

The bitter legacy of Syria's Hafez al-Assad

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The political career of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, whose death June 10 ended a 30-year reign, illustrates the organic incapacity of the Arab bourgeoisie to realise the aspirations of the Arab masses for freedom from foreign domination, democracy and social justice.

Assad was often described as a “strongman”, a fitting term when applied to the ruthless methods he employed to suppress opposition to his rule. But, as is so often the case, Assad's strong measures were the recourse of a weak regime.

Assad spent his 30 years in power carrying out a tortuous balancing act. Domestically, he was compelled to manoeuvre between various social interests and factions—religious, clan, geographical—sometimes by means of diplomacy, at other times using the methods of palace intrigue, political purge or the hangman's noose. Externally, he was obliged to seek the protection of more powerful sponsors. For the first 20 years of his rule, during the Cold War, he was a client of the Soviet Union. After the break-up of the USSR, he inexorably gravitated toward the US-Israeli axis.

This lack of genuine independence was expressed in Assad's twists and turns in foreign policy and the glaring contradiction between his words—bristling with anti-Zionist bravado—and his deeds. Despite being one of the Arab leaders of the so-called “Steadfastness Front” against Israel, Assad's record of treachery toward the Palestinian people stands out among his counterparts in the region, who, as a group, were hardly known for their courage in the face of the traditional enemies of the Arab masses.

In the Western press, Assad's characteristic indecision and even paralysis—except when it came to putting down internal opposition—has been generally interpreted as the modus operandi of a master tactician. In fact, these features reflected the fatally compromised position of the Arab national bourgeoisie—a social class whose misfortune is to have arisen in the epoch of imperialism, when the path to national consolidation undertaken in previous centuries by England, France, the US, etc., was no longer open to countries with a late capitalist development.

Weak, divided, tied by innumerable threads to pre-capitalist clan groupings and big landholders on the one hand, and economically dependent on Western finance on the other, the Arab bourgeois leaders as a breed—from Egypt's Mubarak, to Jordan's King Hussein, to Iraq's Saddam Hussein, to Syria's Assad—built bloated military and intelligence apparatuses, not for the purpose of liberating territories once belonging to the Palestinians, but rather for fending off Israeli expansionism and repressing their own populations.

Because Syria lacked the massive oil deposits of its neighbour to the east, Assad was less able than the Iraqi Ba'athists to develop the rudiments of a modern industrial economy and welfare state. Even less than Saddam Hussein could Assad point to social progress as a justification for his reliance on the police, the military and the secret services.

Assad was born in 1930, when Syria was still a French protectorate. He was a member of the small Alawite Shi'ite community in a country of predominantly Sunni Muslims. The Alawite clans were viewed by France as potential tools in the old divide-and-rule strategy of colonial government, and were given privileged treatment. Assad became the first to leave his village to go to secondary school in Latakia, where he was

soon caught up in the political maelstrom that eventually drove the French out of Syria in 1946.

The newly independent Syria, dominated by big land-owning families, became a byword for political instability, with successive governments deposed through military coups. Political life was dominated by Arab nationalism, the Stalinism of the Syrian Communist Party (which adapted itself to bourgeois nationalism), and Islamic fundamentalism. At the age of 16, Assad joined the newly founded Arab Ba'ath Socialist party, whose name means Arab Renaissance. It espoused secular pan-Arab nationalism, dressed up in socialist phraseology.

Assad joined the Air Force and was rapidly promoted. He was sent for training to the Soviet Union, and was later posted to Egypt during the abortive attempt to unite Egypt and Syria (in the form of the United Arab Republic) at the end of the 1950s. In 1963, the Ba'ath party seized power in Damascus and Assad became commander of the Air Force. In 1966, a radical left-wing group inside the Ba'ath Party overthrew the faction that had toppled the government three years earlier. At the age of 35, Assad was appointed minister of defence.

Despite his initial relations with the left wing of the party, Assad's rise to power was bound up with a right-wing reaction to the initial radicalism of Ba'athism, in the aftermath of the disastrous defeat of the Arab forces in the 1967 war with Israel. The Syrian armed forces, whose ranks had been thinned by constant coups and infighting, were no match for the military power of the Israelis. Despite holding out the longest, they lost the Golan Heights. This defeat strengthened conservative forces within the Ba'ath party and the military, for which Assad became the spokesman.

