

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

Dima Wannous

*'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 rumours circulating around the 'Crisis Room bombing' in Damascus that killed Assef 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 taken off from the Mezzeh Military Airport outside Damascus, with Maher on board, in the company of his confidantes, heading for Moscow to receive treatment. We should also not forget the rumour, which in September 2013 gained currency among Arab and Western officials that former Defence Minister Ali Habib had fled to Paris to prepare for a 'transitional period' 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 effect of the regime's decades-old strategy has been to transform the ruling family and its dependents into icons or almost mythic figures. Ordinary citizens are struck dumb with amazement when they spot one of these figures in a restaurant or drive past them in a car, and here 'amazement' means something like actual disbelief.

The Syrian collective consciousness has a deep-rooted belief in the 'sacredness' of those in charge, whether they be military or religious, from the president himself to the director of a local branch of the intelligence services. The absence of any rule of law is one aggravating cause of this abiding illusion, and is confounded by a generalised inability to properly analyse the situation and these people's role in it. As such, the revolution on the ground has been bedevilled by a lack of logic and a propensity to make hasty judgements (and believe in them)

and unsupported by any developed critical rationality.

## Exalted Totalitarianism

For decades the Syrian regime has fashioned an entirely separate world for itself. The world in which Bashar al-Assad and his wife Asma al-Akhras live is conceivably even more detached than was the world of his father Hafez al-Assad and his mother Anisa Makhlof. This is despite cosmetic attempts to give the opposite impression. No one knows where the family and those around them live. The security that surrounds their existence is absolute and even overdone, given that they lived in a peaceful nation without any political life to speak of: no independent parties, no autonomous institutions, no genuine opposition, and no openly declared opponents with the legal, constitutional and legislative tools to remove the al-Assad clan from power.

However, there was the constant impression that the family was being stalked and targeted, forcing them to sneak around; moving according to pre-laid plans with streets blocked, traffic stopped and curfews imposed in the areas through which they were passing. False rumours were a common tactic here, a patrol would be told that the president's entourage planned to travel along a particular road, then they would select a different road altogether. Likewise, security branches would be ringed round with cement walls topped by barbed wire or electric fences, as if they were the targets of some imminent assault. All these measures served to heighten the regime's mythic status and thus aided the spread of rumour: How did they live and eat? How did they spend their free time? Did they sleep? The regime's human face became utterly occluded, and how could it not? For it was walled in with cement, hidden behind the darkened glass of its car windows and the gates of its many palaces.

From 2000, Bashar and his wife tried, in a somewhat stilted fashion, to humanize the image of the president and his family. 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

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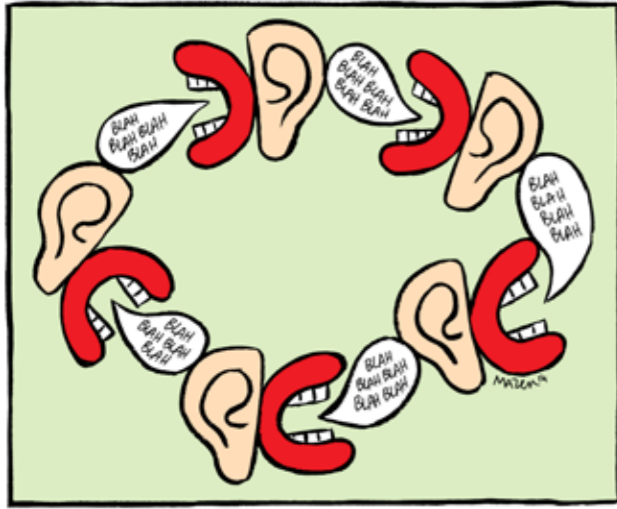
an article in early 2011 (just days before the outbreak of the revolution) that described Asma as 'a rose in the desert.'

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 and kids. These portraits were just a paper-thin caricature, an abstraction freighted with a fantasy that could not support the reality of the president as a person. In Syria the president is not an individual and nor are the people individuals. There are no individuals or citizens, just ruler and ruled, president and subject, executioner and victim, and the distance between these polarities is the distance between life and death, a distance whose substance is the fertile soil of the imagination that nourishes fear and panic. In Syria, the sensation of fear has been transformed over decades of oppression, denial and marginalization into a *fait accompli*. People do not feel fear when something takes place, they fear that it will take place. Maybe it does and maybe it doesn't happen, but the fear is permanent, it has become something like a hereditary disease, imprinted on the national DNA.

Bashar al-Assad and his wife, Asma, have



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three children, and it is no exaggeration to say that most Syrians have lived through three endless and exhausting waves of rumour and speculation, each one triggered by the birth of one of their offspring. Is it a boy or girl? Pale or dark? Healthy or unhealthy? Have they given him or her a traditional name or one of those new-fangled ones? It is my belief that this pandemonium over the three children was ultimately about succession, as it is very hard to conceive of the Assad family ever voluntarily giving up power. It sees itself as immortal, in its portraits, in its 'spirit', in the memory of every 'citizen', and so a new born son signifies the arrival of a 'legitimate' successor. It was this that made Hafez al-Assad junior hated even before he was grown, a criminal in a baby's body, implicated before he even knew the meaning of the word. It was said that behind their high walls the men of Damascus's wealthy families were praying that Bashar's son Hafez would 'turn out a good man, because he'll be our president in the future,'—and this in a country that is supposedly a republic, not a kingdom!

