

# Interview 1

## Hafiz al-Asad: Terrorism and the Anti-Syria Campaign

*Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad was interviewed in Damascus by a delegation of journalists representing the Washington Post (Ben Bradlee, Editor-in-Chief; Jim Hogland, Assistant Editor for Foreign News; and Jonathan Randall, roving correspondent) and the International Herald Tribune (Samuel Kerbitte, Assistant Editor). The text of the interview, which was conducted on 17 May and appeared on 19 May 1986 in the Syria Times, is reproduced in full below.*

*Question: Our first question is on terrorism. Terrorism has become the major preoccupation of the American government and the American people in recent weeks, and some American officials have linked Syria to specific terrorists apprehended in Berlin and London.*

*Asad: We believe that the whole campaign is constructed and arranged in the framework of a general campaign against Syria and other countries in the region, and ultimately against the Arab nation. The aim of this campaign is to make the Arabs surrender to Zionist schemes and to Israeli plans, in order to deflect our course so that we may not adhere strongly to our rights, and discontinue our determined defense of our just cause. Thus the way will be open for Israel to become greater Israel, extending from the Nile to the Euphrates. This is the reality of the matter. Our country is one of the countries most subjected to terrorism. At this point, I want to say that some Western forces were behind this terrorism and were masterminding it. We had discussions with those forces. We did not wage a war against them. We only confronted the terrorists themselves.*

*As you know, a few days ago we suffered another terrorist act against our*

people. The exact result was 144 martyrs and 149 injured. Considering the past of these forces which level the charge of terrorism against us or against others, the brief time we have here does not permit me to mention all the terrorist acts which they planned and carried out. The CIA has a hand in every terrorist organization in the world. The arm of the CIA extends to all these organizations.

Only recently they hijacked an Egyptian airliner. Before that, Grenada was invaded, and before that there was approval of the invasion. This approval means participation. There was also participation in the hijacking of the civilian Libyan aircraft which had on board a high-level Syrian political delegation. That delegation was insulted, abused, and badly treated.

I say there was participation in this hijacking because when Syria complained to the United Nations, the United States not only declined to support the complaint and opposed it, but also vetoed the condemnation of Israel for hijacking the aircraft. What else does this mean but approval of the hijacking?

When I say the United States, I mean the American administration and American policy. The American people are another thing.

Without going too far into the past, I will give some examples of acts against leaders of countries and heads of state. I think the story of President Castro and the cigar is well known. So is the hijacking of planes from Cuba into the United States and the encouraging of the hijackers. Most recently was the bombing of Libyan cities.

It is one of the strangest things to see a superpower going with a fleet of bombers and fighter planes after a head of state to murder him. It means a decision to assassinate him. I know the house which was bombed. To my knowledge, it was in the past the residence of Colonel Qadhdhafi; later it was converted into a guest house, and Colonel Qadhdhafi moved to a smaller house nearby. I know that house because I was once a guest there. Those who saw the scene after the bombardment told me that it was flattened. It seems that American intelligence thought it was still the residence of Colonel Qadhdhafi and therefore destroyed it. This, of course, is in addition to the bombing of other civilian targets.

In any case, the report of the Congressional Church Commission is still fresh in our minds. It exposed the acts of American intelligence. With this in mind, the American administration is not qualified to level, time and again, through some of its officials, charges of terrorism against Syria.

As for the Israelis, their terrorism is continuous and permanent, not confined to a specific time. Look at what they have done for years in

Lebanon. One cannot give precise figures of human losses in Lebanon, but the estimates are in the range of 100,000. It is difficult for me to accept this figure, but in any case the losses have been tremendous. The Israeli air force bombed villages, towns, and refugee camps. This took place while Mr. Philip Habib, the envoy of the American president, was in Lebanon. American journalists also witnessed the Israeli bombing. However, the American administration viewed this as a security requirement and not as terrorism—let alone the individual Israeli terrorist acts which are numerous and well known. They include the assassination of the UN mediator, Count Bernadotte, and the massacring of women and children in the villages of Palestine to intimidate the Palestinians and force them to flee. In effect, this caused hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to seek refuge outside their country. Then there was the bombing of Tunisia and the headquarters of the PLO there, the bombing of the nuclear reactor which was built to generate electricity in Iraq, the bombing of various civilian targets in Syria many times during the seventies, and recently the hijacking of the aircraft carrying the Syrian political delegation.