The incident which propelled these conflicts within Syria's Ba'ath Party forward, and for which Assad became notorious, followed from the September 1970 decision by Syria to send tanks into Jordan to support the Palestinians, who formed the majority of Jordan's population, against King Hussein.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was a radical national movement which won popular support after the Arab regimes were discredited in the 1967 debacle. King Hussein launched an attack on PLO forces in Jordan because of their declared policy of deposing his and other monarchies in the Middle East.

Jordan's government was quickly supported by both Israel and the US, which dispatched the sixth fleet to the eastern Mediterranean. Syria and Iraq both backed the Palestinians, and Syria sent a tank brigade into Jordan. However Minister of Defence Assad opposed Syrian military support for the Palestinians, for fear that Syria would be drawn into an all-out war with Israel. He refused to provide air cover to the Syrian tanks when they came under Jordanian attack, forcing the brigade to withdraw. This left the Palestinians isolated, and thousands were massacred by Hussein's forces in pogroms that became known as “Black September”.

Assad's abandonment of the Palestinians in Jordan set a precedent that was to be repeated in subsequent acts of treachery, including his collusion in the Lebanese falangists' massacre of Palestinians at Beirut's Tel al Zaatar camp in 1976.

Only weeks after Black September, in November of 1970, Assad led a military coup and seized power in Damascus. He consolidated his position

by bringing members of his Alawite clan into key positions, particularly in the armed forces, security services and government bureaucracy. Assad's staying power, now credited by Western leaders with bringing 30 years of political stability to Syria, was largely secured through the ample use of 15 different security services and rigid state control of the media and all forms of communication.

Assad portrayed himself as a defender and friend of the Palestinian people. But his support for the Palestinians was always subordinated to considerations of Syria's national interests, which were identified with the maintenance of his own regime. He repeatedly chose to safeguard Syria from Israeli and US wrath and abandon the Palestinians to their fate. His "support" for the Palestinian cause was, more precisely, an attempt to dominate the Palestinian masses and utilise them as pawns in his diplomatic manoeuvres abroad and power politics at home. As early as 1966, when Arafat first tried to throw off Syrian control, Assad had him and a number of his key supporters locked up in Mezze prison for 55 days.

In 1973 Syria waged an unsuccessful war against Israel alongside Egypt in an attempt to regain control of the Golan Heights, after which Egyptian President Anwar Sadat began to make open overtures to the US and Israel. Two years later, civil war broke out in Lebanon between fascist Christian falangists, who were supported by Israel, and the impoverished Shiite and Druze communities and Palestinian refugees, who together made up a majority of the population. Assad believed that another all-out war with Israel had to be prevented at all costs.

When it looked as though Lebanon was in danger of being split into two, Syria, with the backing of the Arab League, took up arms in a de facto alliance with Israel and intervened to prevent the rout of the falangists, allowing them to besiege the Palestinian camps of Karantina and Tel al Zaatar, killing 2,000 refugees.

In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon when their proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army, were unable to curb the Palestinians. Arafat and Assad agreed to pool their forces to meet the Israeli attack. But after the Israeli air force destroyed the Syrians' Sam missile systems and 40 of their jet fighters in one day, putting an end to any prospect of further support from Moscow, Assad agreed to a truce without so much as consulting Arafat. This truce has been in effect ever since.

Syria's truce paved the way for Israel to lay siege to Beirut, during which an estimated 18,000 people were killed and 30,000 injured. The Israelis demanded the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon as the price for lifting the siege, and then stood by while their falangist allies massacred the Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla.

Notwithstanding Assad's pan-Arab rhetoric, his relations with the other Ba'athist regime, in neighbouring Iraq, were always strained, and they deteriorated rapidly after Tel al Zaatar. Syria and Iraq were divided by party schisms and conflicting interests in the region, including control over the Euphrates' waters, control over oil pipelines and other economic issues. When the Iranian Islamic regime of Ayatollah Khomeini declared war on Iraq in 1980, Syria supported Iran.

If Tel al Zaatar epitomised Assad's duplicity toward the Palestinians, his murderous assault in 1982 on his own citizens in the town of Hama summed up his ruthlessness in crushing internal dissent. The Hama massacre took place under conditions of deepening economic crisis, increasing social inequality and rising popular discontent.

From 1977 on Assad was faced with growing opposition led by the Muslim Brotherhood and other mainly Sunni groups. In June 1979 there was an attempt to overthrow him, when the Muslim Brotherhood murdered 50 Alawite cadets at the military academy in Aleppo. A year later Assad was targeted in a grenade attack. In revenge, his brother Rifaat, head of Syria's security forces, gunned down more than 250 religious opponents in their prison cells.

