

Name: Alert ID: TMML2024039924138 The uncle of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been sentenced to four years in prison by a Paris court for money-laundering. Rifaat al-Assad was convicted of embezzling Syrian state funds to buy homes and offices worth €90m (£80m) to build a French property portfolio. The 82-year-old former vice-president denies any wrongdoing. His lawyers say he will appeal. His property assets in Paris and London will be seized, the court ruled. Assad, who was hospitalised with internal bleeding in France in December, was not in court for the ruling and is unlikely to serve his sentence due to his age. His London property is believed to be worth €29m (£26m). Who is Rifaat al-Assad? He was once the second most powerful man in Syria - the military commander at the right hand of his brother Hafez, who led Syria from 1971 until his death in 2000. Rifaat is known as the "Butcher of Hama" by some Syrians because of his alleged role in the bloody suppression of an anti-government uprising in the city in 1982 but he has denied any responsibility for the massacre. Between 10,000 and 20,000 people are estimated to have died. Since 1984, when he led a failed coup against his brother, Rifaat has mostly lived in exile in France and Spain. After Hafez died in 2000, Rifaat proclaimed himself his brother's legitimate successor. But Bashar became president. When Syria descended into civil war in 2011 he called on his nephew to step down. His lawyers say his political past is irrelevant to an investigation into his financial activities. What is the case about? Rifaat al-Assad has been under investigation in France since 2014, when the legal NGO Sherpa, which defends victims of alleged economic crimes, filed a complaint saying the value of his property empire far exceeded his known income. Five years later, the French judicial authorities decided that he should stand trial for crimes allegedly committed between 1984 and 2016, including organised money laundering, aggravated tax fraud and misappropriation of Syrian state funds. The trial opened on 9 December last year. Assad denied the charges, saying he was given gifts by the Saudi royal family. His reported French fortune includes two Paris townhouses, a stud farm, a chateau and 7,300 square metres of office space in Lyon. Several luxury properties have already been seized by French authorities. Assad and his family also have a portfolio of 507 properties in Spain valued at around €695m (£585m). The properties were seized by the Spanish authorities in 2017 as part of a separate investigation into alleged money-laundering activities by Assad and 13 other people, who have again denied any wrongdoing. This is the second trial of a member of a foreign ruling family in France on charges of "ill-gotten gains". In October 2017, Equatorial Guinea vice president Teodorin Obiang received a three-year suspended jail term after being convicted of using public money to fund a lavish lifestyle.