

I’ve always been conscious of not having brothers or sisters. Matt Cooper. Page 7

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Graphic: Paul Scott

FALL OF THE HOUSE OF ASSAD

Many Syrians are celebrating the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, ending 54 years of ruthless dictatorship started by his father Hafez. The regime’s modern, western image – personified by Bashar and his UK-educated wife Asma – was long ago exposed as an illusion

By LARA MARLOWE

FALL OF THE HOUSE OF ASSAD

After 54 years of ruthless dictatorship, Syrians deserve a better future. But that is far from certain

By Lara Marlowe

“Your turn is coming, Doctor,” said graffiti daubed on a wall in the old town in Daraa, southern Syria, by schoolboys in February 2011. The rulers of Tunisia and Egypt had already fallen, the first victims of the Arab Spring. It took nearly 14 years for the schoolboys’ prophecy to come true for Assad.

The boys were rounded up, beaten with electrical cables and had their fingernails torn off during interrogation. When their parents complained to the local police chief, a cousin of president Bashar al-Assad, he insulted them with obscenities and sent them packing. By March 2011, protests had spread across Syria.

Assad was known to his unfortunate subjects as “doctor” because he earned a degree in medicine in Damascus before going to London to specialise in ophthalmology in 1992. The former meek-mannered computer geek was overthrown in the early hours of Sunday, December 8th, after presiding over the longest and most brutal of Arab civil wars, which claimed more than half a million lives and created 14 million internally displaced people and refugees. Assad imprisoned an estimated 130,000 Syrian citizens since 2011, of whom 15,000 are believed to have died under torture.

Nizar Nayouf, a dissident who survived 10 years in Assad’s prisons, was

disabled by torture on one of the regime’s favourite machines, the so-called German chair, allegedly invented by the Gestapo. “Anyone would prefer to die,” Nayouf told me, “because he knows he is going to be paralysed for life.” The metal chair has moving parts that pull the spinal cord apart. Victims cannot breathe. Their vertebrae are fractured and they are often paralysed from the waist down.

Scenes this week of jubilation, toppled statues and relatives rushing to prisons were eerily reminiscent of Baghdad in April 2003, when Saddam Hussein was brought down by the US-led invasion.

Relatives used telephone flashlights to search for non-existent tunnels and basements, in the hope that disappeared loved ones might materialise like the missing imam of Shia Islam.

In the Assads’ mansion in Malki, the most affluent neighbourhood of Damascus, Islamist fighters and some ordinary Syrians helped themselves to Louis Vuitton handbags, armchairs and chandeliers. Someone found a signed photograph of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, dating from Assad’s visit to Buckingham Palace in 2002. Across the country, ubiquitous images of the dictator were torn down, torched and disfigured.

Decades of Baathist slogans vanished in an instant. As a frequent visitor to Syria between the early 1980s and mid-2000s, I witnessed countless chants of “With our souls and with our blood, we will sacrifice for you, Hafez!” After the death of Assad père in 2000, his name was replaced with that of Bashar.

The conjunction of Vladimir Putin’s war against Ukraine and more than a year of Israeli attacks on Syria’s Arab and Iranian allies left Assad without protection. An estimated 700,000 Russians have been killed or wounded in Ukraine since 2022. In its fury over the Hamas attacks of October 7th, 2023, Israel has virtually flattened much of Gaza and Lebanon and assassinated most of the leaders of Hamas and Hizbullah.

Moscow and Tehran saved Bashar in the 2010s. They were no longer willing or able to do so. The unpaid and demoralised Syrian army melted away as Islamist rebels from the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group took Aleppo, Hama, Homs, then Damascus, in just 12 days.

Bashar and Asma al-Assad fled with their young adult offspring, Hafez, Zein and Karim, to Moscow, where they will probably live in Barvikha, a suburb that is home to a colony of deposed dictators, including the family of the late Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic and Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan.

Viktor Yanukovych, the Putin puppet who was overthrown by Ukraine’s 2013/14 Maidan revolution has also lived there.

