

## Former Syrian VP: Assad's a joke

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Exiled Syrian opposition leader Abdul Halim Khaddam says President Bashar Assad 'incapable of defending the country'. He condemns Syria-Iran collaboration, and notes that last week's IAF infiltration was 'one of many' which Syrian regime opts to keep silent about

Syrian President Bashar Assad "is a child, he's simply a joke," Abdul Halim Khaddam, the nation's former vice president, said Thursday.

Khaddam, who was expelled after alleging that Syrian leaders were involved in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese President Rafik Hariri, made the comments during an interview with the Nazareth-based Arab daily a-Sinara.

Khaddam currently lives in exile in France and frequently speaks out against Assad's regime and calls for an ouster. In the interview he disparaged the Syrian president, accusing him of "tying Syria to Iran's interests".

"Iran aspires to regional hegemony," he said. "Syria's ties to Iran will make it one of the battlefields in the struggle (between Iran and the West) &ndash; and for issues that have nothing to do with Syria's national interests. Therefore, in our opinion it is dangerous to link Syria with Iranian policy, whose results have been Arab and international isolation."

When questioned about the Israeli Air Force's infiltration of Syrian airspace two weeks ago, Khaddam said he had no concrete information on the incident, but added: "What Israel did against Syria is aggression. We condemn this aggression and there is not a soul in Syria who would accept such aggression against it."

"It is aggression against the Syrian people, Syrian sovereignty and independence. On the other hand, the Syrians are more and more concerned because the Syrian regime can't protect the Syrian air, sea or ground," he said.

Regarding whether Syria can even respond to the IDF aerial infiltration, Khaddam answered, "The Syrian regime is too busy oppressing people and being corrupt. If it focused on building the country, making significant infrastructure changes and establishing a democratic government, then Syria could have responded to this or any type of aggression.

"At present, when the regime is occupied with insignificant matters and isn't dealing with the economic crisis, it can't provide the elements that would allow it respond to such aggressions," he said.

'Syria has the means'

However, he added, "Syria has the means to respond, but it doesn't have the will to do so. The regime failed to make the political decision to respond, and therefore it is incapable of defending the country."

Khaddam also said that this wasn't the first IAF infiltration, but rather one of "many incidents" which Damascus chose not to publicize.

He scorned Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's policy of making belligerent moves with one hand while extending the other in peace. "Olmert's talk demonstrates that he mocks Bashar Assad's intelligence. He tells him, 'I respect you, I respect your policy,' but then makes aggressive moves towards him. That's really respectful. What is this silence on Assad's part?"

"We think he's a child," Khaddam wrote off the Syrian president. "He's a joke. Assad can't do anything but oppress the Syrian people."

Regarding reports that the Syrian military was arming and cooperating with Iran's army as well as with Russia, Khaddam said: "There is talk of cooperation, but under that very cooperation the aggression occurred. Cooperation that doesn't benefit the nation's interests isn't really cooperation."

Khaddam heads the Syrian opposition organization in exile, the National Salvation Front, which recently held a conference in Berlin on how to mobilize the Syrian people in the struggle to topple the "dictatorial Syrian regime and building a democratic, civil, and modern state".

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