

Asma al-Assad: A Rose in the Desert

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Asma al-Assad is glamorous, young, and very chic—the freshest and most magnetic of first ladies. Her style is not the couture-and-bling dazzle of Middle Eastern power but a deliberate lack of adornment. She’s a rare combination: a thin, long-limbed beauty with a trained analytic mind who dresses with cunning understatement. Paris Match calls her “the element of light in a country full of shadow zones.” She is the first lady of Syria.

Syria is known as the safest country in the Middle East, possibly because, as the State Department’s Web site says, “the Syrian government conducts intense physical and electronic surveillance of both Syrian citizens and foreign visitors.” It’s a secular country where women earn as much as men and the Muslim veil is forbidden in universities, a place without bombings, unrest, or kidnappings, but its shadow zones are deep and dark. Asma’s husband, Bashar al-Assad, was elected president in 2000, after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, with a startling 97 percent of the vote. In Syria, power is hereditary. The country’s alliances are murky. How close are they to Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah? There are souvenir Hezbollah ashtrays in the souk, and you can spot the Hamas leadership racing through the bar of the Four Seasons. Its number-one enmity is clear: Israel. But that might not always be the case. The United States has just posted its first ambassador there since 2005, Robert Ford.

Iraq is next door, Iran not far away. Lebanon’s capital, Beirut, is 90 minutes by car from Damascus. Jordan is south, and next to it the region that Syrian maps label Palestine. There are nearly one million refugees from Iraq in Syria, and another half-million displaced Palestinians.

“It’s a tough neighborhood,” admits Asma al-Assad.

It’s also a neighborhood intoxicatingly close to the dawn of civilization, where agriculture began some 10,000 years ago, where the wheel, writing, and musical notation were invented. Out in the desert are the magical remains of Palmyra, Apamea, and Ebla. In the National Museum you see small 4,000-year-old panels inlaid with mother-of-pearl that is echoed in the new mother-of-pearl furniture for sale in the souk. Christian Louboutin comes to buy the damask silk brocade they’ve been making here since the Middle Ages for his shoes and bags, and has incidentally purchased a small palace in Aleppo, which, like Damascus, has been inhabited for more than 5,000 years.

The first lady works out of a small white building in a hilly, modern residential neighborhood called Muhajireen, where houses and apartments are crammed together and neighbors peer and wave from balconies. The first impression of Asma al-Assad is movement—a determined swath cut through space with a flash of red soles. Dark-brown eyes, wavy chin-length brown hair, long neck, an energetic grace. No watch, no jewelry apart from Chanel agates around her neck, not even a wedding ring, but fingernails lacquered a dark blue-green. She’s breezy, conspiratorial, and fun. Her accent is English but not plummy. Despite what must be a killer IQ, she sometimes uses urban shorthand: “I was, like. . . .”

Asma Akhras was born in London in 1975, the eldest child and only daughter of a Syrian Harley Street cardiologist and his diplomat wife, both Sunni Muslims. They spoke Arabic at home. She grew up in Ealing, went to Queen's College, and spent holidays with family in Syria. "I've dealt with the sense that people don't expect Syria to be normal. I'd show my London friends my holiday snaps and they'd be—'Where did you say you went?' "

She studied computer science at university, then went into banking. "It wasn't a typical path for women," she says, "but I had it all mapped out." By the spring of 2000, she was closing a big biotech deal at JP Morgan in London and about to take up an MBA at Harvard. She started dating a family friend: the second son of president Hafez al-Assad, Bashar, who'd cut short his ophthalmology studies in London in 1994 and returned to Syria after his older brother, Basil, heir apparent to power, died in a car crash. They had known each other forever, but a ten-year age difference meant that nothing registered—until it did.

