

Desperation and Betrayal
As the Assad Dynasty Fell
Even Aides in the Palace Were Deceived

This article is by Ben Hubbard, Farnaz Fassihi, Christina Goldbaum and Hwaida Saad.

DAMASCUS, Syria — As rebels advanced toward the Syrian capital of Damascus on Dec. 7, the staff in the hilltop Presidential Palace prepared for a speech they hoped would lead to a peaceful end to the 13-year civil war.

Aides to President Bashar al-Assad were brainstorming messaging ideas. A film crew had set up cameras and lights nearby. Syria's state-run television station was ready to broadcast the finished product: an address by Mr. al-Assad announcing a plan to share power with members of the political opposition, according to three people who were involved in the preparation.

Working from the palace, Mr. al-Assad, who had wielded fear and force to maintain his authoritarian rule over Syria for more than two decades, had betrayed no sense of alarm to his staff, according to a palace insider whose office was near the president's.

The capital's defenses had been bolstered, Mr. al-Assad's aides were told, including by the powerful 4th Armored Division of the Syrian Army, led by the president's brother Maher al-Assad, the insider said.

They had all been deceived.

After dusk, the president slipped out of the capital, flying covertly to a Russian military base in northern Syria and then on a Russian jet to Moscow, according to six Middle Eastern government and security officials.

Maher al-Assad fled separately that evening with other senior military officers across the desert to Iraq, according to two Iraqi officials. His current location remains unknown.

Bashar al-Assad left his country so secretly that some of his aides remained in the palace hours after he had left, waiting for a speech that never came, the insider said. After midnight, word came that the president was gone, and they fled in a panic, leaving the palace gates wide open for the rebels who would storm in a few hours later.

Mr. al-Assad's fall brought to a sudden end his family's authoritarian half-century grip on Syria, causing jubilation among his victims and enemies, scrambling the strategic map of the Middle East and setting Syria off on a new, uncertain trajectory.

During his final days in power, Mr. al-Assad pleaded for foreign military help from Russia, Iran and Iraq to no avail as his military's own intelligence service documented his forces' collapse in real time, according to secret reports reviewed by The New York Times.

Diplomats from a half-dozen countries sought ways to push him from power peacefully in order to spare the ancient city of Damascus a bloody battle for control, according to four regional officials involved in the talks. One proposal, an official said, was that he pass power to his military chief, effectively submitting to a coup.

The account of Mr. al-Assad's fall, much of which has not been previously reported, is based on interviews with Syrian, Iranian, Iraqi and Turkish officials; Damascus-based diplomats; as well as associates of Mr. al-Assad and rebels who participated in his ouster. Many of them spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing diplomatic protocols or fear of retribution from remnants of the

Continued on Page 12



A banner of former President Bashar al-Assad north of Hama, Syria, was defaced after his ouster.

FATAL ACCIDENTS
FOR IMMIGRANTS
IN U.S. FACTORIES

SAFETY MEASURE GAPS

Staffing Agencies Shield
Owners of the Plants
From Liability

This article is by Marcela Valdes, Churchill Ndonwie, Danielle Ivory and Steve Eder.

On a brilliant day three years ago, a grieving crowd gathered on the South Side of Chicago to bury Adewale Ezekiel Ogunyemi.

In Nigeria, Mr. Ogunyemi had not earned enough working in a bank to support his mother, wife and two daughters. So in 2019, he flew to the United States on a tourist visa and obtained fake identity documents. He then signed on for temporary work at several staffing agencies in the Chicago area.

Shy and laid-back, he was often assigned to do night jobs. One agency, Snider-Blake Personnel, sent him to scrub machines at Rich Products Corporation, which makes food products that have been sold at stores like Walmart and distributed by suppliers like Sysco.

One night in July 2021, workers at Rich heard a scream. Rushing to an area of the plant where the dough for frozen pizzas rises, they found Mr. Ogunyemi, who was 42, tangled in a machine that helps the dough ferment. His right arm had been pulled through the conveyor and wrapped around his head. His chest was crushed. The fire department had to free him from the machine, and he was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Staffing agencies, like the ones Mr. Ogunyemi worked for, have become ubiquitous in America's on-demand economy. Companies turn to the firms to find workers for factories, warehouses and distribution centers, where jobs are often difficult to fill.

The workers, The New York Times reported recently, include people who are in the country illegally, are desperate for jobs and are vulnerable to exploitation. With staffing agencies acting as middlemen, companies can sidestep responsibility for the hiring and treatment of these workers, even as they profit from their labor.

While relevant data is limited

Continued on Page 20

Swift Rampage
With 200 Hurt
Stuns Germany

By CHRISTOPHER F. SCHUETZE and MELISSA EDDY

MAGDEBURG, Germany — It took an attacker just three minutes to kill five people and wound hundreds by ramming an S.U.V. into a crowded holiday market on Friday night, stunning Germany and shattering the peace of its Christmas season.

