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President Bashar Assad's Responses to Unrest in Syria, 2011-12

Note: Since the outbreak of unrest in Syria in early March 2011, President Bashar al-Assad made four public statements. They came in the form of addresses to the Syrian People's Assembly (30 March 2011), Statement following the appointment of a New government (18 April 2011) and addresses at the Damascus University (21 June 2011 and 12 January). These statements reflect the official reading of the situation within Syria and its response. They are translated and published by the official **Syrian Arab News Agency** (SANA). Given their importance, these statements of President Assad are reproduced as MEI Factsheet. **Editor MEI@ND]**

Source:

Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)

<http://www.sana.sy/section.html?&req=shownews&topicid=11&newlang=eng>

1. President al-Assad's Speech at People's Assembly, 30 March 2011

Damascus, (SANA)-President Bashar al-Assad on Wednesday delivered a speech at the People's Assembly which tackled internal affairs and the current circumstances in Syria and the Arab region.

Full text of the speech:

Mr. Speaker,

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the People's Assembly, It gives me a great pleasure to meet you once again in this distinguished place, to talk to you about the conditions engulfing Syria and the region

and to address, through you, all the children of Syria; Syria which is at the heart of everyone of us, the invincible castle, with its glories, with its people in every governorate, city, town, and village.

At this exceptional moment, events and developments pose a great test to our unity...a test which is repeated every now and then

I speak to you at this exceptional moment when events and developments pose a great test to our unity and self denial. It is a test which is repeated every now and then because of the continued conspiracy against this country. Thanks to our will, solidarity, and the will of God that we succeed in facing it every time in a manner which enhances our strength and pride.

The Syrian people are entitled to hold their heads high. I talk to you from the heart with feelings of pride for belonging to this great people, with gratitude for their love; yet I speak with feelings of sadness and sorrow for the events which claimed the lives of our brothers and children. My responsibility remains that I should protect the security of this country and ensure its stability. This remains the ever-dominant feeling in my heart and mind.

We tell the enemies you have only one choice, which is to learn from your failure, while the Syrian people have only the choice of continuing to learn from their successes

I know that the Syrian people have been waiting for this speech since last week; and I intentionally postponed it until I have a fuller picture in my mind, or at least some of the main features of this picture, so that my speech should depart from the emotional rhetoric which puts people at ease, but does not change anything or make any impact at a time when our enemies work every day in an organized, systematic and scientific manner in order to undermine Syria's stability. We acknowledge that they had been smart in choosing very sophisticated tools in what they have done; but at the same time we realize that they have been stupid in choosing the country and the people, for such conspiracies do not work with our country or our people. We tell them that you have only one choice, which is to learn from your failure, while the Syrian people have only the choice of continuing to learn from their successes.

You are fully aware of the great shifts and changes happening in our region for the past few months. They are important changes which will have repercussions throughout the region without exception, including the Arab countries and maybe far beyond. This obviously concerns Syria, because Syria is part of this region.

But if we want to consider what concerns us in Syria in what has happened so far on the larger Arab scene, we can say that what happened vindicates the Syrian perspective, in the sense that it expresses a popular consensus. When there is such a consensus we should be assured, whether we agree or disagree on a number of points. What this means is that this popular Arab condition, which has been marginalized for three or four decades, is now at the heart of developments in our region. This Arab condition has not changed. They tried to domesticate it, but it has not yielded.

As far as we are concerned, you recall that in my speeches I always spoke about the Arab street, the fact that it gives direction, about citizens' views. Many in the media used it to express cynicism, and many politicians used to reject that and smile slyly, particularly when I used to meet them while Syria was under a lot of pressure. They used to propose ideas which were contrary to our interests and which implied conspiring against the resistance and against other Arabs. When pressures intensified, I used to tell them that even if I accept this the people will not. And if the people do not accept it, they will reject me. And if they do, that means political suicide for me. They used to smile, of course, implying that they did not believe me. Today, after these events, there have been several meetings, and I repeated the same words. Now they were shaking their heads in agreement.

This is very important. On the other hand, and since the Arab peoples refused to be domesticated and have not changed at heart, we have to work harder to heal the rift in the Arab world if changes in the region continue to take the same course, particularly working on the people to achieve certain objectives. The other thing concerning the Arab peoples' concern about core Arab issues, particularly the Palestinian cause, we believe – and I hope rightly so - that the changes in the region will change the course that the Palestinian cause has taken at least for the past two or three decades and shift from a process of making concessions to a process of holding to rights. So, we believe that there are indications that what is happening is positive.

On the internal level, our policies had been based on development, opening up, and communicating directly with the Syrian people

Syria is not isolated from what is happening in the Arab world. We are part of this region. We influence and are influenced by it, but at the same time we are not a copy of other countries. No country is exactly like any other country. We in Syria have certain characteristics which might be different internally and externally from others.

On the internal level, our policies had been based on development, opening up, and communicating directly between myself and the Syrian people. I am speaking about principles regardless of certain negative and positive aspects and what has and has not been achieved. In principle, these are the pillars of our internal policy.

Our foreign policy has been based on holding to our national rights, holding to pan-Arab rights, to independence, to supporting Arab resistance

Our foreign policy has been based on holding to our national rights, holding to pan-Arab rights, to independence, to supporting Arab resistance when there is occupation. The link between domestic and foreign policies has always been the Syrian citizen. When the Syrian citizen is not the heart of domestic and foreign policies, this is a deviation; and it is the job of the country's institutions to correct this deviation. The net outcome of these policies has been an unprecedented case of national unity which has been the real force which has protected Syria during the past years when pressures intensified against Syria. Thanks to this outcome that we have been able to dismantle huge minefields which have faced Syrian policy. We have been able to maintain Syria's central role and position. But this has not deterred the enemies. Of course I have just started to talk about this conspiracy, and then I will move to the internal situation, so that satellite T.V. stations will not say that the Syrian President considered all that has happened a foreign conspiracy. We have to start with the main elements, and then make the connections.

Syria is facing a great conspiracy whose tentacles extend to some nearby countries and far-away countries, with some inside the country

Maintaining this role or strengthening it, based on principles rejected by others, will make enemies try their best to weaken it through other means. I have always warned against rejoicing when we succeed, because success leads to a feeling of safety and complacency. I say that when you are in a battle, you know your enemy, you know the plan. But after the battle, you do not know what the enemy is preparing for you. So, after every success we should work harder in order to maintain our success and protect ourselves against any conspiracy which might be hatched against us in the outside world. And I am sure you all know that Syria is facing a great conspiracy whose tentacles extend to some nearby countries and far-away countries, with some inside the country. This conspiracy depends, in its timing not in its form, on what is happening in other Arab countries.

Today, there is a new fashion which they call "revolutions". We do not call them so because we think this is mostly a popular condition. As far as they are concerned, if something happens in Syria, then it has a cover: there is a revolution there so there is a revolution here: there is reform there, so there is reform here. The tools are the same: the slogans and talking about freedom. Consequently, if there are calls for reform - and I believe we all call for reform - we get along with them without knowing what is really happening. That is why they mixed up, in a very smart manner, three elements. I know that most of the people who are listening to us, and you represent them, know a great deal about these details. Nevertheless, I will discuss them once again in order to harmonize our concepts based on the available information so far. There might be things which will be revealed later. So, they mixed up three elements:

sedition, reform, and daily needs. Most of the Syrian people call for reform, and you are all reformers. Most of the Syrian people have unmet needs; and we all discuss, criticize, and have our disagreements because we have not met many of the needs of the Syrian people. But sedition has become part of the issue and started to lead the other two factors and take cover under them. That is why it was easy to mislead many people who demonstrated in the beginning with good intentions. We cannot say that all those who demonstrated are conspirators. This is not true, and we want to be clear and realistic.

The conspirators are few in number, this is natural. Even we, in the government, did not know, like everybody else, and did not understand what was happening until acts of sabotage started to emerge. Things became clearer; for what is the link between reform and sabotage? What is the link between reform and murder? Some satellite T.V. stations actually spoke about attacking certain buildings an hour before they were actually attacked. How did they know that? Do they read the future? This happened more than once. Then, things started to become clearer. They will say that we believe in the conspiracy theory. In fact there is no conspiracy theory. There is a conspiracy.

It was difficult for us to fight against this situation, because people will mix between our fighting sedition and fighting reform. In principle, we support reform and meeting people's needs. This is the duty of the state. But we cannot be with sedition. When the Syrian people, with their natural and patriotic awareness, realized what was happening, things became easier. And the response actually came from the people more than it came from the state. As you have seen, the state refrained from taking action and left the response to the people. This has provided the sound, safe, and patriotic treatment and restored national unity very quickly to Syria.

What we are seeing today is a stage; and we do not know whether it is a first stage or an advanced stage. But we are concerned with the outcome because the last stage for them is for Syria to get weaker and disintegrate, because this will remove the last obstacle facing the Israel's plans. This is what concerns us. We are not concerned with the process, because we know that they will continue and will repeat what they had been doing in one form or another. Every experience will be based on the previous one. So if they fail, they will develop this experience. And if we succeed, we need to build on this experience. I have been advised by many people not to talk about details and to stick to generalities, but I will address these details as usual in order to be fully transparent.

In the beginning they started with incitement, many weeks before trouble started in Syria. They used the satellite T.V. stations and the internet but did not achieve anything. And then, using sedition, started to produce fake information, voices, images, etc. they forged everything. Then they started to use the sectarian element. They sent SMSs to members of a certain sect alerting them that another sect will attack them. And in order to be credible, they sent masked people to neighbourhoods with different sects living in them, knocking on people's doors and telling each that that the other sect has already attacked and are on the streets, in order to get a reaction. And it worked for a while. But we were able to nip the sedition in the bud by getting community leaders to meet and diffuse the situation. Then they

used weapons. They started killing people at random; because they knew when there is blood it becomes more difficult to solve the problem.

We have not yet discovered the whole structure of this conspiracy. We have discovered part of it but it is highly organized. There are support groups in more than one governorate linked to some countries abroad. There are media groups, forgery groups and groups of “eye-witnesses”.

The people of Daraa have no responsibility for what happened, but with us, they share the responsibility of putting an end to sedition

They started in the governorate of Daraa. Some say that Daraa is a borderline governorate. I say that if Daraa is on the borders, it is in the heart of every Syrian. And if Daraa is not in the middle of Syria, yet it is the throbbing heart of Syria and all the Syrians. This is how it is defined and this is how it is now. Daraa is on the frontline with the Israeli enemy; and it is the first line of defence for the hinterland. Daraa, al-Qunaitira, and part of rural Damascus defend the other parts of Syria which lie behind them. No one can be in a position defending the homeland and at the same time conspiring against it. This is impossible and is unacceptable. The people of Daraa have no responsibility for what happened, but with us, they share the responsibility of putting an end to sedition. In that, we and the whole Syrian population are with Daraa. The people of Daraa are people of genuine patriotism, magnanimity, and dignity. They will get hold of the few people who wanted to stir chaos and destroy the national fabric. The conspirators took their plan to other governorates. As you know, they moved to Latakia and other cities using the same techniques; murder, intimidation, and incitement. There were clear instructions not to harm any Syrian citizens. But unfortunately, when things move to the street, and dialogue is conducted in the street and outside institutions, things naturally become chaotic and reaction rather than action rules the day. What we might call mistakes of the moment become the dominant mode and people get killed. This is what happened and you all know that.

The blood that was spilled on the streets is Syrian blood, and we are all concerned because the victims are our brothers and their families are our families

In any case, the blood that was spilled on the streets is Syrian blood, and we are all concerned because the victims are our brothers and their families are our families. It is important to look for the causes and those behind these events. We need to investigate and bring the people responsible to account. This has happened anyway, but let it be for bringing about national unity rather than disuniting the Syrians. Let it be for strengthening the country rather than weakening it, for putting an end to sedition rather than enflaming it. Let us act as quickly as possible to heal our wounds and restore harmony to our larger family and maintain love as our uniting bond.

Awareness is the real force which protects Syria at every juncture

Part of what has happened is similar to what happened in 2005. It is a virtual war. I said at the time that they want us to surrender through waging on us a virtual war using the media and the internet, although the internet was not as widespread as it is today. They wanted us to feel that things were over and our only choice was to surrender without putting any fight. Today, the principle is the same. They want us to incur a virtual defeat but using different methods. There is some confusion in the country for different reasons, mainly under the headline of reform. With is chaos, using reform as a cover, using sectarianism, where sects become nervous, they clash with each other, virtual defeat is achieved in another form. In 2005 we warded off this virtual defeat through popular awareness. Today, things are obviously more difficult, because the internet is more widespread, and because the instruments are more modern. But the popular awareness we have seen was sufficient to respond very quickly. Nevertheless, I say that we should not feel complacent with what we have got. We need to strengthen this national patriotic awareness because it is the real force which protects Syria at every juncture.

However, there is an essential question. We are talking about changes in the region in the sense that it is a wave; and whenever we meet someone, they say there is a wave and you have to bow. Despite what we said about the positive aspects of this wave, should we be led by the wave or should we lead? When this wave touched Syria, the issue has become of concern to the Syrians. We have to use it as a wave of energy according to our interests. We should be proactive rather than reactive.

I use this in order to move to what we announced Thursday, after the meeting of the Ba'ath Party Regional Command, when we announced a salary increase, and referred to a Party Law and the Emergence Law. I am trying to explain how we think. I am not adding new things, but when you know how we think we harmonize our visions. When something happens and we make a decision, you understand how the state is thinking. There is usually a lack of communication. We have things which we do not know how to market. Sometimes we think they are good things but are misunderstood.

The relationship between the government and the people is not that of pressure or based on pressure. It is based on the needs of society; and these needs are the rights of society

So, did we make these reforms because there is a problem or because there is sedition? If there was no sedition wouldn't we have done these reforms? If the answer is yes, it means that the state is opportunistic, and this is bad. If we say that these things were made under the pressure of a certain condition or popular pressure, this is weakness. And I believe that if the people get the government to bow under pressure, it will bow to foreign pressure. The principle is wrong. The relationship between the government and the people is not that of pressure or based on pressure. It is based on the needs of society; and these needs are the rights of society. It is the state's duty to meet these needs. When

people demand their rights, it is natural that the government should respond to these demands happily. Even if the government is unable to meet these demands, it should say so. It depends on the type of dialogue. The only pressure that a government official should feel is the lack of people's confidence in him, the pressure of the responsibility he has towards the people, and the greatest pressure of all is that of the national and patriotic awareness that we have seen. It was unprecedented and it astonished us as it has done every time. All these pressures make us think how to show our gratitude to this people by providing development, reform and prosperity.

The things announced Thursday were not decisions, because those were the decisions of the Ba'ath Party Regional Conference in 2005. And there were two reasons for that: one is that the content of the decisions is not related to the crisis, it is related to our need for reform. When we proposed these ideas in 2005 there was no pressure on Syria. One year before, in 2004, in the Tunis Summit, which was the first Arab Summit after the Invasion of Iraq, there was a state of collapse and submission to America. The United States wanted to impose on us reform and democracy. We fought against this project in the Arab Summit and it failed.

In 2005 we proposed the same subjects but for our country and the reforms were home grown and not under pressure. The pressure had nothing to do with this; it had to do with the resistance, with Iraq, and with foreign policy issues. When I talked about the three elements: sedition, reform, and people's needs, I think what was needed to put an end to sedition was only popular awareness. As to reform, we already started the reform, there were delays, and this is an indication that it has actually started. The reforms were not intended to fight sedition because the impacts of reform are usually long-term. Some people say that the government made promises to reform but never followed them through. In order to understand this point I will quickly review the reform process since 2000.

It is true that we talked about this at the time but only in headlines. The picture was not very clear about the shape of that reform. Two months after the speech I gave in this magnificent place, the Intifada happened and the conspiracy against the resistance started, and pressures mounted. Then there was 09/11. Islam, Muslims, and Arabs were all accused. There was the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and Syria was supposed to pay a price for its position to invasion.

You know what happened in Lebanon in 2005, and later the war of 2006 and its repercussions, and the war against Gaza at the end of 2008. So, the whole period was that of continued pressure. What added to the problems was that we had four years of drought which damaged our economic program. What happened at that time was a change of priorities, and this is an important point. I spoke about this in more than one interview, but I think I spoke to foreign media. I said that these events made us change our priorities. Of course I am not justifying. I am simply explaining these facts and separating the subjective from the objective. When I say that we had drought, this is beyond our powers. But it does not mean that there aren't any measures that could be taken in order to improve the economy. Those who were ten-years old in 2000 are now twenty, so generations should know about these conditions.

The top priority became Syria's stability; and now we are at a stage when we can appreciate this stability. The other top priority was related to living conditions. I meet many people, and ninety nine percent of my conversation with them revolves around living conditions. Obviously there are grievances, but living conditions remain the major element.

This does not justify lagging behind on other issues, but we did not focus much on political issues like the emergency law and the party law. The reason is that when there are human issues at stake, they cannot be postponed. We can postpone a party statement for months or even years, but we cannot postpone providing food for children for breakfast. We can postpone something which is caused by the emergency law or other legal or administrative measures which cause problems for the population, but we cannot postpone something which causes a child to suffer when the child's parents do not have enough money to treat him or because the government does not have a certain medicine. This is something we face on a daily basis; and I am sure that you as members of the People's Assembly face.

So the issue was that of priorities. At least in 2009-2010 things were better and it was possible to introduce some of these reforms. As for the party law, the Regional Command has actually drafted a law but we had not discussed it. There might have been some delay but we will leave that to people to judge. But hadn't we wanted to make these reforms, we would not have made them in 2005. We would have done them under pressure. Things might get delayed because of bureaucracy, negligence, or other things. We all are part of this people and we know how things are. It is important to explain this in order to know where we are and to know the content of the reforms. Now there is a new People's Assembly in the near future and there will be a new local administration. There will be soon a new government and there will be a regional conference. So 2011 will see new blood and we will move to another stage. We postponed the regional conference because we knew that we need to account for what we have done. We needed to do these things and present them to the conference. We have been thinking of having new blood in all areas. What I want to say is that reform for us is not a fashion. It is not a reflection of this new wave which is sweeping the region. What I said in my interview with the Wall Street Journal two months ago, when things started unfolding in Egypt. They asked me 'are you going to introduce reforms?' I said that, 'if you had not already started, and if you had not had the intention and the plan, now it is too late and there is no point in wasting our time.'

We need to avoid subjecting the reform process to momentary conditions, otherwise it will be counterproductive

Many officials, particularly foreign officials, tell me that they think that the president is a reformer but those around him restrain him. I tell them that on the contrary the people around me are pushing me hard to do these reforms. What I want to say is that there are no obstacles, there are simply delays. No one opposes reform because those who oppose it have a vested interest and are corrupt. You all know

them they were very few and now they are no longer here. The real challenge is what kind of reform we want. That is why we need to avoid subjecting the reform process to momentary conditions, otherwise it will be counterproductive.

