

**Speech of President Bashar al-Assad at
The Meeting of OIC's Council of Foreign Ministers**

Damascus, 23-25 May 2009

Your Excellency, Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference,

Your Excellencies heads of delegations and honorable guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I welcome you all in Damascus, the capital of the Omayyads as honourable brothers and dear guests. It is our great pleasure that Damascus is hosting the 36th session of your council for which you have chosen the theme of “Towards Promoting Islamic Solidarity” at a time when Muslim countries are facing serious political and cultural challenges which make it incumbent on them to coordinate their efforts in order to face these challenges, and in order to have an effective presence on the international arena which enables them to protect their interests and identities.

Your meeting and your discussions, at this critical time for the world, to discuss the promotion of solidarity among our countries in the face of current political and economic developments show the vitality of the Organization of Islamic Conference and its awareness of the challenges which face its countries, and the unsatisfactory relations between some of its members. It also demonstrates our recognition of the historical ties which bring us together and which provide us with adequate grounds to achieve more cooperation and integration in different areas.

This is particularly important since significant political and economic developments swept the world in the past few years and destabilised it. Muslim countries felt the direct impact of the implications of these developments, either as party to them or as a target.

These developments were accompanied by a ferocious campaign against Islam with the objective of tarnishing its image as a frame of reference in terms of the civilization and religion of our peoples. This campaign also targeted Muslims with the objective of isolating and undermining them, as if they were a freak case on the international arena, or a temporary existence on the stage of civilization and humanity. It was also accompanied by willfully ignoring their legitimate rights and putting pressure on some Muslim states to force them to abandon their independence and sovereignty and their rejection of the

interference of foreign powers in their internal affairs. International organizations have been used in order to give legitimacy to these policies or impairing these organizations when it comes to the legitimate rights of these countries, particularly in the Middle East region.

The most dangerous aspect was in the form of concepts like the ‘clash of civilizations’ and the ‘axes of good and evil’ which aim at enflaming feelings of hatred among peoples, which resulted in practice in accusing Islam and Muslims of terrorism and considering this a self-evident truth in policy making, starting with isolation, imposing blockades, pre-emptive wars, in addition to interfering in the internal affairs of states and attempts at dividing them.

It was natural for this situation to create deep feelings of frustration in the minds of Muslims when they face one crisis after another and see their weakness in front of repeated abuses. They see repeated abuses of their symbols and continuing aggressions against their sovereignty. They have seen waves of reactions varying between isolation, discontent and rebellion. Today we wonder about the causes of this regression and weakness which have tempted others to exploit and dominate us. This is not a new question, but today it seems more urgent because of the accumulation of losses and the increasing awareness of the enormity of these losses.

If we have been used to blaming others for our degeneration – which is partly true as a result of dead-end policies – we should, however, carry out an honest stock-taking exercise with our ourselves. We shall immediately discover that we are responsible more than anybody else. Blaming others is merely an attempt at escaping a reality which we do not see and which we do not want to see. It is an expression of weakness which causes more yet weakness and a form of running away from responsibility which incurs a heavy price.

If our religion is being treated with abuse and contempt, it is simply because we have surrendered our decision, and consequently our destiny, reputation and image in the

outside world to others. Consequently, the other will determine the faith which suits us. If the teachings of this religion urge resisting the occupier and returning occupied land, they mean terrorism. And if they invoke saying the truth, they break international consensus; and if we adhere to these teachings, it means we are isolated and out of step with our age.

Our natural reaction was to defend this religion. But without realizing it, we have isolated it from what is going on around it and from what is going on in reality. Consequently, defending the form became more important than defending the substance. For how can we defend our religion while we are being unable to defend our opinion, our decision or our homeland? How do we expect not to be attacked in our religion while we are attacked in everything else, on the material and moral levels? Moreover, how can we defend a religion whose obligations we fail to carry out: these obligations of unifying our ranks and positions, stating the word of truth against the arrogant, and defending our honour and dignity against those who usurp them?

There are self evident and undisputable truths. When our religion calls us to unite and we become disunited, and sometimes stand as each others' adversaries; when it calls us to be more open, and we become more closed on ourselves, we have to look for the root of the problem in ourselves and in our actions. This could sometimes be a reaction against the fact that some others are closed against us. But closing in on ourselves is a sign of weakness, and it is at odds with our tradition.

That is why we must deal with them with the power of openness not the weakness of closure. We should be confidently proactive with them, engage them patiently with dialogue in order to reach with them common grounds which serve our interests. We can do that by explaining our causes and issues, reducing complications and consequently reducing tensions in our region. This will also serve their interests by turning their repeated failure into success, the bottom line of which is having friends in a region populated by 1.3 billion people whose influence on the present and future of the world no one can ignore.

So, if we want to succeed, we cannot separate religion from reality. That is why we need to focus on developing this reality, because the language of complaint, solicitation and begging will never achieve anything for us. Today, we live in a world of the powerful which has no place in it for the weak. Power is never given as a gift. It is rather earned. We can earn it by strengthening our economic ties and breaking the existing barriers in this area. We can earn it by mastering science and possessing knowledge, because ignorance and power cannot meet. Scientific research is the main indicator in this area, and of course political cooperation and mutual support of our national causes, in addition to wise, well-informed policies which do not run away from the storm, nor run directly into the storm, but rather fortify themselves in the national interests as sole resort which protects homelands and wins popular support.

We should not allow our sovereignty and independence to be violated; and arriving at this independence starts from this region, not from the outside, by addressing the challenges we face, depending on ourselves, and finding the solutions which suit us and achieve our interests. This does not mean isolating ourselves and not cooperating with others. Neither does it mean jumping over our reality; for we need the support of our brothers and friends all over the world. But they also need to know our vision and test the strength of our will in order to help us.

Nevertheless, we reject ready-made solutions designed elsewhere and imposed on us with implementation as the only option. This kind of ready-made tailoring will not fit our measure nor the taste of our people. That is why it is doomed to failure. But regardless of who fails, we will pay the price in the end, at least in the form of more instability and frustration, and consequently more difficulties and complications, and being embroiled in a vicious cycle snowballing and destroying everything in its way.

Some of us, naturally, blame the circumstances under which we live in the present or lived in the past. There is no doubting the truth of this, but this is one aspect of the problem. The major aspect, however, lies in possessing the will, and reality testifies to this proposition. If we look at other countries which have gone through similar

circumstances at almost the same time, but whose scientific, economic and political status is much better than ours, we would know that the difference between us and them lies in the strength of will. This strong will got them unified, emancipated them from the inferiority complexes towards the other and paved the way for them to develop and assert themselves.

We do not lack the elements which enable us to do this. Asserting ourselves is done by working for the future not sinking into the glorious past which we miss, or towards which we feel nostalgic every now and then, particularly when we feel our weakness. We get rid of our inferiority complex when we see the results of our work, instead of compensating for that by pride and arrogance towards others in order to have some fake feeling of superiority. The will remains the major prerequisite for success in all of that.

Let us protect ourselves and our region with our own hands. Our region, consisting of 57 countries, should be able to draw visions and executive plans for the complicated issues of our region. When we agree, there is no other choice for the others but to support us; otherwise they would isolate themselves from the region; and this is not in their interest.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It has been proven to everyone, through the experience of the past few years and the instability that has been caused worldwide, that the policy of war and using force in order to achieve political objectives brought nothing but harm to everyone that adopted this policy or contributed to it, let alone those who have been its victims.

If many people, throughout the world, have become certain that this policy has reached a dead end, and have become convinced of the importance of starting a new era based on principles of cooperation in order to face global problems, this is not sufficient for us to be assured about the future, as long as there are parties which have not been able to learn from the lessons of the distant or recent past. Those parties still bet on the possibility of

continuing to resort to force, occupation, the usurpation of rights and the suppression of peoples.