By about 7 p.m. on Friday, the market, in the eastern city of Magdeburg, was packed with families and friends who had gathered under the glow of twinkling lights to celebrate the last workday before the holiday week.

Instead, the weekend began with horror. The attacker, described by officials as a 50-year-old Saudi doctor who had been living in Germany for nearly two decades, slowly maneuvered a rented car through a gap in the security barriers designed for emergency vehicles, then steered for the heart of the celebration at the old market square.

He accelerated, trying to hurt as many people as possible, the police said.

After maiming hundreds, he aimed to escape through a gap on the other end of the square, but was stopped by traffic. Police officers swiftly surrounded the vehicle, forcing the driver to the ground as they apprehended him.

Among the five victims were a 9-year-old child and four adults. More than 200 others were

Continued on Page 14

N.Y.P.D.'s Top Officer Resigns Amid Allegations of Sexual Abuse

This article is by Hurubie Meko, Maria Cramer and William K. Rashbaum.

New York City's top uniformed police officer, the chief of department, abruptly resigned Friday night following allegations of sexual misconduct, setting off local and federal investigations and extending years of turmoil at the Police Department.

The former chief, Jeffrey Mad-drey, submitted his resignation and Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch accepted it, according to a statement from the department on Saturday.

Mayor Eric Adams had vocally supported Mr. Maddrey, a close ally, as recently as October. But on Saturday, a spokeswoman for the mayor, Kayla Mamelak Altus, said that he was working with Commissioner Tisch to conduct a "separate departmentwide review to ensure no high-ranking officers are using their power inappropriately."

"We are deeply disturbed by these allegations, and the N.Y.P.D. is investigating this matter," Ms. Mamelak Altus said.

The New York Post reported on Saturday morning that Mr. Maddrey had traded overtime for sexual favors from a subordinate, sometimes demanding sex at Po-

lice Headquarters.

Another former subordinate, Capt. Gabrielle Walls, said in an interview later on Saturday that Mr. Maddrey had repeatedly made advances on her. Captain Walls said she had hid in her office on more than a dozen occasions to avoid advances from Mr. Maddrey. If he found her, she said, "I knew it was when the kissing would start."

Continued on Page 21



EARL WILSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Year in Pictures

From the shadows of war to the glow of 353 tiny dancers poised to set a record. Special Section.

China Dangles Pandas as 'Bait'
To Court Local U.S. Politicians

This article is by Mara Hvistendahl, Heather Knight and Vik Jolly.

SAN FRANCISCO — After joining the Chinese leader Xi Jinping for dinner last year, Mayor London Breed of San Francisco accompanied him to the airport to bid him farewell. There, on the tarmac, she made her request: pandas.

Her city's zoo was faltering. Tourism was suffering and she faced a tough re-election campaign. A pair of pandas from China would be a political and public relations win.

What ensued were months of informal negotiations, with Ms. Breed — a politician with no foreign affairs or security experience — becoming a diplomat of sorts. She went to China, where she met the vice president and a deputy foreign minister, her calendars and emails show. She traveled

with the editor of Sing Tao U.S., a pro-Beijing newspaper that registers as a foreign agent in the United States, according to other records and photographs from the trip.

All of this was organized by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, a group that American intelligence officials have concluded seeks to "maliciously influence" local leaders. Unlike traveling Washington politicians, Ms. Breed received no C.I.A. briefing about what counterintelligence threats she might face in China and how officials there might try to manipulate her.

If Ms. Breed wanted pandas, China had an interest in the meeting, too — as a way to cultivate a relationship with the mayor of one of America's most technologically important cities. There is no evidence

Continued on Page 8

METROPOLITAN

Risking Lives for Likes

Subway surfers in search of thrills have been riding atop moving trains for years. Now social media is luring a new generation to this reckless pursuit.

PAGE 1

ARTS & LEISURE

A Musical Genre's Evolution

Our critic hit the road to talk with Jelly Roll, Shaboozey, Tanner Adell and other artists to understand why country music was inescapable in 2024.

PAGE 10

SPORTS 26-29

Another Lost Jets Season

The franchise is dysfunctional, and people close to it have characterized the owner, Woody Johnson, as excessively involved and impulsive.

PAGE 26

SUNDAY BUSINESS

Tune In, Run a Company?

More than a few business executives are exploring the theory that mind-altering drugs can improve business leadership.

PAGE 6

SUNDAY OPINION

David Brooks

PAGE 6



Holidays

LAFAYETTE
STREET
BOND
NO. 9

New York

Happy New Year

Bond no. 9
NEW YORK

MAKING SCENTS OF NEW YORK

WWW.BONDNO9.COM