

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Assad besieged

Syria's military has no confidence in him, and the active opposition is broadening fast.

Several weeks after the start of the Syrian rebellion in Hama, President Hafez Assad ordered the air force to carry out a strike against positions in the town held by armed opposition forces. But the pilots, streaking over their target, dropped their explosives instead on the government's own Special Forces commanded by the President's gangster brother, Col. Rifaat Assad.

That incident indicates that the Hama rebellion has caused the Assad brothers to lose control of their last remaining prop: Syria's armed forces. According to Middle East intelligence sources, Assad can hope to cling to power only for a few short months.

From accounts appearing in the Western press, it would seem as if the rebellion against the unpopular Syrian leader is led by Islamic fundamentalists and their Muslim Brotherhood secret society. The *New York Times* and CBS-TV report (without having managed to filter any reporters anywhere near Hama) that "Muslim cries ring from the minarets" of the Syrian city in rebellion.

Reality is far different, and more complex.

The uprising in Hama began in the wake of an attempted coup d'état by Syrian army and air force officers this January. Tipped off by the CIA and the Mossad, Assad rounded up hundreds of plotters and executed 120 officers.

At the end of January, a number

of the anti-Assad military men fled into Hama and defied Damascus to arrest them. On Feb. 1, Assad ordered the Special Forces to Hama, but the entire town resisted the "Rifaat brigades." By late February, the town was still holding out successfully against brutal assault.

That an entire Syrian city could hold out against unrelenting force is a signal that the loose opposition coalition resisting Assad has managed to win the loyalty of broad sections of the Syrian population. At least eight different party factions make up the opposition forces in Syria. According to Arab sources, these factions have established a council inside Syria to coordinate their actions and make plans for a coalition government after the fall of the Assad brothers.

Among the coalition partners are:

- three separate Baath Party factions, one pro-Iraqi, one loyal to jailed ex-President Shalah Jadid, and one comprised of Alawite sect members called the "Free Officers";
- a new Marxist organization made up of ex-Baathists, Nasserists, and former Communists;
- the so-called Riad Turk faction of Communist Party dissidents; and
- the Islamic Front, a hodgepodge of at least five different Muslim organizations, each styling itself to be part of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Syrian general staff and military leadership, while thus far still undecided on the resistance, are reportedly becoming increasingly convinced that the Assad family is no longer capable of ruling Syria. The generals, it is said, are beginning to splinter along the lines of their previous loyalties to one or another of the opposition groups.

Another important factor is the position of the extremely secretive and very powerful council of the religious leadership of the Alawite sect.

The Syrian Alawites, a small minority of the population, are enormously influential under the rule of Assad and his allies, who are almost exclusively Alawite. Until now, Assad and company have tried to portray the rebels as sectarians opposed to the Alawite influence in Damascus. But, in the recent fighting, there are many signs that the Alawites have joined the rebels in increasing numbers.

At present, it is not certain that the Alawite leadership, made up of the impenetrable closed circle of sages in the Latakia region of northwest Syria, has decided to move against Assad. If they do, then nothing can prop him up.

As *EIR* is about to document in depth, the touchstone for the anti-Assad coalition is the perception that Assad and his brothers have become mere instruments of the organized crime mafia internationally. With hundreds of millions in Swiss banks and a reputed drug-smuggling empire, the Assads have been called the "Somozas of the Middle East." Certainly, they are giving every sign that they intend to go down in a blaze of gunfire that would warm the heart of Al Capone.