This is the case of Israel today. And when we say today, we are not talking only about six decades of occupation, but also about seventeen years since the launch of the peace talks in Madrid which led to nothing but harming peace and making it more difficult to achieve. If there is any positive point to be counted for the peace process, it is the fact that it exposed Israel and revealed its truth to the world. This state, which has been aggressive in origin and intentions, has for decades portrayed itself as an innocent 'lamb' which wants peace with the 'wolves' surrounding it, including the original Palestinian owners of the land. But the failure of this process up till now has starkly shown that Israel is the greatest obstacle to peace.

Today, too, after another experience with Israel, and after the indirect talks through Turkey, this truth has been proven once again, which leads to another truth: political failure to restore legitimate rights to their owners will give resistance the right to carry out its duty and restore them.

We, in Syria in particular and as Arab countries in general, have never changed our positions towards peace as a strategic objective that should be attained some day (of course through the full return of the rights, particularly the full return of occupied territories). But at the same time, our pure and honest intentions towards peace, would not make us overlook the facts or the legitimate and logical questions that help us conduct an accurate reading of the future. Is it possible for a state to work for peace while it is founded on illegitimate occupation, continuous killing of the indigenous Palestinian people, and carrying out massacres in Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza for decades? How can such a state be our partner in the peace process while it has always hindered, implicitly and explicitly, the possibility of reaching any agreement during the whole span of the peace process since it was launched. How can it be, when it has chosen the most extremist government in its history? I do not believe that any of us is unaware of the racist segregation wall in the West Bank, or the slow death meted out on Gaza by

imposing a blockade against it and destroying its fields, or the systematic Judaization of Jerusalem in order to have a completely Jewish state with all its implications in the ultimate expulsion of about two million Palestinians in a new, and may be final, act of ethnic cleansing.

This means that we have to expect more turbulence in our political arena; and some Western states are responsible for that turbulence when they used, for years, to deny the facts on the ground and adopted an inverted logic of accusing the resistance of terrorism and depicting them as outlawed gangs who do not belong to or represent their people in their struggle against occupation. Such states have further adopted the worst form of double standards when they preach sermons about human rights, but when these humans are Arabs or Muslims, death becomes the only right they defend or advocate.

Today, these countries have started, though late, to realize their mistake because they can no longer turn a blind eye to the crystal-clear reality, but they are still unable to move in the right direction by dealing with these facts, particularly the massive public support which resistance forces have in our region making them the major element in any solution and the most important guarantor for the return of rights to their owners. But since the events will not wait for their vision to be fully forged, neither will they wait on our delay in taking the initiative, we have to move on to make such events happen, most importantly lifting the siege off Gaza, and seeking to present the resistance in its true image to different parties, as a liberation movement with a just cause that expresses the will of any people whose land is occupied. We also have to stand firm against the Judaization of Jerusalem as process which aims at eliminating the diverse historical and spiritual aspects of this city. But, before and after this, Israel should not be rewarded for its crimes; rather we should link any development of the relations, if they exist at all, to the degree it expresses, in concrete terms, its commitment to just and comprehensive peace, the return of the legitimate rights, and its withdrawal from the occupied territories in Palestine, the Golan Heights and Southern Lebanon.

But maintain the present situation will only lead to the creation of a fertile ground for tension and extremism which breeds terrorism, which is the major source of inspiration for security theorists who used it as an enemy through which to justify their policies under the theme of “security in confrontation with terrorism”. In fact, terrorism is not a state of security; it is rather a state of mind that has its political, security and even cultural manifestations. Therefore, it is not to be fought by suppressing the manifestations, but by addressing the essence and root causes of the issue; and that cannot succeed by chasing or hunting a terrorist who can be replaced by tens of terrorists in another place. This can only be achieved by purging the mental state which leads to terrorism. In other words, the security that most countries talk about, in the practical sense of the word, is nothing but securing the mind and the intellect against any infection or deviation. It is cultural security which is achieved by instilling true faith and sound moral values and by promoting the culture of openness. We achieve political security when we solve pending political issues that cause frustration then give rise to extremism which then leads to terrorism.

