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Interview with Nikolaos van Dam on Syria

BBC: Nikolaos van Dam, who is an expert on Syria and the Middle East and former Dutch Ambassador to Iraq, welcome to the program.

Well, President al-Asad has finally come to the public eye. What should we make of these new developments, and the appointment of a new defense minister.

Nikolaos van Dam: Well, I think it is very easy to replace the defense minister, with all respect of course to the person who has been assassinated. Most of the defense ministers have been previously chief of staff. So [the president] can replace him easily. But the problem is that these killed people are very close to the president. Like former general Hasan Turkmani, who actually is still from the epoch of Hafiz al-Asad, of the father [of Bashar al-Asad], [and was] dealing with security, which says something about the way they are thinking about security. And what it also says is that the job, if you can call it a job, which has been done, is an inside job. I don't believe it has been [carried out] by the opposition. They could not really, technically speaking, reach to the interior of the security place where this gathering took place. So it can be from within the regime, from people, perhaps Alawite officers, who are criticizing the regime for its dealing with the opposition, for its violence and so on. There must be a lot of opposition [also within the regime]. But if [these people] would be visible, they would already be dead.

BBC: Mr Van Dam, let me quickly ask you about these developments out of the United Nations. Clearly, the suicide attack on Wednesday, is a big blow to the Asad regime, but the government still has its supporters, and some of the most powerful, at the UN in New York.

Nikolaos van Dam: I think that even if a Security Council resolution would have been [adopted], it would not mean that things would change a lot on the ground. There are already a lot of sanctions, and there are many security council resolutions which have not been carried out. Some are forty five years old. So, people think that if the Russians would agree, or the Chinese would agree, that the whole world in Syria would change. But this is a struggle of life and death - I think also in the perception of the regime and the opposition. So it is unfortunate that unity in the Security Council has not been achieved. But it would not make much difference, I think, on the ground within Syria.

BBC: We leave it there. Nikolaos van Dam, former Dutch Ambassador to Iraq and expert on the Middle East. Many thanks.