"I was always very serious at work, and suddenly I started to take weekends, or disappear, and people just couldn't figure it out," explains the first lady. "What do you say—'I'm dating the son of a president'? You just don't say that. Then he became president, so I tried to keep it low-key. Suddenly I was turning up in Syria every month, saying, 'Granny, I miss you so much!' I quit in October because by then we knew that we were going to get married at some stage. I couldn't say why I was leaving. My boss thought I was having a nervous breakdown because nobody quits two months before bonus after closing a really big deal. He wouldn't accept my resignation. I was, like, 'Please, really, I just want to get out, I've had enough,' and he was 'Don't worry, take time off, it happens to the best of us.' " She left without her bonus in November and married Bashar al-Assad in December.

"What I've been able to take away from banking was the transferable skills—the analytical thinking, understanding the business side of running a company—to run an NGO or to try and oversee a project." She runs her office like a business, chairs meeting after meeting, starts work many days at six, never breaks for lunch, and runs home to her children at four. "It's my time with them, and I get them fresh, unedited—I love that. I really do." Her staff are used to eating when they can. "I have a rechargeable battery," she says.

The 35-year-old first lady's central mission is to change the mind-set of six million Syrians under eighteen, encourage them to engage in what she calls "active citizenship." "It's about everyone taking shared responsibility in moving this country forward, about empowerment in a civil society. We all have a stake in this country; it will be what we make it."

In 2005 she founded Massar, built around a series of discovery centers where children and young adults from five to 21 engage in creative, informal approaches to civic responsibility. Massar's mobile Green Team has touched 200,000 kids across Syria since 2005. The organization is privately funded through donations. The Syria Trust for Development, formed in 2007, oversees Massar as well as her first NGO, the rural micro-credit association FIRDOS, and SHABAB, which exists to give young people business skills they need for the future.

And then there's her cultural mission: "People tend to see Syria as artifacts and history," she says. "For us it's about the accumulation of cultures, traditions, values, customs. It's the difference between hardware and software: the artifacts are the hardware, but the software makes all the

difference—the customs and the spirit of openness. We have to make sure that we don't lose that. . . .” Here she gives an apologetic grin. “You have to excuse me, but I'm a banker—that brand essence.”

That brand essence includes the distant past. There are 500,000 important ancient works of art hidden in storage; Asma al-Assad has brought in the Louvre to create a network of museums and cultural attractions across Syria, and asked Italian experts to help create a database of the 5,000 archaeological sites in the desert. “Culture,” she says, “is like a financial asset. We have an abundance of it, thousands of years of history, but we can't afford to be complacent.”

In December, Asma al-Assad was in Paris to discuss her alliance with the Louvre. She dazzled a tough French audience at the International Diplomatic Institute, speaking without notes. “I'm not trying to disguise culture as anything more than it is,” she said, “and if I sound like I'm talking politics, it's because we live in a politicized region, a politicized time, and we are affected by that.”

The French ambassador to Syria, Eric Chevallerier, was there: “She managed to get people to consider the possibilities of a country that's modernizing itself, that stands for a tolerant secularism in a powder-keg region, with extremists and radicals pushing in from all sides—and the driving force for that rests largely on the shoulders of one couple. I hope they'll make the right choices for their country and the region.”

Damascus evokes a dusty version of a Mediterranean hill town in an Eastern-bloc country. The courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque at night looks exactly like St. Mark's square in Venice. When I first arrive, I'm met on the tarmac by a minder, who gives me a bouquet of white roses and lends me a Syrian cell phone; the head minder, a high-profile American PR, joins us the next day. The first lady's office has provided drivers, so I shop and see sights in a bubble of comfort and hospitality. On the rare occasions I am out alone, a random series of men in leather jackets seems to be keeping close tabs on what I am doing and where I am headed.

“I like things I can touch. I like to get out and meet people and do things,” the first lady says as we set off for a meeting in a museum and a visit to an orphanage. “As a banker, you have to be so focused on the job at hand that you lose the experience of the world around you. My husband gave me back something I had lost.”

She slips behind the wheel of a plain SUV, a walkie-talkie and her cell thrown between the front seats and a Syrian-silk Louboutin tote on top. She does what the locals do—swerves to avoid crazy men who run across busy freeways, misses her turn, checks your seat belt, points out sights, and then can't find a parking space. When a traffic cop pulls her over at a roundabout, she lowers the tinted window and dips her head with a playful smile. The cop's eyes go from slits to saucers.

