

# World leaders pay homage to Syrian President Assad—Bonapartist ruler and valued asset of imperialism

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Hafez el-Assad, President of Syria for the last 30 years, died on Saturday at the age of 69. Rising to power in the aftermath of the defeat of the Arabs in the June 1967 war with Israel, Assad came to epitomise the venal and reactionary role of the Arab national bourgeoisie, maintaining power by means of palace intrigue and repression, while repeatedly betraying the aspirations of the Palestinian masses.

Assad came from an impoverished background and a minority Shiite sect, the Alawites, in a country of Sunni Moslems. He joined the Syrian Ba'athist (Arab Socialist Renaissance) Party, and rose through the ranks of the air force to dominate Syrian political life.

One of the last of a generation of Middle East leaders, he was a faithful representative of the Arab bourgeoisie upon which imperialism has relied over the past 50 years to defend its interests in the region. It is this class position that ultimately explains his record of political zigzags, suppression of democratic rights and capitulation before Western imperialism and Zionism.

Assad's name will forever be associated with his collusion in the massacre of 2,000 Palestinians by Lebanese Christian fascist forces at Beirut's Tel al Zaatar camp in 1976, and his signing of the truce with Israel in 1982, which paved the way for the loss of 18,000 lives in the bombing of Beirut and the massacres of Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatilla camps.

Syria functioned as a client state of Moscow for many years, until the collapse of the Soviet Union led Assad to seek succour from the United States. While posturing as a militant opponent of Israel, he has refrained from any military conflict with the Zionist state for nearly two decades, and for the last decade has sought a formal peace agreement.

His verbal support for the Palestinians always came a

poor second to the interests of the Syrian ruling elite, with disastrous consequences for the Palestinians. While espousing the pan-Arabism of Ba'athist ideology, he supported Iran in the 1980-88 war against Iraq, a country whose rulers were members of a rival faction of the same Ba'athist party.

After championing the public sector for more than two decades, his privatisation of Syria's state-owned enterprises and opening of the economy to imported manufactured goods have led to closures, job losses and a declining per capita income. With wages averaging \$100 per month, social and political discontent in Syria is mounting.

It was well known that Assad was terminally ill, but his death nevertheless came suddenly. It evoked testimonials from imperialist leaders around the world who have prosecuted their great power aims at the expense of the Arab people.

Representatives of governments, such as the US, which until recently denounced Syria as a terrorist state and international pariah, heaped praised upon a man who, in the end, was recognised as a vital asset in the effort to shape a new imperialist dominated set-up, officially designated as the "peace process", in the Middle East.

US President Bill Clinton said of Assad, "We had our differences, but I always respected him." Assad had made "a strategic choice" for peace, Clinton declared, by attending a US-brokered conference with Israel in Madrid in 1991. "We worked together to achieve that goal," said the US president.

Yasser Arafat declared three days of mourning in the areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority. In a telegram to the Damascus government, he said the Palestinians "will stand with their Syrian brothers to overcome this difficult moment." This testimonial from

the PLO leader says a great deal about that organisation's present-day role as a police force for the Western powers and Israel, and the chasm that separates the Palestinian bourgeoisie from the national and social aspirations of the Palestinian masses.

Britain's Tony Blair called Assad "a figure of stability in the Middle East and much respected in the Arab world and beyond." Israel's Ehud Barak made clear his hope that Assad's successor would continue to pursue the "peace process", saying, "Israel worked in the past for a peace deal with Syria and will continue to work for this in the future with all future leadership."

Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem said his country's relations with Syria were improving. The two countries had been on the brink of war two years ago after Turkey entered Syria in pursuit of Kurdish rebels, but relations warmed after Syria expelled Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan.

The praise by world leaders underlines their appreciation of Syria's strategic position in the heart of the Middle East, as well as apprehension about the future. Assad's death comes amid considerable uncertainty prompted by the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, the on-and-off negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and the stalled talks between Israel and Syria.

Syria's ruling party has moved speedily to install Assad's son Bashar as the new president. He was also named commander of Syria's armed forces, having been promoted from colonel to lieutenant general.

Bashar's accession epitomises the Bonapartist character of the Assad regime. He has been groomed for power for the past six years, since the death of his older brother, Basil, in a 1994 car accident. He was placed in charge of purging the party's old guard, whose targets included a former prime minister, who committed suicide, and the former chief of the Syrian Army, who fled Syria last week.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will carry a more detailed examination of Hafez el-Assad's political career later this week.



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