

# Bombing Strikes At Heart Of Syrian Regime

BY ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY AND ZEINA KARAM  
Associated Press

BEIRUT — Rebels penetrated the heart of Syria's power elite Wednesday, detonating a bomb inside a high-level crisis meeting in Damascus that killed three leaders of the regime, including President Bashar Assad's brother-in-law and the defense minister.

The unprecedented blow to the ruling dynasty could mark a turning point in the civil war, suggesting that those once close to Assad are turning against him. The bombing follows some of the worst bloodshed in Damascus of the 16-month uprising, a growing list of high-ranking defections and mounting frustration by world leaders over their inability to find a diplomatic solution.

The White House said the bombing showed Assad was "losing control" of Syria.

Rebels claimed responsibility for the attack, saying they had been planning it for two months and finally decided to plant the bomb in the room where the top government security officials in charge of crushing the revolt were holding a crisis meeting.

"God willing, this is the beginning of the end of the regime," said Riad al-Asaad, a commander of the disparate rebel forces who operate across the country. Al-Asaad, who is not related to the president, spoke to The Associated Press by telephone from Turkey, where he is based.

"Hopefully Bashar will be next," Al-Asaad said in a chilling warning to the 46-year-old Syrian president, a tall, lanky leader who once felt so confident in his security that he was known to hate being surrounded by bodyguards.

The whereabouts of Assad, his wife and his three young children were not immediately clear. He gave no immediate statements on the attack, which state-run TV initially blamed on a suicide bomber but later called simply a bomb.

As news of the assassinations broke, Syrians opposed to Assad celebrated in several locations across the country.

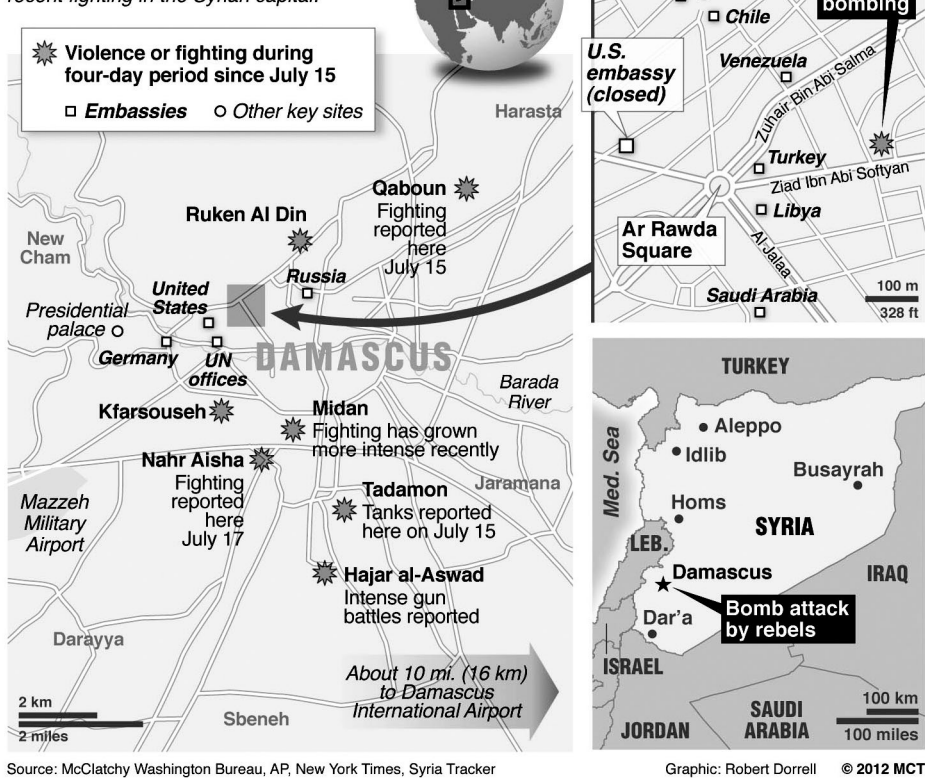
Internet video showed people in convoys of cars and motorbikes honking their horns and firing weapons in the air in the northeastern Idlib province, along with Aleppo in the north, Daraa in the south and Homs in central Syria. In the village of Hass, residents distributed sweets as they gleefully shouted: "You are going to hell, shabihās" — a reference to the pro-regime militia that has been blamed for mass killings.