All these acts are not terrorist acts in the judgment of the American administration, while Syria—herself a victim of terrorism—which seized every available opportunity to help people subjected to terrorism, succeeding in some instances and failing in others, is accused of terrorism. The American administration makes this accusation against Syria, whose territory has been occupied by Israel and which helped in freeing American citizens, including American professors, and exerted tremendous efforts to rescue the hostages of the TWA plane. I don't think anyone else helped in that matter. Even the American administration was unable to do anything then to help the hostages. In fact, any mistake made by the American administration could have been fatal to the hostages. To level this accusation against Syria . . . acts were plotted which we had nothing to do with.

As for what happened in London, I should say that although we wish all kinds of disasters to befall Israel, since we are enemies and have been in a state of war for thirty-eight years—and the Israelis wish the same for us—we refuse to carry out and object to others' carrying out such acts against civil aviation. We condemn the hijacking or blowing up of civilian aircraft. We consider such acts inhuman acts of cowardice which have nothing to do with patriotic struggle for the liberation of occupied territories or restoration of the rights of any people. Despite the fact that we and Israel are enemies and all sorts of things could happen between us, we have never planned any harm to civil aviation. When the Syrian political delegation was hijacked,

we said that we would retaliate but would never harm civilian aircraft. Our response was in the areas where brave struggle is waged.

I want to add that British investigators and British police are aware that had there been any connection between Syria and the incident in London, Syria would have been able to keep the accused person in hiding for a long time and the British police would not have been able to apprehend him so quickly. I say this having in mind the three persons deported by the British. I am sure that the British are convinced that these three persons are innocent. I assure you that there are persons who deal with such matters objectively.

Regarding the incident in Germany, I know no more about it than you do as journalists, and Syria is no more involved in this act than you are. We oppose terrorism. We do not say this out of fear of anybody. We have said so previously, we say it now, and shall say it again in the future. Terrorism is one thing, and the struggle for the liberation of the land and the restoration of usurped rights is something else. A terrorist is a mercenary who is motivated by the desire to kill, while those who struggle are freedom fighters who have a cause, in defense of which they exert all their spiritual and material efforts. A terrorist is more often moved by external forces; the militant is not.

*Question: The second point in my question concerns Abu Nidal, who operates an office here, publishes a magazine, and has a training camp in the Biqa', which is controlled by Syrian forces. Is this true?*

*Asad:* Since the beginning of the Palestinian question, Syrian territory has been open to all Palestinian organizations, but they have been allowed to engage only in the struggle against Israel for the restoration of their usurped rights; they have never been allowed to engage in any other activities. As far as I know and remember, no terrorist act in any other part of the world emanated from Syria.

Abu Nidal is not in Syria. Although I know the great majority of the Palestinian leaders, I do not know Abu Nidal personally, and he does not operate anything in Syria. There is an office doing cultural and political work among the Palestinians, but those who are in Syria have nothing to do with terrorist acts. Abu Nidal's organization is the only Palestinian organization which does not have a camp in Syria.

As for the Biqa' and Lebanon in general, we have Syrian influence there but not Syrian sovereignty. You have to remember that it is Lebanon there, not Syria, and in each area in Lebanon there are all kinds of organizations

and militias. This situation has existed for many years. We do not interfere in their affairs or the affairs of the inhabitants. It is true that the Lebanese government is not in full control, but symbols of the state such as the Lebanese army, the police, the municipalities, the local authorities, and the governors are present in every area. We have not established a civil administration there, nor will we do so in the future. This was not our aim when we went into Lebanon. We shall not fall into such a quagmire. Originally we went to Lebanon in order to help stop the civil war, and we succeeded in stopping the fighting among people in some areas, but we did not go in order to fight the militias. There are all kinds of things in Lebanon, including us. But we are responsible for what happens in Syria and not for what happens in Lebanon. Moreover, the Americans, the British, and the French were in Lebanon but could not prevent such things. Besides, it is not our responsibility to investigate what people are doing there. We shall not use our institutions for such tasks. These institutions are only to serve our people, not others.

*Question: If I have followed you correctly, am I right to conclude that it is unfair for others to hold Syria responsible for what happens in the Biqa', which is under Syrian control?*

*Asad:* Yes, it is unfair, and those who place this responsibility on Syria know that they are unfair because Syria herself suffers human losses from time to time in the Biqa' and other areas in Lebanon as a result of terrorist acts. They also know that no force can eliminate such acts in the present Lebanese situation, because the Lebanese state has no weight, and Syria is not replacing the Lebanese state in Lebanon. We do not interfere in internal Lebanese life, by which I mean the Lebanese administration. Sometimes they ask for help and we offer it, but we do not take their place. Had we decided to do so, the situation would have been different, but this would mean that the Lebanese state is nonexistent since, as you know, two states cannot exist in one and the same land.

*Question: Do I understand from you, Mr. President, that there is no more that Syria can do about terrorism in Syria or in Lebanon to reduce terrorism?*

*Asad:* No, in Syria we are responsible for every terrorist act that takes place on our territory or the terrorists who move against Syria. For example, in the case of the recent terrorist act, and previous acts, we have arrested all

the culprits. They are now in prison and will be tried and be punished under Syrian law.

Nor do we allow anyone living in Syrian territory to carry out terrorist acts abroad. And if anyone does, he will be called to account under our laws. I said that in Lebanon there is no state; but there is a state in Syria.

*Question: The second part of my question concerns Syrian-American relations. All those who have observed these relations over the last fifteen years can see that these relations have not been easy. Even in the days of Kissinger and Carter they were complicated. But now, hearing your accusations against the CIA and hearing American officials accusing Syria of involvement in terrorist acts, as Mr. Whitehead did, one has to conclude that relations are really bad.*

*Asad: This is true.*

*Question: Why have relations become so bad?*

*Asad: First of all I am not inventing accusations against the CIA. I quoted the American press and the report of a congressional commission. This is an official American source, and the members of this commission were elected by the American people. The American raid against Libya and the use of the American veto in the Security Council are also facts.*

*Question: I mean to say that there is a state of verbal war between Damascus and Washington.*

*Asad: So far this war is being waged by one side. I don't think that I have made any statements threatening the United States, while American officials and President Reagan daily throw verbal bombs at us. In my assessment, American officials are talking too much these days, more than usual. A responsible man, especially an official of a superpower, should weigh his words carefully, because whether he errs or is right, his words have an impact on his own country and on other countries.*

*Question: Do you feel, Mr. President, that the American authorities are not weighing their words?*

*Asad: Undoubtedly. And I believe that many Americans share my view, although I have not met with anybody prior to this interview. It was not so with the previous administrations. It is true that we differed on many*

things. But my assessment is that our dialogue, despite our differences, was based on reason and on a certain level of mutual respect. It was at the time of Presidents Nixon and Carter.

*Question: And what is the situation now under President Reagan?*

*Asad:* As you described it. President Reagan is waging a war against us.

*Question: Perhaps you said so now because we asked this question, but there must be another reason why you raised this subject at this time.*

*Asad:* We believe that this verbal war, or rather these threats and accusations which are made by various American officials from time to time, do not serve American interests. We do not want a confrontation with the United States, but we will strongly defend ourselves. We do not fear threats or the implementation of threats. We follow a rule which says that no one can strike Syria and evade punishment. I stress this rule, recognizing that the United States is a big power with immense potential. But our people no longer fear attacks by any side against us. We believe that it is neither in our interest, nor the interest of the people of the United States, for American officials to threaten us. Clearly, it is not in the interest of either of us to carry out these threats.

Past years have proven that Syria accepts no humiliation and fears no danger, however great, when it concerns her dignity and the dignity of the Arab nation. What disturbs us is that this campaign does not serve the interests of the American people. It is more disturbing to us that this campaign serves the expansionist ambitions of Israel.

*Question: You seem, Mr. President, to be bitter and disappointed about the American policy.*

*Asad:* Yes. Because there is no American policy in the Middle East. Instead, there is an Israeli policy, carried out by the United States. All American actions in this area are carried out according to Israeli decisions effected by the Zionist lobby and other Zionist influences. What matters to us is that all American deeds in this area are in the service of Israeli Zionist aims.

*Question: Have you reached this conclusion, Mr. President, especially after Mr. George Shultz became secretary of state? Do you believe that Mr. Shultz played an important role in favoring Israel against the Arabs?*

*Asad:* Before him was Mr. Haig. But Mr. Haig served for a short period. He was a warrior secretary, but in general I do not want to link the subject with any particular person, whether he be Mr. Shultz, Mr. Haig, or President Reagan. It is the American administration. Of course, all of them are competing to demonstrate their love for Israel. Today I heard radio reports that Mr. Shultz spoke to a Zionist meeting about American-Israeli joint interests in the Middle East and he called for upholding these interests, saying that the United States should take military action.

*Question:* *Do you feel that military action and threats by the Reagan administration have made Americans targets of terrorist acts or reprisals?*

*Asad:* Certainly we do not approve of reprisals against American citizens. We reject this. But there is no doubt that such American military actions have not won the support of the people, especially the Arab masses. Instead, they have produced a great deal of hatred, not only in the Arab countries but also in many countries in the third world and I think in the United States as well.

*Question:* *But polls show that President Reagan enjoys the support of the American public.*

*Asad:* It is said that the Americans are preoccupied with their jobs and that the majority does not have enough time to analyze and to listen to different media sources. Therefore, television and the other media, which it is said are under Zionist control, are shaping the thinking of the American public and move in one direction or the other. I cannot understand how an American citizen assumes that his administration or president did a great thing by sending planes to kill a head of a state. It is difficult to believe that this is the nature of the American citizen.

*Question:* *Now we come to the present tension between Syria and Israel. The American government says that there are no signs that Israel is massing its forces. But today we heard you saying that you feel the threat. Perhaps you are moving your forces in the Golan to protect yourselves. What are the sources of information that led you to believe that there is such a threat?*

*Asad:* The Israelis themselves have issued threats since the beginning of this tension. In light of our previous experience, we know that it would not be strange if Israel were to carry out an attack. On our part, we have taken no



unusual measures with regard to deploying our forces. We are not planning to attack Israel. We are planning to achieve parity with Israel. Experience has proven that without this parity, it is difficult to achieve peace.

*Question: Have you attained this parity now?*

*Asad:* This is a long discussion. We are confident, although we still need some time to reach a balance of forces. If we are attacked, we have the capability to defend ourselves. In any case, there is nothing unusual on the ground on our side or on the side of Israel.

*Question: Do you believe that the Israeli statements on Syria are part of a psychological campaign against Syria?*

*Asad:* It is difficult to say precisely how the Israelis will act or what they have in mind now. I would say that they have escalated their statements and have carried out arbitrary acts against the Syrians in the Golan contrary to international law concerning war and occupation. They have also made frequent threats. All this is in addition to their constant aggressive and expansionist intentions. The coincidence between their campaign and the American campaign leads us to watch the situation carefully. Of course, their recent statements differ from previous ones in that they tend to ease the tension.

*Question: We want to ask you a question on the French and American hostages, one of whom is an American journalist. Can you give us any information on the location and the condition of any of the hostages?*

*Asad:* In fact we do not know their location, but I assure you that we worked in the past for the release of these hostages on the basis of humanitarian considerations. The American administration knows that we made these efforts but they were not successful. From time to time, new political developments occurred, making these efforts more difficult. Once it was American threats, another time the American bombing of Libya. This makes it difficult to handle the question of the hostages in isolation from American political stands. Objectively speaking, I would say that American stands affect the question of the hostages positively and negatively.

*Question: You have said, Mr. President, that the question of Libya made certain things impossible.*

*Asad:* Yes. It complicated things, not because Libya complicated the situation or because Libya has influence on the kidnapping groups. I do not think it has such influence. However, attacking an Arab country causes spontaneous reactions regardless of the bilateral relations between these groups and the attacked Arab country. As I said a while ago, the situation in Lebanon is not a classic one, not only from the point of view of the absence of the state, but also as a result of the situation in the political parties in Lebanon. One cannot say that the leadership of each party has full disciplinary control over all the party members. Besides, there are a large number of small groupings, and dealing with these small groupings is much more difficult than dealing with the bigger ones. Moreover, the small groupings are changeable and keep on the move, which adds to the difficulty of the problem. But we are with those hostages both emotionally and in terms of our efforts. Our attitude in Syria towards the hostages has nothing to do with our relations with the American administration, either positively or negatively. We shall do all we can for them, as we did in the past for others.

*Question:* Do you believe the American administration feels that you are in a position to be the best interlocutor for the release of the American hostages?

*Asad:* Actually the American administration should be in the best position, because no one can do anything while it is carrying the hammer of war. Of course, we have a certain influence on the big political parties in Lebanon. However, our influence on the smaller groupings is limited. Yet under normal conditions, one may find channels for dealing with them.

*Question:* Can you tell us about your talks with Hizballah for the release of the French hostages, which you thought were about to succeed but finally failed?

*Asad:* After contacts between us and the French, we made contacts with Hizballah. As a result of our efforts, Hizballah responded, and the French hostages were supposed to be released in a few days. Then, to our surprise, this did not happen. Upon asking them, they answered that there was a small group outside their control holding the hostages. At first, we did not believe them, and misunderstandings arose between us and them. There are still problems between them and the Syrian forces in the area.

*Question:* Do these problems include the recent fighting between the Syrian forces and these groups in the Biqa'?

*Asad:* It is one of the by-products, because when there is misunderstanding, it may cause daily problems. But we have now discovered that there is a small group beyond their control.

*Question:* *Do they still hold the French hostages?*

*Asad:* Yes. We shall now try to find a way to deal with this new small group. I may say here that the French president was the most concerned among Western heads of state for the safety of citizens of his country kidnapped in Lebanon. He is still making serious efforts.

*Question:* *Do you believe that the American hostages are held by a small group outside the control of Hizballah?*

*Asad:* We talked to Hizballah about the Americans. But talking to them about the French hostages was easier than talking about the Americans, not because of the individuals but because of new factors which appear from time to time. French policy does not have the complexities of American policy.

*Question:* *Do you believe the Americans are held by Hizballah?*

*Asad:* There are many Islamic organizations, but we did not talk to the small ones. We talked only to Hizballah, even when the question concerned other groups. We did so because we felt that Hizballah could help. Strangely enough, our first political contact with Hizballah was for the Americans. That was when the TWA plane was hijacked. Before this incident, our contacts with Hizballah were of a security nature. We put some officers in charge of making these contacts for the sake of the kidnapped Americans. In the case of the TWA plane, we reached a certain stage when it was necessary to make direct contact with Hizballah at a political level. We did so in order to facilitate the release of the TWA hostages.

*Question:* *Yesterday al-Jihad al-Islami made a statement in Beirut suggesting that the United States is exerting pressure on Syria in the hope that Syria will work for the release of the hostages. Did your foreign minister, Mr. Sharaf, raise this question with the Iranian and Saudi authorities during his recent visits to both countries?*

*Asad:* Of course, we do not know which side made that statement, and we do not know how those people think. Perhaps they thought that our attitude was the result of American pressure, but they should know that our attitude is not the result of such pressure; it is the result of kidnapping itself.

*Question:* *By saying that talks about the French hostages were easier, do you mean to say that the release of French hostages, or some of them, will be easier?*

*Asad:* I wish it were so, but I did not mean that. I meant that talks with the religious groups in Lebanon about French hostages were easier because those groups talk differently about French policy.

*Question:* *Mr. President, regarding the rapprochement with King Hussein, your efforts to reunite the PLO, and the deadlock of the American peace initiative—can you tell us what is important in all this?*

*Asad:* We always attempt to achieve solidarity among the Arabs because the conflict with Israel is essentially, and in principle, an Arab–Israeli conflict. It is not a conflict between a single Arab country and Israel. Of course, this does not mean that the roles of all the Arab countries are equal in the conflict. My meeting with King Hussein should be understood in this context. Before and during that meeting there was agreement between us to work for peace through an international conference under UN auspices, in which the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. would participate, with the aim of reaching a comprehensive peace, and not a separate and partial peace. We also discussed bilateral questions and general Arab issues. If the United States is desirous of bringing about peace in this area, I do not see any justification for its opposition to such an international peace conference.

