

**Interview of Nikolaos van Dam with Eleanor Hall, *The World Today*,
ABC News Australia, 12 September 2011.**

With extended audio:

<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2011/s3315452.htm>

Arab League's Syria deal too late: former diplomat

Eleanor Hall reported this story on Monday, September 12, 2011 12:34:00

ELEANOR HALL: Opposition groups say this week has been one of the bloodiest in the Syrian uprising and this morning the United States condemned yesterday's death in custody of a Syrian human rights activist.

But the head of the Arab League says he's now reached an agreement with the Syrian president on a political reform process that could end the regime's deadly crackdown.

The Arab League is providing only scant details of the deal, but a former Dutch ambassador to Syria and to Egypt says he understands the agreement leaves president Bashar al-Assad in power for the next three years.

And when he spoke to me this morning, Nikolaos Van Dam said that while that may have worked six months ago, the Assad regime has killed too many Syrians for such a political settlement to work now.

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, at first they called for just reform and for freedom then they started to call for the replacement of the president and now during demonstrations even they call for his execution so if the regime would not use that enormous violence, there might have been a prospect for dialogue. Now I think it is much too late, much too long.

ELEANOR HALL: So even if the president has agreed to some proposal being put by the Arab League, at this point you would say it is irrelevant?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, it is relevant that there is at least a kind of dialogue between the president and the Arab League. If he would really be prepared to stop the violence then there is a possibility for discussion. Perhaps

this Arab League initiative may lead to something.

ELEANOR HALL: With the US though, European leaders, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and indeed the opposition groups inside Syria now calling for president Bashar al-Assad to step down, do you think there is a solution that can be reached that leaves him in power?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well I think he will just try to stay in power through force because the alternative is that if he will be stepping down, it will mean his end not only the regime but I mean he has now seen examples in other countries. I think he doesn't want to sign his own death penalty.

ELEANOR HALL: Well, the UN says more than 2000 people have been killed. You have been an ambassador in Syria. Should the international community - could the international be doing more?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, one of the things that has been missing is the dialogue. So for instance the United States or the European Union, they have imposed all kinds of sanctions but at the same time these sanctions were not accompanied by any kind of dialogue.

One of the problems is that if there would be really a resolution of the type of Libya which would keep all kinds of doors open for military action, I think this would be vetoed by the Russians and the Chinese.

ELEANOR HALL: Is there any likelihood though of the international community moving towards any sort of military intervention along the lines of Libya?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: I don't think so at all because in the first place it is much more complicated in Syria. They have weapons much more, they have much more training and where to start and what would you like to achieve.

ELEANOR HALL: What do you think then is the way forward to stop the violence?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, I think one of the possibilities is that there would be a coup, a military coup within the regime from Alawite officers who are very close to the regime and are prepared to, without violence against the population, to make a new effort for reform.

Another thing is the possibility, the very destructive possibility of a civil war.

ELEANOR HALL: Well, you mentioned the possibility of a coup. There were reports of more military defections on the weekend but is it really likely that senior military elements in his army will abandon Assad?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, it is extremely dangerous even to contemplate a coup because if it is being discovered, the people who want to try this will be immediately executed so it may take some time but the people who defect are usually junior officers or junior military but they don't have any power because they don't have any weapons.

ELEANOR HALL: So how likely then do you think it is that he will be removed by a military coup?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, it is extremely difficult, I mean, and it could be very bloody because all those who are empowered simply don't want to leave.

ELEANOR HALL: You don't sound terribly optimistic that we are likely to see an end to the violence any time soon.

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: No, it may take a long time and gradually the violence from the opposition may increase because they don't see any other way to topple the regime.

ELEANOR HALL: The Syrian government has always dismissed these protests, saying they are orchestrated by foreign terrorists. What do make of those allegations?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, I think there may be some truth in the sense that there is armed opposition so their strength in a way was their peacefulness, now they are looking for other means, there is more violence is getting into the system.

I think there are probably Salafist people, Islamic extremists which have been fighting in Iraq, Syrians who have returned, so I don't think it is foreign powers who are inter-meddling but Syrians themselves who have had experience abroad.

ELEANOR HALL: But if there are armed elements in these protest groups, does that mean that president Assad is then justified in stopping these protests?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, I think he may be justified in going against those people who use armed violence but the repression is completely disproportionate.

ELEANOR HALL: What advice would you give president Assad right now?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, I would have given him advice many months ago to being a dictatorship I think he should have the power to order all his people to stop the violence and then open a dialogue but a dialogue which is serious enough, but after all these bloodshed it has become much more difficult.

ELEANOR HALL: Do you think that Bashar al-Assad will survive?

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM: Well, I think in the end he will not survive but he can still stay in power for quite a long time.

ELEANOR HALL: That is former Dutch ambassador, Nikolaos Van Dam, who has just updated his book, *The Struggle for Syria*.

He spoke to me this morning from Cádiz Province in Southern Spain, and you can listen to a longer version of that interview on our website which includes his views on the latest developments in Egypt where he was also ambassador.