

Here you have the article about Asma al-Assad in Vogue (<http://www.vogue.com/vogue-daily/article/asma-al-assad-a-rose-in-the-desert/>) and reactions to it. Vogue removed it from its website after a wave of protests.

As of page 8 there is an article about her meeting with aid workers in September 2011.

## **Asma al-Assad: A Rose in the Desert**

*by Joan Juliet Buck | photographed by James Nachtwey*



Photographed by James Nachtwey

*Asma al-Assad, Syria's dynamic first lady, is on a mission to create a beacon of culture and secularism in a powder-keg region—and to put a modern face on her husband's regime.*

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 Chevallier, 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.”



Photographed by James Nachtwey

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!"

*February 25, 2011 9:03 a.m.*

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Wal street journal

Maybe it takes a fashion dictator to know a fashionable dictator. How else to explain Vogue editor Anna Wintour's decision this month to publish a 3,000-word paean to that "freshest and most magnetic of first ladies," Syria's Asma al-Assad?

That's right. As Libyans braved fighter jets and machine-gun fire in their drive to overthrow the tyrant Moammar Gadhafi in Tripoli, the queen of Condé Nast thought it was in good taste to feature the beautiful wife of Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Apparently Vogue missed the trend: Dictators are out this season.



AFP/Getty Images / Syria's First Lady Asma al-Assad

The Assad family—first Hafez and now his son Bashar—has ruled Syria since 1970. In that time, they've killed 20,000 Syrians to put down an uprising in Hama, provoked civil war in Lebanon and then occupied the country to "keep peace," built a secret nuclear-weapons facility modeled on North Korea's, and established Damascus as a hub for terrorists from Hezbollah to Hamas and Islamic Jihad. All part of keeping their countrymen under foot for 40 years. No matter. The only feet that seem to interest Vogue writer Joan Juliet Buck are the manicured toes of the first lady. Mrs. Assad reveals a "flash of red soles," we're told, as she darts about with "energetic grace."

The red soles are an allusion to the signature feature of Christian Louboutin designer heels—easily \$700 a pair—that Mrs. Assad favors. (Mr. Louboutin, says Vogue, visits Damascus to buy silk brocade, and he owns an 11th-century palace in Aleppo.)

Mrs. Assad also sports Chanel sunglasses and travels in a Falcon 900 jet. But, we're assured, she's not the ostentatious sort: "Her style is not the couture-and-bling of Middle Eastern power but deliberate lack of adornment." She once worked at J.P. Morgan, never breaks for lunch, and starts her day at 6 a.m.—all while raising three children! Just another 21st-century woman trying to do it all in style.

And her parenting? "The household is run on wildly democratic principles," Vogue reports. "We all vote on what we want and where," says Mrs. Assad of herself, her husband and their children.

For the people of Syria, not so much. Outside their home, the Assads believe in democracy the way Saddam Hussein did. In 2000, Bashar al-Assad won 97% of the vote. Vogue musters the gumption only to call this "startling." In fact, it's part of a political climate that's one of the world's worst—on par, says the watchdog group Freedom House, with those of North Korea, Burma and Saudi Arabia.

But none of those countries has Asma. "The 35-year-old first lady's central mission," we're told, "is to change the mind-set of six million Syrians under eighteen, encourage them to engage in what she calls 'active citizenship.'" That's just what 18-year-old high-school student Tal al-Mallouhi did with her blog, but it didn't stop the Assad regime from arresting her in late 2009. Or from sentencing her, in a closed security court last month, to five years in prison for "espionage."

Ms. Mallouhi goes unmentioned in Vogue. But readers get other crucial details: On Fridays, Bashar al-Assad is just an "off-duty president in jeans—tall, long-necked, blue-eyed." He "talks lovingly about his first computer," Vogue records, and he says that he studied ophthalmology "because it's very precise, it's almost never an emergency, and there is very little blood."

So it's the opposite of his Syria: murky and lawless, operating under emergency law since 1963, and wont to shed blood through its security forces and proxies like Hezbollah.