We have been talking about reform for the past ten years, and our reform today should reflect the past ten years and the next ten years. It should not only reflect this stage or this wave whether it is internal or external. This is how we are thinking. Changes might delay or precipitate reform, change its direction, make us build on other countries' experiences. For instance, Tunisia's experience was useful for us more than that of Egypt, because in Tunisia there was a model and we used to send experts to learn from that experience. When the revolution started, we realized that the causes lied in the way wealth was distributed, not only in terms of corruption but also in terms of geographical distribution. This is something that we have tried to avoid, and we are calling for a fair distribution of development in Syria. In principle, we cannot say that we do not want reform because this will be destructive to the whole country, but the main challenge is finding out what kind of reform you want and we need all our skills as Syrians when we start discussing the laws which will be proposed soon. The measures announced last Thursday did not start from square one because as I said the Regional Command already made drafts for the emergency law and the party law more than a year ago.

There are other draft laws which will be debated publically and then they will be discussed by the relevant institutions before they are passed. There are other measures which were not announced on Thursday: some of them are related to strengthening national unity and others related to fighting corruption, the media and creating jobs. These will be announced after they are fully studied. The former government started these studies and they will be a priority for the new government. For instance, the salary increases were discussed in our meeting with the economic team. I headed that meeting and we discussed a package of economic decisions and only the salary decision was taken. There is more to follow.

Our duty is to provide the Syrian people with the best, not with the fastest... We want to proceed quickly, but we do not want to be hasty

Talking about this, and about the one thousand five hundred Syrian pounds increase, the government received complaints and they responded. About an hour ago I received an amendment to their decision to solve this problem. We should give them credit for the work they have done on their own initiative and not responding to instructions. I just wanted to make that clear to the Syrian citizens. I hope that we will be able, during the next month, to identify the measures that need to be taken. And I will ask for a timeframe for every measure. Of course you in the People's Assembly and in the next assembly will make sure that there are time frames for any measure, because this will help regulate work. Some people ask me to announce a time frame at the People's Assembly but I think putting a time frame is purely technical. I might put a time frame which is shorter than what is necessary and in that case the

pressure of time will affect quality. I think our duty is to provide the Syrian people with the best, not with the fastest. We want to proceed quickly, but we do not want to be hasty. In any case, I am sure there will be someone on the satellite T.V. stations who will say that this is not enough. What is enough for them will destroy our country and we simply cannot afford that. By the way, do not get angry for what some T.V. stations have done, because they always fall in the same trap when they try to fabricate things for us and for the Syrian people. The fact is that they follow the principle of lie, lie until they believe you. So, they believe their own lie and fall in the trap.

Brothers and sisters, this might be a blessing in disguise. But we are humans and we cannot like what happened. We cannot like sedition, we cannot like killing, we cannot like tension, but crises are a positive condition if we can control them and get out of them victorious. The secret of Syria's strength lies in the many crises it faced throughout its history, particularly after independence. We have to face the crises with great confidence and with a determination to win. Concern also should be a positive condition because it pushes us to move forward rather than escape forward because when we move forward we move with confidence, while when we escape forward we stumble and then fail. In times of crisis, many people just look for any solution, while it is actually better to stay without any solution if we do not find the right one. This is one of the lessons that we learned from these crises.

Burying sedition is a national, moral, and religious duty

Burying sedition is a national, moral, and religious duty; and all those who can contribute to burying it and do not are part of it. The Holy Quran says, "Sedition is worse than killing," so all those involved intentionally or unintentionally in it contribute to destroying their country. So there is no compromise or middle way in this. What is at stake is the homeland and there is a huge conspiracy. We are not seeking battles. The Syrian people are peaceful people, loving people, but we have never hesitated in defending our causes, interests and principles, and if we are forced into a battle, so be it.

I remind you of the "domino effect" term which was used after the invasion of Iraq when the United States assumed then under the former administration that the Arab countries are domino blocks and the American projects will hit just one of these blocks and the others will fall. What happened is the exact opposite when their projects turned into domino blocks, we hit them and they started to fall one after another. This one will fall too.

Since some people have short memory, I will refresh their memory once again by saying that not all of what is happening is a conspiracy, because I know that they are on the ready in their studios to comment.

As for you, children of this great nation, your love for your country which you express day after day and which is clearer than ever at times of crisis, and which you particularly expressed yesterday through your unprecedented mass demonstrations throughout the country gives me more confidence and

determination. Your solidarity and unity in fighting sedition assures me about the future and if you, in the slogans you chanted, expressed willingness to sacrifice yourselves for your president, the more natural thing is for the president to sacrifice himself for his people and homeland. I shall remain the faithful brother and comrade who will walk with his people and lead them to build the Syria we love, the Syria we are proud of, the Syria which is invincible to its enemies.

Thank you very much.

Source: Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)

<http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2011/03/30/pr-339334.htm>

2. President al-Assad's Speech to the New Government, 18 April 2011

Damascus, (SANA) - Before President Bashar al-Assad, the new government led by Adel Safar was sworn in on Saturday. Afterwards, President al-Assad chaired a meeting of the new government and delivered a speech addressing directives to the ministers.

Full text of the speech:

In the beginning, I would like to welcome you to your important positions of responsibility. I would like particularly to welcome the new ministers who joined this government. I wanted us to start as soon as possible after forming the government; for every day that passes, we can achieve great things.

My past week was full of activities. I met a number of delegations from different Syrian governorates; and there will be other delegations from other governorates in the next few days. I wanted to listen to all these delegations at this particular time, and to ask them for their views on the issues which they think should be priorities for this government and for the state in general.

For the Syrian citizens, the new government means new blood; and new blood means new and great expectations. But for this blood not to become old in a short period of time, we need to renew it constantly. This renewal happens by introducing new ideas. This new blood is not necessarily related to the individuals who join the government, but rather related to the new ideas which we produce every day. The world is moving fast around us, and we need to move at the same pace so that we can say that we are developing. Otherwise, we will be moving backwards. The world is moving ahead every month, every week, and sometimes every day.

What's important at this stage is for us to reach a state of unity, unity between the government, state institutions and the people. We are supposed to be moving in parallel when we move in the same direction. In this case we maximize the outcome and the achievement. The more we distance ourselves from the Syrian population, the weaker our strength and the less our achievement.

The most dangerous thing is the existence of contradiction between the direction we are moving in and the direction the people are moving in. The outcome in that case will be zero; and the achievement will be moving backward. The important thing, as I said, is to stress these channels of communication because the lack of communication with the citizens creates a feeling of frustration and a feeling of anger, particularly when there are daily needs and within the capacity of the state and yet we do not provide them. In that case the results will not be good.

Of course, we want to open a broad dialogue with everyone; for everyone we meet should have a certain idea or a certain complaint. We need to talk to trade unions and organizations which represent professionals and interests throughout the country. We need to consult them, to build a dialogue with them, so that this dialogue and this consultation becomes part of the decision that we take and which has a bearing on the different sections of society which belong to these unions or these organizations. The challenges before us and before this government are as huge as the expectations pinned by the Syrian population on this government. They are as big as the challenges which lay ahead of us, the challenges we faced in the past and the ones we face at present. No government can make any achievement under any circumstances unless it in enjoyed popular support.

From my meetings with sections of the population last week, I found that there is a gap which started to appear between state institutions and the Syrian citizens. This gap must be closed; and we need to find channels between ourselves and the Syrian population. These channels should work both ways. We need to broaden and strengthen these channels. And we need to fill this gap; but it should be filled with one thing which is trust, the trust of the citizens in the institutions of the state.

This trust cannot be built except through full transparency with the citizens. This transparency and this trust will be able to provide sufficient popular support to your government, to enable it to carry out its tasks, even if we were unable to achieve a number of things. When we are transparent with our population, and we tell them that these are our capabilities, and these are the needs and the challenges, I am sure that the Syrian citizen has enough understanding. But when we do not explain to our population what is happening, and the details of the situation, how can we ask them to understand these circumstances if they don't know them?

As you know, Syria is going through a critical stage. As I said in my speech to the People's Assembly, there are different components of this stage. There is the conspiracy. There are the reforms and the needs. The conspiracy has always been there as long as Syria acted independently and as long as it has taken its decisions in a way that does not appeal to many parties. And as long as there are adversaries or enemies, conspiracies are natural around us. That's why we shouldn't give this component a lot of attention. What's important for us is to focus our attention on strengthening our internal immunity inside Syria. This immunity is definitely linked to the reforms we are carrying out and to the needs of the Syrian population.

Of course the reforms are very important; and many of these reforms will not produce results soon. And of course we cannot say that we are waiting for the results of these reforms on parallel lines, we should address the needs of the Syrian population within the available capabilities in order to be able to meet them. When we talk about needs, we do not only mean economic ones. Obviously the economy is the biggest problem, and the daily needs are the greatest for the citizen who needs services, security and dignity. And all these elements are interrelated.

The loss of dignity doesn't necessarily mean that an individual is directly humiliated or insulted by another individual in or outside the state. It rather means neglecting citizens. It means not dealing with a certain transaction that he has in a government department. It might mean asking for a bribe. All these are insults and forms of humiliation that we need to get rid of once and for all. All these elements are strongly connected: the economy is connected with services, services are connected to dignity, the economy is connected to dignity, and security is connected with all of the above. This means that all these elements are interrelated and need to be achieved in parallel and at the same time.

Since we are talking about this particular stage, I would like to say that the blood which has been spilled in Syria has pained us all. It pained the heart of every Syrian. We are sad for the loss of every Syrian and for all those who have been injured. We pray to God to provide solace to their families and friends. We consider them all martyrs, whether they were civilians, members of the police or the armed forces. In any way the investigation committee is proceeding with its work in order to know the causes of what happened and to identify those responsible and then bring them to account.

We have a number of areas to cover. And the points that I have in front of me are derived from my meetings with Syrian citizens during the last week. But I haven't included all the points. I only wrote the points which the Syrian citizens consider priorities.

On the political level, we have achieved certain things and there are things which are still to be achieved. A law was passed giving our Kurdish brothers the Syrian nationality about two weeks ago. This law will enhance national unity in Syria. The new government will only need to follow up the necessary measures in order to implement the law.

The second point is related to lifting the state of emergency. In my speech to the People's Assembly, I talked about lifting the state of emergency; and immediately a legal committee was set up and then proposed a whole package of laws which will need to be passed when the state of emergency is lifted. All of this is done according to international standards and practices in other countries of the world. I believe that the committee finished studying these laws a few days ago; and the proposals will be sent to the government in order to turn them to legislation which will be passed immediately.

I don't know how many days you need in order to get to know your ministries, but let's say that the deadline for completing the laws related to lifting the state of emergency is next week; and if we can complete that this week, it will be good. Otherwise, they need to be completed maximum next week. Contrary to what some people believe – that lifting the state of emergency will create a security failure – I think that lifting the state of emergency will enhance security in Syria. It will achieve security while maintaining the dignity of the Syrian citizen.

The last law proposed within this package made by the committee is allowing for people to demonstrate. The Syrian constitution allows for demonstrations, but we do not have a law which regulates the process of demonstrating. This process is a challenge to the police because they are not prepared for such things. That's why the police should be adequately prepared and supported by personnel and equipment. There might be a need for restructuring the police in order to cope with the new reforms. One of the tasks of the police is to protect demonstrators and at the same time protect other individuals and public and private property from any attempt at sabotage or undermining people's security.

When this package of laws is passed, there will no longer be a need to organize demonstrations in Syria. What will be immediately required of the relevant bodies, particularly the Ministry of Interior, is to implement the laws strictly and rigorously and not to tolerate any act of sabotage.

With these laws, we draw a line between reform and sabotage; and there are clear differences between the demands for reform and the intentions of creating chaos and sabotage. We want the law to be implemented immediately, and we don't want any sabotage or any undermining of the security of Syrian citizens. The Syrian people are civilized, committed to law and order and do not accept chaos and demagoguery.

The other thing is related to the party law. A number of drafts have been made previously; and different ideas have been presented, but they were not in a governmental framework in any previous government.

What is required of this government is that it should start to study this subject within specific timeframe and to make proposals. Obviously, this is an extremely important subject and is highly sensitive because it will impact Syria's future in a dramatic manner. It will either strengthen national unity or lead to fragmentation of society. That's why the study needs to be adequate and mature. Preferably, there should be a national dialogue, since this issue has an impact on Syria's future; so it shouldn't remain only at the level of government, organizations, or parties. It should be put to national dialogue in Syria in order to see what is the best model suited to Syrian society.

Another issue is related to the local administration law. I believe this to be one of the most important laws which will also lead to dramatic changes in Syria. Studying this law started at least a year ago; and

there were discussions between the Ministry of Local Administration and the governors. There are two aspects to this law. On the one hand it has to do with the structure and the authorities, and on the other, it has to do with elections. Any amendment to local administration elections law without changing the structure will be useless. That's why we started studying the structure and the authorities; and of course there will be a study of the second component. Again, this is one of the main tasks of this government.

In addition, there is a need for a new and modern law for the media. This law has been studied; and I believe that it was in its last stages, but there were some remarks and reservations or ideas which can be added to it. So, this government can complete this law, and also within set and announced timeframe.

I believe that this package will broaden participation and increase freedoms in Syria. But there are conditions for the success of the reform process. The reform process does not only need legislation to succeed. It succeeds through the institutions because it is not sufficient to simply pass a law. The law needs to be implemented. Syrian institutions need a lot of development. The success of this passage is strongly related to the success of the institutions which will administer these reforms when we start the implementation process. I always say that we should make haste, but we shouldn't be hasty. Time is of the essence. We need to make haste, but we need results which are useful to our country. We do not want to be hasty and bring about counterproductive outcomes in any issue. That's why any reform should be based on internal stability and on security.

It's important for this government to set timeframe for every one of these areas and to make this timeframe public. When it is public, it would be possible to hold any official who does not do what is required of him in a certain subject accountable. If we succeed in this reform, we will be able to strengthen our country and we will be able to face the powerful regional or international winds blowing on Syria. I have full confidence in the Syrian people in this regard, because they have the will, they have the history, and they are highly dynamic.

The last three or four weeks were telling. The outside were betting on the people, and the people foiled their plots. On the other hand, the Syrian policy which also bet on the people won the bet. That's why I can say that these reforms are reassuring as the people are concerned. We have a mature and intelligent population who are able to cope with these reforms with minimum difficulties. What remains is the development of institutions so that we have the laws, the institutions and the people on the same level for Syria to move forward. If we succeed, this will be a historic response to the orientalist who in the past wrote many things about the Arab society. They said that as a result of the social structure of this region, it will not be able to proceed with democracy at all. This will be equally a Syrian response; and you will be able to provide a model in the Arab region or the Middle East in producing a civilized democracy which is in the best interest of all the population.

On the issues which are of concern to our citizens – and they are many and difficult to innumerate. People want justice, they want roads, water, development, healthcare, education, and many other things. I decided to choose a number of points to talk about. There is no doubt that unemployment is the biggest problem we face in Syria. We have a large number of unemployed young people; and we have a high population growth rate, even in comparison to other less advanced Arab countries. When young people feel that they have no prospects, they will be frustrated and may reach despair. This despair might push them to revolt against family, social and national values. That's why this is a challenge, not only economic, but rather a national one strongly linked to Syria's stability.

In this context, we always say that improving the economy will create jobs. This is true, but improving the economy might need a long period of time. We need quick projects which address the problem of unemployment and which deal with the problems of these young unemployed people. The former government prepared a study for a small and medium enterprise body; and this government needs to continue to work on this law in order to help these young people.

Talking about unemployment, we shouldn't forget agriculture, for it is the basic natural economic pillar in our region. More than 60% of our society depends on agricultural or live in rural areas. There's no doubt that agriculture is the backbone of Syrian economy; and the state has made great efforts in order to develop this sector during the past decades. But the attention given to agriculture during the past few years was not adequate, particularly with four years of drought. Even this year we have regions which enjoyed a large quantity of rain, while others remain dry. These four years made a direct impact on our farmers, and led to a drop of revenues from agricultural products. They also pushed a large number of people to migrate and leave their work in agriculture either to other professions or to other regions. So, agriculture is labour-intensive, and awarding agriculture adequate attention helps addressing the problem of unemployment in Syria. But we cannot talk about agriculture only in terms of land, rain and agricultural services. Farmers cannot live on the land without the other services necessary for their livelihood and daily life, including education, roads and other services.

In other words, this means that we should award proper attention to rural areas in general. What is good about Syria in comparison with other more advanced countries in the Middle East, and whose experience I have looked at, is the distribution of services during the past five decades between the big cities and the countryside. The distribution is relatively fair, but it should be even fairer. In this context, the Eastern region project is an extremely important one which we started a number of years ago. The idea is important, but I don't think the implementation has yielded the desired results. We need to re-examine the contents and the mechanisms of that project to achieve the best possible results.

On employment too, the industrial sector has had problems too related to the financial crisis, the situation inside Syria, the low purchasing power, and outside competition. Of course, this doesn't mean that we should go back on opening up, but this opening up should be regulated and positive and it should lead to a better economy in Syria. It shouldn't act against the economy or against the Syrians.

In the area of attracting investment, we always talk about exemptions. Exemptions are not enough, because investors do not only look for exemptions. They look for the right mechanisms for investment which prevent corruption and provide a qualified workforce. Qualifying people is as important as fighting corruption, and as important as developing the judiciary and legal processes in attracting investment.

We need to focus on developing the public sector in all its areas. The public sector does not only consist of factories. It also provides services to the population, and the public sector has proven to be guarantor of stability in Syria. It contributes to the treasury and guarantees stability at the same time. The role of the state in the economy has become more important, particularly under the global conditions, rising prices of commodities abroad and with the emergence of monopolies which push prices up. When the state provides consumer goods at reasonable prices, this protects the population and at the same time brings the prices down and foils any attempt on the part of those who might think of monopoly or exploiting people's needs. When we say that we care about the public sector, this doesn't mean that we don't care about the private sector. Caring about the private sector also doesn't mean that we only care about big investors or businessmen only. We should also care about small professions and small businesses everywhere. Previously, we used to give exemptions to projects with capital amounting to millions. The fact is that the Syrian economy is based on small and medium enterprises, not primarily on large projects. That's why, it might be better to move on parallel lines between big projects and giving advantages to small projects.

People talk about justice. They want an equitable distribution of income and wealth not only among individuals, but also among regions, between cities and the countryside, between big cities and small cities. They want a developed judiciary. We need to continue automating the legal system, and there is a great need for more judges in order to be able to deal with the large numbers of cases and transactions in front of them. At the same time, people need new premises for the courts in different parts in Syria in order to take in the newly-recruited judges. A fair and well-functioning legal system is essential for investment, stability, the economy and for achieving justice to the population in general. The most important problem, which we hear about on a daily basis, is corruption. It is definitely the biggest problem that can plague any society because it leads to a waste in money, morals and the whole potential of the country. It is the exact opposite of development. A number of ideas have been suggested on how to deal with it, but they remain general ideas. We need to look for practical measures to fight corruption. I think the worst thing is for a government official to be accused of corruption. That's why I think that Syrian officials, and let us start with government, should present a statement of their property and other assets. When a certain official is accused of corruption, we can check this statement and compare between the officials' assets before the accusation and after. In some countries, this statement is presented on an annual basis and in others it is presented only once. What's important is to have a frame of reference. We started this process about three years ago, but it wasn't at ministers' level and it was a pilot and the data wasn't really used.

There were also proposals about creating a corruption-fighting agency which is staffed by trustworthy people who carry out two tasks; investigating corruption charges on the one hand and checking certain cases where there might be suspicion about the integrity and soundness of transactions in order to ensure that things are done according to procedure, when there are important bids or calls for tender with big amounts of money. In this case, the agency can monitor and audit the process.

The third point is about bribery which usually changes hands on a daily basis in small figures, but ultimately it creates new burdens for people and leads to a lot of anger. This is natural. Bribery cannot be addressed except through administrative reform, first through reducing unnecessary procedures; and second through computerizing administrative work. Administration needs full restructuring of procedures and transactions and at the same time monitoring the behaviour of the personnel. But if we do not computerize and organize transactions, it will be difficult to control this process.

More than one official from different countries have raised questions about big calls for tender, and sometimes these raise a lot of talk in society. There is no reason why we shouldn't be transparent with people and make these bids public. In some countries, they are usually broadcast on television; I mean the process of examining the tenders and awarding the bids and so on. The more transparent we are, the more we protect ourselves against unfounded allegations and charges. In the same context we need to have a tax reform, because it is one of the big corruption areas in Syria. It is true that tax returns have risen during the past few years, but still there is a lot of waste. Tax reform is an important area if we want to fight corruption properly.

There is also the question of controlling government expenditure, although it is not directly related to corruption. Yet, there might be some aspects of corruption there and some negligence, but we need to put an end to unjustified government expenditure, whether it has to do with cars, gas, building, unnecessary travel, particularly in these circumstances. I don't think that we need to attend conferences anywhere. Ministers should remain in Syria at this time. The priority will be given to the internal situation, and the public sector should be transparent in terms of its expenditure. Everything should be presented to people and expenditure should be justified. This means that transparency is at the heart of this process in all areas.

These are some of the points that the Syrian people raised when I met them. But even if we had the good intentions to achieve all these points, we cannot do that except by developing government mechanisms, improving government efficiency and improving the decision-making process at government level. There are a number of principles which should be the foundation of government work. First, increased participation in decision-making. This means involving everyone without exception. When we pass a decree, who implements the decree? It is not only implemented by the minister. It is implemented by the ministry staff at different levels. The staff knows the possibility of implementing the decree from their experience, so it's important for them to participate and express

their views. Sometimes there are unpractical points in the law which are difficult to implement. So, they will point to these difficulties. We need to have full participation inside institutions, and second, as I said in the beginning, with relevant organizations and trade unions. There are stakeholders and they have their views. When we expand the decision-making circle, we ensure that the decision we passed in order the interests of a certain group of people will not damage its interests in other areas. The more we broaden participation, the less errors we make and the more people defend this government's decision. And the government needs people to defend its decisions.

There were structures created in other times, and these structures might have been necessary in those times, but are no longer so. That's why we have to abolish these unnecessary structures. On the other hand, we need to create new structures which we need now. For instance, we talk all the time about having the right individual in the right place, and there were many experiences, but they were all partial and achieved very little of what we wanted. We want a centralized structure. Now there is a study of creating a body for public administration or public services. The important thing is to have such a structure at the Prime Minister's office concerned with public appointments, putting criteria for evaluation and assessment, training plans and career paths for state employees: criteria for promotion and for evaluation. All these standards and criteria will be central and applied by the ministries. This is one of the necessary new structures in order to have better quality in the public sector or in government.

We need to computerize government work with the ultimate objective of having e-government and I believe that we lag much behind many Arab and non-Arab countries in our region. The more we computerize, the more we reduce corruption, save time and reduce the suffering of the citizen, the investor, or any person who has anything to do with state institutions. We should also put a timeframe for any project or any law. When the government says that it is studying a law, it should say that we will complete this law by such and such a time. We will finish a certain project during this time period. All projects should be connected with a specific timeframe. Now there is follow-up office at the Prime Ministry which can follow up at least in terms of the timeframe in order to help the Prime Minister address any areas of failure or lagging behind on the part of any state official. On the question of reducing centralization, many officials are inclined to deprive their subordinates of all the authorities they have and putting them in their own hands. This has a negative impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of government work. I now ask every minister to give full authorities to their staff, so that he/she has time to think about strategy and to monitor the performance of their ministries and to hold their staff accountable.

There is the question of committees. A certain issue is proposed to the Cabinet. The Cabinet sets up a committee. In many cases, these committees are set up on issues which are part of the minister's authorities. This is wrong. The minister himself should examine the subject, he is responsible for it and he should make proposals. If the minister wanted a committee to assist him, no problem. But, before the Cabinet, he is the minister and he is responsible. A committee could be set up for a new issue which

is not related to any specific ministry, an issue which might have something to do with a number of ministries. In that case we can set up a committee to examine it. Otherwise, we shouldn't absolve a minister of his responsibility and shift it to a committee. How can we bring people to account? Is the committee responsible in this case? No, the minister is responsible in all cases.

Memoranda are usually circulated among ministers or across different levels. Many junior officials report to their seniors about a certain problem but without a proposal. The memorandum is sent back with the appendage of "for implementation according to the laws and procedures." It is a given that any official should apply laws and regulations, and there shouldn't be anything outside these laws and regulations. But, an official sends memorandum with either a decision or a proposal. Without a decision or a proposal he will be held responsible because he is simply shifting responsibility to a higher level. If such an official believes that the proposal isn't part of his authority, or it might violate laws and regulations but for the public interest, he might propose this to the Cabinet and the Cabinet takes the decision and justifies it.

Most of the issues and the projects proposed are related to more than once ministry; and we have a big problem with cooperation between the ministers. The solution is to have only one authority. Even if we have a number of authorities considered with an issue, there should be one leading ministry which leads action and the others assist or compliment, so that we deal with one minister and not a group of ministers on one issue.

We often propose a large number of projects. These projects go on for years, and sometimes for tens of years without being completed. Of course when we pay money on a certain project and then it's not completed, this is waste. So we lost a lot of money and for a number of years. What is better in this case is to have a smaller number of projects within a shorter timeframe so that the projects start to give returns, and then we move to new projects. In other words, we shouldn't spread our efforts too thinly. And as I said, when we talk to people and explain these things to them, they understand and they help us identify priorities for these projects.

Of course it's important to base our work on legislation, but we need to know that legislation is only the foundation of development. Real development, however, happens through the projects which are based on these laws. That's why we need to think of projects which aim at reducing unemployment, which help the agricultural sector, which help the Eastern region, projects which are properly managed and which are based on development laws. These projects enable people to feel the tangible results. But for us to say that we passed a law, this doesn't mean a lot in most cases.

When we talk about figures, these figures have to be strongly linked to people's lives. When we announce figures about economic growth, we also need to talk about population growth, about inflation, about unemployment, about other figures related to the subject, about living standards, about income. Figures are important, but they should give us an indicator that we can achieve better things if

the figure is positive, but it doesn't necessarily mean that people's lives have become better. So, we shouldn't talk about figures in their abstract.

As I said in the beginning, participation is about expanding and broadening the decision-making circle. But at this particular time, participation has a slightly different meaning, because as I said, the tasks ahead of us are immense. And no state can meet all requirements. We have certain capacities, but we have an active civil society in Syria and it is expanding quickly. So, why don't we involve civil society in different sectors? Why don't we distribute and share tasks instead of having duplication of efforts, whether with civil society organizations or with mass organizations and trade unions? Some organizations have certain projects, and we discover later that the government is working on a similar project and spending more money. This is waste, and we need to have a dialogue with them in order to distribute and share tasks. Involving civil society is one of the mechanisms and channels we talked about in the beginning which allow the citizen to feel involved with the state and that he takes part in building his country.

Going back to the question of communication, there is dialogue and there is communication through the media. You cannot hold a dialogue with the whole population at once. But you can do that through the media. Every minister should talk to the media every now and then to explain what he is doing, what he has done, how he thinks. He should invite journalists to explain to them off the record just to give background information about the issues raised. In that case, the media will be able to pass the real picture to the population. At the same time, there is a possibility to have a government spokesman but not necessarily in the traditional sense, to have someone whose only job is to be a spokesman. Some governments do this and some others make a minister a spokesman for the government. Sometimes a certain minister might be asked to explain something and not necessarily the minister designated as official spokesman. Sometimes the minister functioning as a spokesman might not be able to talk about a certain issue because it's too technical for him. But when there are important decisions taken by the Cabinet, they need to be talked about and explained after the meeting, and there should be questions and answers. This is an important way in opening channels between the government and the population.

In general terms, it is difficult to acknowledge failure, but we shouldn't see it as difficult whether the failure is justified or unjustified. What is important is for us to be transparent. We should acknowledge that there are failures and mention the reasons. People understand when we are clear. But when we deny failure, this is failure itself.

My role as far as you're concerned will be monitoring, supporting and bringing to account. I give priority to support. What's important is that we and the population are one party, not two parties. The citizen is our compass, and we get along with our citizens in the direction they identify. We are here to serve our citizens; and without this service there is no justification for the existence of any one of us. What is important is for the citizen to feel his or her citizenship in every sense of the word.

My last advice to every official I meet and to every government is to be humble and modest. Be humble and modest with people. There is no justification for arrogance because that is the beginning of failure for any individual, any state, and any nation. When an individual is charged with an official responsibility, he should lose the feeling of himself as a private individual and should feel that any citizen is better than him. He should restore his self-esteem and self-value through the satisfaction of the citizen. When citizens are satisfied with your performance, you feel your real value as a human being who deserves respect, but also without arrogance.

I wish you all possible success in the tasks you are charged with; and I hope that you and I, and every official in this country will be able to speak for Syria, glorious Syria which is at the heart of the Arab nation and to truly represent what our country stands for, as the throbbing heart of the Arab nation. Once again I wish you all the best and thank you.

Source: Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)
<http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/04/18/pr-341923.htm>

3. President Bashar al-Assad's Speech at Damascus University, 21 June 2011

DAMASCUS, (SANA) - President Bashar Al-Assad on Monday delivered a speech at Damascus University on the current situation in Syria.

Full text of the speech:

Peace be upon you, upon all those who are protecting this dear and precious homeland. Peace be upon the people, the army, the security forces and all those who have been working to insure the prevention of sedition; burying it in the detestable snake holes where it belongs. Peace be upon every mother who has lost a dear son, on every child who lost a father, on every family that lost a beloved one. Peace be upon the souls of our martyrs whose blood has grown into chrysanthemum in the spring and summer when the seasons of flowering and fruition have been replaced by seasons of conspiracy and killing. But even season of conspiracy gives flowers in Syria. They bloom into pride and impregnability.

Today, and through you, I address every Syrian citizen throughout the homeland. I wanted to speak to you directly in order to strengthen the interaction and spontaneity that have characterized our relationship for years. I wish I had the chance meet every Syrian citizen in person, but I am convinced that meeting some of you on any occasion makes me feel that I am reaching out to all of you.

Through you, I would like to send my greetings to every brother and sister, every young man and woman, every mother and father expressing adherence to their national unity, working hard in order to ensure the country's safety, while giving everything in their power in order for it to remain strong. It took me some time to address you, despite the fact that many of the Syrians I met recently urged me to speak sooner. It took me this time because I did not want to make my speech a platform for propaganda. I did not want to speak about what we "will achieve" but rather about what we "have achieved" or what is "in-process of being achieved." I wanted the substance of my speech to be based on what I heard and felt through my meetings with Syrian citizens throughout the past weeks.

Credibility after all has been the foundation of my relationship with the Syrian people; a relationship built on deeds rather than words and on substance rather than form. This relationship was built on the basis of trust which grew through the meetings that we recently held.

Although these meetings included relatively small groups, when compared to the larger Syrian population, they clearly established the greatness of our people who showed patriotic awareness, goodness, intelligence, and pride. Of course, delaying my speech until today gave rise to many rumours in the country—rumours that were heard by both you and I.

Rumours, however, are not important. What's more important is time. Every day brought with it new information, and so did every meeting I held with the many popular delegations that I met. As a result of these rumours, however, every delegation wanted to check about me personally and how authentic or not these rumours actually were. I want to say that every rumour you heard about the President, his family, and his work is absolutely groundless. All of them, whether malicious or innocent, are untrue.

Today we meet at an important juncture in the history of our nation. This is a moment in which, through our will and determination, we strive to make a point of departure from a past burdened with pain and unrest—where innocent blood, which has pained every single Syrian heart, was shed. We aim at a future full of hope; hope that our homeland will restore the harmony and tranquillity that it always enjoyed, based on strong foundations of freedom, solidarity and engagement. We have been through difficult times.

In terms of our security and stability, we have paid a heavy price. What happened was an unprecedented ordeal that overshadowed our country and led to a situation of distress, confusion, and frustration. This was due to riots, the killing of innocents, terrorizing the population, and sabotaging both public and private property.

A number of martyrs died and others were injured during these incidents, being ordinary citizens, security personnel, and the Armed Forces. That was a great loss to their families and loved ones, a great loss to the homeland, and an extremely heavy loss for me personally. I pray the Almighty God to have

mercy on the souls of all martyrs, and offer my deep and heartfelt condolences to their families and relatives.

In as much as we feel the loss and pain, we are prompted to contemplate this profound experience, both in its negative aspects, vis-à-vis the loss of life and property, and in its positive ones, in terms of the test it has constituted to all of us. We discovered our true national element with all its strength and solidity, on the one hand, and weaknesses on the other. Since turning the clock back is futile, our only option is to look forward.

We took this option when deciding to shape the future, rather than standing by and letting the future shape us and the events around us. We have decided to control events rather than letting events control us—we will lead rather than be lead. This means that we should build upon rich experiences that have singled out deficiencies. In all this, we keep looking forward while taking a long hard look at the past in order to understand the present. It is only natural that the common question today is: What is happening to our country, and why? Is it a conspiracy, and if so, who stands behind it? Or is it our fault, and if so, what is this fault? And of course there are many natural questions during these circumstances. I do not think there is a stage in Syria's history where it was not the target of some sort of conspiracy, both before and after independence. Those conspiracies took place for many reasons, some relating directly to the important geopolitical position that Syria occupies.

Others were linked to its political positions, principles, and interests. Conspiracies are like germs, after all, multiplying every moment everywhere. They cannot be eliminated, but we can strengthen the immunity of our bodies in order to protect ourselves against them.

It doesn't require much analysis, based on what we heard from others and witnessed in the media, to prove that there is indeed a conspiracy. We should not waste time discussing it or being frightened by it. Rather, we would to identify the internal weaknesses through which this conspiracy can infiltrate the country. Then we should work on correcting these weaknesses. The solution, at the end of the day, is for us to solve our own problems and to avoid ramifications that could weaken our national immunity. Germs exist everywhere, on the skin and within the guts.

Throughout the history of scientific development, scientists always thought of ways to strengthen the immunity of our bodies. This is what we must think of because it is certainly more important than analyzing the conspiracy. I don't think that data will show all details anytime soon. Probably the truth will not emerge for years to come. Some, however, say that there is no conspiracy. This is also not objective, not only for the crisis, but for the circumstances and the historical context of Syria.

External political positions, after all, are applying pressure on Syria and trying to interfere in the internal affairs of our country. Their target is a price that we know in advance, related directly to us abandoning

our principles, rights, and interests. What do we say about these political positions? What do we say about all of this media pressure?

What do we say about these sophisticated phones that are found in Syria in the hands of vandals? What do we say about all the fraud that we witnessed recently? We certainly cannot say that this was an act of charity.

It is definitely a conspiracy, but again, we will not waste our time discussing it. I said this before in my speech before the People's Assembly and at the Cabinet: "We must focus on domestics." In today's speech I will only address the domestic situation, without referring to external factors, neither positively or negatively. What is happening on the street has three components. First are those who have demands or needs that they want the state to meet. I have previously spoken about rightful demands. This is one of the duties of the state towards its citizens; where it should work tirelessly in order to meet those demands to the best of its capacities.

All of us, in our positions of responsibility should listen to them, talk to them, and help them, under the umbrella of public order. Law enforcement does not justify neglecting demands of the people. The urgent need of some people also does not justify the spreading of chaos, the breaking of laws, and harming of public interests. I met a large number of those who belong to this component. And when I say those who have needs, I do not mean the demonstrators in specific. I rather mean all those who have needs.

Although some of them also have needs, they did not demonstrate, and yet, we need to deal with them as well.

The delegations I met with were from all sectors of society and all religions as well. We need to differentiate between those people, and others who were involved in destruction.

The latter are a small group. It is true that they made an impact; they tried to manipulate others. They tried to manipulate the good majority of the Syrian people in order to achieve different purposes. Differentiating between the two groups is very important.

The first constitute a part of our national component and all of the demands I heard from them were raised underneath the national umbrella. They had no foreign agenda and no foreign connections. They were against any foreign intervention under any pretext, asking to engage, however, rather than be marginalized. They wanted justice. Many issues were raised. For instance, there are unsolved accumulated issues dating back three decades since confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. That was a black phase, and generations are still paying the price for that period, like being refused government employment, for example, or not being given security permissions. In other words, we held

certain individuals responsible for other the mistakes of other individuals—which is not right. We have started to solve these problems.

Delegations from Hama and Idlib in particular, raised such issues during our meetings. As I said, we have started solving these pending issues and we will solve them completely. We cannot continue living in the shadow of a dark phase in our history that happened three decades ago. These issues relate to the justice and injustice every citizen can associate with. There are other issues related to passports, although two years ago we instructed all ambassadors to start issuing passports even to those who are wanted, whether they fled the country or left it but believe that they are “wanted” in Syria.

A large number of those were afraid and did not go to the embassies to receive their passports. Even after the amnesty was declared, they did not collect their passports.

There is still a kind of fear which prevents people from making an initiative towards state institutions. This fear makes them feel injustice despite the fact that this injustice does not exist. Talking about the amnesty, in my recent meetings I felt that it did not satisfy many people. The fact is that it is the most comprehensive in twenty three years. I believe a similar one was given in 1988.

Nevertheless, there is a desire that it should be more comprehensive. We do not usually address names, we put criteria, like saying we give amnesty to all, except drugs, terrorism, issues of public morality, etc. Nevertheless, and based on what I heard from a number of people, or information I received from people I did not meet, I will ask the Ministry of Justice to make a study of the margin that we can use in order to make the amnesty more comprehensive, even in a future decree which includes all the others without undermining state security and interests, on the one hand, and the rights of private individuals, like those whose relatives were killed, on the other.

The second component consists of outlaws and wanted for various criminal cases who found in the state’s institutions an enemy and a target because they constitute an obstacle for their illegitimate interests and because they are sought by the state’s institutions. For those, chaos was a golden opportunity that should be grasped in order to ensure that they remain free and persist in their illegal activities. If it is only natural that we seek to enforce the law on all, it does not mean that we should not look for solutions with a social nature in order to prevent those people from choosing the wrong path and encourage them to be good citizens fully integrated into society. You may be asking about the number of these outlaws and wanted individuals? I myself was surprised with this number.

I thought they were a few thousand in the past. The number at the beginning of the crisis was more than 64,400 people. Imagine this number of wanted persons for various criminal cases the verdict of which ranges between few months and execution, and they had escaped justice; the verdict of 24 thousand of those is three years and above. Of course, a few days ago that number dropped slightly to less than 63,000 because some turned themselves in to authorities.