The Assad saga began in the early 20th century, when Bashar’s paternal grandfather changed the family name from Wahhash, meaning savage or monster, to Assad – lion. Bashar’s father Hafez was a poor boy who worked his way up to colonel in the Syrian air force. He helped lead the 1963 Baathist revolution, whose goal was to create a single, secular Arab nation. In a 1970 coup, Hafez seized the president’s office.

The Alawites are an offshoot of Shia

■ Clockwise from main: a bullet-riddled poster of deposed Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in Aleppo; celebrations in Damascus; a toppled statue of Hafez al-Assad; and the leader of the HTS rebel group Abu Moham-med al-Jolani.

Photographs: Getty Images





Islam and comprise about 10 per cent of Syria's population. They ruled over the majority Sunni by forging alliances with other minorities, mainly Christians and Druze. The Sunni majority never forgot the slaughter by Assad of tens of thousands of Sunni Muslim Brothers in Hama in 1982. The Assads appointed token Sunnis, including Mustafa Tlass and Abdel Halim Khaddam, respectively defence minister and vice-president, as proof that theirs was not a sectarian regime.

I interviewed Hafez al-Assad in 1992, with top editors from Time magazine. Assad's staff kept us waiting several days, a standard Assad strata-

gem, like serving cup after cup of coffee or tea until his guests' bladders were bursting. When we were finally ushered into a reception room in the presidential palace, the "lion of Damascus", as Hafez liked to be called, talked for five hours. There was "no possibility of compromise" over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, Hafez told us. "Nobody in Syria could give one inch of land in the Golan. Every Syrian believes deep in his heart that whoever yields a part of his land is a traitor."

Hafez doted on his eldest son Bassem, a handsome playboy who died after crashing his red Ferrari on his way

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to Damascus airport en route for a tryst with a mistress in Vienna early one morning in 1994.

Hafez was devastated, but shifted his attention to Bashar, the less-loved second son, as heir apparent. Bashar was brought back from his ophthalmology studies in London, given the rank of army colonel and entrusted with responsibility for Lebanon, which was to Syria what Ukraine is to Russia, the coveted neighbouring state whose independence it contested.

When Hafez died in June 2000, Syria's constitution had to be amended to allow Bashar, then 34, to assume the presidency. Western leaders, especial-

ly the British and French, were enthusiastic. Then French president Jacques Chirac took Bashar under his wing, gave him a state visit to Paris and decorated him with the highest rank in the Légion d'Honneur.

Shortly after Hafez' death, British journalist Robert Fisk and I interviewed Bashar at the Baath Party conference that was about to declare him president of Syria. He was an ungainly creature, with protruding ears, a receding chin and a very long neck, which earned him the sobriquet Zafafa or giraffe.

In retrospect, Bashar al-Assad was the personification of Hanna Arendt's

term “the banality of evil”. He spoke English with a slight lisp, which accentuated the impression of a gawky young man out of place amid torturers and assassins.

Syria had been stuck in a time warp for the 30 years of Hafez’ rule. Bashar said he wanted to modernise it. He gave Syria mobile telephones and access to the internet, albeit strictly controlled. His economic reforms, like those in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union, consisted of privatising state-owned monopolies so they could be snapped up by relatives and cronies.

Bashar may have doubled down on brutality to compensate for an inferiority complex towards his dead brother Bassel. He is widely believed to have ordered the assassination of Chirac’s best friend in 2005. The Lebanese construction magnate and former prime minister, Rafik Hariri, had joined forces with Chirac in the hope of freeing Lebanon from Syrian domination.

I interviewed Hariri the month before the Valentine’s Day massacre of Hariri and 21 other people in a suicide car-bombing. Bashar had threatened to “break Lebanon over [his] head”, Hariri told me. “You westerners are so naive,” Hariri continued. “You think that because Bashar speaks English and studied in London, he is like you. I tell you, he is worse than his father.”

