So you can understand that we have that diversity of culture inside our society and we have this contact with the rest of the world. So we cannot say that this embargo has been killing Syria. No, it affects certain sectors in humanitarian aspects. I mean at the end you can get these materials from black market, he used to buy the materials from the US, this year he bought his instruments from France, for instance, he didn't buy from the United States. Recently we bought two airplanes, not big ones, with propellers at the end from France; we didn't buy from the United States. So, people are shifting more towards Europe, now you can buy from China, you can buy from India, now we moved in that direction, we moved East, we used to look West, now we are moving East. this is important, not only us, even countries that have good relations with the United States, even their allies are not sure that the United States can help them some day, they wanted to diverse their resources, their relations, their interest, and everything. They want to have good relations especially with China and India.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *Mr. President, Thank you so much.*

*Bashar al-Assad*

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