Her younger brother Feras, a surgeon who moved to Syria to start a private health-care group, says, “Her intelligence is both intellectual and emotional, and she's a master at harmonizing when, and how much, to use of each one.”

In the Saint Paul orphanage, maintained by the Melkite–Greek Catholic patriarchate and run by the Basilian sisters of Aleppo, Asma sits at a long table with the children. Two little boys in new glasses and thick sweaters are called Yussuf. She asks them what kind of music they like. “Sad music,” says one. In the room where she's had some twelve computers installed, the first lady tells a nun, “I hope you're letting the younger children in here go crazy on the computers.” The nun winces: “The

children are afraid to learn in case they don't have access to computers when they leave here," she says.

In the courtyard by the wall down which Saint Paul escaped in a basket 2,000 years ago, an old tree bears gigantic yellow fruit I have never seen before. Citrons. Cédrats in French.

Back in the car, I ask what religion the orphans are. "It's not relevant," says Asma al-Assad. "Let me try to explain it to you. That church is a part of my heritage because it's a Syrian church. The Umayyad Mosque is the third-most-important holy Muslim site, but within the mosque is the tomb of Saint John the Baptist. We all kneel in the mosque in front of the tomb of Saint John the Baptist. That's how religions live together in Syria—a way that I have never seen anywhere else in the world. We live side by side, and have historically. All the religions and cultures that have passed through these lands—the Armenians, Islam, Christianity, the Umayyads, the Ottomans—make up who I am."

"Does that include the Jews?" I ask.

"And the Jews," she answers. "There is a very big Jewish quarter in old Damascus."

The Jewish quarter of Damascus spans a few abandoned blocks in the old city that emptied out in 1992, when most of the Syrian Jews left. Their houses are sealed up and have not been touched, because, as people like to tell you, Syrians don't touch the property of others. The broken glass and sagging upper floors tell a story you don't understand—are the owners coming back to claim them one day?

The presidential family lives surrounded by neighbors in a modern apartment in Malki. On Friday, the Muslim day of rest, Asma al-Assad opens the door herself in jeans and old suede stiletto boots, hair in a ponytail, the word happiness spelled out across the back of her T-shirt. At the bottom of the stairs stands the off-duty president in jeans—tall, long-necked, blue-eyed. A precise man who takes photographs and talks lovingly about his first computer, he says he was attracted to studying eye surgery "because it's very precise, it's almost never an emergency, and there is very little blood."

The old al-Assad family apartment was remade into a child-friendly triple-decker playroom loft surrounded by immense windows on three sides. With neither shades nor curtains, it's a fishbowl. Asma al-Assad likes to say, "You're safe because you are surrounded by people who will keep you safe." Neighbors peer in, drop by, visit, comment on the furniture. The president doesn't mind: "This curiosity is good: They come to see you, they learn more about you. You don't isolate yourself."

There's a decorated Christmas tree. Seven-year-old Zein watches Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* on the president's iMac; her brother Karim, six, builds a shark out of Legos; and nine-year-old Hafez tries out his new electric violin. All three go to a Montessori school.

Asma al-Assad empties a box of fondue mix into a saucepan for lunch. The household is run on wildly democratic principles. "We all vote on what we want, and where," she says. The chandelier over the dining table is made of cut-up comic books. "They outvoted us three to two on that."

A grid is drawn on a blackboard, with ticks for each member of the family. "We were having trouble with politeness, so we made a chart: ticks for when they spoke as they should, and a cross if they didn't." There's a cross next to Asma's name. "I shouted," she confesses. "I can't talk about

empowering young people, encouraging them to be creative and take responsibility, if I'm not like that with my own children."

"The first challenge for us was, Who's going to define our lives, us or the position?" says the president. "We wanted to live our identity honestly."

They announced their marriage in January 2001, after the ceremony, which they kept private. There was deliberately no photograph of Asma. "The British media picked that up as: Now she's moved into the presidential palace, never to be seen again!" says Asma, laughing.