Thus, the number is 64,000, may be more or less, and this equals in military terms almost five military divisions, almost a whole army. If a few thousands of those wanted to carry weapons and engage in sabotage, you can imagine what damage can be caused to the state.

The third and more dangerous component, despite its small size, consists of those who have extremist and takfiri ideology. We have known and experienced this kind of ideology decades ago when it tried to infiltrate Syria; and Syria was able to eliminate it thanks to the wisdom and intelligence of the Syrian people. The ideology we see today is no different from that we saw decades ago. It is exactly the same. What has changed, however, is the methods and the persons. This kind of ideology lurks in dark corners in order to emerge when an opportunity presents itself or when it finds a handy mask to put on. It kills in the name of religion, destroys in the name of reform, and spreads chaos in the name of freedom. It is very sad to see in any society in the world some groups that belong to other bygone ages, that belong to a period we do not live in and we do not belong to.

In fact, this is the biggest obstacle in the reform process because development starts with human beings. It does not start with computers. It does not start with machines. It does not start with legislation or anything else. It starts with human being. Therefore, we have to encircle this ideology if we really want to develop.

In any case, there are other components. I did not talk about the external component and its role in this crisis. I did not talk about the components that we all know. There are people who are well paid to carry out video cameras, film and collaborate with the media.

Some are paying money for those to participate in demonstrations and to do the video filming. These components do not concern us that much. That is why, and recalling the course of events, it is found that escalation and chaos have always been the response to every reform announced or accomplished. When they lost all justifications, taking to arms was the only available choice remaining to them in order to execute their plan.

In some cases, peaceful demonstrations were used as a pretext under which armed men took cover; in other cases, they attacked civilians, policemen and soldiers by attacking military sites and positions or used assassination. Schools, shops and highways were closed by the use of force, and public property was destroyed, ransacked and put to fire deliberately. Cities were cut from each other by blocking highways. All of this has posed a direct threat to the normal daily life of the citizens and undermined their security, education, economic activity, and communicating with their families. They distorted the country's image in the outside world and opened the way, and even called for, foreign intervention.

By doing so, they tried to weaken the national political stand, which adheres to the full return of national rights and supports the legitimate rights of our brothers and supports their resistance. They

invoked detestable sectarian discourse which we have never endorsed and in which we only see an expression of a hateful ideology which has never been part of our religion, history or traditions and which has been an anathema and a sacrilege to our national, pan-Arab and moral identity. In all these issues, and with the exception of the first component, I am talking about a small minority which constitutes only a very small part of the Syrian people.

That is why it is not cause for concern, but once again I say this should be addressed. When they failed in the first stage, in manipulating the first component, those who have demands, they moved to armed confrontation and acts of violence. When they failed in this, they moved to a new kind of action. They started this in Jisr al-Shughour by committing the atrocious massacres whose images we saw in the media, when they killed security men and destroyed the Post Office. The Post Office is public property: people living in the city use it. There is a great deal of hatred. The important thing is that they possessed sophisticated weapons which did not exist before. They had sophisticated communication systems. They moved to another kind of action.

Near the town of Ma'aret al-Nou'man, they tried to strategic fuel and gas depots. They were able to take control of them. They surrounded the army units which tried to restore them. We were surprised that they have modern four wheel drive vehicles on which they installed sophisticated weapons capable of dealing with helicopters. They also had communication equipment. They tried to commit another massacre in Ma'aret al-Nou'man against a security check points. They almost succeeded had not the people of the town intervened to protect the patrol by hiding them in their houses. Some of the town people paid the price by being tortured and having their bones broken. I appreciate the work of all of those who took this patriotic stance and hope to meet them soon.

Of course there were many people who tried to do similar things, to prevent sedition in different parts of Syria. Many of them succeeded, and some of them have not succeeded so far. Had it not been for this patriotic feeling that many people have, the situation in Syria could have been much worse. The response came from the Syrian people who have once again come up in force to express their national and patriotic feelings in a manner that superseded all expectations.

All this under the heavy shadow of a media campaign launched through satellite TV stations and in cyber space which made it difficult to distinguish what is real from what is illusory and what is genuine from what is fake. But the patriotic feelings and the historic intuition that our people possess, and which are based on an accumulation of experience across generations, were immeasurably more powerful.

The importance of this experience, then, is that it showed the extent of national and patriotic awareness which is the most important guarantee for the success of the development and modernization process we are embarked on and which is based on three pillars; awareness, morals, and institutions.

The absence of any of these pillars will definitely lead to a deviation of the process from its intended objectives and consequently lead to its failure with all the dangerous consequences on our society and our future. What some people are doing today has nothing to do with development, modernization, or reform. What is happening is a form of destruction, and with every act of destruction we are driven away from our objectives in modernization and development and from our aspirations. And here I do not only mean material destruction, for rectifying this can be easy. I rather mean psychological, moral, and behavioural destruction which becomes difficult to correct as time goes by. And we see that some people are trying to endorse such practices and are gradually enshrining disrespect for state institutions and what they stand for on the national level. This will lead to a slackening of the patriotic and national feelings which are essential for the creation and the protection of the homeland.

This is exactly what our enemies want us to do and this is the direction they want us to take. Today we have a generation of children who grew up witnessing these events or learned disorder, lack of respect for institutions, lack of respect for the law and hatred for the state. The consequences of this will not be felt today but later on, and the price will be high. And here I want to raise the question of whether this chaos has produced more job opportunities for job seekers or whether it has improved public conditions. Has it improved the security which we have enjoyed and prided ourselves on? There is no development without stability, and there can be no reform through destruction, sabotage, or chaos.

On the other hand, laws and decisions on their own will not be sufficient to achieve any progress in isolation from the appropriate environment. That is why we should rebuild what has been destroyed and we need to correct these destructive elements or isolate them. Only then can we proceed with development and modernization. All the above is concerned with principles.

As to practice, however, it should be based on reality; and when we talk about reality we need to talk about people. That is why I started a long series of meetings which have included all sections of society from Syrian regions and governorates in order to see this reality and understand it as it is or to have as close an idea as possible about reality from the different perspectives of the Syrian people and in a manner which helps us arrange the priorities of state institutions in line with the priorities of our citizens.

I wanted to understand the details directly from the citizens and without the other channels which might do some filtering of the information. They might pass the information in full, but without the emotions involved; and relationships between people are not only facts and information.

There are emotions too. I wanted to build everything I wanted to say in the future on these meetings. Actually, the substance of this speech and what I am saying today is based on the dialogue I had with the citizens. I met people from all sections: demonstrators and non-demonstrators.

In fact, I consider these meetings, despite the difficult circumstances surrounding them, the most important thing I have done throughout my years in my official position. Despite the pain and the frustration in the general atmosphere surrounding these meetings, I can say that the benefit I got from them was astonishing.

The love I felt from those people who represent most of the Syrian people is something I have never felt at any stage of my life. I certainly reciprocate the love of these people and the love of every Syrian citizen whom I do not know, but hope to meet in similar meetings. But what I hope more than that is to turn this love to action.

This, of course, can happen, with your help. These meetings have been useful, frank, in depth and comprehensive. They covered all issues without exception; some of these issues were local, at the level of the city or the governorate, and some were country-wide. My priority was the issues which have a bearing on the largest sections of the Syrian people, and they have been given precedence over local issues, important as they are. Citizens expressed an anger mixed with love and a sense of blame mixed with loyalty because they felt that their state has distanced itself from them by adopting certain policies or by getting involved in certain practices.

I sensed that their suffering was multifaceted; for part of it was related to services and living standards and some related to undermining citizens' dignity, ignoring their views or excluding them from participation in the development process of which they are the objective and the substance. But I also felt the love of this people who have always given me, through their sincerity, pride, and steadfastness, the strength to proceed with our political stances and our resistance and noncompliance.

I felt that there is a strong desire to eradicate corruption as a major cause for the lack of justice and equal opportunities and for feelings of unfairness, injustice, and oppression, in addition to its dangerous moral consequences on society. What is more dangerous still, are the cases of unfair discrimination among citizens on abominable narrow-minded bases. This on its own is sufficient for undermining the most powerful of nations.

Corruption is the result of moral degradation, the spread of patronage and nepotism, and the absence of institutions, which means the absence of the protector and the guarantor of national feelings which are replaced by narrower feelings of identity.

That is why we need to start working immediately in order to strengthen institutions by passing developed legislation and providing these institutions with officials capable of bearing responsibility instead of being born by the positions they occupy. And there will be no leniency towards those who are unable to shoulder this responsibility.

But we cannot succeed unless we find the appropriate channels through which citizens can participate and play a role in oversight and in pointing to errors and failures. I told many delegations that the state can address, fight or reduce corruption at the higher levels, while we need to find channels for addressing the problem at lower levels.

This is the task of the Anti-Corruption Commission whose mechanisms have been studied by the committee set up for the purpose. These are nice words, but how can they be achieved; for it is easy to say what needs to be done, but putting these words into action is the decisive factor.

As I said, I aimed, through these meetings, to have a more in depth knowledge of reality, but I found myself at the heart of genuine national dialogue. National dialogue is not restricted to specific elites. It is not a dialogue between the authorities and the opposition, neither is it necessarily limited to political issues. It is a dialogue between the different sections of society about all national issues.

If we assume that the government can be given a certain size and the opposition a certain size, it is true that in all countries and all societies, the largest section of society is that which does not belong to either. We cannot talk about a national dialogue, about planning for the future and about drawing Syria's future for decades and generations to come by neglecting the largest section of the people. Hence the idea of national dialogue which have started recently.

There is no doubt that I was part of a national dialogue; nevertheless, I cannot claim to have accomplished it, because in the end I am only an individual and those I met were hundreds or thousands, and the country includes tens of millions. Hence, the basic idea was to launch a national dialogue in which the widest social, intellectual, and political stakeholders take part in an institutional forum. For this purpose, a national dialogue committee has been set up charged with identifying the principles and mechanisms for ensuring comprehensive dialogue on the different issues of concern to Syrian citizens.

The dialogue will allow, on the one hand, a discussion of the proposed draft laws at this stage, and on the other, provides an opportunity to drawing Syria's future in a comprehensive sense for future decades and generations and help us all arrive at a mature vision for this future. It will push forward the political, social, and economic dynamics in our country until political parties can play a wider role in public life after a new party law is passed.

A number of views have been expressed about the possible format of the dialogue. And one of the first tasks of the national dialogue committee is to consult with different stakeholders in order to arrive at the best format which enables us to accomplish our reform project within a specific timeframe. As I said in my meeting with the cabinet, everything should be tied to a timeframe, and I believe that you are all calling for a timeframe for everything we talk about. We can say, then, that national dialogue is the title for the present stage.

When we started with this idea, we thought that the dialogue should be at governorate level. What I have noticed in my meetings with citizens from different governorates is that the issues themselves are not looked at from the same perspective, and the reason is the large social diversity we have in Syria. Although there are points of convergence, still there are differences to a certain extent.

So, in the beginning we thought of conducting the dialogue on governorate level as a first phase in order to move later to central dialogue. The issues raised in this central dialogue will be determined according to agreements reached or the issues around which there was a consensus in the governorate dialogue.

However, and after setting up the Dialogue Commission, and in order to reduce the time needed, and as a result of the conditions Syria is going through, they thought of starting directly with central dialogue. There were questions raised which have now become part of the mandate of the Commission. If we want to start dialogue, who should take part, what are the criteria, how to identify the different axes, who takes part in the discussion over which axis, and other technical details.

At this moment there is confusion, although this has been explained on television: about the role of the Commission. The Commission does not conduct the dialogue, it rather supervises the dialogue. It lays the mechanisms and identifies the timeframe. After the end of the dialogue, what is agreed upon is referred to the Commission. If there are laws to be passed, they are passed by the president, and if there are other issues which need certain measures, the state follows them up.

In any case, the commission did not want to have a monopoly over setting the criteria. It decided to hold a consultative meeting in the next few days to which it invites more than a hundred personalities from the different sections of the Syrian society in order to consult with them about the criteria and the mechanisms. After that, dialogue starts and the Commission identifies a timeframe, one month or two months, in accordance to what the participants in the consultative meeting decide.

This dialogue is a very important process, and it should be given an opportunity, because the whole future of Syria, if we want it to succeed, should be based on this dialogue in which all parts of the Syrian spectrum take part. We cannot always expect a vision from the state or from the government. A few scores of people cannot plan for millions of people. This is the importance of this dialogue.

As to the urgent needs and demands of the people, they have been put into implementation before the beginning of the dialogue. We have lifted the emergency law and abolished the state security court, steps which will ensure the organization of the work of relevant agencies in a manner that enhances and protects people's dignity without undermining the country's security. We also passed a law regulating the right to peaceful demonstration which strengthens the possibility of expressing views and positions in a free, peaceful, and organized manner as a healthy condition which helps the state rectify failures

and correct trends. Questions have been raised about the issue of arrest and detention, for some people found that detentions continued after lifting the state of emergency.

I believe that most people, whether in the state, inside and outside the competent authorities, did not understand the meaning of the state of emergency nor the meaning of lifting the state of emergency. However, we stressed the import of this issue. What is important is that any case of arrest takes place after permission is obtained from the Attorney General. There is a specific period allowed for investigation. If they want to extend this period, they should obtain permission from the Attorney General or from the judicial system.

But there is a specific time limit. When somebody is caught in the act, there is no need for permission, but the same procedures are followed with the permission of the Attorney General. However, lifting the state of emergency does not mean violating the law. This should be clear.

Lifting the state of emergency has nothing to do with legal punishments or the nature of these punishments. Based on our conviction that citizens should be better represented in elected institutions, particularly in the People's Assembly and local administration councils, a committee was set up to draft a new elections law.

This will strengthen the role of these institutions for the public good and enable them to be more effective and ensure wider participation. This will enhance the principles of justice, equality, integrity, and transparency. These principles will be the hallmark of the future which we seek for our country. This issue is now subject to public discussion.

The Committee has finished the draft law, and I believe it is going to be an important law, because most of the criticism I heard from the citizens revolves around their representatives in the different councils.

This law will give the opportunity to citizens to elect the people who will represent them and represent their interests. Another committee was set up to draft legislation and design the necessary mechanisms for fighting corruption. I believe that it concluded its work yesterday and proposed a draft law which is now subject to public discussion.

The Anti-Corruption Commission has been set up in order to reduce it and turn it into an unwanted exception rather than a widespread phenomenon or an inevitable reality. Citizens will play a wide role in oversight and participation in this process. No success can be achieved in eradicating this epidemic without the full participation of all citizens.

The media plays a central role in this regard, for they should be the eye and the voice of the citizen. And we have started a large workshop in order to modernize the media, expand the scope of its freedom and strengthen its responsibility so they become a transparent medium of communication between citizens

and the state. The law will be subject to public discussion, in order to receive and incorporate feedback before it is passed. I believe the Media Committee has until July 24th to complete its work.

As to the local administration law, it has been put in draft and is being discussed. I believe it is one of the most important steps which will be taken in terms of its impact on development or in terms of participation in local administration. It will contribute to addressing a number of problems which cannot be solved under the present central administration. It will regulate the authorities and relationships between the different levels of local administration and will have a positive impact on the general performance and consequently on the citizens.

Syrian nationality has been given to Kurdish citizens registered previously as foreigners. This will enhance national unity and contribute to more stability in the long term. There have been over thirty six thousand applications so far, and the number of identity cards given so far is over six thousand seven hundred.

Setting up a committee to study a new party law was a major step for political development and widening the scope of democratic life. A new party law will enrich party diversity and allow for more participation for different trends in political life. These laws, this political package I have mentioned, will create a new political reality in Syria through broadening popular participation in the affairs of the state and making citizens responsible through their contribution to decision making, oversight, and accountability.

They will lead to deep transformations at the level of political dynamism and mass activity. This will also lead to reconsideration of many principles of political activity in the country and consequently make it necessary to revise the constitution in order either to amend some of its articles or make a new constitution in line with the economic, political and social changes in Syria during the past four decades since it was passed. This package will be presented to national dialogue.

Of course there are a number of points which need to be mentioned regarding this package. Some people believe that there is a certain degree of procrastination on the part of the state regarding political reform. In other words, they imply that the state is not serious about this reform. I want to stress that the reform process for us is a matter of complete and absolute conviction because it represents the interest of the country, and because it expresses the desire of the people, and no reasonable person can oppose the people or the interest of the country. What is more important is that there is no opposition to reform.

This is a question which has been put to me. I personally have not met any individual in the state who opposes reform. Everybody is enthusiastic for reform. The problem, however, is what reform do we want? What are the details? The package of laws which I have mentioned consists of laws in the general sense. But what are the details which we want and which we believe are useful? Some people expect

that the law is passed and the president signs it, so it is easy. Can this happen? Does this lead to positive results and achieve the public interests? Maybe. And when I say maybe I mean that all possibilities are there.

We cannot do something crucial and carry out a full reform process after fifty years of a certain political structure, and move forward by leaping into the unknown. We need to know where we are going and what to expect. What we are doing now is making our future, and making the future is a sort of history.

The history or the future which we are making will affect future generations for decades to come. Even if they make amendments in line with their circumstances in the future, still what we do now is something of crucial importance which will affect Syria's future.

That is why we need to have the broadest possible participation; and hence the importance of national dialogue. We need the broadest possible participation in order to have a wider take on things and to have a far-reaching impact on the future.

When some people say that the president should lead the reform process, this does not mean that he can replace the people and carry out the reform process on his own. Leadership does not mean that one individual should stand alone but rather he should be in front and the people proceed with him. Leadership is a process of consultation and interaction.

And here I reiterate the importance of national dialogue. What are the things that the dialogue should focus on? We are talking about an election law. Which election law is in the best interest of Syria? Do we want small constituencies, medium-size constituencies or large constituencies? Every option has its positive and negative aspects. Which election law achieves full integration for Syrian society and does not lead to fragmentation? Which election law is better suited to the new party law which we want? What is the party law which leads to full integration of Syrian society and preserves Syria's unity and at the same time prevents Syria from turning into a ball rather than a player, as it used to be decades ago. There are so many questions which need to be raised.

As to the election law, do we want to elect an individual or a programme? There are questions, and so far we do not have answers. Even if we have an answer, we should not say that this is the right answer and proceed carrying all the negative aspects to the future generations. We should take responsibility together. We have people with a great degree of awareness, and the question is that of discussion.

So, we need to answer these questions, and these are only samples of a larger variety of questions. There are others; do we pass the party law and the election law before the elections for the People's Assembly? The majority say yes. Some people want to separate the election's law from the party law and want the new Assembly to pass the party law. Do we want to postpone the People's Assembly elections for three months, as some people have proposed or do we have them on time?

As far as we are concerned, we do not want to adopt a certain answer for these questions. We want to be impartial as a state. What is important is public consensus. If there is no consensus on these and other issues, we will have a big problem in Syria. As to the constitution, this is a slightly separate question. Do we replace a few articles of the constitution, including article (8), or do we change the whole constitution since it was written about forty years ago, and it might be better to change it completely. Some people suggest that we undertake certain steps now and amend some articles, and later on make a revision of the whole constitution.

