

**RELEASE IN
PART B6**

From: Sidney Blumenthal [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, September 18, 2012 2:29 PM
To: H
Subject: H: Intel, Assad's plans for retreat. Sid
Attachments: hrc_memo_assad's_plans_091812.docx

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CONFIDENTIAL

September 18, 2012

For: Hillary
From: Sid
Re: Assad's plans

SOURCE: Sources with access to the highest levels of the Governments and institutions discussed below. This includes political parties and regional intelligence and security services.

1. During mid-September 2012 a sensitive source stated that while Syrian President Bashar al Assad remains convinced that his military forces can defeat the forces of the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA), his closest family advisors are discreetly working on plans for a retreat to the Alawite homeland around the cities of Latakia and Tartus. Although Syrian military commanders believe that the lack of unity among the factions of the FSA and the rebel Syrian National Council (SNC), added to the continuing support of the governments of Russia and China for Assad, give them a real advantage over the rebels they realize that the situation could change rapidly if the rebels score major victories to follow up on their successes in July 2012. In particular, the continued defection of Sunni Arab supporters undermines Assad's Alawite based regime; with the Alawites controlling only approximately twelve (12) percent of the population.

2. (Source Comment: This particularly sensitive individual stated that Assad does regularly visit Latakia, which serves to inspire reports that he has or is about to permanently flee Damascus. This source believes that this step will come only when it appears the Army has turned against him or is falling apart in the face of FSA attacks.)

3. In the opinion of this individual, the reverses suffered by the Syrian Army in July have been offset by increased military supplies from their foreign allies, particularly Russia. This source adds that the support from Russia for the Syrian helicopter forces has been particularly important. At the same time, the Assad family and their closest supporters realize that if the FSA does capture

Damascus they will face violent retribution for their activities during the civil war. While Bashar al Assad remains confident, his wife, and several other close relatives are focused on the fate of Assad's former ally Muammar al Qaddafi of Libya, who was captured and killed by rebel forces while attempting to flee to his home territory of Sirte. These individuals say in private that they do not want Assad to make the same mistake and wait too long to retreat to a secure area. This individual repeated that Assad had not, in his opinion, reached the point where he is willing to abandon Damascus, and begin any possible partition of Syria.

4. (Source Comment: According to a particularly sensitive source, President Assad is not interested in fighting to the death, and is watching the situation in Damascus with great care. However, for the present he is convinced that his forces are making advances against his enemies. This source believes that Assad worries that to a certain extent he is the prisoner of his father's legacy and there is a very real risk the Alawite commanders of the Army would move against him if he does not continue to show resolve. Assad does realize that if he is eventually forced to flee Syria and is unable to reach Russia or another allied state, he will be detained and face a trial for human rights violations at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague.)

5. A separate sensitive source added that Assad's contingency plans take into consideration the fact that Latakia Province is the heart of Alawite region. The village of Qardaha, located just outside of Latakia in the al-Alawiyin Mountains is the Assad family's ancestral home, where Assad's father Hafez al-Assad and his eldest brother, Basil, are buried in the family crypt. The Assad family tightly controls an area of about 60 miles around Qardaha, in what was the short lived Alawite State set up during the French mandate prior to Syrian independence in 1946. This region includes the city of Latakia and the port of Tartus with its Russian naval base protected by 2,500 elite marines. The Assad family advisors believe that if necessary the President, his family, and closest advisors can retreat to this region, where they can continue to receive supplies via the Russian naval base for a period of time. They also believe that the foreign supporters of the FSA will be reluctant to take direct military action in the region around the Russian base, fearing a serious international incident if Russia facilities or personnel are attacked by mistake.

6. (Source Comment: A particularly sensitive source added that the planning for a fallback position for Assad became more intense following July 18 attack on the National Security Building in which Assad's brother-in-law and other senior officials were killed. But the President is for the present reassured by the increased success of the Army, the continuing support of Russia, and the failure of the FSA to form a united front, despite the efforts of Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. That said Assad's family advisors are also talking to Hezbollah leaders, who have promised to support the Syrian President if he is forced to withdraw to Latakia, working out of their bases in the nearby Bekka valley in Lebanon. According to this plan, the Assad clan could try to hold on to the strip of coastal and mountainous land between the northern border with Turkey and the southern Lebanese frontier.)

7. According to a very sensitive source, Assad realizes that a retreat to the Alawite region will be a very temporary solution at best. Even the President's closest advisors do not believe that they can set up a separate Alawite state, and see any move in this direction as a last stand, from which Assad's supporters could try to mount an insurgency against an SNC revolutionary government in Damascus. At the same time it will provide the President and the ruling family with a secure escape route via the Russian Naval base at Tartus.

8. (Source Comment: One particularly sensitive source added that Assad's closest advisors are convinced that if the fighting goes badly for his government, the President will hang on in Damascus until there is absolutely no chance for a successful counter-attack. They contend that he realizes that a retreat to Latakia will be the beginning of what will be a very short lived endgame in the revolution. At this point this source believes that Assad is still convinced his forces can maintain their advantage

over the FSA until internal conflicts in the SNC, and between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, undermine the revolution.)