Security is also achieved when our political stands reflect the real positions of our peoples, because internal factors are much more influential than external ones, whether positive or negative. There is no doubt that all this requires cooperation amongst ourselves and with others. But the fact that terrorism has today become a dangerous global phenomenon which requires joint efforts in order to fight it does not mean that we should allow for manipulating it and making it an open arena for mixing cards and replacing it with a worse terrorism through exaggeration, terrorization, launching aggressions against peoples or occupying countries. In this regard, we naturally reject labeling any religion or culture with terrorism, as the situation now is for Islam and Muslims. But I would not make this a priority. Priority should rather be given to the reality of things. This accusation will not change the essence of Islam as a religion of tolerance. Nor will accusing the Muslims of backwardness obscure the truth about their civilization and what it offered to humanity in terms of thought, values, and respect of humans. And if there are ignorant people, some day they will know the truth; and if they persist in their ignorance, they will be the biggest losers. But the important thing for us is

that some Muslims do not confuse defending their religion with defending terrorism, or being committed to their faith and being stringent and fanatical. Confusing our affairs gives others a pretext to confuse them, as when some people talk about 'Islamic terrorism' which gives the impression that 'terrorism' is a major component of Islam. That is why priority should be given to protecting our youth against any factors of deviation, and helping them see their religion from the right perspective in order to help others do that too.

Brothers and Sisters,

Islam is the religion of openness and cultural interaction; and it has gained its strength and continuity from its openness to all, in every sense and implication of openness and interaction. Islam has always lived side by side with other religions in one geographical and human space and has been able to engage all the nations and ethnicities which assimilated it without undermining their cultures or peculiarities. That is why, when we talk about an Islamic world, we do not mean only Muslims but also all the components of this rich diversity which, through its existence, expresses the truth of openness which characterizes Islam and our Organization which defends the interests of all those who live in this vast region regardless of their faith or ethnicity. All those who live in this area are brothers and sisters and have commitments towards each other; and unity among them is a duty within the same religion and ethnicity in as much as it is a duty among different religions and ethnicities. That is why any call for closure is contradictory to the essence of religion and destructive to its noble goals, and any attempt at instigating division inside this world and among its components is a violation of the essence of its human mission.

In this context, we must face the attempts aiming at creating conflicts and hostility among our peoples and cultures. We must also understand the logic and implications of the media and cultural war, the war of terminology and concepts which are exported to us, and which are then transformed into a cultural and political reality that has nothing to do with our reality. In this fake reality a friend is turned into an enemy and a brother into an

adversary. The illusory difference, which exists neither in our culture nor among our cultures, is turned into a real war, with our blood as a necessary fuel for external intervention in our affairs and for weakening our countries. Such massive wars start with a short-sighted political term and a faulty concept which express isolation and intellectual closure. These wars could result from a shortsighted political performance. A big bomb is detonated by a small detonator. Pulling the detonator turns the bomb into a passive object. Such detonators are breeding in our societies today and we have to pull them before they explode in our faces.

Hence the importance of coordinating our cultural and media policies in order to face this worrying situation by expanding the circle of dialogue among ourselves for consolidating the natural bridges among our peoples and filling in the artificial gaps so that we can walk together towards the future as a force molded by cooperation and solidarity.

Education complements media and culture in protecting the next generations through designing educational policies which open their eyes to the truth of Islam and the essence of its message of good, construction, and the use of the mind for achieving progress, rejecting laziness and dependence, and fostering the values of right, justice and human dignity.

As for the economy, it has always been the natural channel for communication and interaction among peoples, in as much as it is the road for achieving development. It is normal for us, as for other countries of the world, to have our economic bloc which advances our interests and interacts positively with the interests of others.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish your conference success in reaching the right framework for activating our Organization and strengthening our solidarity in a manner that reflects the strong ties which connect us, moving away in our approach and performance from any feeling of inferiority and isolation, distinguishing accurately between the real and the illusory

enemy, and identifying our friends and our brothers, based on our confidence in the future that our peoples can guarantee by possessing all the necessary elements, means and resources for making and driving it. What remains for us, as states and governments, is to forge the vision, make the decision, and gain the knowledge for using these resources in the right place at the right time.

Once again, I welcome you and wish you all success.

Wassalamu Alaikum!

SP-PRES-SYRIA
ZAHID