The AP could not immediately verify the authenticity of the video.

Syrian TV confirmed the deaths of Defense Minister Dawoud Rajha, 65, a former army general and the most senior government official to be killed in the rebels' battle to oust Assad; Gen. Assef Shawkat, 62, the deputy defense minister who is married to Assad's elder sister, Bushra, and is one of the most feared figures in

## Fighting intensifies in Damascus

Rebels claimed responsibility for a bombing attack that killed three high-level officials of the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, including the defense minister. A look at recent fighting in the Syrian capital:



the inner circle; and Hassan Turkmani, 77, a former defense minister who died of his wounds in the hospital.

Also wounded were Interior Minister Mohammed Shaar and Maj. Gen. Hisham Ikhtiar, who heads the National Security Department. State TV said both were in stable condition.

Rajha was the most senior Christian government official in Syria, appointed to the post by Assad last year. His death will resonate with Syria's Christians, who make up about 10 percent of the population of 22 million and have mostly stood by the regime.

Christians say they are particularly vulnerable and they fear that Syria will become another Iraq, with Christians caught in the crossfire between rival Muslim groups.

The attack came at a time of great momentum for the forces trying to oust Assad, whose family has ruled Syria for four decades. Although the uprising began in March 2011, recent weeks have seen a spike in potentially transformative events, including high-level defections from the regime.

Four straight days of clashes between rebels and government troops this week in Damascus

showed the rebels can now infiltrate the tightly controlled capital. On Tuesday, Israel's military intelligence chief said Assad had diverted his troops away from the Israeli border area toward the center of Syria, reflecting the regime's worsening position.

The state-run news agency, SANA, reported the bombing was aimed at the National Security building, a headquarters for one of Syria's intelligence branches and less than 500 meters (yards) from the U.S. Embassy. The embassy has been closed since Washington withdrew its ambassador months ago.

Although there were no statements from Assad, Syrian TV said after the attack that a decree from him named Gen. Fahd Jassem al-Frej as the new defense minister. Al-Frej used to be the army chief of staff.

Wednesday's attack was the most brazen by the rebels. The last major attacks on regime figures and government buildings date back to the early 1980s, when the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood waged a guerrilla war to topple the regime of Assad's father and predecessor, President Hafez Assad.

## Explosion Hits Bulgarian Bus, At Least 6 Dead

SOFIA, Bulgaria (AP) — A bomb exploded on a bus carrying Israeli youth in a Bulgarian resort Wednesday, killing at least six people and wounding 32, officials said. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it "an Iranian terror attack" and promised a tough response.

The explosion took place in the Black Sea city of Burgas, some 400 kilometers (250 miles) east of the capital, Sofia. TV images showed smoke billowing from the scene — a parking lot at the local airport where the Israeli tourists had landed shortly before the blast. Several buses and cars were on fire near the shell of the exploded vehicle.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, after being briefed by his Bulgarian counterpart, said the explosion was caused by a bomb placed on the bus. He said seven people died, but by Wednesday night the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry had placed the death toll at six and the number of wounded at 32. Bulgarian leaders, including the president, rushed to the site, while the Foreign Ministry said authorities were operating under the theory the blast was a terrorist attack.

No group immediately claimed responsibility. But Israelis often have been targeted outside their country, and Wednesday's attack coincided with the 18th anniversary of the bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina that killed 85 people.

Israel suspects archrival Iran of being behind several of those assaults. The two nations have long been in dispute over the nature of Iran's nuclear program. Israel has warned it will use military force to curb Iran's program if it must because it believes Tehran wants atomic weapons — a charge Iranian officials deny.

## Romney Criticizes Obama Employment Issues

BOWLING GREEN, Ohio (AP) — A defiant Mitt Romney brushed aside more calls for the release of his tax returns on Wednesday and instead accused President Barack Obama of protecting his job at the expense of millions of unemployed Americans.

Intensifying his attacks as Obama focused on official meetings in Washington, the Republican presidential candidate told an overflowing Ohio crowd that the Democrat hasn't met with his jobs council in more than six months. In that time, however, Romney says Obama held 100 fundraisers.

"His priority is not creating jobs for you," Romney declared. "His priority is trying to keep his own job. And that's why he's going to lose it."

For the often-reserved Romney, the fiery rhetoric marks an aggressive shift as he struggles to answer questions about his business career and personal tax returns. The former businessman, who would be among the nation's wealthiest presidents if elected, has broken from tradition so far, having released just one year of personal income tax returns and promised to release a second.

But in speeches across four states this week, Romney has thrilled supporters with aggressive attacks on Obama and charges of "crony capitalism." At the same time, the Republican's campaign has teased reporters with news that Romney's selection of a running mate could come any day, forcing new attention on what may be the most important decision of the campaign so far.

## Welfare Restrictions Target Booze, Tattoos

BOSTON (AP) — Taking aim at what they call an abuse of the taxpayers' money, a growing number of states are blocking welfare recipients from spending their benefits on booze, cigarettes, lottery tickets, casino gambling, tattoos and strippers.

"If you're not abusing the program, then you should really have no problem with these reforms," said state Rep. Shaunna O'Connell, a Republican pushing for restrictions in Massachusetts.

While the crackdown has strong populist appeal in Democratic and GOP states alike in this era of tight budgets and tea party demands for fiscal discipline, advocates for the poor argue that the restrictions are based on stereotypes about people on welfare, and they say the notion of any widespread abuse is a myth. Most people on public assistance, they contend, are single mothers struggling just to get by.

The movement has been spurred in part by Congress. Under legislation signed by President Barack Obama in February to extend a payroll tax cut and unemployment benefits, welfare recipients are barred from using their cash assistance in strip clubs, casinos and liquor stores. States must change their own laws to conform by 2014.

From Arizona to Maine, states have been going even further on their own, adopting or considering legislation to block the use of benefits for other items deemed frivolous. Among them: porn, cruises and psychic readings.

## Tribes May Soon Approve Their Own Land Leases

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bill giving Native American tribes authority over agreements to lease their lands for development awaits the president's signature.

Supporters say the legislation, called the HEARTH Act, will hasten housing construction, clean energy and business or industry development on tribal lands. It allows tribes to approve their own land leasing agreements rather than the Bureau of Indian Affairs, if they choose. The Navajo Nation already has this sort of authority.

The Interior Secretary still must approve the tribes' leasing regulations. The bill does not apply to oil and gas leases. The administration issued new leasing regulations last November that set deadlines for approval of leases to end long delays.

# Drought Assistance Sought From Congress By Obama Administration

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Obama administration called on Congress Wednesday to assist farmers suffering from the worst drought in 25 years. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said three-fifths of the U.S. land mass and much of the country's corn and soybean crops have been affected by the lack of rain.

Vilsack met with President Barack Obama Wednesday to discuss a response to the disaster. Vilsack said farmers need Congress to pass a five-year \$500 billion farm and nutrition bill that is awaiting action in the House of Representatives or at least approve additional disaster programs or provide more flexibility in the availability of credit.

The administration has declared drought disasters in one

third of the counties in the country, making them eligible for assistance such as low interest loans.

Vilsack cautioned consumers about potential price gouging in the short-term, saying any increase in retail costs would likely come late this year and next year. In fact, he said, the price of beef, chicken and poultry could well go down in the short term as producers reduce their stocks in the face of higher feed costs. Vilsack also said that despite the drought, corn farmers are on track to having the third best corn crop in U.S. history.

"If in fact people are beginning see food price increases now, it is not in any way shape or form related to the drought and we should be very careful to keep an

eye on that to make sure that people do not take advantage of a very difficult and painful situation," Vilsack said.

The farm bill passed the Senate and cleared the House Agriculture Committee on a bipartisan vote. House Speaker John Boehner has not scheduled a vote on the legislation, but lawmakers representing rural regions were pressing him to accelerate action on the bill. Reps. Kristi Noem, R-S.D., and Peter Welch, D-Vt., were collecting signatures from their colleagues urging passage before the August congressional recess.

Asked about the role of prayer in addressing the drought, Vilsack said "If I had a rain prayer or rain dance I could do, I would do it."



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