

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Time running out for Assad

Syria's president has provoked the formation of an opposition National Front.

Syrain President Hafez Assad is digging himself deeper and deeper into a hole and, increasingly in the international intelligence community, there are fewer and fewer people who think that he can get out.

The most recent example of the utter isolation of the Assad regime in Syria is his cable on Nov. 12 to the headquarters of the League of Arab States asking officially for a postponement of the long-scheduled Nov. 25 meeting of Arab heads of state in the Jordanian capital of Amman. Assad, whose foreign minister participated in a planning meeting for the summit only last week, announced that the summit ought to be put off because of "differences" among the Arabs.

Syria's action shocked many Arab leaders, because of the crucial, even indispensable role that is planned for the Arab summit Nov. 25. At that meeting, a plan for the economic development of the entire Arab world to the year 2000, initially proposed by Iraq and ratified by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other Arab states, will be formally approved.

"What Syria is doing is outright sabotage of the Arab effort," said an informed European analyst.

According to highly informed Arab sources, the Assad regime in Syria is nearing the end of the line. Since at least 1978, Assad has adopted policies that have alienated virtually every important section of the Syrian power structure. That opposition goes far deeper than the

public evidence of Muslim Brotherhood terrorism and violence, according to sources.

In fact, a consensus is developing among dozens of Syrian exile dissidents, Syrian political and military leaders, and others in merchant and business layers that Assad must either be forced to make a radical policy shift—or be toppled.

In the near future, an anti-Assad "National Front" reportedly will be created, with the backing of Syria's Arab neighbors, that intends to crystallize the anti-Assad sentiments.

Iraq, which already cooperates with many Syrian exiles who are members of the Arab Baath Socialist Party, is supporting the formation of a nationalist Syrian opposition. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's royal family is quietly supporting anti-Assad religious currents in Syria, including some elements in the Muslim Brotherhood, to further put pressure on Assad.

Faced with isolation on the Arab front and growing domestic action, President Assad has thus launched two dramatic moves in recent weeks: first, a sudden merger of Syria with the Libyan dictatorship of Col. Muammar Qaddafi, whose public insanity has made him an object of scorn among Arab circles; and second, the signing of a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union.

Both actions were viewed as moves of desperation by Assad.

Within weeks of the Syrian-

Libyan merger, Saudi Arabia took the unprecedented action of breaking off diplomatic relations with Libya, following a call to "revolution" in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, by the Libyan madman. The Saudi break with Libya hit Syria like a thunderclap, since Syria depends financially and to some extent politically on support from Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are said to be putting enormous pressure on Assad to drop the Libyan unity plan and to stop posturing as an Arab "radical."

But Assad is reportedly not making moves for a reconciliation with the Arabs, as the move to postpone the Arab summit reveals. Instead, Assad, whose rule is based on the sectarian influence of the minority Alawite Shiite sect, of which he is a member, is, through his brother Rifaat Assad, encouraging moves that seem to be aimed at the creation of a separate "Alawite state" in northern Syria.

For several years, as part of his maneuvers within Arab and Syrian internal politics, Assad has more and more relied on the manipulation of tribal and religious sectarian issues to prop up his rule. According to some sources, he has gone as far as to provide covert support to the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood in order to strengthen the Alawite sentiment for separatism. But now it is all on the verge of an explosion.

According to Arab sources, only one door remains open to the Syrian leader: should he announce a national reconciliation policy, free political prisoners, welcome home Syrian exiles, and engage in a serious national policy debate to form a government of national unity, he might survive. Otherwise, it is only a matter of time.