

Assad's death spiral

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This may be how it ends for President Bashar al-Assad. A bomb attack struck a high-level meeting in the capital of Damascus today, killing four of the president's top security officials. Syrian state media has been surprisingly quick to report these details -- an oddity for anyone accustomed to the normally opaque nature of Syrian politics.

There are competing accounts of who was killed in the bombing, and how it was carried out. The Free Syrian Army has said the device was planted in the room and detonated by remote control, while Syrian state media declared that it was a suicide bombing. The officials reported dead as of this writing are Assad's brother-in-law and deputy Defense Minister Assef Shawkat, Defense Minister Dawoud Rajiha, Interior Minister Mohammad Ibrahim, and former Defense Minister Hassan Turkmani. There could be more -- many details of the attack are still unconfirmed, and could remain that way for some time.

The rapid deterioration of Assad's control in Damascus -- the capital was largely free from serious fighting a week ago -- may be surprising, but was also increasingly inevitable. For the past 16 months, the Syrian government has been caught in a vicious cycle: A city or a town rises up, and the military arrests, tortures, and kills its citizens in a bid to quell the uprising -- but only ends up driving Syrians into the arms of the opposition and spurring further military defections. This basic dynamic first played out in miniature in regions like Deraa, then on a grander scale in cities like Homs, and now in the capital. Since the beginning of the uprising, the Assad regime has found itself in a death spiral from which it seemingly has no clue how to extricate itself.

For those of us on the outside, all we can do is watch developments carefully, be careful of rumors and sources with an agenda, and try to make sense of the few pieces of confirmed news that filter out. With that in mind, here is a primer on the three Syrian officials confirmed dead or injured.

Assef Shawkat (far left in photo): Shawkat has long been rumored to be the strongman behind the Assad family's rule -- a married-in whose power derived from his ruthlessness rather than his genes. He overcame intense opposition from Assad family members to marry Bashar's sister Bushra, earning him a sort of grudging admiration in the ruling elite. "Anyone who could go into the home of Hafez Assad and take his daughter away without his permission has the power to do anything," remarked one television newscaster who met him several times.

When Bashar rose to the presidency in 2000, Shawkat rose with him as a member of the so-called "new guard." He was reportedly Syria's liaison to U.S. and European intelligence agencies following the 9/11 attacks, and also served as one of the key officials guiding Syria's occupation of Lebanon, which ended in 2005. A U.S. diplomatic cable, employing a gift for understatement, implicated Shawkat in Syria's "killing problem."

Dawoud Rajiha: Syria's defense minister wasn't a powerhouse in his own right. He was appointed in August 2011, replacing Gen. Ali Habib Mahmoud, who was broached as a possible transitional figure in the early days of the revolt. He was a former chief of staff of the Syrian army, as well as an artillery specialist. As a member of the Greek Orthodox community, some analysts speculated his appointment was "politically motivated, rather than merit-based, in order to garner the support of the Christian minority."

Hassan Turkmani: Turkmani was reportedly the secretary general of the Syrian regime's "crisis cell," which was formed to suppress the uprising. He was a career military man, joining the Syrian army in 1954 and ending his career as defense minister in 2009. Earlier in the revolt, he served as Assad's envoy to Turkey, where he held (ultimately unsuccessful) talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in an attempt to keep Ankara from siding with the opposition.

Mohammed al-Shaar: Syria's interior minister was another military man, rising to the ranks of lieutenant general. A 30-year veteran of the Syrian military, he had previously served as the military police chief in the northern city of Aleppo and as the director of Sednaya prison. He was seen as one of the enforcers of the regime, periodically blasting what he claimed were "terrorists" seeking to undermine Syria's stability. In one typical quote, he vowed to "strike back with an iron fist at anyone tempted to tamper with the security of the country or its citizens."

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