They had a reason: "She spent three months incognito," says the president. "Before I had any official engagement," says the first lady, "I went to 300 villages, every governorate, hospitals, farms, schools, factories, you name it—I saw everything to find out where I could be effective. A lot of the time I was somebody's 'assistant' carrying the bag, doing this and that, taking notes. Nobody asked me if I was the first lady; they had no idea."

"That way," adds the president, "she started her NGO before she was ever seen in public as my wife. Then she started to teach people that an NGO is not a charity."

Neither of them believes in charity for the sake of charity. "We have the Iraqi refugees," says the president. "Everybody is talking about it as a political problem or as welfare, charity. I say it's neither—it's about cultural philosophy. We have to help them. That's why the first thing I did is to allow the Iraqis to go into schools. If they don't have an education, they will go back as a bomb, in every way: terrorism, extremism, drug dealers, crime. If I have a secular and balanced neighbor, I will be safe."

When Angelina Jolie came with Brad Pitt for the United Nations in 2009, she was impressed by the first lady's efforts to encourage empowerment among Iraqi and Palestinian refugees but alarmed by the Assads' idea of safety.

"My husband was driving us all to lunch," says Asma al-Assad, "and out of the corner of my eye I could see Brad Pitt was fidgeting. I turned around and asked, 'Is anything wrong?' "

"Where's your security?" asked Pitt.

"So I started teasing him—'See that old woman on the street? That's one of them! And that old guy crossing the road?"

"That's the other one!" They both laugh.

The president joins in the punch line: "Brad Pitt wanted to send his security guards here to come and get some training!"

After lunch, Asma al-Assad drives to the airport, where a Falcon 900 is waiting to take her to Massar in Latakia, on the coast. When she lands, she jumps behind the wheel of another SUV waiting on the tarmac. This is the kind of surprise visit she specializes in, but she has no idea how many kids will turn up at the community center on a rainy Friday.

As it turns out, it's full. Since the first musical notation was discovered nearby, at Ugarit, the immaculate Massar center in Latakia is built around music. Local kids are jamming in a sound booth;

a group of refugee Palestinian girls is playing instruments. Others play chess on wall-mounted computers. These kids have started online blood banks, run marathons to raise money for dialysis machines, and are working on ways to rid Latakia of plastic bags. Apart from a few girls in scarves, you can't tell Muslims from Christians.

Asma al-Assad stands to watch a laborious debate about how—and whether—to standardize the Arabic spelling of the word Syria. Then she throws out a curve ball. “I’ve been advised that we have to close down this center so as to open another one somewhere else,” she says. Kids’ mouths drop open. Some repress tears. Others are furious. One boy chooses altruism: “That’s OK. We know how to do it now; we’ll help them.”

Then the first lady announces, “That wasn’t true. I just wanted to see how much you care about Massar.”

As the pilot expertly avoids sheet lightning above the snow-flecked desert on the way back, she explains, “There was a little bit of formality in what they were saying to me; it wasn’t real. Tricks like this help—they became alive, they became passionate. We need to get past formalities if we are going to get anything done.”

Two nights later it’s the annual Christmas concert by the children of Al-Farah Choir, run by the Syrian Catholic Father Elias Zahlawi. Just before it begins, Bashar and Asma al-Assad slip down the aisle and take the two empty seats in the front row. People clap, and some call out his nickname:

“Docteur! Docteur!”

Two hundred children dressed variously as elves, reindeers, or candy canes share the stage with members of the national orchestra, who are done up as elves. The show becomes a full-on songfest, with the elves and reindeer and candy canes giving their all to “Hallelujah” and “Joy to the World.” The carols slide into a more serpentine rhythm, an Arabic rap group takes over, and then it’s back to Broadway mode. The president whispers, “All of these styles belong to our culture. This is how you fight extremism—through art.”

Brass bells are handed out. Now we’re all singing “Jingle Bell Rock,” 1,331 audience members shaking their bells, singing, crying, and laughing.

“This is the diversity you want to see in the Middle East,” says the president, ringing his bell. “This is how you can have peace!”

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