Regarding the reunification of the PLO, it depends on the Palestinian groups. Palestinian unity can be achieved only on the basis of serving the Palestinian cause. We support the reunification of the PLO on this basis. But in any case, this essentially depends on the Palestinians themselves.

*Question:* *The Algerian government recently volunteered to host a conference in Algeria for the reunification of the PLO. Do you favor this conference? Do you foresee any circumstances in which a working relationship between you and Arafat may be achieved?*

*Asad:* Holding the conference does not constitute a problem either to us or to the Palestinian groups, but the important thing is agreement on the

bases, the principles, and the content. As for the Palestinian groups, we have no personal problems with anyone. We do not like or dislike persons. The question is not one of liking or disliking persons. The question is that we are as close to any Palestinian as he is close to the cause of his own people, and vice versa.

*Question: Recently, it was attributed to you, Mr. President, that you agree to amendments to the [Lebanese] tripartite agreement. The question is, how can these amendments be made, and is there anything that the Western countries in general, or the United States in particular, can do to help in this matter? Also, it is said that the Palestinians seem to be a strong force in Lebanon. What is your opinion on the report saying that they have a tactical alliance with Hizballah? How will Syria deal with this tactical alliance between the Palestinians in and around Beirut?*

*Asad:* Hizballah was not a signatory to the tripartite agreement, and the Palestinians are not a direct party to an agreement reached among the Lebanese. It was neither Hizballah nor the Palestinians who subverted the agreement. The tripartite agreement was not Syria's agreement, although it was under our auspices. We helped move the parties toward one another so that they could find common denominators. Had they agreed on other points, we would also have agreed to them, because our aim is to achieve Lebanese reconciliation. Therefore, if they now want to make some amendments, we have no objection.

Our view is that the broad lines of reconciliation will continue in some way or another to emanate from the same ideas in the agreement. The important thing is that we will be in accord with what they agree to. We do not want to impose on them anything to which they do not agree.

As to the questions of how and when, the answers seem to be frozen at present, or at least facing a blocked road. But I am sure the road will be opened again because reconciliation is indispensable, no matter how long it will take to achieve it, especially since the forces which obstructed it are not the strongest in Lebanon and they do not constitute the majority. The problem is more external than internal.

As to your question about what the Western countries and the United States can do to help, the answer should come from the United States itself. So far the United States has obstructed efforts. We wish that it would at least refrain from obstruction. It has no interest in the continuing absence of reconciliation in Lebanon, because those who complain about the situation in Lebanon and its by-products should be eager and keen to

achieve security, stability, and reconciliation in Lebanon. The present situation creates a climate conducive to the appearance of terrorism, and therefore we argue that the Israeli invasion was the main factor which led to terrorism after 1982. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 contributed to the appearance of most of the terrorist acts.

*Question: Can we say that the elements of the misunderstanding between Syria and Hizballah are a reflection of misunderstanding between Syria and Iran?*

*Asad:* No, there is no connection between the two. The disagreement was on the question of kidnapping.

*Question: Are there issues which require clearing up between Syria and Iran?*

*Asad:* Our relations with Iran are good. If you are asking about the visit of our foreign minister to Tehran, this visit was in the framework of Syria's unceasing efforts from the beginning of the war to prevent its spread to other countries. This is the subject which our foreign minister went to discuss.

*Question: Was his mission successful?*

*Asad:* In our estimation it was successful, especially in light of our previous experience and our efforts in this regard. We have focused on this matter since the beginning of the war, and I believe that we have succeeded.

*Question: When you talked about the CIA, did you have in mind that the CIA was behind the explosions on buses and trains in Syria recently?*

*Asad:* No. I wanted to say in general terms that the United States has committed many acts in the past. As for the recent acts, we announced the confessions of the criminals on television. This is one point. The other point is that the arm of the CIA, as I said in the beginning, extends to all the terrorist organizations. The CIA could be aware of these acts, although it may not have planned them.