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Assad says Qusayr now 'main battle,' Lebanon ex-MP says



Syria's "main battle" at present is raging in the Qusayr area, close to the Lebanese border, President Bashar al-Assad reportedly told Lebanese politicians this weekend. Speaking to a delegation of Lebanese backers of his regime, Assad said his forces were determined to succeed in the area "at any cost," according to Abdel Rahim Mrad, a former MP who spoke to AFP after the meeting in Damascus. "The main battle is taking place in Qusayr," he quoted Assad as saying. "We want to finish it at any cost and we want to do the same in Idlib," a province on the Turkish border in the northwest which is a major rebel stronghold. Syrian regime forces, reportedly backed by fighters from the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah movement, are engaged in fierce battles in the Qusayr area. Government forces reportedly retook a string of strategic villages in the area over the weekend, raising concerns that the town of Qusayr -- a rebel stronghold -- could itself fall too. The area is strategic because of its proximity both to the Lebanese border and the main road connecting Damascus to the coast. The As-Safir daily also reported the meeting, quoting Assad as mocking Lebanon's official policy of neutrality in the conflict in Syria. "What is this policy of neutrality, I don't understand it," it quoted him as saying. "Is Lebanon going to move to Africa until the end of the Syrian crisis and then return to its normal place? Lebanon can't be on the border and separate itself." Mrad told AFP that Assad also voiced confidence that U.S. support for the rebels fighting his rule would eventually dwindle. "The United States is pragmatic and, with time, when they see we are strong, they will change their position and drop those they are currently betting on."