Bashar’s wife, Asma, née Akhras, strengthened the illusion of westernised modernity. Born in London and a dual citizen of the UK and Syria, she studied computer science at Kings College, worked as a financial analyst for Morgan Stanley and abandoned plans to pursue an MBA at Harvard when she married Assad. Bashar and Asma hired public relations firms to improve an image tarnished by years of human rights reports on torture, arbitrary imprisonment and disappearances in Syria.

The couple’s PR campaign claimed the career of US journalist Joan Juliet Buck as collateral damage. On assignment for Vogue magazine, Buck travelled to Damascus in December 2010 to write a profile of Syria’s first lady, whom she described as “glamorous, young and very chic”. On the day Buck accompanied Asma to the Mediterranean port of Latakia, Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old Tunisian fruit vendor, self-immolated in protest at police brutality, sparking the series of revolts that came to be known as the Arab Spring.

Asma al-Assad was, Buck wrote later, “brisk as a prefect, as on-message as a banker, as friendly as a new acquaintance at a friend’s cocktail party. She sounded like the kind of young Englishwoman you’d hear having lunch at the next table at Harvey Nichols”.

As the Arab Spring burgeoned into mass protests across Tunisia and Egypt, Buck had misgivings about the piece she had written for Vogue and asked editors to hold it. They refused, and entitled the profile A Rose in the Desert. Though the article was taken offline in May 2011, Buck never lived it down.



As the civil war progressed, Syria’s economy nosedived. The Assads’ alliance with Syria’s business bourgeoisie floundered because Bashar and Asma took more and more for themselves. The couple prised the lucrative telephone company from Bashar’s cousin, Rami Makhlouf, who was said to be the richest man in Syria. Asma used her business acumen to manage the couple’s interests in the property, shipping and banking sectors. According to the Financial Times, Asma ran the Syria Trust NGO, which oversaw all foreign aid to Syria. Bashar’s brother Maher turned Syria into a narco-state that produces 80 per cent of world’s sup-

■ **Top: Bashar al-Assad and his wife, Asma, in 2023. Above, people search through documents at Sednaya prison in Damascus, hoping to find loved ones who disappeared in government jails.** Photographs: Getty Images

ply of the illicit amphetamine-like drug, Captagon. Three different countries bombed Syria on the day of Assad’s fall. Turkey, which has backed HTS, attacked Kurdish-held Manbij, north-eastern Syria, because the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are allied with the Turkish Kurdistan Workers’ Party, PKK. The US – Turkey’s Nato ally – has deployed 900 troops alongside the SDF to protect it. US bombing raids targeted remnants of Islamic State or Isis, which maintains some 2,500 fighters in central Syria. By doing so, the US made itself a de facto ally of HTS. Over several days, Israel destroyed

the Syrian navy and carried out more than 300 air strikes on Syrian airbases, weapons facilities and Assad’s chemical weapons research centre, ostensibly to prevent them falling into hostile hands. Arab countries protested when Israel also took advantage of the regime’s collapse to move into formerly Syrian-held positions on the Golan Heights, including the top of Jebel Sheikh (Mount Hermon).

“DO NOT GET INVOLVED,” said the message posted by president-elect Donald Trump on December 7th. But US policy towards post-Assad Syria is far from certain. During his previous term, in April 2018, Trump joined France and the UK in cruise missile strikes against Bashar’s chemical weapons facilities, after the Syrian dictator used chemical weapons against the town of Douma.

As a Democratic congresswoman in 2017, Tulsi Gabbard, who Trump has selected to be director of national intelligence when he takes office next month, visited Bashar al-Assad in Damascus and said it was important to end “these wasteful regime-change wars”. Gabard later questioned whether Assad had indeed used chemical weapons. HTS leader Abu Mohamed al-Jolani has promised to respect the rights of women and minorities and to co-operate with the remnants of the Assad regime. But like Iraq at the end of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship, Syria comprises an explosive mix of Islamic fundamentalists, religious and ethnic minorities, a substantial Kurdish population who seek independence and unification across national boundaries, hydrocarbons and meddling foreign powers. After 54 years of ruthless dictatorship, Syrians deserve a better future. But that is far from certain.