

**War is only option to topple Syrian leader, says colonel  
Reuters  
October 07, 2011**

ANTAKYA (Turkey), Oct 7 — The most senior officer to defect from Syria's armed forces has said there is no option but to topple President Bashar al-Assad by force and he was directing a military uprising against the Syrian leader from within Turkey.

Colonel Riad al-As'aad, who is now living under Turkish government protection in Hatay province on the Syrian border, said some 15,000 soldiers, including officers, had already deserted, and he was waiting to move his command inside Syria.

As'aad, A slim, softly-spoken man dressed in civilian clothes and open-collared shirt, said rebel soldiers were forming brigades around the country who were setting up ambushes against government forces to prevent them entering villages.

Morale in the Syrian army, he said, was low.

"Without a war, he will not fall. Whoever leads with force, cannot be removed except by force," As'aad told Reuters in a Syrian refugee camp in Hatay.

"The regime used a lot of oppressive and murderous tactics so I left, so that I will be the face outside for the command inside, because we have to be in a secure area and right now there is no safety in all of Syria," he said.

As'aad sat in the shade of a tree as Syrian refugee children laughed and played in the background. Music rang out from a nearby tent that served as a makeshift school.

Like most of the military, al-As'aad is Sunni Muslim; but the command is in the hands of officers from Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam that also dominates the security apparatus and the ruling elite in the majority Sunni country.

As'aad, who has been in Turkey for more than two months, is under constant guard by Turkey's gendarmerie and his exact location is kept secret for his own security.

"We're in contact with defectors on a daily basis. We coordinate on a daily basis with officers. Our plan is to move to Syria. We're waiting to find a safe place which we can turn into a leadership base in Syria," he said.

Damascus portrays the rebel soldiers as traitors serving the enemies of Syria.

Some of the fighting has come close to the Turkish border and there has been speculation in Turkish media that if the flow of refugees became too great, Ankara could impose a 'buffer zone' on the Syrian side of the frontier — something it did in northern Iraq in the 1990s. Turkey denies any such plans.

Turkey's open harbouring of As'aad marks a further sharpening of its attitude towards President Bashar al-Assad, whom it had long seen as an ally.

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan has called for Assad to go and is drawing up sanctions that

could hit the Syrian economy hard. He is expected to fly down to the Syrian border soon to make a speech at a refugee camp for Syrians fleeing fighting.

“One army”

Greying and clean-shaven, except for a moustache, As'aad reflected on the situation inside Syria, painting a picture of movement to and fro across the border.

“The army officer comes here only if he's reached the stage of death or if he's in very serious danger, so he is forced to enter Turkey. sometimes they don't stay for too long and then re-enter Syria, depending on the security situation.”

“Today there was an attack on Jabal al-Zawi and the Ghab region and military jets bombarded civilians who had escaped to the mountains. Until now three have been martyred, and 27 are missing. I have the names of the martyrs,” he said, pulling out a folded piece of paper with three names scribbled in Arabic.

The 50-year-old colonel, who served as an engineer in Syria's air force for 31 years, said the Syrian government had started to harass him and other officers when pro-democracy protests first started in Tunisia.

“During the revolution in Tunisia, the regime started getting ready. It felt there will be a revolution in Syria. So it (stepped up security), hired spies to harass us. We were always under surveillance,” he said.

As'aad said he was summoned to the air force intelligence department in Aleppo where he was coerced into confessing there were armed groups among his relatives because there were demonstrations in his village. It was after this that he deserted.

As'aad says he commands the Syrian Free Army, which he helped form after his defection and that they had joined forces with another rebel force, the Free Officers movement, which activists have said is led by Lieutenant Abdelrahman Sheikh inside Syria.

“We're all one group, we're all one army. We're all waiting, the defecting brothers are working inside,” he said.

As'aad said 10-15,000 soldiers, out of the roughly 200,000-strong military, had defected all over the country and that desertions were continuing every day.

“The Syrian army's morale is tired. Defections are happening daily. There are several units that have lost their function because of the defections,” he said.

“The regime is weakening and the biggest proof, is that they're using air support in addition to tanks and artillery, that proves their weakness.”

Some opponents of Assad argue resistance should remain peaceful and that armed action could only worsen the situation.

“We will fight with our nails”

There are fears, including in Turkey, that an escalation of violence in Syria, particularly with an armed opposition, may lead to a sectarian civil war. But As'aad said while Assad's rule was discriminatory, it would not lead to sectarian war.

"The regime depends on a sect ... and it is a sectarian and discriminatory regime. But our people are wiser than that. All Syrians are one people, whether Alawite, Druze or Christian or even the Kurds. We respect them we consider them our family," he said.

There had so far been no defections from Syria's political elite as happened in Libya, As'aad said, because they were tied too closely through economic interests or positions.

As'aad said he did not want to see any foreign soldiers in Syria but that the international community should provide the rebels with weapons and enforce a no-fly zone.

"If they don't give it to us, we will fight with our nails until the regime is toppled. I tell Bashar al-Assad, the people are stronger than you. — Reuters

The Malaysian Insider

Copyright © 2011 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/world/article/war-is-only-option-to-topple-syrian-leader-says-colonel/>