Was Maher al-Assad present in the great hall? Did he listen to the swearing-in speech? We didn’t see him! We didn’t notice him! And Farouk al-Sharaa! He wasn’t there either! They must have been purged…”

This is what a number of Facebook activists were preoccupied with in the weeks following Bashar al-Assad’s swearing in speech delivered on July 15 last year (2013). Many of these people had previously been preoccupied with Maher al-Assad, appearing in the company of Lebanese-Syrian singer George Wassouf. One activist went so far as to doubt the authenticity of the images claiming that it could not have been a recent photograph, because George Wassouf was now confined to a wheelchair and could only have been standing if two people had picked him up, then sat him down again after the photograph was taken.

Two years ago, many activists and even some Western officials were caught up with rumour circulating that Maher al-Assad had been ‘spotted bombing’ in Damascus that killed Assaf Shawkat, the head of Military Intelligence, former deputy Defence Minister and husband of Bashar al-Assad’s sister Bushra. At the time it was claimed that Maher al-Assad had been at the meeting of security and military personnel and had been killed with the others. Then another report emerged that a private jet had been picked up, then sat him down again after the photograph was taken.

The effect of the regime’s decades-old strategy has been to transform the ruling family into an abstraction freighted with a fantasy that can only be reached through the ‘Crisis Room’ in which he would replace Bashar al-Assad as an ‘acceptable’ Alawite leader. He was seen as a moderate who had refused to stain his hands with the blood of Syrians (especially Sunnis) and who had opposed the decision to send the army into Hama in 2011, when the uprising was still centred around peaceful demonstrations.

These and other stories passed around by activists, opposition figures and revolutionaries, all point to the same thing: the Syrian regime is still just as present in people’s thoughts as it was prior to the revolution. The regime still functions as it has for decades; a shadow, a spectre, an abstraction, an intangible myth fenced round with rumour and folklore. Not only has the security regime not been penetrated, it has also retained its capacity to toy with the day-to-day course of the revolution. While tales of Maher preoccupy many of its opponents, the regime is free to pursue its methodical slaughter, torture, kidnapping and sieges.

The bubble in which the family lived made it the prisoner of the portraits stuck up in car windows, on the walls of state agencies, in the streets, on lampposts, tree trunks and wherever there was space to stick a picture of the president and his wife. Their ‘spontaneous’ appearances, and those of their children became events in themselves, carefully planned and devoid of any revealing details. Take, for example, the choice of the location where they spent their Eid vacation. The people who were chosen to visit the resort where Bashar and Asma had ‘by chance’ turned up, the preparations and events at the resort, all of which coincided with their short stay, clearly everything was thought through and planned in advance. Pictures of their visit were distributed to the official Syrian news agency, SANA, and uploaded onto ‘blocked’ Facebook pages that could only be accessed via proxies.

It was this type of thing that made people gasp when they caught sight of Bashar or Asma in the street, as though they were movie stars and not the president and his wife. Compare this to the famous phrase uttered by the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish after one of his performances in Damascus. As usual he had received rapturous applause, but after the show he grumpily confided to a friend: ‘I don’t like all that. What am I, Ragheb Alama (a famous Lebanese singer), or something?’

By contrast, Bashar and his wife became obsessed with being seen as the most beautiful, the cleverest, the chicest. Their media machine even managed to convince Vogue to publish an article in early 2011 (just days before the outbreak of the revolution) that described Asma as ‘a rose in the desert’.

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The Iconoclasts: How Syrian Citizens Brought a God back down to Earth

Tyranny and the vaults

At the same time as we Syrians pointed our fingers heavenwards, in reference to those mysterious, anonymous figures who ran our lives, caused us hardship, prevented our neighbour, our friend, or our relative — all of them are brave enough to give expression to their sectarian affiliation is outlawed and suppressed.

Three years on, with frustrations and failures building, many areas of Syria have become mass graves. In this context rumours have started to function as a kind of temporary shot of morphine passed back and forth between activists on social media sites to revive some degree of hope. Reports of the regime’s fall or ‘the death of the president’ or ‘the death of the president’s mother’ have become an increasingly tired joke against the backdrop of the regime’s ongoing policy of murder, destruction and deterritorialization. It is not incumbent on Syrians — meaning intellectuals, activists, members of the opposition, and the fighters on the ground — to locate hope in something more substantial, and useful than rumour. They have had to mine despair and frustration to fashion alternatives and strategies for the next stage, which will be exceptionally difficult and complex now that their single enemy, the regime, has morphed into a horde.

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The regime has spread the idea that Bashar al-Assad’s acceptance of the presence of an alternative candidate in his staged presidential election is a major concession. In this vein some opposition figures claim that ‘the most important achievement’ of the revolution, after more than 170,000 have lost their lives, millions have been displaced and tens of thousands wounded or locked up, is that Bashar al-Assad has been transformed from a god into an mere mortal.

1. Commander of the Syrian Republican Guard and Brother of President Bashar al-Assad
2. Vice President of Syria
3. Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger