

Physician, then Political Dictator: Bashar al-Assad, President of the Syrian Arab Republic

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the life influences and circumstances that enabled President Bashar al-Assad to shift from the practice of medicine to becoming a brutal political dictator. Assad is one among the few members of the medical community who have transitioned from doctor to political dictator. Widely known for his deadly rule over Syria, his formal education and training were in medicine, specializing in ophthalmology. He graduated from Damascus Medical University, briefly practiced in a Syrian military hospital, and later sought to advance his training at the Western Eye Hospital in London. Following his father's death, Bashar al-Assad assumed power and has ruled Syria as its president for over 20 years. Using psychobiography, this case study assesses Bashar al-Assad's brutal transformation from doctor to dictator. His leadership sophistication and social elevation were originally enhanced from his upbringing as the second son of the President of Syria and his training as a physician. While he initially chose to specialize in Ophthalmology, reportedly because of the reduced exposure to blood, al-Assad is responsible for the deaths and disappearance of approximately 500,000 people.

Keywords: psychobiography, leadership analysis, doctator, dictator, authoritarian, at-a-distance-assessment

Médico, entonces dictador político: Bashar al-Assad, presidente de la República Árabe Siria

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina las influencias de la vida y las circunstancias que permitieron al presidente Bashar al-Assad pasar de la práctica de la medicina a convertirse en un brutal dictador político. Assad es uno de los pocos miembros de la comunidad médica que ha pasado de médico a dictador político. Ampliamente conocido por su gobierno mortal sobre Siria, su educación y formación formales fueron en medicina, especializándose en oftalmología. Se graduó de la

Universidad de Medicina de Damasco, practicó brevemente en un hospital militar sirio y luego buscó avanzar en su formación en el Western Eye Hospital de Londres. Tras la muerte de su padre, Bashar al-Assad asumió el poder y ha gobernado Siria como su presidente durante más de 20 años. Utilizando la psicobiografía, este estudio de caso evalúa la brutal transformación de Bashar al-Assad de médico a dictador. Su sofisticación de liderazgo y elevación social se mejoraron originalmente a partir de su educación como segundo hijo del presidente de Siria y su formación como médico. Si bien inicialmente eligió especializarse en Oftalmología, al parecer debido a la menor exposición a la sangre, al-Assad es responsable de la muerte y desaparición de aproximadamente 500.000 personas.

Palabras clave: psicobiografía, análisis de liderazgo, doctor, dictador, autoritario, evaluación a distancia

从医生到政治独裁者：阿拉伯叙利亚共和国总统巴沙尔·阿萨德

摘要

本文分析了使巴沙尔·阿萨德总统从行医转变为残酷的政治独裁者的一系列生活影响和环境。阿萨德是医学界为数不多的、从医生转变为政治独裁者的成员之一。他对叙利亚的极端统治广为人知，但他接受的正规教育和培训是医学（专攻眼科）。他毕业于大马士革大学医学系，曾在叙利亚军队医院短暂行医，之后试图在伦敦西部眼科医院进修培训。在其父去世后，巴沙尔·阿萨德掌权并作为总统统治叙利亚超过20年。本案例研究使用心理传记学，评估巴沙尔·阿萨德从医生到独裁者的残酷转变。他的领导才能和社会地位最初是从他作为叙利亚总统的第二个儿子的成长经历以及他的内科医生培训中得以提升的。尽管他最初选择从事眼科（据报道是因为接触血液的情况较少），但阿萨德对大约 500,000 人的死亡和失踪负有责任。

关键词：心理传记学，领导力分析，医生独裁者（doctor），独裁者，威权主义者，远距离评估

“Doctators” – Physicians Who Become Political Dictators

If you have a doctor who cuts the head because of gangrene to save a patient, you don't say he's a brutal doctor, he's doing his job in order to save the rest of the body. So when you protect your country from the terrorists and you kill terrorists, you are not brutal, you are a patriot. That's how you look at yourself, and that's how the people want to look at you. (Bashar al-Assad, President of Syria in Neely, 2016).

Over the years, some doctors have found their way into politics, serving in roles like a head of state or cabinet members. Several traits make doctors well suited for political office, including time management skills, making quick decisions under stressful situations, and working as a team (Stanley 2020). However, upon entering politics, doctors are looked upon differently compared to career politicians, lawyers, or any other professions. Arguably they are looked upon as father figures, persons to make us feel safe and secure (Perper and Cina 2010). Additionally, society perceives that through their wisdom and healing hands, they will know what is best for the country (Perper and Cina 2010). However, even some doctors have a dark side despite these high standards. The unique phenomenon of a physician turned dictator, coined “doctator,” in the domains of political science and psychology was first identified and discussed by the journalist Robert Montefiore (1997), who defined the concept as “the process by which a medical doctor, devoted to sacrificing himself to save lives, becomes a dictator, devoted to sacrificing lives to save himself” (17). While several physicians have served honorably at the level of President or Prime Minister,

including Sun Yat-Sen (First Provisional President, Republic of China), Ram Baran Yadav (President of Nepal), Gro Harlem Brundtland (Prime Minister of Norway), Michelle Bachelet (President of Chile), and Juscelino Kubitscheck (President of Brazil), elevated paternalistic roles in society have at times transferred to malignant national leadership roles by physician politicians (Lass et al., 2012).

Examples of previous physician dictators include Hastings Banda, Prime Minister, then President of Malawi. Banda, trained in medicine in the United States and Scotland, was reputed to have fed his imprisoned political enemies to crocodiles (Forster 2001). Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier, President-for-Life of Haiti, transformed from an American-trained physician specializing in infectious and tropical diseases to a political dictator. Utilizing a cult of deified personality, he devised a combination of Voodoo, Christianity, torture, and extreme punishment during his 14-year reign of terror (Drumhiller and Skvorc 2018). Radovan Karadzic, President of the Srpska Republika, a Bosnia psychiatrist trained in Denmark and the United States, has been referred to as the “Butcher of Bosnia” for his ac-

tions resulting in a conviction of genocide and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Previous research focusing on dictators has provided additional insight into whether leaders are born or made and how physicians can come to commit and order extraordinary acts of violence against others (Drumhiller and Skvorc 2018). Drawing upon psychobiography as an at-a-distance assessment technique (Schultz 2005), this case study assesses how Bashar al-Assad has transitioned from a pathway of professional healing as an ophthalmologist into a dictator whose regime is responsible for the deaths and disappearances of more than 500,000 people (Ebrahimi 2021). In the early days of his rise to power, there were hopes that Bashar al-Assad would be very different from his father, bringing positive reforms to Syria and its people. This initial optimism can be attributed, in part, to the social bias and elevation afforded to him as a result of his medical training and practice as an Ophthalmologist (Perper and Cina 2010). Further fueling this hope, his inaugural speech contained assurances of “creative thinking, constructive criticism, transparency, and democracy” (Post 2015, 209). As a demonstration of this for a brief period, Assad allowed the organization of opposition parties, provided more freedoms to the press, and released many political prisoners as a show of good faith (de Halvetang 2017). Additionally, “liberal intellectuals founded discussion salons across the Syrian capital and put together political pamphlets and petitions for reform” (de

Halvetang 2017, 4). However, these reforms were brief as Assad would later backtrack on his position and consolidate his power to maintain his position as President of Syria.

Psychobiography as a Means to Assess Doctor-Dictators

This study uses psychobiography as an at-a-distance assessment technique to assess Bashar al-Assad’s transformation from ophthalmologist to a political dictator. As the term implies, using psychobiography to assess a political leader involves applying psychological concepts to a personal biographical history to better understand their leadership behavior and ultimately “make predictions about the individual’s motivations” (Cara 2007, 115; see also Lasswell 1930; Post 2003; Schultz 2005). Psychobiography has been used to assess a wide range of political leaders such as Woodrow Wilson (George and George 1998; McDermott 2008), Condolezza Rice (Fitch and Marshall 2008), Hitler (Victor 1998), and François Duvalier (Drumhiller and Skvorc 2018) to name a few. Furthermore, case studies of dictators have been carried out to assess their leadership transformation (Victor 1998); personalities (Coolidge and Segal 2007); psychopathology (Coolidge, Davis, and Segal 2007); as well as their overall development and pathology (Hyland, Boduszek, and Kiełkiewicz, 2011).

By analyzing written material focused on Assad’s upbringing, socio-political development, and rise to power,

we can assess his political psychological make-up by way of the personality traits that are revealed within the available data (Birt 1993; Coolidge, Davis, and Segal 2007; Coolidge and Segal 2007; 2009). This assessment considers Syria's development under Assad's father and how its organizational instabilities may have contributed to Assad's development. We review Assad's early years in power, hints of reform, and later his consolidation of power and human rights abuses. As a doctor-dictator, we pay particular attention to the development and cultivation of his medical interests, especially related to his later uses of this skillset to gain favor in the global community. This case study reveals Assad's use of Western-based professional training and sophistication to advance and justify the brutal treatment of any person or group perceived as disloyal. As a means of gaining additional insight into the doctor-dictator framework, this case study helps to identify the convergence of psychological traits and historical circumstances resulting in human rights violations on an epic scale.

Personality and Environmental Constructs

Dark Traits

Psychiatrists and psychologists have an established history of studying dictators both from a distance like that of Saddam Hussein (Post 2003; Coolidge and Segal 2007), Kim Jung Il (Coolidge and Segal 2009), or Stalin (Birt 1993; Stal 2003), and also in-person, such as Carl Jung's description of meeting Ad-

olf Hitler and Benito Mussolini (Goldman 2011). In 2009, Coolidge and Segal identified six personality disorders common to dictators; these include the sadistic, antisocial, paranoid, narcissistic, schizoid, and schizotypal personality disorders. Over time, these disorders have come to be referred to as so-called "Dark Traits," which are reflected in dictators' cruel and antisocial behaviors (Haycock 2019). These traits include egoism, Machiavellianism, moral disengagement, narcissism, psychological entitlement, psychopathy, sadism, self-interest, and spitefulness. Examples include disregarding valid criticism, exploitation of others to facilitate an identified goal, holding oneself above moral and ethical conventions, extreme self-centeredness, extreme desire for reward without effort, lack of empathy and remorse for manipulative and dishonest behaviors, taking pleasure in abusing others (psychologically or physically), seeking rewards without concern of impact on others, and deliberate injuries to others.

Dark Traits have been incorporated in research to form a "common core of dark traits," known as a D-factor (Moshagen, Hilbig, and Zettler, 2018). In particular, "persons with a high D-factor score are capable of doing whatever is necessary to get what they want no matter who is inconvenienced or harmed They may act as if they want to help others, but their only goal ultimately is to help themselves" (Haycock 2019, 66). Associated behaviors include an exaggerated sense of self-importance, craving for excessive admiration, a self-entitled view of the

world, willingness to exploit others, an absence of empathy, envy toward others perceived as successful, and an exaggerated self-report of accomplishments and achievements (Haycock 2019).

Dictators “see themselves as ‘very special’ people, deserving of admiration and, consequently, have difficulty empathizing with the feelings and needs of others Not only do dictators commonly show a ‘pervasive pattern of grandiosity,’ they also tend to behave with a vindictiveness often observed in narcissistic personality disorder” (Norrholm and Hunley 2017, 1). Politics are viewed as a means to personal gain, regardless of utilized methods or consequences to all others. Accompanying these perspectives is a willingness to believe conspiracy theories focused against them and a willingness to order extreme brutality (including death) to anyone challenging their authority. Subordinates are provided incentives, including status and power, to reinforce their loyalty, with disfavor resulting in extreme punishment, including incarceration or execution.

Additionally, autocratic leaders have difficulty experiencing empathy, love, and guilt (Burkle 2019). Instead, they are “distinguished by sociopathic and narcissistic behaviors that self-serve to cover their constant fear of insecurity and the insatiable need for power” (Burkle 2019, 1). In this regard, fundamental components within a democratic state, such as human rights and basic human security needs, are disregarded (Burkle 2019). Burkle further observed that dictators reflect a narcissism that exists concurrently with antisocial per-

sonality disorder, with a lack of conscience and remorse for their despotic behaviors and wrongdoings.

Failing to govern fairly, substituting deviousness and deception for the lack of competence, obsessing over power, perpetuating fraud, and gaming the system become their own ‘theology’ Despite initial promises to the contrary, authoritarian leadership is too often based on manufactured fears, mistrust, and paranoia leading to incremental assaults on the population’s human rights (Burkle 2019, 6).

Despite the work carried out linking personality disorders and dark traits to dictators, it is crucial to keep in mind that there are numerous examples of individuals with these six concurrent personality disorders who do not become dictators or terrorists, and some dictators likely have different diagnoses of personality and psychiatric disorders (Goldman 2011). Also, along these lines, having some of these darker traits is not enough to assume and sustain dictatorial power (Haycock 2019). As a result, it is also essential to consider the environmental conditions in the area when assessing leadership development and behavior.

Environmental Conditions

Instilling fear and terror in their opponents, lacking any remorse for the suffering of anyone challenging their rule, and appointing subordinates who can manage the logistics and details of administration—with a full under-

standing of their loss of societal privileges if there is a regime change—are tactics consistently used and reinforced by dictators. On their own, and sometimes even combined, these tactics are not enough to secure, let alone keep an individual in political power. This is likewise the case when it comes to their personality and personality traits. Moghaddam (2013) made the critical observation that comprehending the psychology of the dictator was less important than considering the environmental conditions that facilitate the rise of a dictator. Reinforcing this analysis, Haycock (2019) wrote, “it takes a broken nation to raise a dictator” (240). Facilitating events, including economic devastation, political revolution, and polarizing political divisions, can create situations ripe for the rise of individuals with the requisite personality traits and ambitions. Intense uncertainty, insecurity, and destabilization can lead to a willingness to believe messages of scapegoating, resentment, suspicion, and fear, where an “other” is blamed for the nation’s problems (Haycock 2019; Roulet and Pichler 2020).

Freud’s theory of displacement of aggression has been used to misdirect hostility to an innocent person or group to avoid appropriate channeling of responsibility (Haycock 2019). Likewise, discrediting the credibility of others and the use of a scapegoat also serve as additional blame avoidance strategies leaders may use to direct hostility towards another target (Preston 2011). Leading followers to fear an opposing group propels the dictator who promises protection against the identi-

fied group to power. Assertions of the inferiority of others have been linked to higher self-esteem and positive distinctiveness (Haycock 2019). The certainty of a superior national infrastructure that denies privileges and rights to some individuals or groups reinforces the sense of dominance, entitlement, and superiority (Haycock 2019). Trusting a dictator to properly interpret news events that potentially disagree with the dominance or superiority of the favored group reinforces the belief that only the dictator can preserve the status quo. Severe punishment for opposition sustains fear and obedience to the dictator (Haycock 2019).

When a ruthless desire for power is combined with paranoid personality traits that help ensure survival, and a Machiavellian determination to do whatever is necessary to achieve power, you have a potential tyrant. Add in an ability to attract and hold the devotion of a set of followers, a messiah complex, or narcissistic belief of one’s own greatness, and organizational skills, and you have a serious threat given the right circumstances for the tyrant. And you have the wrong circumstances for the rest of us (Haycock 2019, 239).

Maintaining a cult of personality requires the modern dictator to create an illusion of popular support by manipulating the electoral system, relying on secret police forces threatening loss of life or torture to assure maintenance of power (Gallo 2020).

In 1964, Erich Fromm coined the term “malignant narcissism,” describing it as a severe mental illness and the personification of evil (Zeiders and Devlin 2020, 3). The concept of evil was used in the context of a socially cancerous generation of hate, culminating in terror, humiliation, and death. Related criminal features include criminal behavior, lying, betrayal, humiliation, brutality, and violation of civil rights. Paranoia leads to enemy identification and creates a bond of tribal exclusion. Sadism creates a deserving victim, for whom punishment is seen as a victory. Public calls for accountability evoke rage, fear, and loathing. Claims of infallible superiority fused with god-like powers of strength and authority are recurrent themes in speeches and interactions with followers.

Discussion

National and Political History

The region known historically as Syria is currently composed of the nations of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. In the past 4,000 years, foreign influence has been exerted by the Phoenicians, Aramaeans, Greeks, Romans, Muslim Arabs, European Christian Crusaders, Ottoman Turks, and the French. In addition, Alexander the Great and successive empires have exerted various cultural influences, including Christianity and Islam (Country Profile: Syria 2005). “Syria witnessed 15 successful *coup d'états* between 1949-1970, external wars with Israel (1948, 1967, and 1973), vicious Pan-Arab competition with regional states, and a near civil

war between 1976-1984” (Stacher 2011, 197). In modern times, Syria briefly merged with Egypt into the United Arab Republic (1958-1961). Syria subsequently broke away from Egypt, and Hafez Al-Assad was elected President of Syria in 1970. His 30-year Presidential term reflected an intolerance for dissent, enactment of a police state, and suppression of opposing political parties and leaders (Country Profile: Syria 2005). Hafez ultimately transformed Syria from a “coup-ridden ‘semi-state into a veritable model of authoritarian stability’” (Stacher 2011, 197). In 1982, a political insurrection in Hama, the Syrian military, led by Assad’s brother Rifaat and the Defence Brigades, regained control by destroying half the city and killing 10,000 residents (BBC 2012). During his rule, Hafez al-Assad established a highly personalized political regime which left the country with policies out of alignment with leadership practices (Stacher 2011; Owen 2014). For example, “Article 85 of the 1973 constitution provided that it was the first vice president, [then] Abdul-Halim Khaddam, who was to succeed the president on his death” (Owen 2014, 85). It is under this environmental backdrop where Bashar al-Assad would eventually gain power and control. However, ascension to the Syrian presidency was not his first career choice.

Family Background, Medical Training, Succession to Presidency

Bashar Hafez al-Assad was born on September 11, 1965, in Damascus (Al Jazeera 2018). His father was, at the

time, Commander of the Syrian Air Force, and his mother belonged to a prominent family with extensive involvement in business and commerce. Bashar was the third child and second son. Described as a shy adolescent, he graduated from a private Arab-French high school before beginning his studies at the Damascus Medical University, focusing on the study of ophthalmology. Interestingly, his father, Hafez al-Assad, had initially wanted to study medicine; lacking the necessary monetary resources, he joined the military instead (Post and Pertsis 2011).

After an initial assignment to a local military hospital, Bashar moved to London to pursue advanced training at the Western Eye Hospital. In London, he met and married a British-Syrian investment banker working at JP Morgan, and the couple lived a quiet life. Assad has commonly been described as a with words and phrases such as being “gentle,” “Westernized,” and as being “computer nerd” or “geeky I.T. guy” (Hemmer 2003; Burke 2015). In some respects, he may have been unassuming as “he was the eye doctor, [who] spent time in London, [and] had the British-Syrian wife He was by and large completely separate to the politics of the country” (Burke 2015, 4). A friend described him as shy, covering his mouth when speaking and not making eye contact (de Haldevang 2017). He reportedly avoided large gatherings of people and would deliberately hunch over to minimize his tall height (de Haldevang 2017).

While Bashar was in England preparing for a medical career, his elder

brother Bassel (three years older) was known as the successor to his father as President of Syria. “He was forceful, macho, an aficionado of fast cars who was popular with women. He stood in stark contrast to Bashar ... who grew up in Bassel’s shadow, weak and in his own world, calm with a soft voice” (Post and Pertsis 2011, para. 4). Invoking family and national pride, President Hafez al-Assad referred to himself as “Abu Bassel” (father of Bassel), a label denoting the pride he took in his firstborn and chosen successor (Dwyer 2013).

Following the unexpected death of Bassel, Bashar was chosen by his father to be his new successor (Post 2015). Currently training in London to be an eye-surgeon, Bashar terminated his medical studies, returned to Syria to enroll in the Syrian Military Academy, and was quickly elevated to senior rank (Post 2015; Al Jazeera 2018). As President Hafez al-Assad became progressively burdened with severe health issues (heart disease and diabetes), Bashar’s political profile in domestic and international politics and diplomacy became increasingly prominent. In order to ensure an effective turnover, Hafez al-Assad, retired or replaced several army offices and security chiefs that presented a possible threat to his son taking control of Syria (Rais 2004). Upon the death of President Hafez al-Assad, the Constitutional Presidential age requirement was reduced from 40 to 34, and Bashar al-Assad became President following an election in which he was the only candidate (Hemmer 2003; Owen 2014; Fares 2014).

Bashar al-Assad's early years, roughly between 2000 and 2001, were marked by moderate reform indicators and a move away from his father's grip on political organization. Key aspects of this included a brief ending to the Ba'ath monopoly over newspapers and political organizations. He also downplayed the cult of personality built-up around his father, Basil, and then later himself by discouraging the display of their pictures in public spaces (Hemmer 2003). Early on, Bashar also had a keen desire to hold a presidential election after his original seven-year term was up instead of another referendum (Hemmer 2003). Early characterizations of Bashar were largely positive, with him being presented as someone committed to the modernization of Syria, selflessly devoted "to his people," and also some-

one who seemingly had "wide support at home" (Heydemann 2007, 169). However, by 2001 Bashar can be seen to roll back his original attempts at openness, and by 2003, Bashar "embraced his role as America's adversary, shed his support for domestic political reform, and adopted a harsh, bellicose tone toward both the United States and Israel" (Heydemann 2007, 170). The consolidation of power would continue in 2005 when Assad forced the resignation and later exile of the Vice President, and in 2006 he would reshuffle his cabinet (Lesch 2010). Despite Assad's promises for economic and political reforms, in the end, instituting these with any real meaning for the people of Syria would result in a loss of power for the Assad regime and family as a whole (Hemmer 2003; Rais 2004).

Initial Indicators of Reform and Perception of Westernization

I am president, (but) I don't own the country, so (the military) are not my forces. (Bashar al-Assad, in Post and Pertsis 2011).

At the beginning of Bashar Al-Assad's Presidency, indicators of political reform and freedom of political expression emerged as indicators of changes to his father's autocratic regime (Fisher 2012). Between September 2000 and February 2001, Assad allowed for moderate freedoms and political activity. Given his interests in technology, observers expected Assad's reign to be more open and transparent in the information age (Owen 2014). As an example of moderate freedoms, the "Manifesto of 99" was signed by Syrian intellectuals which "called for an end

to the state of emergency in place since 1963" (Rais 2004, 156). In addition to releasing several political prisoners, he also provided "a substantial rise [sic] in the wages and salaries of public-sector workers, and [promised] to reactivate the role of the National Front, a defunct seven-party coalition led by the Ba'ath" (Owen 2014, 86). Control over Syrian newspapers, previously monopolized by members of his political party, was relaxed, and other political parties were permitted to publish their newspapers. Assad even extended these journalistic reforms by allowing the publication of

a satirical newspaper (Hemmer 2003). When proposals of political reforms were set forth and civil society forums emerged to discuss political change, there were no government reprisals (Hemmer 2003).

“Initially, Syrians and Syria-watchers hoped that Bashar would be an open-minded, liberal, and reforming leader. But these hopes rested on a fragile foundation” (Post and Pertsis 2011, para. 5). This optimism was based upon Assad’s study of ophthalmology in London and his marriage to British-born Asma Assad, a graduate of Kings College and employee of the investment banking firm of JP Morgan, whose parents had immigrated from Syria. Subsequent political analysts found these assumptions to be superficial.

Bashar was 27 when he lived in London, a fully formed adult and had spent his life absorbing his father’s political ideas and observing his leadership style, in particular how to deal with conflict He only spent about 18 months in London, so his actual exposure to “Western” ways of life was likely quite limited ... and not a guarantee that (he would) adopt and internalize its values and ideals (Post and Pertsis 2011, para. 6).

The apprehension of growing political opposition stemming from the Damascus Spring resulted in a hard stop on reforms within the first year of the new Presidency (Owen 2014). An official announcement was made requirement advance government approval of

all political meetings, new restrictions impacting the press and promulgation of news, and the arrest of emerging political leaders, including two members of Parliament, subsequently convicted of “aiming to change the Constitution by illegal means” (Hemmer 2003, 227). To prove himself as the strong successor to his father’s autocratic Presidency, Bashar tightened his grip on the Presidency, and squashed any challenge to his authority (Post and Pertsis 2011; Miller and Sly 2021). In a drive against ‘corruption’ Bashar al-Assad gradually stripped his political opponents of their responsibilities, and others “such as senior generals and security chiefs whose loyalty to Bashar’s succession was deemed suspect, were retired at the regulation age” (Owen 2014, 84).

The devolution of political rights has been linked to catastrophic declines in the Syrian economy. Arrests of business executives and seizure of corporate assets have been termed a “mafia-style money grab” (Miller and Sly 2021, para. 9). The current regime faces economic bankruptcy due to domestic civil war, debts to Iran and Russia, and the impact of continuing economic sanctions from the U.S. and other democratic nations. Syrian currency has been devalued 85% in the past decade. The current bleak economy has reduced the capacity of Syrian political rivals to challenge Assad’s control. Assad has characterized government seizures of business assets as an anti-corruption measure, stating that “ending corruption is an economic, social and patriotic necessity” (Miller and Sly 2021).

It has recently been reported that an illegal drug industry has emerged in Syria, that is overseen by the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian Army, under Bashar's younger brother Maher al-Assad (Hubbard and Saad 2021). Narcotics have been identified as the country's top export, with over 250 million pills seized worldwide in 2021. "The idea of going to the Syrian government to ask about cooperation is just absurd It is literally the Syrian government that is exporting the drugs They are the drug cartel" (Hubbard

and Saad 2021). One business leader, reported to facilitate the movement of illegal narcotics, is a public supporter of the Assad regime and was recently awarded the Order of Merit by Assad, "in recognition of his prominent services in economics and financial management during a time of war" (Hubbard and Saad 2021, para. 35). The U.S. has imposed economic sanctions against Bashar and Maher al-Assad, and other identified Syrian participants in the trafficking of illegal drugs (Hubbard and Saad 2021).

Human Rights Violations and War Crimes

When asked, 'As you know, doctors take an oath never to do harm to anyone Does a doctor give them up when he takes office?' President Assad responded: 'First of all, a doctor takes the right decision to protect a patient. You can't say they do not do harm physically. Sometimes they have to extract the bad member that could kill the patient Extract eyes, could extract a leg, and so on, but you don't say he's a bad doctor. It's still a humanitarian job, whatever they do. The same for a politician but on a larger scale. Whether your decision helps the life of the Syrians or not in such a situation (Resnick 2013, para 6-7).

Quality of life for the majority of Syrian citizens has starkly declined during the Assad regime. An estimated 700,000 Syrians have been killed or have disappeared during this time. The United Nations (2021b) has described Syria as the "world's largest refugee crisis," with more than six million Syrians escaping to foreign countries (UNHCR 2021). In addition, ninety percent of Syrians live in poverty, and 50% of Syrian children are malnourished. Despite these facts, Assad has steadfastly denied wrongdoing, characterizing his right to disci-

pline his people "as a father would do to his son. "The father is allowed to do whatever when the sons make mistakes ... this is a social contract between the Syrians and elected officials" (de Haldevang 2017).

There have been a reported 336 chemical weapons attacks throughout the Syrian civil war, with 98% of these attributed to the Assad regime (Schneider and Lutkefend 2019). These attacks have been described as targeting opposing civilians (Schneider and Lutkefend 2019). Physicians for Human Rights has

verified reports of 509 attacks made by the Syrian government or their allies on 348 medical facilities during 2011-2020. During this time, approximately 263 physicians and an additional 667 health care providers were killed, with an additional 143 medical professionals kidnapped, detained, or subsequently killed (Physicians for Human Rights 2019). The World Health Organization reports that Syria accounts for 70% of all healthcare facilities attacks documented worldwide (WHO 2018). In addition, an estimated 70% of the health workforce has left Syria (IRC 2021).

Over 80% of the Syrian population earns less than \$1 daily. From 2014 to 2019, it has been reported that 40% of public schools have been destroyed and that over 2 million Syrian children do not have access to schools (Ghitman 2018).

During the past decade, at least 300 journalists have been arrested, and over 100 are missing (Reporters Without Borders 2021). The Syrian Network for Human Rights claims Assad is responsible for 14,338 deaths due to torture (including 173 children) in the past decade (Syrian Network for Human Rights 2021). After the defection of a member of the Syrian military police, 55,000 photographs were released, documenting the torture of an estimated 11,000 dead individuals held in Syrian detention centers. “The photographs were taken apparently as part of a bureaucratic effort by the Syrian security apparatus to maintain a photographic record of the thousands who have died in detention since 2011 as well as

members of security forces who died in attacks by armed opposition groups” (Safi 2019). Assad responded to the release of the photographs and subsequent multi-national inquiry team with an assertion the materials were “allegations without evidence.” However, a response by a former conscript at one of the military hospitals claimed otherwise. “I know this place from the photographs, stone by stone, brick by brick. I lived there 24 hours a day. I had to carry (the bodies) myself” (Motaparthi and Houry 2015).

Russian support of Syria in the United Nations has prevented allegations of Syrian war crimes to the International Criminal Court (Phillips 2021). In addition, international sanctions issued by the U.S., EU, Canada, Australia, and Switzerland have significantly impacted Syria’s economy, but do not yet appear successful in deterring crimes against humanity (United Nations 2021a).

Malignant Narcissism and Dark Personality Traits

The preceding sections reflect Bashar al-Assad’s presidency as a dictatorship maintaining brutal political power and control by imposing well-documented state-sanctioned human rights violations and engagement in war crimes (Moghaddam 2013). Central to Assad’s dictatorship perpetuates the psychological constructs of malignant narcissism and dark personality traits. These constructs include the absence of “constraint of conscience, paranoid orientation, preoccupation by one’s brilliance,

and such extreme grandiosity that there is no capacity to empathize with others” (Post 2015, 190-191). Further, “dark personality traits” have been applied to describe dictatorships and include “messianic ambition for unlimited power, absence of conscience, unconstrained aggression, extreme self-interest, consistent use of deception, moral disengagement, psychological entitlement, sadism, and spitefulness” (Haycock 2019, 64-66).

Zeiders and Devlin (2020) describe malignant narcissism in political leaders as including identification with an ultimate power value, reflecting Assad’s use of the analogy of himself as the physician who removes a patient’s gangrenous body part, as reflected in his suppression of his political opponents (Resnick 2013). Machiavellianism, including false imprisonment and torture to suppress dissension, is an additional component of malignant narcissism, as is the creation of group scapegoats to enhance the cohesion of the predominant group. Associated perceptions of a malignant narcissistic dictator include, “I alone can solve this problem,” “Diseases must be eradicated,” and “They plot against us” (Zeiders and Devin 2020, 27-30).

