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www.afgazad.com

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Al Jazeera

Syria warns against foreign intervention

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Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has warned of an "earthquake" if the West intervenes in his country.

In an interview with Britain's *Sunday Telegraph newspaper*, Assad said international involvement risked transforming Syria into "another Afghanistan".

Assad's comments on Saturday came as reports emerged of **heavy fighting and mounting casualties** in the city of Homs over the past few days.

He also stressed Syria was key to keeping the peace in the region.

Assad has drawn repeated condemnation from the United Nations, Arab League and Western governments for the violent manner in which he has attempted to crush a seven-month uprising against his rule.

Assad said in the interview that Western countries "are going to ratchet up the pressure, definitely... but Syria is different in every respect from Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen", comparing his countries to others affected by 'Arab Spring' uprisings.

"The history is different. The politics is different. Syria is the hub now in this region. It is the fault line, and if you play with the ground you will cause an earthquake," he said.

"Do you want to see another Afghanistan, or tens of Afghanistans? Any problem in Syria will burn the whole region. If the plan is to divide Syria, that is to divide the whole region," Assad added.

'Not the stereotypical Arab dictator'

In an interview with Al Jazeera, Andrew Gilligan, the *Telegraph* journalist who met Assad, said the Syrian president seemed "reasonably relaxed, and quite personable" during their interview.

"He is not the stereotypical Arab dictator," said Gilligan. "He is not blustering, or aggressive."

When discussing reforms, Assad "said to me he had made a number of concessions already," Gilligan continued. "He said he announced several new laws."

The UN estimates that more than 3,000 people, including nearly 200 children, have been killed in the unrest. Since the start of protests in March, Syrian authorities have blamed the violence on gunmen they say have killed 1,100 soldiers and police.

Syria has barred most international media, making it hard to verify accounts from activists and authorities.

Assad said that Syrian authorities had made "many mistakes" in the early part of the uprising, but that the situation had now improved.

"We have very few police, only the army, who are trained to take on al-Qaeda," he said. "If you sent in your army to the streets, the same thing would happen. Now, we are only fighting terrorists. That's why the fighting is becoming much less."

Assad said he had responded differently to calls for political change than other, now-deposed Arab leaders. "We didn't go down the road of stubborn government," he said.

"Six days after [the protests began], I commenced reform. People were skeptical that the reforms were an opiate for the people, but when we started announcing the reforms, the problems started decreasing. This is when the tide started to turn. This is when people started supporting the government," Assad told the *Sunday Telegraph*.