And if some articles need to be amended, then they should be amended by a new People's Assembly. If what is needed is changing the whole constitution, this needs a public referendum.

There are numerous questions but the main question is within this framework. I can raise them without giving a timeframe, but it is better if we give a timeframe even in light of all these questions. Now, most committees have completed their work with the exception of the Media Committee which will complete its work in July.

The Party Law Committee will finish in the next few days. If we complete the Party and Election Laws, the most important for political reform, we can start the national dialogue directly and discuss all these laws and the laws which will be passed later. Concerning national dialogue, I do not want to set a timeframe on their behalf, but some of those involved suggest a month and others suggest two months. In any case, if the People's Assembly elections are not postponed, they will be held in August, and we will have a new People's Assembly in August. We can say that we can complete this package by the end of August.

By the beginning of September all this package will be completed. The constitution is different because it needs the People's Assembly. If the new People's Assembly is elected in August, it can directly start studying the constitutional amendments. If they are postponed as a result of a decision taken in the process of national dialogue for three months, the package will be completed before the end of the year, i.e. in five months.

However, if we want to have a full revision of the constitution and to have a new one, the process is completely different. Then we should have a constitutional assembly which proposes the constitution for the public referendum. But what we will do immediately is to set up a committee to study the issue of the constitution in order to save time.

The committee will start its work in the next few days and we will give it a month, which I think is sufficient. It will refer its studies to national dialogue, and then we will have a clear time frame, let us say three months until the beginning of September or five months until the end of the year. But we are moving ahead with all the laws and with studying the constitution which will be the last phase.

A lot has been said about the delays in reform. I talked about this in front of the People's Assembly and said that we are a bit late. Some people started to ask why they are late. There is no justification. I said that we are late but did not say that we have stopped. In other words, the law for lifting the state of emergency was ready about eighteen months ago and the draft party law was also ready about a year ago.

We started preparing the local administration law less than a year ago. The reason why we have not passed the first and second laws is that we believe that the local administration law, which is the most important in the reform process, has two aspects to it; elections and participation. Getting to the local administration law, in any case, requires amending the election law. So it was a matter of priorities, and we did not neglect the other laws.

We looked at priorities then in a different way from that we look at them now. Amidst this huge workshop of reform, laws and dialogue, we have not forgotten the day to day living problems of the Syrian citizen which remain more urgent. The government passed a number of decisions with the objective of improving people's living standards.

One of the most important decisions was to reduce diesel prices, for it was one of the most frequent demands made by all the delegations which I met without exception. I hope that its impacts on the living standards will be felt in the near future, particularly among the poorer sections of the Syrian population.

We also worked on reducing constructions costs through reconsidering with the Engineers' Association the related fees in order to ease the financial burdens on citizens to the extent available resources allow. We hope that the general reduction of costs will push the economy forward, increase job opportunities and compensate the large losses suffered by the Syrian economy during the current events. They would increase the suffering of the citizens if we do not face them with rapid procedures that mitigate the pressure at the present and reverse its direction later on. This is a group of measures aimed at alleviating the crisis and reducing burdens on Syrian citizens. There are other measures taken by the government; but what is important now is for all of us to work in order to restore confidence in the Syrian economy. The most dangerous thing we will face is the weakness or the collapse of the Syrian economy. A large part of the problem is psychological; and we should not allow fear or frustration to defeat us. We should defeat the problem by returning to normal life. Returning to normalcy has a moral impact, and the economy is affected by the psychological condition of the population. We should go back to normal life as far as possible.

The crisis might give us a bloody nose, might give us pain, might shake us, might throw us on the ground, but we should rise again stronger and more tenacious in order to carry out our life normally.

Here I want to express my thanks and appreciation for all the citizens who have taken part in the campaign to support the Syrian pound. There are people who have less than a thousand Syrian pounds, yet they contributed. Some have thousands and they did the same thing. One day, after we overcome the crisis, God willing, we should ask all those who have money about the role they played, how they contributed to this campaign. This is a national duty. Administrative development remains the biggest challenge in the work of our institutions. And we will proceed in our plans by regulating authorities and controlling practices in order to prevent overlapping in the work of different institutions or in the work of individuals from inside and outside the state.

We should also adopt sound criteria for choosing personnel and assessing performance. In other words, we should prevent nepotism. Measures have been taken, and so far about one hundred and twenty security permissions, which have been part of bureaucratic procedures, have been abolished. At the same time the work of the security systems has been recently separated from the work of civil institutions. We need to rely more on inspection, the judiciary, financial control and the Anti-Corruption Commission in its new format. The media contributes to oversight by providing transparency to government work, and it will constitute a channel of communication between state institutions and the citizens, in addition to other channels between state officials and citizens, either directly or through the organizations and trade unions which represent their interests.

We should also examine economic issues and we need to look for a new economic model. In the past there were two models; the socialist and the capitalist. Many people believe that these models have fallen. Now we do not have ready-made experiences to take and implement. We need to look for a model which suits Syria.

The measures we have taken now have to do with dealing with the media and dealing with suffering. In other words, they deal with temporary problems and do not solve the problem in the long term. If we do not know the model suitable to Syria and which achieves social equity between the rich and the poor, the country and the city, we will have a problem.

Because there is already a big problem in the disparity between the country and the city despite the balanced economic policy which Syria has followed in terms of providing equal opportunities and economic independence and relying on local resources.

I believe that this issue needs national dialogue on the economy, something we will do later in order to move ahead in this field. These are some basic titles for the next phase. These titles are the axes around which any other evolves. There is no doubt that one single speech would not address all the raised issues.

Therefore, the national dialogue will be the method through which any issue that enriches what I talked about in my speech or more than that could be raised. The next stage is the stage of turning Syria into a

construction workshop to compensate for time and damages, and to rectify rifts and heal wounds; when the blood of any Syrian citizen whoever he is and in whatever circumstances is spilled, this means that the entire nation is bleeding. Stopping this bleeding is a national responsibility every citizen should be involved in.

Sitting on the fence, however, is to deepen the wound. We are all responsible for protecting the security and stability of the country regardless of our positions and views. We will prosecute and hold responsible anyone who spilled blood or sought to do so.

The delay of legal procedures for bureaucratic reasons does not mean procrastination and does not mean indulgence because the damage that happened impacted everyone; and bringing all those responsible to account is the right of the state as much as it is the right of individuals.

The Judicial Investigation Committee is proceeding with its work without any intervention.

It has full immunity and independence. I follow up their work from time to time, but it does not work according to political criteria. It works in accordance with legal criteria, which means that they constantly look for evidence in order to indict any individual. Some people believe that the Commission has not done anything yet. This is not true. It has arrested a number of individuals involved in the crisis and they are completing their investigation in order to bring them to justice and it will continue to move in this direction.

When we enforce the law, this does not mean revenge in any way against people who have violated the law without killing or destruction. The state is like a mother or father who embraces everyone and accommodates all her children; the state's relationship with them is based on tolerance and love, not on hatred and revenge, and when the state forgives those who make mistakes, it aims at enshrining this sound relationship between the state and the citizens.

But this does not mean the abandonment of toughness when it comes to harming the public interest. There are those who say that some demonstrators continue to demonstrate because they demonstrated in the past and believe that they will be prosecuted by the state. We announced an amnesty for all those who turn themselves in during the months of April and May. There were those who turned themselves in with their weapons, and they were pardoned immediately.

And I say to all these people: try to contact the state and you will find a positive response and tolerance on part of state institutions, even regarding those who have carried weapons but did not use them against anyone. However, as for terrorizing citizens and committing acts of killing and terrorism, this is another issue and the state cannot but enforce the full extent of the law. At the same time, I call on all those who have left their cities or villages to return.

The return of the displaced is a very important issue, because a city dies without its people. And we cannot talk about normal life and economic life while there are people who left their towns and villages and went to other places. I call on every individual and every family who left their cities or villages to return as soon as possible.

And I stress that the Syrian government calls on all those who left Jisr al-Shughour and the villages surrounding it to Turkey to return immediately. There are those who tell them or suggest to them that the state will take revenge against them. I assure them that this is not true. The army is there for their security and the security of their children. So, we hope to see them soon in Jisr al-Shugour.

Every individual might ask how can I contribute? I want to do something. How can I contribute to solving this problem? Of course we do not have complete solutions but we can contribute now. I say that there is a role that the people can play and a role that the state can play. The state plays its role through the reforms I talked about; political reform, economic reform, and reform in other areas. The state has a role to play in providing services.

There are deficiencies. There are grievances. There are measures which have harmed the citizens. The state should rectify these deficiencies. Those who have been involved in acts of killing, terrorization and destruction will be brought to justice and prosecuted.

It is the duty of the state to prosecute them. In this regard, some people debate whether the solution should be political or security-based.

They say that the security-based solution has failed, and consequently the state should proceed in the direction of the political solution. In fact, we in the state think that the solution should be political.

The problem consists of political, economic and social demands. But what identifies the method of solving the problem is not the state's view but the nature of the problem itself. It is not the state which wanted, desired, or forced those who are involved in acts of destruction; neither can we deal with those politically. This is not reasonable.

There is no political solution for those who carry weapons and kill. We want a political solution and want the army to go back to its barracks as soon as possible. We want security personnel to go back to their offices, premises, and positions, also as soon as possible.

The normal thing is for citizens to deal with the police and the judiciary. Citizens have nothing to do with the army or with security personnel. The problem is that the police force in Syria is small and the police have not been trained for such cases. We started recruitment, but the capacity is limited, and at the same time training takes a long time.

In any case, and regardless of the crisis, if we want to regulate the relationship between the citizen and the state in this direction, this needs some time. As to citizens, to the people, the first thing I want to say is we want them to support reform, and this is self-evident, because the people are demanding reform, so it is only natural for them to support reform. But supporting reform takes place by distinguishing between real reformists and those involved in destruction and sabotage, and also isolating those who want to ride the wave of reform in order to make personal gain.

We want them to prevent chaos. As I said, there are those who acted in order to prevent chaos; parents with their children, brothers with each other, friends among each other. It is a process of awareness raising. We want the demonstrations to be turned into pens, to written opinions, to ideas, to dialogue, to acts on the ground. Now I am not talking about something theoretical, I am talking rather about something practical. In many places, the security forces were withdrawn and the people of the region started to work with the state for the development process, in fighting corruption, in order to preserve the security of the villages and cities in which they live.

This requires the existence of channels between these people and the state. When we created these channels, they turned from demonstrators into individuals who wanted to build their country.

A demonstration is an expression of pain, of suffering that the state has not responded to. When the state responded, the situation became completely different. We can increase the number of these channels in order to turn every individual into a productive citizen. This is of course a temporary phase until political parties start to play their role in the future, for parties are the natural channel for transforming the energy of individuals into action on the ground and contributing to the return to normal life. This is the most important, even if the crisis went on for months or years, we should accommodate ourselves to it, we should corner it and make it limited to those who are concerned with the crisis.

Now we have an army there. Until the army returns to their barracks, we have to support this army and ask for its support everywhere.

The army consists of the brothers of every Syrian citizen, and the army always stands for honour and dignity. Young people have an important role to play at this stage, because they have proven themselves to be an active power. There is the electronic army which has been a real army in virtual reality. There were those who took part in the blood donation campaign, and other initiatives. I met a number of youth delegations from different sections of society and found that Syrian youth enjoy a high sense of patriotism, and this is self-evident because they belong to this country.

This generation has to prepare itself for the next political phase so that we become the model for the whole region. Instead of taking lessons from others, we will teach them.

In this speech, I touched on a number of important points. I met a large number of delegations, and I have a list of issues which number over one thousand and a hundred big and small issues, and every one of those I met would wish that I raised the issue they touched on, for everyone believes that his issue is an important one. I mentioned these issues not because they encompass all our problems, but because they are the most important and most comprehensive. As to the other issues, we in the state are addressing them continuously.

The intensive meetings with public delegations have allowed me to expand the direct communication channels which principally exist between me and the citizens. These channels have formed a rich source of information on the reality with all its facts, and this is what any official needs. In the next stage, I will continue holding such meetings which, in addition to providing me with confidence, are the compass according to which our internal policies will be built.

The same goes for foreign policy which I sought to base on the pulse of the street and reflect in every situation we faced; this popular pulse which does not accept anything short of Syria as an independent state both on its land and its decisions. This popular pulse which refuses to let the homeland be a ball instead of being a player on its own court. This pulse refuses to allow its role to be measured according to its geographical size rather than its historical importance.

Otherwise, Syria will be besieged within its borders, rather than reaching out to its natural and vital regional dimension, and thus to turn into a state of rival tribes living on the crumbs thrown to her children from outside the borders.

Through all of that, we must realize that achieving reform and development does not only represent an internal need, but it is necessary and vital to confront those plans; and therefore we have no option but to succeed in the domestic project in order to succeed in our external project. The pressures are directed against Syria's role in resisting the schemes of sectarian division in the region which will mean that there is neither resistance nor rights, but collapse and surrender.

Accomplishing security is our starting point; and the people are the most capable to be entrusted with maintaining security and protecting the homeland. I am saying this based on experience and reality, not out of courtesy. Those who protected the country through hard times, and those who protected it today are the people, the young people who confronted dangers, made initiatives and implemented things on the ground, forming popular committees and youth groups, making personal initiatives which kept the country's name high and reflected its spirit and the pulse of its youth and people.

The power of the state is derived from the power of the people whose power is derived from their dignity, which in turn is derived from their freedom, which is again derived from the power of their state. So, let the people embrace the state and let the army, the security personnel, the police and the people work hand in hand to prevent sedition, protect the homeland and ensure its supremacy.

Syria's destiny is to face crises; but it is also its destiny to be proud, strong, resistant and victorious. Its destiny is to come out of crises stronger thanks to the solidarity and cohesion of its society, its deeply rooted values and the determination of its people who are endowed with intelligence, civilization and openness.

It is you who prevented the confusion between the greed and designs of superpowers, on the one hand, and people's desire for reform and change on the other. It is you who protected the flower of youth from being sacrificed to the greed of international powers. It is you who prevented all attempts of sectarian sedition scrambling at the gates of the homeland and cut off the head of the snake before it could bite the Syrian body and kill it.

I say that as long as you enjoy this great spirit and this deep sense of identity, Syria is fine and safe.

Source: Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)

<http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/21/pr-353686.htm>

4. President al-Assad's Speech at Damascus University Auditorium, 12 January 2012

DAMASCUS, (SANA)_ President Bashar al-Assad delivered on Tuesday before noon a speech at Damascus University Auditorium covering domestic issues in Syria as well as local and regional conditions' developments.

President al-Assad reiterated in his speech Syria's determination to continue the ongoing process of reforms, whose results are known before hand, citing some of the measures and steps taken to this effect including the abrogation of emergency law, authorization for parties, local administration elections, information law, elections law, and the under-discussion anti-corruption law.

President al-Assad declared that the new constitution is to be soon put into popular referendum, citing some aspects of the constitution as to include 'political and party pluralism', 'the people are the source of power especially through elections'.

The President welcomed an expansion of the government as to include all political forces and national opposition and pointed out to the importance of dialogue.

The second to none priority for Syrians is the restoration of security and fighting terrorism with an iron fist, outlined President al-Assad hailing the Syrians' steadfastness and awareness.

President al-Assad underlined that no orders were given to shoot at the citizens and that no cover-up for any person would be given.

President al-Assad cited in his speech some aspects of the conspiracy hatched against Syria, including the failing media war, blasting the role played by some Arabs as to pave the way for foreign interference in the Syrian affairs.

The President spoke of the Syrian long experience with elected parliaments, parties highlighting the Syrian Arab role in the Arab League, whose Arabism is to be suspended without the participation of Syria, in reference to the decision taken by the League of Arab States to suspend Syria's participation.

The full text of the speech:

I know that I have been away from the media for a long time, and I have missed having direct contact with the citizens, but I have always been following up with the daily occurrences and gathering the information so that my speech can be built on what is said by the street.

I would like to salute you in the name of pan-Arabism which will continue to be a symbol of our identity and our haven in difficult times, as we will continue to be its heart beating with love and affection. I would also like to greet you in the name of our home country which will always be the source of our pride and dignity, as we will remain faithful to its genuine values for which our fathers and grandfathers sacrificed dearly to keep the country glorified and independent. And I am proud of your steadfastness which will keep Syria an invincible fortress in the face of all forms of penetration, and free in resisting submission to foreign forces.

Today, I am addressing you ten months after the outbreak of the unfortunate events which befell the country imposing new circumstances on the Syrian arena. For all of us, these conditions represent a serious test of our national commitment, and we cannot pass this test except by our continuous work and honest intents based on our faith in God, the genuine character of our people, and its solid nature which has been polished over the ages and made brighter and more robust. Although those events have made us pay, until now, heavy prices which made my heart bleed, as it made the heart of every Syrian bleed, yet they require the sons of Syria, regardless of their beliefs and doctrines, to be wise and sensible, and to be guided by their deep national feelings. Only then our entire country can achieve victory with our unity, our fraternity, and our will to go beyond narrow horizons and momentary interests and reach where our noble national issues lie. For this is our destination and there lies the strength of our country and the glory of our history.

External Conspiring Is No Longer a Secret

External conspiring is no longer a secret because what is being plotted in the pal talk rooms has started to be clearly revealed before the eyes of the people. It is not possible anymore to deceive others except for those who do not want to listen or see; as the tears shed by the dealers of freedom and democracy for our own victims can no longer conceal the role they played in the bloodshed which they tried to use for their own purposes. At the beginning of the crisis, it was not easy to explain what happened. Emotional reactions and the absence of rationality were surpassing the facts. But now, the fog has lifted, and it is no longer possible for the regional and international parties which wanted to destabilize Syria to forge the facts and the events. Now the masks have fallen off the faces of those parties, and we have become more capable of deconstructing the virtual environment which they have created to push Syrians towards illusion and then make them fall. That virtual environment was created to lead to a psychological and moral defeat which would eventually lead to the actual defeat. That unprecedented media attack was meant to lead us to a state of fear, and this fear, which could paralyze the will, would lead to defeat.

Over Sixty T.V. Channels in the World Are Devoted to Work against Syria

Over sixty T.V. channels in the world are devoted to work against Syria. Some of them are devoted to working against the Syrian domestic situation, and some others are working to distort the image of Syria abroad. There are tens of internet websites, and tens of newspapers and different media channels, which means that we are talking about hundreds of media networks.

Their aim was to push us to a state of self-collapse in order to save their efforts in waging many battles; and they failed in doing so, yet they did not give in.

One of their attempts which you are aware of is what they did with me personally in my interview with the American news channel. Usually I do not watch myself on T.V whether in an interview or a speech. That time I watched the interview and I was about to believe what I myself was presented to have said. If they were capable of convincing me of the lie, how can they not convince others! Fortunately, we had an original version of the interview, and they did what they did because they thought that we did not have an original version which we can present to the citizens to compare with their version. Had that not been the case, no one would have ever believed the professional fabrication which they did even if I talk now for hours and try to tell you I did not say what was misrepresented on that news channel.

