

## Syrian President Bashar al-Assad meets French counterpart in Damascus



**President al-Assad: Syria's Vision of Gaza Solution: Immediate Stop of Brutal Aggression, Withdrawal of Israeli Occupation Forces, Lifting the Siege. President Sarkozy: No Military Solution to Situation in Gaza**

DAMASCUS, Jan 06, 2009 (SANA)—President Bashar al-Assad held a meeting on Tuesday with French President Nicolas Sarkozy who arrived earlier in the day on a visit to Syria.



The two Presidents held a plenary meeting attended by the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU Javier Solana, Chief Advisor of the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmed Dawood Oglu.

The Syrian side was represented by Vice President Farouk al-Shara, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, Presidential Political and Medial Advisor Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, Assistant Foreign Minister Dr. Abdul-Fattah Ammoura, and Syrian Ambassador to France Lamia Shakkour.

The French side was represented by Diplomatic Advisor to the French President Jean-David Levitt, Technical Advisor for North Africa, Middle and Far East Boris Boillon, and the French Ambassador to Syria Michel Duclos.

The meeting was also attended by European Envoy for the Peace Process in the Middle East Marc Oti, Head of the European Commission Delegation to Syria Vassilis Bontosoglou, and the Czech Ambassador in Damascus Tomas Ulicny.

After the talks, President al-Assad and President Sarkozy held a joint press conference, where President al-Assad began by welcoming Syria's guests, saying “we are gathered today under difficult circumstances and a dangerous situation currently taking place in Gaza, as the Israeli aggression on Gaza has been continuing for eleven days, with many massacres committed until this hour against innocent civilians. Victims from the Palestinian side up to this morning amount to 580 men, women and children... 30% of these victims are children under the age of ten, and many of the victims are women.”

President al-Assad added “Yesterday, 17 children were killed in one day... seven women, most of them mothers... the number of injured surpassed 2700, most of them in critical condition, and there is no medicine to treat them. Widows and the disabled are in the thousands. We are talking here about a situation that resembles a collective detention camp that aims to break the will of an entire people.”

His Excellency said “In light of this serious atmosphere, many deliberations took place among countries interested in resolving this issue and this dangerous situation. There

were many initiatives that preceded the ground invasion during the aerial assault. These initiatives focused on the need for a ceasefire for humanitarian reasons... for transporting medicine and food. Israel rejected these proposals, including the European proposals following the invasion. Yesterday, the Israelis refused any ceasefire.”

President al-Assad said “the visit of President Sarkozy comes within this context. This is an important visit during which we discussed various issues and details related to this matter. I have explained to President Sarkozy the vision and position of Syria, which is summarized by first stopping the brutal Israeli aggression on the Palestinian people immediately, reaching ceasefire, and the immediate withdrawal of the occupation forces from Gaza lands.

“Second, lifting the siege as it constitutes a non-military declaration of war and a slow death. There can be no real and lasting ceasefire without lifting the siege. When we give someone a choice between slow death and fast death, they will choose fast death since it's easier. These two points are basic, with more details following them to form the basis for any permanent and lasting solution in Gaza.”

His Excellency added that “we always talk frankly away from foggy diplomacy which has become the prevailing state, particularly in early 1990's...that's why we reached this stage because there were no solutions but rather idioms that governed the political



work....there were no real work that corresponds to the realities on the ground.”

He added that “I told President Sarkozy that we have to be frank and call things by their very names...and I'm here in my first public appearance after the start of the aggression...we have to call things by their names...for us what is happening is a war crime...and yesterday the Amnesty International issued a report saying that Israel has been bypassing Geneva Convention....

“Unfortunately, the Israelis didn't learn from Lebanon war...they wanted to eradicate the resistance but the answer was that the thought of resistance has been augmented. The resistance is not an organization to dismantle, or an individual to be assassinated or a weapons cache to be destroyed...It's a thought that expands...they committed the same fatal mistake again, and now this thought is spreading more and more...and who pays the price...the demonstrations we see in the Arab and Islamic streets and in some European countries prove that well.”

His Excellency added that “in all cases we seek to reach a quick solution to this humanitarian tragedy...the essence of talks with President Sarkozy revolved on that subject: We agreed on the importance of ceasefire and the withdrawal and the lifting of the siege...we'll follow on later the other details.”

President al-Assad went on to say that: “We are confident that the Israeli aggression will not be able to break the Palestinian people's will to establish their own independent state and withdrawal of the occupiers from their

occupied territories...We are ready in Syria to exert all efforts and cooperate with any effort exerted in the region in this regard, regionally or internationally.”

For his part, President Sarkozy thanked President al-Assad for the great hospitality, saying that “Javier Solana and I are convinced that Syria can offer important

contribution in seeking a solution to this conflict in which the region is passing. With our partners in Europe we condemned without any doubt this Israeli disproportional reaction, and also we condemned the land attack which started four days ago.”

“Yesterday evening, I was with president Peres and prime minister Ehud Barak and I told them the same thing, and said there was no military solution to the situation in Gaza, and violence has to stop as soon as possible...all possible efforts should be exerted so that humanitarian aid reach to Gaza population...I hope that European non-governmental organizations will be able to enter Gaza today and humanitarian corridors be opened...I also said that firing shells towards Israel is unacceptable and should be stopped.”

He added that “as for all these points Syria can offer full contribution. Syria had already indicated that when it started indirect negotiations with Israel through the Turkish mediation. France, Turkey and Syria work on the same point and determination. We know you want peace, and Syria indicated

**“We are gathered today under difficult circumstances and a dangerous situation currently taking place in Gaza...We are talking here about a situation that resembles a collective detention camp that aims to break the will of an entire people,” the Syrian President said on Tuesday.**

that it works for peace as shown in Doha Agreement. I'm directly heading for Beirut after Damascus...and as part of this region and thanks to Syria's efforts pressures must be put on all the parties concerned included Hamas so that weapons are silent and peace is restored.”

He added that “President Bashar al-Assad can play a main role in that direction. Syria must help us to persuade Hamas to opt the sound of reason, logic and Palestinian reconciliation. All must work so that we reach the only permanent solution: The establishment of two states: a Palestinian modern democratic viable state and Israel which has the right to safety.”

He said “the images we saw yesterday is really unbearable for everybody. We don't want to say that this problem must be solved in fifteen days...it must be solved now. If Europe can help everybody to tread the first step alongside with Syria and Turkey, and if Egypt as a big country, and President Mubarak can make an initiative...then I'm convinced that we will get out of this whirl of violence and enter into peace...time isn't on our side.”

“Those who are able to make peace must come forth now and immediately. I found the way for a confident dialogue with Syria, and I recognize Syria's importance in this region of the world and its influence on several influential parties. I have no doubt that President al-Assad will do all the best to persuade everybody to pursue the path of reason.

Later, Presidents al-Assad and Sarkozy answered journalists' questions.

In answer to a question regarding Syria's invitation to hold an Arab Summit, President al-Assad said “Syria adheres to its position

on the necessity of holding an Arab Summit... there were contacts during the past few days between me and the Emir of Qatar to discuss this issue.”

President al-Assad added “If this isn't the right time to hold an Arab Summit, then what condition calls for holding an Arab Summit? Is it possible to attend an economic summit in two weeks while it is impossible to attend a summit for a political reason and for dealing with a humanitarian, political and military situation? This is unacceptable... what is being done so far is unacceptable.”

His Excellency said “Syria still insists on holding this summit. There have been attempts recently by Syria as the president of the Arab Summit and Qatar as a host of the Summit to achieve the quorum in order to hold a successful Arab Summit, but circumstances call for a Summit in any form, even a mini-summit, even a summit with whoever attends. This calls for deliberations with some countries before we can define stances, but we have few hours between one massacre and the next... we have neither days nor weeks to waste, and despite that I say that it will be embarrassing if no solution is reached to the Gaza situation before the next Summit.

President al-Assad added “I will contact His Highness the Emir of Qatar to discuss this subject and see what we can accomplish.”

In answer to a question to President Sarkozy on whether there is a movement with President al-Assad to establish an Arab-

international action or present an integrated solution to the Gaza issue, Sarkozy said “I believe that returning to the state that existed a few days ago is unacceptable by all sides, as Israel wants to guarantee security and the Palestinians want to reopen the crossing points. This is at least the solution that will allow us to move forward to stop the language of war and try to understand how we arrived at the current complicated situation. This is the roadmap, but there is no trust between the two sides, and we must create this trust by pushing everyone to dialogue.”

Sarkozy added that “France is presiding on the Security Council for January, and I believe that the international order is necessary and that the role of the UN is integral, but peace comes first and foremost from the culture in the field, neighboring countries and Europe, which must adopt an ambitious policy in the Middle East as a strong and independent Europe bearing good will and an honest intention.”

Regarding President Sarkozy's tour in the region, he said “It's too early to reach conclusions, as there are many calls to make and meetings to hold. We will draw conclusions when the time comes.”

President Sarkozy addressed the journalists, saying “It is easy to remain outside the fray, to look at the people who are fighting and make clever statements. It's natural to raise our hands to the heavens and say this is not a good thing... this is not the strategy I choose; I chose to come to the field with good will and try to establish dialogue with my fellow Europeans and show that we can push everyone to reach a decision. You will judge later whether my arrival was useful or not.”

President Sarkozy concluded by saying “I believe that due to the serious situation, a

statesman worthy of that title doesn't remain standing in front of the television, watching people fighting, expressing regret and sadness as they sit on their chairs in their offices; instead they come to the field and take some risks. Believe me that these risks in service of peace are smaller than the risks of watching war and doing nothing. I believe that we must trust the judgment of the region's leaders, and those leaders must find means to establish peace.

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