In addition to these constructs, Moghaddam (2013) adds an interesting example of how the President and First Lady of Syria attempted to manipulate Western perception, specifically younger individuals, through an article in a fashion magazine published in 2011 (Buck 2011). The article described Mrs. Assad as a “rose in the desert” (529),

and as “glamorous, and chic” (529), with a characterization of Syria as “the safest country in the Middle East” (Buck 2011, 529). The article claimed that the Assads saw no need for bodyguards and quoted Bashar as claiming their Hollywood guests, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, wanted to “send his security guards here to get some training” (Buck 2011, 532). Moghaddam (2013) pointed out that Assad, whose dictatorship “relies on guns, tanks, tear gas and torture; he enforces obedience and conformity through direct, brutal tactics” (125), used the fashion article to deliberately intertwine his regime with the subtle dictates imposed by a media publication designed for young women aspiring to conform with popular public figures and fashion. Moghaddam (2013) noted that widespread objection to the article led to a rapid public relations decision to remove the article from website access.

Beginnings of Criminal Accountability

In a landmark case alleging crimes against humanity perpetrated by former members of Syria’s General Intelligence Directorate, a German court has convicted and sentenced Eyad al-Gharab, a former low-ranking member of the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate, to a 4.5-year prison term. Additionally, Anwar Raslan, a former Colonel in the Syrian intelligence service, was also found guilty of human rights abuses and was sentenced to life in prison (Hubbard 2022). Al-Gharib was charged with bringing at least 30 pro-

testors to a Damascus prison for torture in 2011. Raslan was convicted for his involvement in the torture of at least 4,000 Syrian prisoners and is charged with 58 counts of murder, with additional counts of rape and sexual assault.

The arrest warrants, charges, and trial were based upon a series of criminal complaints regarding torture in Syria in Germany, Austria, Sweden, and Norway. Germany is currently home to more than 800,000 Syrian refugees. Trial witness testimony described the killing and torture of prisoners on “almost an industrial scale.” Witnesses described being physically beaten in prison, with torture techniques that included rape, hanging from the ceiling for hours, having their fingernails ripped out, the administration of electric shock, cigarette burns, and blows to the genitals (Amos 2021). In addition, Germany reportedly investigates dozens of former Syrian officials accused of atrocities (BBC News 2021).

Both defendants initially received asylum in Germany after fleeing Syria (Amos 2021). Al-Gharab’s defense cited his fear of retribution and the killing of his family if he refused his orders and that he had assisted in the prosecution of his co-defendant, former Colonel Anwar Raslan (Amos 2021). Both verdicts have been characterized as a significant test-case to establish a record of evidence regarding the crimes against humanity committed by the regime of President al-Assad. These cases help send the message that people can be held accountable for their actions, further conveying a message of

future accountability for Assad when he is no longer President, and for those continuing to serve the Assad regime. Russia and China have, so far, thwarted actions by other nations to establish an international tribunal for Syrian war crimes (Amos 2021).

Conclusion

Bashar al-Assad, MD, and his father, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, share remarkable parallel career outcomes. Hafez’s original career goal was to become a physician; lacking the necessary funds to attend medical school, his alternate choice was a military career that ultimately catapulted him to the country’s Presidency (Seale 2000). His autocratic regime was characterized by brutal suppression of political opposition and human rights violations (Post and Pertsis 2011).

Born into wealth and privilege, Bashar’s desire to become a physician was easily assured, progressing to graduation from medical school and placement in a London ophthalmology medical residency (Burke 2015). However, after the death of his elder brother Bassel, the original heir apparent to succeed his father, Bashar set aside his medical studies, returned to Damascus, and enrolled into the Syrian Military Academy. Upon the death of Hafez from a heart attack, the Syrian Constitution was rapidly amended to lower the age requirement for office. As a result, Bashar was elected President of the Syrian Arab Republic, winning 97% of the vote (Al Jazeera 2018).

At the time of his succession/election, it was believed that Bashar's training as a physician could potentially result in a more progressive presidential administration, something depicted in the statement, "we've lost a dictator, and gained an ophthalmologist" (*The Economist* 2000). Soon thereafter, Bashar removed any ambiguity regarding his intent to closely emulate his father in doing whatever necessary to cement his dictatorial authority (Fisher 2012).

Bashar's invocation of a medical analogy to justify his brutality reflects his abiding self-perception as an omnipotent physician/president who knows best, regardless of outcome measures. Unlike a sick patient who hopes to restore their health after surgery, quality of life measures for the nation of Syria has undergone a catastrophic decline during the Bashar administration. For the Bashar Al-Assad presidency, the historic physician admonition of Hippocrates to "first, do no harm" has been systematically violated.

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