Of course, they had one aim in mind. When they failed in causing a state of collapse on the popular and institutional levels in Syria, they wanted to target the top of the pyramid of the state in order to say to the citizens, on the one hand, and, of course, to the West, on the other hand, that this person lives in a cocoon and does not know what has been going on. They also wanted to say to the citizens, especially those in the state, that if the top figure in the pyramid is evading responsibility and feeling that things are falling apart, then it is normal for things to go out of control.

There were continuous rumours like saying that the president has left the country, as to say that the president has given up on his responsibilities. They did their best to circulate those rumours but we say to them, 'in your dreams, for I am not a person who surrenders his responsibilities.'

When I sipped some water in my previous speech, they said the president is nervous, but we never fish in troubled waters, neither in crises nor in normal situations. Now they will use the previous statement to say that the Syrian president is announcing that he will not relinquish his post. In fact, they do not distinguish between the two notions of 'office' and 'responsibility', and I did say in the year 2000 that I am not after office and I do not run away from responsibility. An office does not have any value. It is a sheer device and whoever seeks to office does not get respect.

We are talking now about responsibility, and this responsibility derives its importance from public support. This means that I acquire a position with the support of the people; and when I leave it, it will be with the will of this people. This is final, and regardless of what you heard, I always based my external policy in all our positions on public support and public will. What do we make of the interview with the American channel in the media framework? There was repeated talk about the good intention of many from within Syria and the outside world. Why did we not allow the media to enter Syria? In fact, during the first month or month and a half of the crisis, Arab and foreign media networks were completely free to move inside Syria. However, all the media fabrications, and the whole political and media campaign against Syria, were built on that phase of forging and distortion; and there is a difference between distorting the truth then giving it credibility as being presented from the inside of Syria, on the one hand, and distorting the truth from the outside of Syria where less credibility tends to be given to such misrepresentation. That is why we took a decision not to close the door to all media networks, but to be selective in the access given to them in order to control the quality of the information or the falsification which goes beyond the borders.

Victory Is Very Close As Long As We Are Able to Survive and Invest in Our Points of Strength

We were patient in an unprecedented battle in Syria's modern history; a battle that made us stronger. If this battle carries significant risks and decisive challenges, the victory is very close as long as we are able to survive and invest in our points of strength which are many, and to know weaknesses of opponents which are even more. Your public awareness which is based on facts, not on hype, underestimation, exaggerations or simplifications, had the most important role in uncovering the scheme and restricting it in preparation for thwarting it entirely. In our quest to dismantle that virtual environment and to ensure the importance of the internal situation in confronting any external interference, we took the initiative to talk transparently on having a default here and a defect or delay there in some areas. I mean in previous speeches when I was talking about mistakes, but we did not mean at all to underestimate the importance of such external schemes. I do not think that a reasonable person can deny today those

schemes that shifted acts of sabotage and terrorism to another level of crime which targeted minds, highly qualified people and institutions. The aim of which is to generalize the state of panic, to destroy morale and to make you reach the state of despair which would open the way for what was planned in the outside to become a reality, but this time with local hands.

At the beginning, they searched for their desired revolution, but their revolution was against them and against their vandals and their tools. Since the early days, however, the people revolted against them, thus precluding them and their henchmen. When they were shocked by your unity, they tried to dismantle and fragment this unity through using the hideous sectarian weapon after masking it with the cover of holy religion. When they lost hope to achieve their goals, they shifted into acts of sabotage and murder under different headings and covers such as the utilization of some peaceful demonstrations and the exploitation of wrong practices done by persons in the state. Thus, they started the process of assassinations and attempted to isolate cities and dividing the various parts of the country. They stole, looted and destroyed public and private facilities and after experimenting with all possible ways and means in today's world with all the regional and international media and political support, they did not find a foothold for their hoped-for revolution.

Arab Countries Are Not the Same in Their Policies towards Syria

Here comes the foreign role after they failed in all attempts; there was no choice but the foreign intervention. When we say foreign, it usually comes to our minds that it is the foreign outside. Unfortunately, this foreign outside has become a mix of Arab and foreign, and sometimes, in many cases, this Arab part is more hostile and worse than the foreign one. I do not want to generalize; the image is not that bleak because Arab countries are not the same in their policies. There are countries which tried during this stage to play a morally objective role towards what is happening in Syria. In contrast, there are countries that basically do not care about what is happening in general. I mean they stand on the fence in most cases, and there are countries that carry out what they are asked to do. What is strange is that some Arab officials are with us in heart and against us in politics. When we ask for clarifications, it is said or the official says I am with you, but there are external pressures. I mean this is a semi-official declaration of losing sovereignty. It is not a surprise that the countries will one day link their policies to the policies of foreign countries just like linking local currency to foreign currencies, and thus giving away sovereignty becomes a sovereign matter.

The truth is that this is the peak of deterioration for the Arab situation, but any deterioration always precedes a renaissance; when we move from the first independence which is the first liberation of land from occupation to the second independence which is the independence of the will. We will reach this independence when Arab peoples take the lead in the Arab world in general. This is because the official policies we see do not utterly reflect what we see on the public arenas in the Arab world.

We do not see this Arab role, which we have suddenly seen now, when there is a crisis or a dilemma in an Arab country. In contrast, we see it in its best forms when there is trouble in a foreign country or a superpower. Saving that state from its crisis is often at the expense of another state or at the expense of Arab states, and often through the destruction of an Arab country. This is what happened in Iraq and this is what happened in Libya, and this is what we see now in the Arab role towards Syria. After they failed in the Security Council when they could not convince the world of their lies, there was a need for an Arab cover and a need for having an Arab platform. Here comes this initiative. The truth of this initiative and the monitors' issue is that I am the one who proposed this issue in my meeting with the Arab League delegation a few months ago. We said since the international organizations came to Syria, reviewed the facts and they got a positive reaction at least through reviewing things - we do not say things are all positive; they see positive and negative things and we do not want more than knowing the truth as it is – it is more worthy of the Arabs to send a delegation to see what is happening in Syria. Of course, there was not any interest in this proposal put forward by Syria, but suddenly after several months, we see that this topic became the focus of global attention. It was not sudden attention towards what we put forward at all, but because the scheme has started from the outside under this title.

In all cases we continued dialogue with various parties and the Foreign Minister spoke in his press conferences on details I will not repeat here. We were focusing on one thing only which is the sovereignty of Syria. We were considering that the Arab citizen, the Arab official or the Arab observer has feelings towards us; I mean we remain Arabs who sympathize with each other no matter how bad the Arab situation is. Why they started the Arab initiative? The same countries that claim concern for the Syrian people were initially advising us to reform. Of course, these countries do not have the least knowledge of democracy and have no heritage in this area, but they were thinking that we will not be moving towards reform and there will be a title for these countries to use internationally that there is a conflict inside Syria between a state that does not want reform and the people who want reform, freedom or the like.

When we started reform, this thing was confusing for them, thus they shifted to the issue of the Arab League or the Arab initiative. The truth is that if we are to follow these countries, which give us advice, we have to go backward at least a century and a half. What happened a century and a half ago? We were part of the Ottoman Empire and we had the first parliament which we are concerned with in one way or another. The first parliament was opened in the year / 1877 / and if we put this aside, the first parliament in Syria was in 1919; this means less than a century ago. Therefore, imagine these countries that want to advise us about democracy! Where were these countries at that time? Their status is like the status of a smoking doctor who advises the patient to quit smoking while putting a cigarette in his mouth.

Eventually, outrage of the Arab or public reaction in Syria towards the issue of the Arab League was the result. In fact, I was not angry; why to get angry with someone who does not know his decision. If

someone attacks us with a knife, we defend ourselves not by struggling with the knife but with the person. The knife is just a tool. Our struggle is not with these people but against those who stand behind them. The public reaction was outrage, indignation and surprise; why did not the Arabs stand with Syria rather than standing against Syria? I ask a question: when did they stand with Syria?! I will not go back far in the past, but let us just talk about the past few years. Let us start by the war on Iraq, after the invasion, when Syria was threatened with bombing and invasion. Who stood with Syria in 2005 when they exploited the assassination of Hariri? Who stood alongside Syria in 2006? Who supported our positions against the Israeli aggression on Lebanon in 2008? Who supported us in the IAEA in relation to the alleged nuclear file? Arab states vote against us. These facts may be unknown to many citizens. That is why we need to explain everything in these junctures and situations.

Recently, Arab states voted against Syria with regard to the Human Rights issue. In contrast, some non-Arab countries stand with Syria. That is why we should not be surprised. I mean we should not be surprised with the Arab League status because it is just a reflection of the Arab situation. The Arab League is a mirror of our situation.

The Arab League mirrors our current miserable situation. If it has failed in over six decades in taking a position in the Arab interest, why are we surprised today if the general context is the same and hasn't changed except in the sense that it is pushing the Arab condition from bad to worse and in that what was happening in secret is now happening in public under the slogan of the nation's interest.

Has the Arab league actually gained independence for its states, and consequently for itself? Has it ever implemented its decisions and removed the dust off its files and achieved only a fragment of the aspirations of the Arab peoples? Or has it contributed directly to sowing the seeds of sedition and disunity? Has it respected its charter and defended its member states whose land, or the rights of whose peoples, have been violated? Has it returned one olive tree uprooted by Israel or prevented the demolition of one Palestinian house in occupied Arab Palestine? Has it been able to prevent the partition of Sudan or prevent the killing of over a million Iraqis or feed a single starved Somali?

Today, we are not in the process of attacking the Arab League because we are part of it, although we are in the age of decadence. Nor am I talking about the Arab league because it or the Arab states have taken a decision to suspend Syria's membership in it. This does not concern us in the least. I am talking about it because I have noticed the extent of popular frustration which we need to put in its natural context. The Arab League has been doomed for a long time. When we used to sit in Arab summits listening to criticism and denunciation whose echo reverberated in conference halls, we used to talk about this candidly, as Arab officials; some felt ashamed and some behaved as if it was no concern of theirs. So, being out of the Arab League, or suspending Syria's membership, and all this talk is not the issue. The issue is who wins and who loses. Does Syria or the Arab League lose? For us, we and the Arab states are losing as long as the Arab condition is bad. This is a chronic situation, nothing new in it, and there are no winners. We have been working for years to minimize the losses because it is not possible to win. But

suspending Syria's membership raises a question: can the body live without a heart? Who said that Syria is the throbbing heart of Arabism? It wasn't a Syrian, it was President Abdul Nasser, and this is still true.

Many Arabs have the same conviction. For Syria Arabism is not a slogan, it is a practice. Who offered, more than Syria, and is still offering and paying the price? Who, more than Syria, has offered to the Palestinian cause in particular? Who, more than Syria, has given to the process of Arabizing culture and education everywhere, in the mass media? Syria is quite strict about Arabization, particularly in school curricula. Who has offered more to Arabism and to Arabization and insisted on Arab culture in their school curricula more than Syria does in its schools and universities. The issue for us is not a slogan. If some countries seek to suspend our Arabism in the League, we say to them that they are suspending the Arab identity of the League itself. They cannot suspend Syria's Arab identity. On the contrary, the League without Syria suspends its own Arab identity.

Arab League without Syria Means Suspending Arabism

If some believe they can get us out of the League, they cannot get us out of our Arab identity, because the Arab identity is not a political decision. It is heritage and history. Those countries, which you know, have not acquired, and will not acquire, the Arab identity. If they believe that with money they can buy some geography and rent and import some history, we tell them that money does not make nations or create civilizations. Consequently, and as I heard from many Syrians, and I agree with them on this point, maybe in our present condition we are freer in exercising our real and pure Arabism which Syrians have been the best to express throughout history. That is why we say that with this attempt they don't focus on getting Syria out of the League, but rather on suspending Arabism itself so that it becomes an Arab League only in name. It will no longer be a league – bringing people together –or Arab. It will be a mock-Arab body in order to be in line with their policies and the role they are playing on the Arab arena. Otherwise, how can we explain this unprecedented and unreasonable tact with the Zionist enemy in everything it does and this decisiveness and toughness with Syria?

We have been trying for years to activate the Israel-boycott office; and we have been receiving excuses of the type that this is no longer acceptable; but, within a few weeks, they activate a boycott against Syria. This means that their objective is replacing Syria with Israel. This is only a pattern; and we are not naïve. We have known this Arab condition for a very long time. We have not clung to illusions. By showing our patience regarding these practices, before and during this crisis, we wanted to prove to all those who have their doubts about the bad intentions, wrapped in beautiful and ornamented language, that their intentions are bad and their objectives are vile. I think now this has become abundantly clear to most people.

We Shall Never Close the Door to Any Arab Endeavour As Long As It Respects Our Sovereignty, the Independence of Our Decision and the Unity of Our People

We realize all that. But based on our genuine Arab character, and our desire to restore the original idea of the Arab League, in which we are supported by some sisterly countries keen on making the Arab League a truly collective and Arab body, we haven't closed the doors to any solution or proposal; and we shall never close the door to any Arab endeavour as long as it respects our sovereignty, the independence of our decision and the unity of our people.

All these negative accumulations on the Arab arena, throughout decades, in addition to the current situation, led some of our citizens to take their anger out on Arabism which has been wrongly confused with the Arab League or the performance of some pseudo-Arabs to the extent that they denounced it.

Brothers and sisters,

The social structure of the Arab world, with its large diversity, is based on two strong and integrated pillars: Arabism and Islam. Both of them are great, rich and vital. Consequently, we cannot blame them for the wrong human practices. Furthermore, the Muslim and Christian diversity in our country is a major pillar of our Arabism and a foundation of our strength. When we get angry with Arabism or abandon it because of what some have done on this wide Arab arena we commit a gross injustice. As we have refused to generalize the mistakes done by some officials to the whole country, we shouldn't generalize the mistakes of some pseudo-Arabs to Arabism. What we are doing now is similar to what the west did against Islam in the wake of 9/11.

We say that there is a great religion – Islam, and there are terrorists taking cover under Islam. Who should we banish: religion or terrorism? Do we denounce religion or terrorists? Do we fight those who trade in Islam or fight terrorism? The answer is clear: It is not the fault of Islam when there are terrorists who take cover under the mantle of Islam.

Christianity is a religion of love and peace. What is the fault of Christianity in the wars waged under its name and in the crimes committed in the heart of America or in European countries by people who claim to be committed to Christian values? The same applies to Arabism. We should not link it to what some pseudo-Arabs are doing; otherwise we head towards the greatest sin. There are things which have existed through a historical process and we cannot respond to them by an act or a decision. These things didn't take place through a decision. There is a historical context and there is a divine will behind religions and nationality which we cannot face through reaction.

The first reaction was proposing the “Syria first” concept. It is natural to put Syria first. Every person belongs to his country first and foremost. One’s homeland cannot be in the second, third or fourth place; but the context in which this concept was made was isolationist –only Syria.

Every person belongs first to his city more than to other cities. He is naturally connected to it. Everyone likes the village he grew up in more than other villages, but this doesn’t prevent one from being patriotic and like the whole of the homeland. Being Syrian doesn’t prevent us from being Arabs; and being Arab doesn’t create any contradiction between our Arab and Syrian identities.

That is why we should stress that point, that the relationship between Arabism and patriotism is a close and vital one for the future, for our interests and for everything. It is not about romanticism or principles. It is about interests too. If we separate this fact from reaction, we should always know that Arabism is an identity not a membership. Arabism is an identity given by history not a certificate given by an organization. Arabism is an honour that characterizes Arab peoples not a stigma carried by some pseudo-Arabs on the Arab or world political stage.

Some might wonder about all this talk about Arabism and Arabs while in Syria there are only Arabs. My response is: who said that we are talking about an Arab race? Had Arabism been only the Arab race, we wouldn’t have had much to be proud of. The last thing in Arabism is race. Arabism is a question of civilization, a question of common interests, common will and common religions. It is about the things which bring about all the different nationalities which live in this place. The strength of this Arabism lies in its diversity not in its isolation and not in its one colouredness. Arabism hasn’t been built by the Arabs. Arabism has been built by all those non-Arabs who contributed to building it and those who belong to this rich society in which we live. Its strength lies in its diversity. Had there been a group of non-Arabs who wanted to change their traditions and customs and abandon them, we would oppose them on the grounds that they weaken Arabism. The strength of our Arabism lies in openness, diversity and in showing this diversity not integrating it to look like one component. Arabism has been accused for decades of chauvinism. This is not true. If there are chauvinistic individuals, this doesn’t mean that Arabism is chauvinistic. It is a condition of civilization.

All the above will not affect our vision of the internal situation in Syria and how we deal with it. There is no doubt that the current events and their repercussions have posed a huge number of questions and ideas which aim at finding different solutions for the current situation Syria is going through. If it is natural and self evident, but it cannot be positive and effective except when it is based on the importance of facing the problem not running away from it, or when it is based on courage not panic and escaping forward.

We Cannot Carry out Internal Reform without Dealing with Facts

If we want to talk about the internal situation – and I think it is the issue over which all Syrians’ concerns are focused - we should identify issues clearly. There are numerous ideas, which might be good. But unless they are put in the appropriate framework they remain useless and sometimes harmful. Instead of having ideas moving in one strain contradicting and fighting with each other, let’s draw some definitions before we get into the details.

First, we cannot carry out internal reform without dealing with facts as they are on the ground, whether we like them or not. We cannot just hang on to a straw in the air. Neither the straw nor the air will carry us. This means falling. Under the pressure of the crisis, some talk about any solution and call for any solution. We shall not give ‘any’ solution. We shall only give ‘solutions’. Solutions mean that the results are known beforehand. ‘Any solution’ will lead to the abyss. It might lead to deepening the crisis. It might get us into an impasse. The pressure of the crisis will not push us to adopt just ‘any’ plan. Even though time is very important, but it is not more important than the quality of the solution which we shall provide.

Today, we are dealing with two aspects of internal reform: the first is political reform and the second is fighting terrorism which has spread recently to different parts of Syria. In the reform process, there are those who believe that what we are doing now is the way to get out of the crisis or is the whole solution to the crisis. This is not true. We are not doing it for this reason. The relationship between reform and the crisis is limited. In the beginning, it had a larger role, when we decided to separate those who claim reform for terrorist objectives and those who genuinely want reform. This has happened. My vision from the very beginning was that there is no relation between the two, but it wasn’t easy to talk about it then because, as I said, things were not clear for many Syrians as they have become clear now.

What is the relationship between the reform process and the outside plot? Will the outside plots against Syria stop if we introduce the reforms today? I’ll tell you something. We know a great deal about discussions taking place outside Syria, particularly in the West about the situation in Syria. None of those involved cares about neither the number of the victims nor about reforms, neither about what has been achieved nor what will be achieved. Everyone is talking about Syria’s policies and whether Syria’s behaviour has changed from the beginning of the crisis till now.

The Outside Part of the Crisis Is against Reform That Makes Syria Stronger

On the other hand, there were those who came to bargain, saying if you do 1, 2, 3, 4, at least the outside part of the crisis and its internal tentacles will stop immediately. So, there is no relation between reform and the outside part of the crisis, because this part is against reform and because reform will make Syria

stronger. If Syria is stronger, this means strengthening Syrian policies, and we all know that Syrian policies are not well liked in foreign circles. On the contrary, such policies are loathed by many countries which want us to be mere lackeys.