## Tyranny and the vaults

At the same time as we Syrians pointed our forefingers heavenwards, in reference to those mysterious, anonymous figures who ran our lives, caused us hardship, prevented our books and films from being published, and imprisoned our friends, every one of us was aware that there was another world that played itself out underground, down in the vaults and dungeons of the regime. There were rumours about the true extent of these underground chambers, and how they linked security branch-offices together. The 'Metro Tunnels' project, the plan for an underground transport system in Damascus, for instance, which should have

been completed years before the revolution broke out, just served as proof for the rumour-obsessed. The regime owns the underground, we would say, just as it owns the land and the sky up above.

Life in this underground world was lived in isolation from those above ground. Secrecy surrounded its inhabitants, who, it was claimed, went for days, months, even years, without seeing the light of day. Their identities and affiliations were almost a complete mystery; their scents and tastes and preferences — everything linked to their humanity — was unknown. Jelly-like creatures, trapped beneath the earth, beneath the office of the director of such-and-such a security branch. Beneath the offices where the director would receive his guests, drink tea and coffee with them, eat, wash, and maybe even invite his girlfriend for the night.

The tyranny, the savagery, with which this unknown 'Above' to whom we pointed with our fingers would treat the similarly anonymous 'Beneath' — someone who might have been our neighbour, our friend, or our relative — all this veiled the machinery of the regime with a cloak of fantasy; incomprehensible, intangible, impossible to see with the naked eye. In this way, the security regime became a nursery not just for the spreading of rumour, but for believing it, too.

## 'The other' as stranger

The regime has never stopped, not for an instant, promoting an official discourse of fraternity, peace, and embracing 'the other'. Indeed, fraternity — or coexistence — has been a duty, forced on every Syrian, and practiced for fear of retribution. Discourse on issues related to sectarian affiliation is outlawed and suppressed

to the point of creating ignorance, and mutual misunderstanding. Religions and sects are surrounded by a fog of legend and rumour. Minorities preserve their distinctiveness with secret, undeclared rites. Among the stereotypes that were circulated were: 'The Druze have become creatures who hide tails beneath their clothes and worship bulls'; 'The Shia bow down before vaginas'; 'Alawites are pagans who do not pray or fast and who drink alcohol'; 'Alawite women are whores who sell their bodies.'

The very regime that called for brotherhood was in truth participating in the oppression of all minorities. It outlawed their traditions and customs, while restricting their movement outwards from their traditional bases. This ignorance of 'the other' has also turned sects into taboos, sacred icons sunk in their past. The different sects that make up Syrian society are consequently beset by rumours, most of them untrue. Over the past few years of revolution we have seen much of this rumour-perpetuated stereotyping, so beloved of the regime: 'every Alawite is loyalist'; 'every Sunni is in the opposition' and the other minorities are treated with suspicion and face accusations until they are forced to prove their innocence. Far from fraternal conviviality, or the balanced critical thinking that would benefit the popular movement, Syrians are using abuse, insubordination and hatred, instead of the balanced 'conscious' thinking that should properly accompany the popular movement. This generalized tone of accusation has extended to all those who were employed in various government centres, institutions and agencies prior to the revolution - as though we had all been living in France where independent jobs were plentiful and easily available!

## Despair

Muammar Gaddafi was taken from his bolthole and led to a car a dying man. He was feeling his head, looking at his fingers and marvelling at his blood. He couldn't believe that he was bleeding. Him... Muammar Gaddafi! And us... we couldn't believe it either. The tyrant could die! Just as happened with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. To this very day, we still encounter people who are not convinced that Saddam Hussein was executed. It's claimed that his body-double was killed and that he lives on in a tunnel in Baghdad. For many it is difficult to believe the news. Many fear that if they believe it, and are brave enough to give expression to their feelings, he will suddenly emerge from beneath the earth and hold them to account. Here, too,

we encounter the problem of the individual beset by an a priori fear.

Following the killing of Muammar Gaddafi, some Syrians were convinced that getting rid of Bashar Al-Assad and his family was no longer just a dream, no longer just a wild fantasy. Rumours about his death started up, filling social media. Bashar orders the bombing of some district and they start passing round reports of his death: 'His convoy came under attack and he was killed'; 'They detained him on the road to the international airport as he was trying to make a run for Russia.'; 'They stormed the palace and assassinated him'; 'They shelled the People's Palace'. People began criticizing the assassins, saying it would have been better to keep the president alive so he could face trial! The identity of the assassins was also obscure. Sometimes it was the Free Army, sometimes the Nusra Front. 'Elements' (an abstraction) 'assassinate a president' (another abstraction).

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 even '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 detentions. It is now 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 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.

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

\*Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger