

Khaddam's Revelations: Is the Asad Regime Unraveling?

by [Robert Rabil \(/experts/robert-rabil-0\)](#)

Jan 6, 2006

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Rabil \(/experts/robert-rabil-0\)](#)

Robert Rabil is the LLS Distinguished Professor of Current Affairs in Florida Atlantic University's Department of Political Science.



Brief Analysis

Abdul Halim Khaddam, who was vice-president of Syria from 1984 to June 2005, gave an explosive interview to the Dubai-based al-Arabia TV on December 30 implicating the Syrian leadership, including President Bashar al-Asad, in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Khaddam's action widened irrevocably the crack in Syria's political system.

Khaddam and the Hariri Case

Khaddam's allegations went far beyond anything the UN investigation into the murder of Hariri has been able to establish. The former vice president revealed that the Syrian leadership had harshly threatened Hariri before his death; that the former Syrian chief of intelligence in Lebanon, Rustom Ghazaleh, had acted as the absolute ruler in that country; that only an apparatus with strong infrastructure could have carried out the assassination; and that no security apparatus could have taken the decision unilaterally.

Immediately after the interview, the UN investigation commission renewed its request to interview Asad and Foreign Minister Farouk Sharaa, giving Syria a deadline of January 10 to respond. Damascus approved the commission's request to interview Sharaa but has not given its final word regarding the interview with Asad, which it initially rejected. Syrian parliamentarian Faysal Kalthoum insisted, "This request must not contradict the constitutional and legal rules surrounding the dignity of the presidency, the symbol of sovereignty and national unity." This could signal that Asad may agree to an interview so long as he could claim that Syrian sovereignty was not violated.

Sidelining Hafiz al-Asad's Old Guard

Khaddam's testimony tears apart the facade of regime solidarity the Syrian leadership has been careful to project. The Syrian parliament and the ruling Baath Party therefore responded with great fury. Parliament voted unanimously to charge Khaddam with treason and accused him of corruption, and the Baath Party expelled the former vice president for betraying his country.

Bashar al-Asad has recently consolidated his power by appointing loyalists in sensitive positions and retiring senior officials. The Baath Party regional congress in June 2005 saw the retirement of high-ranking officials who helped

create the country's political system under Bashar's father, Hafiz al-Asad, including the defense minister, Mustafa Tlas; two vice presidents, Zuheir Mashariqa and Khaddam; and the assistant secretary-general of the Baath Party, Abdullah al-Ahmar. Meanwhile, Bashar narrowed the base of his regime to the most trusted, mainly Alawi officials. The sheer magnitude of the change pointed to a bargain whereby the interests of the old guard would be protected in exchange of their departure.

The manner with which the regime operated by silencing potential opposition and ignoring former senior officials engendered a deep personal animus toward Bashar al-Asad among those like Khaddam who considered themselves pillars of the political system. Against this background came the death -- reportedly, the assassination -- of Ghazi Kenaan, the interior minister, in October 2005 and the Khaddam interview.

By giving the interview, Khaddam jeopardized the lavish lifestyle he could have had in Syria. Presumably, a mixture of reasons led him to speak out against the regime: his friendship with the murdered Hariri; his ambition to once again play a role in Syrian politics; and most importantly, a personal antipathy toward Bashar, who has not only ignored Khaddam's advice but also was ungrateful to the vice president's efforts to smooth the younger Asad's transition of power. Taken together, these two incidents, Kenaan's death and Khaddam's statement, show that the Syrian leadership is split over the direction Asad is taking Syrian politics. Apparently, the old guard, who served Hafiz al-Asad, have become disillusioned with the new guard of Bashar al-Asad's regime. In his interview, Khaddam spared no harsh words against Ghazaleh and Sharaa. Though he denounced Sharaa's diplomatic blunders, he squarely placed the blame on Ghazaleh for creating the anti-Syrian conditions that preceded the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and accused him of corruption. Following the assassination of Hariri, Khaddam said he advised Asad in a meeting on February 28 to "cut the neck of the criminal Ghazaleh." But Asad kept Ghazaleh and even rewarded him.

The Fraying Regime

There are several indications that Khaddam's turn heralds a fraying of the Asad regime:

- 1) He set off a chain reaction of charges, further undermining the legitimacy of the regime. Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bianouni, head of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, said, "Khaddam's testimony will break up the power monopoly of the regime." Some members of parliament, mainly independents, began renewing their calls for investigations into official corruption. Khaddam is expected to appear on the al-Jazeera to defend himself and accuse others of corruption. There are ample targets from which he may choose; some of Asad's close relatives, such as the Makhlufts, are notorious for corruption.
- 2) The delicate confessional balance within the regime has been disrupted. Hafiz al-Asad was careful to cultivate Sunni alliances and appoint Sunnis to important posts across the political system, while real control remained in the hands of an informal power structure led by Alawi security officials. Bashar al-Asad has narrowed the base of his regime mainly to close, trusted Alawi officials, cutting out the key Sunnis with whom his father allied, especially Khaddam and the former defense minister, Mustafa Tlas. The regime recently closed the influential forum run by the Sunni Atassi family. (One of Khaddam's sons is married to a member of the Atassi family.)
- 3) Given his past stature in the Hafiz al-Asad regime, Khaddam may find some former senior officials ready to collaborate with him. It is rumored that Khaddam is coordinating with former chief of staff Hikmat Shihabi, who is in Paris. It is no idle speculation that disgruntled Alawi officials may rally around Khaddam. In this case, Khaddam may approach former chief of military intelligence Ali Douba, who is also currently in Paris. Khaddam may even contact Rifat al-Asad, Bashar's uncle, who has been exiled by the regime. This potentially emerging nexus between former senior Sunni and Alawi officials could strengthen itself by attracting alienated Alawis in Syria. For example, Khaddam's wife and daughter-in-law are from the influential Alawi al-Kheir Bek clan. Similarly, it is reported that

the family of Gazi Kenaan, from the powerful Alawi al-Kalbiyyah tribe, is mortified by the ill treatment they received at the hands of the regime. It is noteworthy that Kenaan's son is married to the daughter of Bashar al-Asad's uncle Jamil, who has been at odds with his late brother and nephew. According to unconfirmed reports, Munther al-Asad, son of Jamil, was recently arrested in Lebanon at the request of the Syrian regime.

All of this shows that the fabric of the Syrian regime is fraying.

Prospects

Bashar al-Asad could regroup and survive. Cooperating with the UN investigation would matter to the international community, but that is not the key issue now. More important for Asad would be opening the state to influences outside his narrow circle. The most effective step would be to appoint a powerful Sunni as prime minister to oversee genuine reforms. However, Asad's record suggests that he is unlikely to opt for such a course.

Robert Rabil, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, is an assistant professor and director of graduate studies in the Department of Political Science at Florida Atlantic University. He is the author of *Embattled Neighbors: Syria, Israel and Lebanon* (Lynne Rienner, 2003) and of the forthcoming *Syria, the United States and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Praeger, 2006).

Policy #1068

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)