It's hard to believe that a veteran journalist would so diminish these matters, but it seems that Ms. Buck's aim was more public relations spin than reportage. As she reveals, her every move was watched by state security: "The first lady's office has provided drivers, so I shop and see sights"—including, in a trip reminiscent of Eva Perón, an orphanage—"in a bubble of comfort and hospitality."

In the past weeks, as people power has highlighted the illegitimacy and ruthlessness of the Middle East's strongmen, various Western institutions have been shamed for their associations with them. There's the London School of Economics, which accepted over \$2 million from Libya's ruling family, and experts like political theorist Benjamin Barber, who wrote that Gadhafi "is a complex and adaptive thinker as well as an efficient, if laid-back, autocrat."

When Syria's dictator eventually falls—for the moment, protests against him have been successfully squelched by police—there will be a similar reckoning. Vogue has earned its place in that unfortunate roll call.

*Ms. Weiss and Mr. Feith are assistant editorial features editors at The Journal.*

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[http://www.newenglishreview.org/blog\\_display.cfm/blog\\_id/33044](http://www.newenglishreview.org/blog_display.cfm/blog_id/33044)

Thursday, 10 March 2011

### **Charles Jacobs' Letter to WSJ Exposes Harvard Connection with Assad Syrian Dictatorship Syria's First Lady Asma Al-Assad**

Hugh Fitzgerald [posted](#) a *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) features column earlier today, "[The Dictator's Wife wears Louboutins](#)," excoriating the charm offensive by the Syrian Assad regime and its stylish First Lady, Asma al-Assad, the wife of Ba'athist regime head, Bashir Assad. That WSJ article prompted letters published today in the WSJ by [Charles Jacobs](#), of Americans for Peace and Tolerance (APT) and Imad Moustapha, Syrian Ambassador to the US. Jacobs pointed out that a Harvard alumni event in Damascus scheduled for St. Patrick's Day, March 17<sup>th</sup> as well as the thought control exercised by the Syrian regime to stifle unrest and opposition. This faux pas by the Harvard Alumni Association is occurring while the rest of the Sunni Muslim ummah is in turmoil, including Wahhabist Saudi Arabia with its Day of Rage about to erupt tomorrow.

Below are the letters to the WSJ by Jacobs of APT and Syrian Ambassador to Washington presenting contrasting views.

#### **Letters to the Editor:**

Not only has Asma al-Assad, wife of the brutal Syrian dictator, charmed the editors of Vogue, it looks like she's also captivated fair Harvard. Under Mrs. al-Assad's patronage, Harvard's Alumni Association is sponsoring a conference in Damascus on March 17, at the posh Four Seasons Hotel. The university's vice provost for international affairs, Prof. Jorge I. Dominguez, will deliver the Harvard guest address.

At a time when the peoples all across the Middle East are risking their lives to be free of tyranny, why in the world would Harvard partner with a ruling family that has brutally dominated Syria for 40 years and runs a country on the State Department's terror list? Since the al-Assad family took power in 1970, a state of emergency has remained in effect that gives security forces sweeping powers of arrest and detention.

Syria, a one-party state with no free elections, harasses and imprisons human-rights activists and other critics of the

government. The most basic human freedoms-of expression, association and assembly-are strictly controlled. Indeed, Facebook, which has functioned as a tool for liberation across the region, is blocked by the Assad regime.

Clearly today Harvard would not sponsor events with the Ben Alis of Tunisia, the Mubaraks of Egypt or the Gadhafi clan. Must Harvard administrators witness a bloody revolt by Syria's freedom-starved people to withdraw from the embrace of a tyrant?

Charles Jacobs, Boston

### **Syria Responds to Op-Ed on First Lady Asma al-Assad**

Instead of targeting Vogue's profile on Syria's first lady, the anger and indignation emanating from Bari Weiss and David Feith's op-ed "The Dictator's Wife Wears Louboutins" (op-ed, March 7) should be directed toward matters of grave proportions, such as the recent killing of nine boys in Afghanistan by the U.S. military, the hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis as a result of the U.S. invasion, or the "war crimes and crimes against humanity" committed by Israel in Gaza (as reported by the United Nation's Goldstone Report).

Indeed, such vitriol on behalf of Ms. Weiss and Mr. Feith begs the larger question: Why does the Journal turn down op-ed submissions on the aforementioned momentous topics, and instead devote so much space for an op-ed that finds as a grievance the first lady's "manicured toes"? One possible explanation: Vogue succeeds in showing a side of Syria that the editors at the Journal don't want, or refuse, to see: "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," as a Western ambassador observes in the article.

Make no mistake, this is what angered the authors, not red soles on a first lady's feet.

Imad Moustapha, Washington  
Ph.D. Ambassador of Syria to the U.S.

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<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/so-what-do-you-think-of-your-husbands-brutal-crackdown-mrs-assad-2372008.html>

So, what do you think of your husband's brutal crackdown, Mrs Assad?

**What did Syria's First Lady, supposedly a force for compassion, say when aid workers confronted her about the bloody crackdown? Alastair Beach reports**

Tuesday, 18 October 2011



*Syria's First Lady Asma al-Assad, who stonewalled questions about the violence carried out in her husband's name*



Vogue magazine famously called her a "rose in the desert", while Paris Match proclaimed she was the "element of light in a country full of shadow zones". But when Syria's glamorous First Lady invited a group of aid workers to discuss the security situation with her last month, she appeared to have lost her gloss.

During the meeting, British-born Asma al-Assad – who grew up in Acton and attended a Church of England school in west London – came face to face with aid workers who had witnessed at first hand the brutality of her husband's regime. Yet according to one volunteer who was present, the former investment banker and mother of President Bashar al-Assad's three children appeared utterly unmoved when she heard about the plight of protesters.

"We told her about the killing of protesters," said the man, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution. "We told her about the security forces attacking demonstrators. About them taking wounded people from cars and preventing people from getting to hospital ... There was no reaction. She didn't react at all. It was just like I was telling a normal story, something that happens every day."

Syrians working with aid agencies to try to help the thousands injured as Mr Assad's security forces unleash tanks, guns and airpower to crush a seven-month uprising against his rule had hoped for a lot more. The First Lady's office contacted them and said she wanted to hear about the difficulties they faced in the field. She met the humanitarians in Damascus.

"She asked us about the risks of working under the current conditions," he added. But when she was told about the abuses of power being committed by her husband's notorious secret police, Mrs Assad's blank face left them unimpressed. "She sees everything happening here. Everything is all over the news. It's impossible she doesn't know," said the volunteer. Yet even if Mrs Assad does know about the worst of the violence and the 3,000 civilians human rights groups accuse the regime of killing, many people who have met her question what she could possibly do about it.

"Whatever her own views, she is completely hamstrung," said Chris Doyle, the director of the Council of Arab-British Understanding. "There is no way the regime would allow her any room to voice dissent or leave the country. You can forget it."

Mrs Assad, who achieved a first class degree in computer science from King's College University, was brought up in Britain by her Syrian-born parents, who were close friends of Hafez al-Assad, the former President of Syria. She started dating Bashar al-Assad in her twenties, and they eventually married in 2000, when she moved to Syria for the first time.

According to one prominent Western biographer of the Assad family, Bashar chose Asma against the determined opposition of his sister and mother. "He had lots of beautiful girlfriends before her," said the journalist, who asked not to be named. "He faced opposition when he wanted Asma because she was Sunni and he is Alawite. Here was Bashar al-Assad marrying outside the clan."

She championed several development initiatives, and delivered genuine change by helping to create NGOs in Syria, as well as highlighting the plight of disabled children and laying the groundwork for plans to rehabilitate dozens of Syria's ramshackle museums.

For some, she is the modern, made-up face of a former pariah state; to others, an aloof, 21st-century Marie Antoinette. Either way, nothing perhaps crystallised the fate of Syria's First Lady better than the disastrously-timed interview run by Vogue magazine in its March issue this year.

Amid obsequious descriptions of Chanel jewellery and her matey banter with Brad Pitt during the Hollywood star's 2009 visit to Syria, the article described how the Assad household was run on "wildly democratic principles".

According to Mrs Assad: "we all vote on what we want, and where."

Naturally, many outraged Syrians were left asking why the Assads could not extend them the same courtesy.