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Syrian dissident: Assad will fall only with Alawite help

By John Irish

August 23, 2012 6:59 PM GMT+1 · Updated 13 years ago



By John Irish

PARIS (Reuters) - A former member of the Syrian National Council, who says she was driven out of the leading opposition group after expressing fear about Islamist domination, said on Thursday President Bashar al-Assad would fall only when ruling minority Alawites jumped ship.

Randa Kassis, a Paris-based secular opposition figure, said the SNC was ignoring the rise in Salafist and al Qaeda fighters in the country and had little contact with the Alawites, let alone a strategy to convince them to swap sides.

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"Without the defection of the Alawites, we won't be able to do anything and we will go

straight into civil war," Kassis told Reuters. What began last year as a mostly peaceful protest movement against Assad's rule is now an armed insurrection led by rebels from the majority Sunni Muslim community.

Kassis, a writer and anthropologist, said she would unveil a new Syrian opposition bloc - The Movement for a Pluralist Society - in September to challenge the faction-ridden SNC.

It would, she said, be comprised of religious and ethnic minorities, including Druze, Christians and Kurds, as well as secular and pluralist members.

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Among those supporting her are Omar Idelbi, from the Local Coordinating Committee in Syria, film director Jamal Suleiman, and Imad Houssari, an SNC member and member of the local coordinating committee in Damascus, she said.

Separate Syrian opposition groups have floated proposals for a transitional government over the last month, a sign that differences among the many factions opposing Assad are deepening even as rebels have made gains on the battlefields.

With fighting reaching the capital Damascus and commercial centre Aleppo, Western countries are increasingly anxious for the disparate opposition factions to agree on a credible plan for a transitional government to succeed Assad.



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Kassis said she was sceptical any transitional government would be put in place, given the long history of mutual mistrust among Syrians after decades of police state repression.

She said her group's primary objective would be to organise mass defections, especially within the Alawite community that she said would hit the regime "hard."

Their families would first have to be smuggled out of the country, a feat only accomplished with the help of major powers.

There have been no known defections by powerful Alawites close to Assad but some high-ranking Sunni Muslims have bolted, including Prime Minister Riyadh Hijab who fled Syria on August 6. A trickle of defections from army ranks has raised rebel morale.

"We are working with Alawites - the children of the old guard - to convince Alawites to defect," she said. "I don't think there will be any for the first few months, because how do you reassure a community that feels in danger?"

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Financing is her group's main obstacle, Kassis said, adding that the SNC and rebel fighters had received funds from Islamist groups in the Gulf and the Muslim Brotherhood, helping them to create an "illusion" of legitimacy.

As a result, Kassis said, she would be lobbying anti-Islamist groups for financial backing. She urged Western powers to push Gulf Arab countries concerned with the rise of Islamists to channel their funds towards her group rather than to the SNC.

"I have to try. We're on the brink of civil war and now with the fundamentalists involved that can push the country into the unknown."

The SNC recently elected Kurdish activist Abdelbasset Seida to head the group. He has said his priority would be to expand the council and hold talks with other opposition figures to include them in the council, which some have accused of being dominated by Islamists.

Editing by Alexandria Sage and Mark Heinrich

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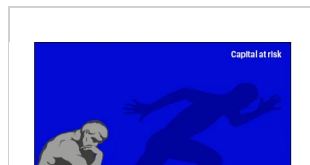
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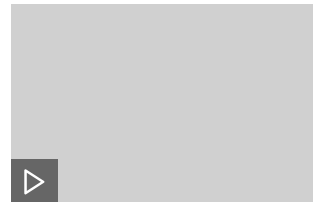
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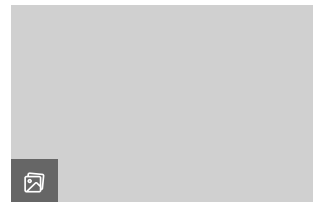
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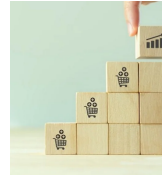


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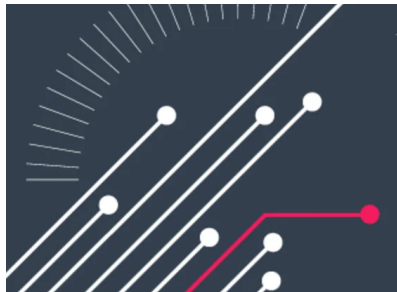
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