The second point: what is the relationship between reform and terrorism? If we carry out the reforms, will terrorists stop? Does this mean that the terrorists who are killing and destroying are keen on the political parties law, the local administration elections or things of that kind? They are not. Terrorists don't care. Reform will not prevent terrorists from being terrorists. So, what is the component which concerns us?

The greatest part of the Syrian people want reform, and they have not come out, haven't broken the law, haven't killed. This is the largest part of the Syrian people, it is the part which wants reform. For us, reform is the natural context. That is why we announced a phased reform in the year 2000. In my swear-in speech I talked about modernization and development. At that time, I was focused on state institutions. In 2005, we talked about political reform. Part of what we are doing now was proposed in 2005 in the Bath party conference. At that time there were no pressures in this regard. Pressure was different, in a different direction. No one was talking about internal reform. We proposed it because we thought of it as a natural context not a forced one. It cannot be forced. It is a natural requirement for development. We cannot develop without reform. Whether we were late or not is a different question. Why we were late is a different question. But it remained a natural need. Had reform been part of the crisis, it would fail; and if reform were forced, it would fail. That's why, in our discussion of reform, let's separate natural needs from the crisis.

If we start from the current crisis, reform will be abrupt and tied to its current circumstances which are temporary. What about future decades? Things will be different. We have to connect what is before the crisis with what is after it regardless of it and then base our work on the reform process. Of course this is not in the absolute. Sometimes, we take into account what we are going through now in our reform efforts. We don't separate it completely from the timetable. Sometimes we move quickly. Sometimes we assume that people's reaction needs a move in a certain direction. There are some impacts of the crisis; but we don't build our reforms on the crisis. If we do so, we justify foreign powers' intervention in our crisis under the title of reform. So, let's agree on separating the two and deal with the details on these grounds.

Now that we talked about the details, I proposed in my speech in this auditorium last June about an action plan; and I talked mainly about the legislative component in relation to laws and the constitution. At that time, I offered a timeframe for the laws which have all been passed within the timeframe identified at the time. Now, we hear many people saying "we haven't seen any tangible results". I always like to talk transparently, and I'll address every subject separately.

The first law we passed was lifting the state of emergency. In such circumstances that Syria is going through, can any state lift the state of emergency. On the contrary, any state would have imposed the state of emergency. Nevertheless, we didn't do that. We insisted on lifting the state of emergency. Some Syrians accused us of abandoning part of the security of Syria because we lifted the state of emergency. Of course this is inaccurate, because lifting the state of emergency or the state of emergency itself doesn't provide security. It is rather an organizational issue. When there is a state of emergency, there are certain measures and when it is lifted there is a different set of measures. We haven't abandoned security.

No state could accept to abandon security. The laws and the measures now in place give us full authority to control security regardless of the state of emergency law. But lifting the state of emergency needs training for the relevant services, including the security and police forces which deal with citizens. We all know that they are all over Syria now; and some of them haven't taken leave for months. So, it is logical, reasonable or practical to train them now? This is impossible. There will be no training in the current circumstances. Nevertheless, we insist that the services stress some basic regulations in relation to lifting the state of emergency. When there is an environment of terrorism, destruction and law breaking, if there are errors they will multiply tens of folds. That is why we are not dealing only with the results but with the causes too. The results are the mistakes we see being committed by some, but the causes are related to the state of chaos in itself. We need to control the chaos in order to feel the results. In other words, we cannot feel the true effects of lifting the state of emergency while chaos prevails. And here I distinguish, of course, between different levels of mistakes, on the one hand, and killing, on the other.

There Is No Cover for Anyone; There Is No Order at Any Level of the State to Shoot at Any Citizen

There is no cover for anyone; but the issue of killing needs evidence. Some people believe that none of those who committed acts of killing have been arrested. That's not true in relation to those working for the state. A limited number of people have been arrested in relation to murder and other crimes. I say limited because the evidence was limited and connected with those people. The existence of evidence or searching for evidence needs institutions; and institutions need appropriate conditions; and the current conditions hamper the work of such institutions. But I would like to stress that there is no cover for anyone; and there is no order, I stress, no order at any level of the state to shoot at any citizen. Shooting, under the law, is allowed only in the case of self defence and in defence of citizens and in cases of engaging an armed person. So, there is a specific case in the law. In this regard, I stress the need to deal with causes and effects.

Concerning the political parties, the political parties law has been issued. Some parties have applied and have been given licenses. The first license was given to the first party a few weeks ago; and I believe that

yesterday or today there is a second party on the way which met all the conditions. There are many other parties which are still trying to meet the conditions and submit the necessary documents to be licensed. Of course we didn't feel the existence of these parties, because political parties need time. But, in any case, after the political parties law has been passed, we haven't only given licenses, but encouraged many groups to form parties. I don't think that the state is responsible in this regard. We will not form any parties, will not appear in the media or conduct activities on behalf of anyone. So, there are no obstacles in this regard and it is only a question of time.

The local administration law has been passed and elections have been held. Of course they have been held in difficult circumstances; and it is natural that they will not give the desired results because participation, neither on the part of the candidates or the voters, was not as they were supposed to be with a new law because of the security conditions. There was a point of view saying that we should postpone local administration elections to a later stage. But there was a different opinion, which we adopted, saying that there should be change because every change is positive, particularly that most citizens' complaints were about the performance of local administration. We embarked on that effort. But in any case, anything related to elections will not give results if there is no broad participation on the part of candidates and also on the part of voters, so that there is competition. That is why you will not feel the results. In general, with anything related to elections, part of the responsibility lies on the citizens and not only on the state.

As for the media law, I think the government has completed last week the preparation of executive instructions and have become ready for implementation. There are requests ready for television, press and others. The election law was issued and the aim of which is to frame all these ideas that we hear on the political scene, and anyone who has an idea should go to the ballot box which is the voice of law for everything in this country; this is the core of the issue.

The important law is the law of fighting corruption. It is the only law which has been delayed for several months. The first reason is related to the fact that this law is very important and has many aspects. Therefore, I asked the government to extensively consider it in collaboration with various bodies and parties. It was put on the internet and there were many posts and useful ideas. The government finished this and sent it to the Syrian Presidency which sent it back recently to the government. It is a good law which includes very important points and a point related to the inspecting authority.

In the current law, the anti-corruption law, the inspection commission was abolished, and the Anti-Corruption Commission replaced the inspection commission, but the anti-corruption law is specialized in corruption cases. This means that it deals only with small issue which does not often list all cases of corruption. This commission deals with corruption after its appearance, while the inspection commission was in charge of broader functions, including organization of management, raising proposals in the field of management and control of state action in terms of administration as well as combating corruption. Thus, the abolition of all these tasks and linking them only to one title which is

corruption is not good, especially that fighting corruption cannot be done in isolation from the organization of the administration.

We cannot fight corruption alone because this is a great imbalance apart from other points that are present. There are proposals on the integration of the inspection commission with the Financial Control Commission, but this issue is not important. The most important thing is to know the relationship between inspection and Anti-Corruption Commissions. If there is a cancellation of the inspection commission, will the Anti-Corruption Commission include all the tasks of the two bodies or should we leave the two commissions and specify different tasks for each one of them, or should we coordinate between both of them in respect of the issue of corruption? That is why this law was resent to the government to resolve this point. After that, the law of fighting corruption will be issued.

Anyway, if the law was passed in the best of conditions, it will be easy for the state to fight corruption at the intermediate level and above, but it is difficult to fight it from the intermediate level and below without the contribution of the citizens and the media. This means that prosecution will not be done even by this commission because it will only receive information. Thus, we need to look for the information and report them to this commission. This means that the success of this law needs significant popular awareness.

Within the framework of the corruption topic, many people whom I meet say we want the President to hold corrupt people accountable. Here, I want to clarify that the President does not replace institutions; I handle one or two issues when I see an error, but the institution holds thousands of people accountable or address thousands of cases. When the President replaces the institutions, this will not be reassuring even if he is doing the right thing. Therefore, we have to work in order to activate institutions.

I told them that I will take care of this law and the activation of these institutions, and I want to see fighting corruption through normal legal channels. At that time, we solved the problems of thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands and millions of Syrians. I always focus on institutional work. If I solved a problem, it is an individual problem; I solve the problem of someone but not the problem of thousands of people.

The other pillar in reform is the Constitution. The decree that provides for establishing a committee to draft the constitution was issued. This committee was given a deadline of four months and I think that it has become in its final stages. This constitution will focus on a fundamental and essential point which is the multi-party system and political pluralism. They were talking only about article eight, but we said that the entire Constitution should be amended because there is a correlation among articles. The Constitution will focus on the fact that the people is the source of authority, especially during elections, the dedication of the institutions' role, the freedoms of the citizens and other things and basic principles.

There was a question: why we had legal reform before changing the Constitution? Logically, we must begin with the Constitution and then laws come after that. This is true in terms of logic, but people's pressure and questioning the credibility of the state that it wishes to carry out real reform, have led us to work in parallel. Moreover, issuing laws is faster in terms of time; it takes a few months and this is less than needed by the Constitution. If logic contradicts reality, we go with reality and in any case this is not an important issue. What is really important is that when laws are passed and the Constitution is drafted, we will be in a new phase which is not a transition. This is related to the legislation aspect.

The More We Extend Participation in Government, the More Benefits We Achieve in All Aspects and Generally for the Sake of the National Feeling

As for things that we can do as initiative, we heard a lot about a national unity government. I always like to check terminology because we should not take the term without knowing its content. We hear about the national unity government in the states that have complete division on the national level between parties, a civil war, war-lords communities or princes of nationalities who are directly gathered at the table or through representatives to form a government of national unity. We do not have a national division. We have problems, we have a split in certain cases, but we do not have a national division in the sense that could be asked. I know they do not mean this, but I do not use such an expression as 'national unity government'. For this reason we do not have a government of national division. At any rate, governments in Syria are always diversified governments which include independents and various parties.

But now we have a new political map for the crisis and the new Constitution. With the new parties' law, new political forces have emerged and must be taken into consideration. Some may propose the participation of all these political forces in the government. Some others focus on the opposition. I say all political parties from the centre to the opposition to the pro-government forces and everyone should contribute because the government is the homeland's government not a government of a party or a state. The more we extend participation, the more benefits we achieve in all aspects and generally for the sake of the national feeling. Thus, expanding the government is a good idea. I do not know what label we may use here because some call it a national consensus and some others call it expansion participation; this does not matter. What is important is that we welcome the participation of all political forces. In fact, we started dialogue recently even in general headlines with some political forces to take their views in this participation and the answer was positive.

I want to go back to a point in the Constitution which is related to the dates. When the Committee finishes the draft constitution within the time limit, there will be several propositions either to be issued by the President as a decree, or to be referred to parliament in order to be issued by a law. I refused the first and the second and I stressed the fact that there should be a referendum because the Constitution

is not the state's Constitution; it is an issue related to every Syrian citizen. Therefore, we will resort to a referendum after the committee finishes its work and presents the Constitution which will be put through constitutional channels to reach a referendum. The referendum on the Constitution could be done at the beginning of March.

Parliamentary elections are linked to the constitution, especially as most of the political forces want to have these elections after having the constitution. I was thinking as I said in my last speech that it would be at the end of last year or the beginning of this year, but as a response to their will, I say that elections are linked to the new constitution because this would give much time for these powers to establish and prepare themselves and their grassroots for the elections. We said that we do not have any objection to this.

The timeframe is connected with the new constitution. What is the constitutional grace period: two or three months? If it was two months, and the referendum is held in March, the elections can be held in early May. If the grace period is three months, the elections can be held in early June. This depends on the new constitution.

Back to the subject of the national unity government, if we talk about the participation of the opposition and say that all the parties will take part in the government including the opposition, who do we mean by 'opposition'? Any person can now call himself/herself 'opposition', and I have met some of such people and used to ask them, 'who do you represent?' The opposition stands for a public body, not for a person as an opponent. Now we have opposition figures and currents, but the opposition is usually an institutional body which is established by elections. For the time being, we do not have elections; so how do we define the opposition? Who takes part in that opposition, and what is the volume of their participation? We still do not have the criteria for all this. Before the next elections, we could still say that the government will take a certain form after the elections. But we want to accelerate the process and launch the contribution in the opposition before the elections. In other words, we will adopt special, rather than institutional, criteria.

We haven't accused people of being traitors. The criteria are clear stating the establishment of a national opposition. What do we mean by 'national government'? We do not want an opposition that sits in embassies and receives gestures from the outside where they will be told not to have dialogue with the state or to delay the dialogue now because things are over and it is a matter of weeks before the total collapse! We do not want an opposition that sits with us and blackmails us under the title of the crisis in order to achieve personal gains. We do not want an opposition that wants to have a secret dialogue to avoid the anger of others. If we take the existing national criteria and figures, we can start to work on this government immediately now that we have understood the subject, whether they call it a 'national unity government' or 'separation government'. What they choose to name it is not important at all.

This means that we will start to work on this within a very short period of time, but there is an important question: will the government be political or technical? Some talked about having a micro political government, but this does not work for several reasons. First, we are a country with a big public sector which is not independent and where each institution still depends on the ministry, the minister, the deputy minister, the directors, and others.

Can a political figure lead a technical sector? This is not possible in addition to the fact that the problems of the people are not limited to the security issue. There are issues to do with the services which everyone is complaining about at the time. Will a political government be able to provide the people with diesel, gas, or medicine? This is unrealistic in our current conditions. Let there be an inclusive government which has a mixture of politicians and technocrats and which represents the political forces, if they want to be represented, and comprises the technical aspect where we do not lose this or that. I believe that this is the best framework, but of course I always like to have dialogue and discuss things with others in order to see the negatives of every proposal. At the moment, I am raising titles which were not agreed upon completely. I am only presenting the framework and introducing preferences which we could change throughout the discussions.

We Will Be Witnessing Changes, the Most Important Is to Focus in Future on the Young Generation

There was a question about dialogue. We launched the dialogue in July, and we were supposed to start with the extensive dialogue and then move to the central dialogue. However, different forces exerted pressure to reverse the process and we agreed and finished the first phase of the dialogue without the contribution of all the opposition forces. Only part of them participated in the dialogue which was a very fruitful dialogue with a wide participation from the different institutions in the governorates.

Two months ago it was suggested to start the third phase of the dialogue on the central level, and I can say that we, as a state, political party, or authority, are ready to start tomorrow and have no problem in that. However, some of the opposition forces are not ready. Part of them wants to conduct a secret dialogue for certain personal gains, as I mentioned earlier, and another part wants to wait and see how things go so that they determine where to go. But we will not wait for those forces to come and join in a celebratory dialogue which is conducted just to show off. We are now having dialogue with other forces which are ready to have a public dialogue and we are discussing the ideas which were raised earlier. What I wanted to clarify is that the delay in the dialogue is not caused by Syria.

We have even accepted to have dialogue under the Arab initiative which was built on the idea of conducting dialogue with all the forces including hostile forces which committed crimes of terrorism in the seventies and the eighties of the last century. We said that we did not have a problem in conducting dialogue with these forces if they wanted to come to Syria, and we gave all the guarantees. In other

words, we do not have any restrictions to dialogue and we will show full openness when see that everybody is ready for the dialogue and has a perspective on that dialogue. We are ready to start dialogue right away.

There will always be a question as to whether we will witness changes and transformation. Usually I do not talk about this as we tend to change things whenever there is need for transformation. But it is clear from my earlier speech that we will be witnessing changes. When we talk about a new government and a new structure of the government, and when the Country Command has been announcing for a week now that there will be a national conference very soon, this means that we will be witnessing changes, part of which already started few days ago. The most important thing is for these changes to focus in the future on the young generation which considers itself marginalized to a large extent, although it is the generation which faced the crisis boldly; and we saw how young people have been active in defending their country with all the meaning of the word.

Syria Needs All Its Honest Sons Regardless of Their Political Attitudes

At any rate, Syria now needs all its honest sons, regardless of their political attitudes. And when we talk about the coming phase, while we are still at the beginning of the New Year, some talk about the new Syria. But I say we do not have a 'new Syria' but a 'renewed Syria' because renewal is a continuous process and we are talking here about a new phase, rather than a new Syria. We have to understand the requirements of every phase; otherwise, all that we have said will be futile. What we have dealt with comprises procedures and regulations whose implementation does not succeed without the awareness needed for any process of development and transition. I can give an answer to this by saying that the previous ten months, with all their miseries, were very helpful in this regard as they proved to the Syrian people that they are capable with their awareness to present a model of a modern country which is stages and centuries ahead of other countries. I was talking about a hundred and fifty years, but actually we are capable of becoming one thousand years ahead of those countries which try to give us lessons about democracy, and I am confident that this future will come. Even so, the more we are capable of spreading the state awareness which we have witnessed, the better the situation. There is no doubt that despite the presence of an overall awareness in Syria, there are small holes of ignorance which might influence the general situation, and we do not want such holes and certain cases of ignorance to influence the process of development. We rather want to have a maximum level of positives and a minimum level of negatives.

In summary, the points which are related to the issue of domestic reform have become clear. After the Constitution is issued, we do not have additional steps to make except for the procedures; and if there is a shortcoming in the laws, we can, after the Constitution is issued, re-study these laws as we will not stop at this stage of development. Notes are also to be taken about the laws and the practices as mistakes might happen throughout the implementation, and the process of renewal is a continuous process on the anatomical level.

Sisters and brothers,

What is taking place in Syria is part of what has been planned for the region for tens of years, as the dream of partition is still haunting the grandchildren of Sykes–Picot. But today their dream turns into a nightmare, and if some believe that the time of conflict over Syria is back, then they are mistaken because the conflict today is ‘against Syria’ and not ‘over Syria’ or ‘on Syria’. And one thing we will never allow them to achieve is defeating Syria as it means defeating steadfastness and resistance and it also means the fall of the whole region to the hands of great powers. Defeat is not necessarily military and it might come true if they succeed in making us withdraw to internal conflicts and forget about our bigger issues on top of which the Palestinian Issue. Their ultimate goal which they aspire to achieve eventually is a Syria which is busy with internal marginal conflicts and withdrawn to its false borders, rather than its natural, historical, nationwide borders. They want to see a shrunk Syria which is prone to demise and deterioration as a result of division and partition, and their aim is to dismantle the cultural identity and character of our people which has always protected us against defeats of all kinds. Dismantling this identity leads to an actual defeat which was not caused by repeated wars, but which could be caused by the destroying the structure of a society that produced the systems of social and cultural resistance. This was the system which raised their concern more than any other system because it is the foundation and incubator of any form of resistance. But they did not succeed in destroying our identity or in shaking our belief that the resistance is at the core of this identity which shall remain firm as it has always been over history.

There Is No Compromise with Terrorism, No Compromise with Those Who Use Arms to Cause Chaos and Division, No Compromise with Those Who Terrorize Civilians, No Compromise with Those Who Conspire with Foreigners against Their Country and against Their People

In cases of war or confrontation, states rearrange their priorities. Our utmost priority now, which is unparalleled by any other priority, is the restoration of the security we have enjoyed for decades, and which has characterized our country, not only in the region but throughout the world. This will only happen by striking these murderous terrorists hard. There is no compromise with terrorism, no compromise with those who use arms to cause chaos and division, no compromise with those who terrorize civilians, no compromise with those who conspire with foreigners against their country and against their people.

