

## **Syrian President Bashar Assad: Will he fight or flee?**

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As Syrian rebels encircle President Bashar al Assad's stronghold in the capital he will be aware of the fate met by fellow travellers who faced the wrath of the people they misruled.

Moammar Gadhafi of Libya dragged out of a drainpipe, stabbed and shot; Egypt's Hosni Mubarak jailed for life.

Assad is fighting hard to avoid a similar grim end. His warplanes are pounding residential suburbs in the south and east to keep at bay opposition fighters under the Free Syrian Army umbrella.

Now they have Damascus airport — just 25 kilometres from the heart of the old city — within their crosshairs and have declared it a legitimate target.

The battle for Damascus looms closer. As the police state Assad, 47, inherited from his father 12 years ago crumbles around him he faces tough choices about what to do next. Fight or flee?

One veteran diplomat believes the president will fight to the death. "This is a battle for death or life," said Nikolaos van Dam, author of *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, who has 35 years of experience in the country. "The regime knows if they are toppled they will simply be killed.

It could be a long battle in Damascus.

Meanwhile, events outside Syria are moving apace to find a post-Assad future. The newly formed Syrian National Coalition, recognized by the European Union and Gulf states as the "sole legitimate representative of Syria," is meeting western and Arab representatives Dec. 12 in Morocco, where political transition will be discussed.

Assad has remained defiant. In an interview with Russia Today television, broadcast on Nov. 8, he said: "I am Syrian, I was made in Syria, I have to live in Syria and die in Syria."

He may have little choice.

Exile with his wife Asma and their three young children to Russia, which has supported the regime, or to another country, is no guarantee he would not be extradited for war crimes in the future, said van Dam.

A peaceful settlement with rebels is no longer an option, van Dam added. A ceasefire brokered by UN peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi in October was violated by both sides or simply rejected by some fighter groups.

And an internal coup by Alawite officers to find a more agreeable leader would not work because the opposition wants to end Alawite domination of Syria, said van Dam.

"They themselves would be toppled," he said.

"Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave" is common graffiti, underlining the sectarian divisions in the civil war where many Sunni religious extremists in the rebel ranks believe Alawites are heretics.

Alawite civilians and soldiers risk being massacred if Assad were to abandon them, said Joshua Landis, director of Middle East Studies at Oklahoma University, who blogs at Syria Comment. "The Alawites are counting on Assad to protect his people from possible retribution," he said. "He has kept them hostage in a sense and now he can't abandon him."

Van Dam agreed. "He took this position from his father not because he earned it but because he was put on the throne and he feels a responsibility to not just save his skin."

Assad will fight hard to hang on to Sunni-dominated Damascus, the seat of his family's rule.

The city is defended by two elite forces loyal to the family: the Republican Guards, comprised almost entirely of Alawites, and the Fourth Armoured division, commanded by the president's younger brother Maher, 44, who has a reputation for savagery.

“Damascus is the golden goose and Assad will not allow them (rebels) to get that goose alive because they will have something valuable,” said Landis.

However, it may take much longer to dislodge Assad than it did Gadhafi, according to Paul Rogers, a professor in the department of peace studies at northern England’s Bradford University.

“The power base in Syria still has domestic support, and far more military capability than Gadhafi’s Libya, which survived six months of extensive NATO action,” he wrote at openDemocracy.

Germany and the Netherlands are sending four Patriot missile batteries with 760 soldiers under NATO command to the Turkish border, and the British government announced in a statement it was amending an arms embargo against Syria to help the rebels.

If Assad is driven out of Damascus he will probably retreat north with Alawite loyalists to the coastal mountainous provinces of Latakia and Tartus, which are the historic Alawite heartlands, said Landis.

With 1.2 million Alawite men and an average median age in Syria of 21, Landis added, Assad has a large pool of young recruits to continue fighting, with financial and military support from Shiite brethren in Iraq, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and most importantly Iran.

“If he gets pushed out of Damascus it is not the end of him,” he said. “The regime will be gone, I suppose, but Assad and his militia will not. They have command and control, leadership and good arms.”

On Wednesday U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters in Brussels the regime was “increasingly desperate” and could turn to chemical weapons because it was on the brink of collapse, echoing similar warnings by European Union officials.

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad has repeatedly said the government would never use chemical weapons against its own people and western nations of setting up a pretext to invasion.

A poison gas attack on his opponents while he controls Damascus would be a mistake because it would ensure foreign intervention, said Landis. But up in the mountains, with his back against the wall and the prospect

of widespread massacres, the calculation could change.

“I am just trying to think what the leadership there is thinking. And that’s what they will be thinking: ‘my families, my village.’ They’ve got to get there and protect those people because there is so much hatred, sectarian demonization that they will get massacred.”