

SYRIA DEEPLY

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Alison Tahmizian Meuse – March 15, 2013

Syria Deeply Asks: Where Would Bashar al-Assad Go If He Were Overthrown?

As a regular feature, inspired by your questions about the Syria conflict, we've rounded up answers from some of the top minds in our network. If you'd like to submit a question for us to tackle send it to ask@newsdeeply.org.

Question: *Where would Syrian President Bashar al-Assad go if he were overthrown?*

Nikolaos van Dam, former Dutch ambassador to Iraq and Egypt and author of 'The Struggle for Power in Syria': *He will not flee.*

He will stay until the end and fight to death. Firstly, he is not going to sign his own death warrant. Secondly, he feels it is his responsibility as president, and also as the man who succeeded his father [former Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad].

He also feels an obligation towards his supporters, his community and minorities that support him. He is certainly aware that the Alawite community is threatened. The key positions of the regime are all Alawites and the shabiha are to a great extent Alawites. This has reinforced the sectarianism of the conflict. While you have very avid Sunni supporters [of the regime], the majority does not like this regime at all. No one does, except those that are linked to it and benefit from it.

The people surrounding him would not believe everything would be solved. Theoretically, there could be an agreement that around 200 of the most important people around him would go as well on understanding that others will be left alone. But I don't see such an agreement coming and even then it will not be solved. What about the rest of the regime, the armed forces, the key officers and so on?

You hear month in and month out that president should resign. I presume people who say that have not thought about stage two.

Andrew Tabler, Syria expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy: *He will go to the Alawite coastland.*

He would go to the Syrian coastal mountains if he were forced to retreat from Damascus, probably Qurdaha. The Alawite community and other minorities would follow him if they had to, and they increasingly have to.

In terms of sustainability, that depends the degree to which others in the Alawite community do not want to kill him for bringing down the regime, and on how much the regime is prepared to use chemical weapons as a deterrent.

It does not seem that a negotiated solution is possible.

Wayne White, former senior U.S. State Department intelligence official and expert at the Middle East Institute: He will go to Iran, if he can.

In order to place himself as far as he could from the inevitably intense pressures on a host government...to turn him over to the ICJ [International Court of Justice], Iran probably is his only reasonable venue of flight and a country that could readily provide the means of aerial evacuation. If he could get there, wanted to go, and was welcomed, perhaps the ever sanctions-defying North Korea might be another possibility. Russia had been a possibility, but late last year senior officials in Moscow indicated they were not offering Bashar sanctuary.

Regarding a negotiated exit – in which case more venues might be arranged with guarantees if he and his entire family were to leave – we could see a juncture at which the regime's military fortunes decline to the point at which other members of the ruling elite might be willing to rid themselves of Bashar in order to secure their own survival. However, their willingness to do so at that point might turn out to be a Catch-22 type affair: if their plight was noticeably worse, the opposition could become even less willing to negotiate than the divided feelings it appears to have at this point. After all, they would likely smell victory, and would prefer to be rid of the entire abusive, bloody, and corrupt clique in Damascus in order to begin anew.