The battle against terrorism will not be the battle of the state or state institutions alone. It is the battle of all of us. It is a national battle; and it is everyone’s duty to take part in it. “Internal sedition is more grievous than murder”, because it involves dismantling and fragmenting society and ultimately destroying it. This is what we shall not allow in order to keep Syria immune and impregnable.

Yet, the immune and impregnable state knows when and how to forgive, and knows how to bring its children back to right path. It knows how to take the hired guns out of the hands of those who have been misguided and delusioned and return them to the process of building a modern state while maintaining its authenticity and originality and the spring wells of its Arab and identity. In as much as we need to strike the terrorists in as much as we need to bring those who have gone astray back to the right path. There are those who made mistakes and those who have been misguided. After they started on their mistaken course, they have been told that the state will take revenge against you, so you cannot go back. The objective is to push them on the course of crime and to the point of no return.

The state is like the mother who opens the way for her children to be the best every day in order to maintain security and avoid bloodshed. That is why, in this regard, we have passed one amnesty after another. Some people believed that these amnesties led to more security failures. But the fact is that in most cases the results were positive, particularly when the amnesty was coordinated with local actors in every city, village and governorate and in coordination with the parents whom we met and talked to. They had enough wisdom to bring their children back to the right path.

Of course there are cases which don't succeed, but this is not the general trend. That is why I believe that decisiveness is necessary but continuing to show tolerance and forgiveness from time to time within the framework of clear criteria and sound mechanisms is equally important. I'll explain this point because many people didn't quite understand what we think of when we issue an amnesty in such security conditions. We conducted dialogue with everyone, except the criminals. I met a number of these people, even in the last few days. When they saw things moving in the direction of weapons and killing, a large number of them changed completely and started to cooperate with the state which he had opposed for objective or non-objective reasons. Some, however, persisted on their wrong course and the Quarnic verse "they stumble in their grave error" applies to them. There are those who lose their physical eyesight but compensate and excel in the arts, literature, science or other professions, but those who lose the 'mind's eye' are hopeless, for the real blindness is that of the mind not o the eyes.

Some of those really believe that they are revolutionaries. All right, let's see what they have done and what are their attributes. Would a real revolutionary steal a car or rob a house or a facility? Can the revolutionary be a thief? For us, the image of the revolutionary is a bright, idealistic untainted one with something very special about it. Those people have assassinated innocent people in and out of the state system. Can a revolutionary be characterized by cowardice and treachery? The prevented the schools from carrying out their tasks and functions in society. They did the same in universities. Can a revolutionary be against education? In some areas, teaching dropped to half, which means our schools would send to society people who are half educated half ignorant. Yet, we have another army fighting together with the armed forces, security services and the police. They are those in the education sector, particularly in schools in some areas where teaching dropped by 50% and they are risking their lives in order to continue the educational processes.

Until the end of 2011, the number of martyrs among teachers and university professors was about 30 and over a thousand schools have been vandalized, burned or destroyed.

On your behalf, I salute all the teachers, councillors, administrators and caretakers in schools. Can a revolution be against education, against national unity? Can revolutionaries use language which calls for the disintegration of society? Can a revolutionary rise against citizens depriving them of cooking gas which they need on a daily basis in order to push them to hunger, or of heating fuel to make them catch their death because of the cold, or medicine to push them to death because of diseases or deprive them of their livelihood by burning government and private factories and facilities to make the poor poorer still?

This is not a revolution. Can a revolutionary work for the enemy – a revolutionary and a traitor at the same time? This is impossible. Can revolutionaries be without honour, moral values or religious principles? Have we had real revolutionaries, in the sense we know, you and I and the whole people would have moved with them. This is a fact.

The basic question which has been put to me with a great deal of intensity is: when and how will it end? This is, of course, a difficult question and we cannot give an answer without having all the facts. There are things which we know and things we don't. The first thing which we don't have full information about but we can draw deductions about is the conspiracy. It will end when the Syrian people decide to turn into a submissive people, when we submit and abandon all our heritage: the heritage of the October war of liberation in 1973, when we abandon our pan-Arab positions. We defended Lebanon in 1982, when it was the springboard of resistance which led to the liberation of Lebanon in 2000, when we stop supporting the resistance which we supported in 2006 and 2008 in Lebanon and Gaza, when we give free concessions partially or fully in the peace process, particularly in our occupied land in the Golan, when we abandon our pan-Arab positions towards the Palestinian cause which we have adopted since 1948, when we accept to be false witnesses to the systematic and unprecedented destruction of al-Aqsa mosque.

I don't know whether the Arab League would set up a committee to address this issue. I don't think they will, because it is an issue of concern only to 1.3 billion people; so it is not worthy of their concern and that is why they won't do it – just for the sake of comparison.

The Syrian people will never be submissive for many reasons. First, the principles to which he has been brought up; second, the models presented to us of submissive leaders, submissive policies or submissive states are not encouraging. In all circumstances and in the worst conditions, Syria's condition was better than the conditions of all those countries, even those who appear to be in good shape now. The symptoms haven't appeared so far, but one day they will.

We Cannot Abandon Our Dignity That Is Stronger than Their Armies and More Precious than Their Wealth

All these things can be summed up in one word: Syrian dignity. We cannot abandon our dignity because it is the most precious thing the Syrian people possess. Our dignity is stronger than their armies and more precious than their wealth.

The second point is related to the first: when will it stop? When the smuggling of arms and money from outside stops. This related to the first point. When we submit and give in we reach the second point. But what I know fully is that the conspiracy will stop when we beat it. We shouldn't be reactive. It stops when we stop it. We can defeat it when we do so politically on the outside; and inside the country, we beat it when beat this dangerous arm of the conspiracy which is terrorism. The second point is related to our wisdom and awareness. We beat the conspiracy when we beat our own whims and passivity and return to reason and go back to the state of pure love which we had in Syria. Thank God, this is still the general state in the country, but I am talking about a few areas.

There is no doubt that Syria is strong, but strength is not an absolute. The immunity of the strong and healthy person might drop, and when that happens he might get ill, but death and collapse are not inevitable. Immunity gets weaker when there is chaos. The events and the chaos which happened in Syria weakened this immunity. When that happened, terrorism struck. Consequently, whoever contributes to chaos now is a partner in terrorism and in shedding Syrian blood. We cannot separate the first from the second. We cannot fight terrorism without fighting chaos, for both of them are linked. This should be clear. Immunity drops when national awareness gets weaker.

Here, I am talking about those with god will and good intentions. Those with bad intentions do not concern us. In the beginning, we used to tell those with good intentions that there is a foreign conspiracy. They would respond by saying this is just shifting responsibility to others. We used to tell them there are weapons, and they would respond by saying, these are all fabrications of state media. Now things have become clear, albeit belatedly. This terrorism cannot appear like that suddenly. There are stages which started from the beginning. There was small-size terrorism using small arms and in small areas. Then it grew to reach this stage and this level.

We were late, and they were late in understanding this. This was a major obstacle, but our being late doesn't mean that we reached the point of no return. The important thing now is to stand united. When we have national causes, there should be no differences. When we differ, we go to the ballot box. We chose our government, our parliament. This is a different issue. But when there are foreign threats, the states which respect themselves stand united. In this case there is no grey colour. Those who stand in the middle in national causes are traitors to their country. There is no choice. We must stand united: all of us are responsible. We should all contribute with words, acts, in any way or form.

The second point, when we talk about differences, we should distinguish between mistake made by individuals and mistakes made institutions. I said this before. Institutions do not commit mistakes except when they adopt mistaken policies. This is a different issue. We have two policies: the first is to proceed in the reform process and the second is to fight terrorism. Can anyone say that this a mistaken policy: I am against reform and support terrorism. This is impossible. I am talking about the Syrian arena. When we put these things aside, what this means is that we stand united with state institutions. We help them, we help the army, we morally embrace the army and the security.

If we go back to the 1970s and 1980s, when the devils' brothers, who covered themselves with Islam, carried out their terrorist acts in Syria. In the beginning there were many Syrians who were misguided. They believed that they were genuinely defending Islam. They didn't take any position. When things became clear decisive acts were taken and it was quick when the people stood with the state at that time. Of course the killing and the assassinations went on for six years. We don't want to wait all that long. Things are clear for all of us. If we stood together and embraced members of the security and other relevant systems, I believe the results will be quick and decisive, because terrorism strikes, and every time it strikes it makes reform more costly and more difficult.

The question is a race between the terrorists and reform. Terrorism and those standing behind it don't want reform and want to reach a stage where we say there is no time for reform. Let's deal with terrorism. In that case they would have an excuse to ask for intervention in Syria. All of us have recently felt, through television, radio and the internet, that people are worried and upset and all of them are calling for decisive action.

Of course, this issue is already settled for us because dealing with terrorism must be in the strongest legal means. We are keen of the law because we are keen at same time on the blood of innocent people. We do not want the price of the fight against terrorism to be the blood of innocent people, but the problem is that they began to hit innocent people. Now, the Syrian people are being killed and political belonging has nothing to do with the person killed even if he is an opponent to the state. They are killing the Syrian people; they are punishing the Syrian people because the Syrian people refused to abandon his morals, refused to become a mercenary and refused to sell his conscience. Thus, it was necessary to punish the Syrian people everywhere.

Therefore, we have to be united and we have to resolve this issue. As I said, the main pillar is how the citizen stands with the state. In some cases when the army entered a city (which controlled by the terrorists), some people from the region's population formed teams to protect the army's flanks in order to enter the city. Some other people in other regions formed observing patrols to prevent terrorists from carrying out acts of murder and sabotage or sedition in some areas. In other areas, they were delivering their information to the army. Thus, we have many ways. I think we should start now a direct dialogue among the concerned authorities in the country, in different regions and different activities to see how we can achieve security on all Syrian territories.

I want just to talk about one point linked to the issue of the national reconciliation because it was raised in this context. I mean if we stand together, where to get then? There are those who proposed at the beginning of the crisis the idea of having a national reconciliation. The national reconciliation at the end of the crisis means that everyone forgives everyone; I mean to say that everyone has committed a mistake against everyone and there are many mistakes. Everyone forgives everyone because revenge does not lead to a positive result. Revenge does not build a country. Revenge does not return the blood spilled and, of course, chaos destroys the homeland as we are witnessing now. Only tolerance builds nations and achieves the flourishing future.

This means that national reconciliation stems from this feeling existing among the citizens, because some people at the beginning of the crisis has proposed national reconciliation. National reconciliation needs a general feeling among citizens that we are closer to the end of the crisis and that we stand undivided in one place. The most important point is who are the parties of such reconciliation? The national reconciliation is among parties, who are the parties? The parties are not specified. Thus, we reach a national reconciliation through national awareness not through a decision taken by the President who shall issue a law and a general amnesty, etc. The state may absolve a party, but what about other parties? It is a national situation that is followed by laws and legislations, etc. Thus, we do need to get to that stage but in a timely manner. Now, as a result of the public awareness which has emerged recently, I see that we can move in this direction with putting an end for terrorism on the Syrian arena.

In order to succeed in all these procedures, reforms, confrontations and complex conditions, we must be cautious of the psychologically defeated people who are seeking to spread the spirit of defeat and frustration among citizens, whether from their psychological reasons or their self-interest considerations. If this bunch of few people decided to contribute to the defeat of the homeland in the virtual squares, the overwhelmingly majority of people have decided to achieve victory in the real squares. National battles have its own squares and men where there is no place for the shaking hands and the frightened hearts. As for their embargo, it will not terrorize and will not be able to humiliate our people because it is not the Syrian who sells his honour and dignity for money. This is not out of verbal rhetoric but out of the fact that we are the ones who fed many Arab countries during many lean years.

I am talking about the lean years which prevailed three or four year ago. Four countries, as well as the Syrian people, ate Syrian wheat, and we are the ones who developed their industry in the eighties although we did not have any foreign currency reserves. We did not even have a small amount of reserves and, during that time, we could hardly pay the salaries and we hardly had enough wheat for our bread. So we say to the generation who does not remember that stage, and who was probably not born during that phase, do not allow the fear to control your heart as a result of the media war which is targeting you. Syria has undergone much more difficult conditions during which even the security situation was much more difficult. Yet, we bypassed those conditions and were victorious. With all their

negatives and misfortunes, crises give opportunities to genuine people to achieve something, and today we are more capable of transforming all that to gains by our self-dependence. If we think scientifically and collectively away from selfishness, this will help us compensate for our loss in the short term and turn them into gains in the long term.

The most important thing is not to have a monopolizing group which makes use of crises to collect their fortunes at the expense of the food and blood of the people. This is an important point. Of course, it is the responsibility of the state to fight this situation and we always instruct institutions to control this issue, but we also know that, under the conditions of disorder, deficiency infiltrates even through institutions, which is yet another obstacle ahead of us. This is a fact but with our cooperation we can find a solution for this issue.

Under these conditions, and regardless of the crisis, we have to concentrate on small and medium enterprises and on handicrafts. First, we need to establish a wide base for job opportunities and to have more social justice. We always talk about the volume of growth but we do not identify the dimensions of the pyramid or the pyramid's base which benefits from this growth. Such industries in addition to handicrafts create great social justice and, at the same time, they do not fall under the influence of external blockade and are not highly influenced by the security conditions. Recently, we have started to focus to a large extent on handicrafts as supporting them in this stage is very necessary.

In agriculture we, in Syria, have made very good steps despite the difficulties, and we have continued to pay attention to the conditions of farmers and workers. But I think that paying attentions to craftspeople and similar professions was not as it should have been.

A great part of the psychological war is launched now against Syria. When they failed in the sectarian issue, they also failed in the national issue. They failed in all the issues which have a political aspect. Then they moved to the economic aspect. Of course, the stock market rates and the exchange rates of the Lira do have an effect, and do we know that when the value of the Lira decreases, prices increase. But this is not the only criteria. There is another criterion which is more important. What is the volume of production in Syria? Production in Syria was generally weak, and over the last few years when we opened our economy we turned to consumption. Even products which exist in Syria are bought from non-Syrian producers. This has very badly damaged the economy. Therefore, we have to concentrate on the level of production in Syria, and we are capable even during this crisis to increase this production. We must know that we have many points of strength. For example, the volume of foreign debt in Syria is very limited, our relations with different countries have been ongoing, and we have olives (I believe that we were the fifth olive producer on the level of the world, and some say that we have even jumped to the third or fourth level, which I am not sure of).

For us, as a small country, to occupy the fifth position in producing olives and olive oil among hundreds of countries is a very positive thing. We also have a strong presence as a wheat producer, as I said

earlier. The land is there, the farmers are there, and the rainfall is there. This means that we have real points of strength but we have to regulate the economic process and we can kick things off even while under the influence of this crisis.

If They Want to Besiege Syria, They Will End up Besieging a Whole Region

They are trying to depict Syria as an isolated country, trying to stress this over and over again. But our points of strength lie in our strategic position. If they want to besiege Syria, they will end up besieging a whole region. As for our relations with the West, they talk about an international community. This international community is a group of big colonial countries which view the whole world as an arena full of slaves who serve their interests.

For us, the West is important and we cannot deny this truth. But the West today is not like the West a decade ago. The world is changing and there are emerging powers. There are alternatives. It is important but it is not the oxygen which we breathe. If the West closes its doors, we can still breathe. It is not the life buoy without which we drown. We can swim on our own and along our friends and brothers, and there is plenty of them. That is why we decided in 2005 to move eastwards. At that time, we knew that the West will never change. The West is still colonial in one way or another. It is changing from an old colonizer to a modern colonizer and from a modern colonizer during the Sykes-Picot agreement to a contemporary colonizer. It has different forms and shapes but it will never change, which means that we have to turn to the East. We, as a state, started this procedure several years ago, and my visits during the recent years fell under that initiative in one way or another. But this is not sufficient. The private sector must also open channels with those countries.

Most countries of the world have good relations with Syria, and they insisted on having good relations with us even under the conditions of the current crisis and the Western pressures on them. All this does not mean that we will not pay a price or there will not be loss as a result of the blockade, on one hand, and the political and security situation, on another. However, we can have achievements which could reduce the effects of the damages. At this stage, there fundamental points which make all these achievements closely related to the security situation including incidents of highway robbery, and the issues of gas and diesel. For example, we might have to cancel a train shipment and transport the diesel, fuel, or gas by vehicles, which makes the cost higher and the transported amount smaller; and this does not fulfil the citizens' needs of consumption or the consumption needs of electricity power stations or other systems. Our entire livelihood is now linked to controlling the security situation. That is why I reiterated the importance of this so that we can all cooperate in putting an end to it, and so that, we, as a state, do not break our commitments towards our citizens. Security, economy, and all other issues are indispensable things for the Syrian citizen.

Despite all those complex circumstances, I am greatly confident of the future. My confidence is inspired by you, and by your throats which hailed glory, dignity, and defiance when millions of you filled tens of cities and squares along the country. I say to you I, as you have always known me, am one of you. When we do not face up to the challenges, we do not deserve the name of Syria; and when we do not dare to defend it or cannot defend it against its enemies, we do not deserve to live on its soil. Our people has proven its genuineness and sincerity when the bloody media machine fell short of destroying its unity and when the starvation attempts did not make it kneel and could not taint its honour and dignity. A people with such sophist feelings of belonging to their home country, with such high morals which face the most dangerous crises, and with such strong faith in its ability to overcome those decisive moments in its history will not allow a small group of frauds or delusional people to make it stray from the road of truth and righteousness; and it will not allow groups that sold themselves to the devil of pernicious desires and dubious interests to destroy what it has built over a long history of effort and sacrifice.

Our Martyrs' Blood Is behind the Steadfastness of Our Country

My confidence in that is inspired by you and the men of our armed forces, the men of living conscience and strong resolve. They are the ones who truly express the feelings of the people, safeguard its values and aspirations, and give all sacrifices in order for the people to enjoy security. On your behalf, and on the behalf of every honourable citizen, I would like to greet them as they stand ready to protect the honour of their country, and the integrity of its soil and people. As for our martyrs' blood which is behind the steadfastness of our country, it will always be the lightship that will light the road of our next generations to build the future Syria. Because when their blood waters the land, it will make it bear the fruits of a more secure tomorrow, unity and freedom for us all. As for the strength of their families who lost their dearest people, it has made us firmer and more determined and persistent in following on the same road which was taken by their brothers, fathers, and sons in defence of their country and its values, no matter how expensive the price is and to be as an example for all of us on how an individual dies in order for the country to live.

I would like to salute you, the sons of this great people, with all your intellectual, and political doctrines, you who strongly and unyieldingly defend the values of solidarity and love that unify our people against the feelings of malice and hatred which some try to invoke spreading their poisons all over the country, and you who work relentlessly in order to develop our country, regain its security, enhance its unity, and protect its sovereignty. And glory to our proud people who reject defeat in the age of collapse and who say to their enemies, 'never will we be defeated!' For you, our proud people, we are persistent, and with your support, we continue to resist and win, and we will insha' Allah win, and the peace and mercy of God be upon you all.

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