In February 1982 a Muslim Brotherhood revolt broke out in Hama. Ba'ath Party officials were killed and appeals were broadcast from the

mosques for a national insurrection. Assad's retribution was ruthless. The military levelled half of the city, slaughtering an estimated 10,000 to 25,000 people.

It is estimated that between 1982 and 1992 thousands were arrested for political dissent and 10,000 were executed. Amnesty International noted in its most recent report that thousands of political prisoners remained incarcerated, without having had the benefit of a trial, while many more were in exile.

Despite Assad's troubled relations with the major capitalist powers and Israel, he pioneered his country's initial rapprochement with the West. In May 1973, he restored diplomatic relations with Britain, and in 1974 with the US and Germany. Nevertheless, because of his support for various terrorist groups and his backing of Iran in the 1980s, Washington branded Syria a pariah state.

In his dealings with the Western powers, Assad relied on the military and political support of the USSR. However, Soviet credit, aid and military hardware were always miserly compared to the lavish support the US gave to Israel. Moreover, Assad's political machinations took their toll on the Syrian economy. The Gulf States cut off aid because of his support for Iran, and the West imposed trade restrictions.

In 1989 Moscow cut off arms supplies to Syria, and the crisis that was to lead two years later to the collapse of the USSR assumed increasingly open forms. Assad responded by largely abandoning the pretence of opposing the imperialist powers. He threw his lot in with the US and sent troops to join the Western coalition against his old rival Iraq in the 1990-91 Gulf War.

While only a few thousand troops were deployed as a reserve force in Saudi Arabia, the presence of soldiers from an Arab nationalist country was a major propaganda coup for the US. Following his support for the bombing of Iraq, Assad supplied information about hostages and planned terrorist attacks on Western targets. He evicted some of the West's most wanted terrorists from Damascus, such as Carlos "the Jackal". More recently, Assad gave way to US pressure and expelled Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdish Workers Party, thereby paving the way for his trial as a terrorist in Turkey.

In return for Syria's role in the Gulf War, the West turned a blind eye to Assad's despatch of troops further into Lebanon and the installation of a pro-Syrian government in Beirut in 1991, effectively making the country a satellite of Damascus.

That same year, Assad agreed to attend bilateral talks in Madrid on a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, despite having long spoken against separate agreements with Israel. To date, Syria has not been able to reach a final settlement with Israel, in part because the resulting internal economic and social tensions could blow the fragile Syrian state apart. Not long ago Assad said he faced assassination if he negotiated a deal on terms unfavourable to Syria.

The praise extended to Assad after his death by world leaders reflects their appreciation of his role in suppressing the revolutionary aspirations of the Arab masses. He is mourned in Washington, London and Paris because his sudden departure is one more destabilising factor in a region pregnant with explosive contradictions.

Today, the Syrian economy is in dire straits. Oil production is down to 400,000 barrels per day, and there is little prospect of an increase. Syria no longer has the cash to maintain the state apparatus and public services that provided work and wages for wide layers of the population. The turn to privatisation and integration into the world economy threatens the wealth and privileged position of Assad's narrow political base. With one of the highest birth rates in the world, and more than half the population under 25, income per head is declining.

Assad's legacy is a bitter one, but it is by no means unique. Despite different origins and histories, he ended up treading essentially the same road as King Hussein of Jordan and his long-time foe, Arafat.

Under various banners, the Arab bourgeoisie has sought to advance itself as the “natural leader” of the movement of the oppressed Arab masses against imperialist domination. In the case of Pan-Arabism and Ba'athism, it sought to combine the project of building an “Arab nation” with pledges to construct an egalitarian regime, akin to socialism. It was aided in this task by the Stalinist parties, which subordinated the independent interests of the working class to the bourgeoisie and its nationalist program.

The history of Syria and the entire Middle East has demonstrated, in the negative, the correctness of the Marxist theory of Permanent Revolution, as elaborated by Leon Trotsky. In countries with a belated capitalist development—even those possessing vast oil wealth—the native bourgeoisie is organically incapable of leading the workers and oppressed masses in overcoming the legacy of feudal backwardness and colonial subjugation. Its interests are fundamentally linked with and subordinate to those of the imperialist powers—economically, politically and militarily. Above all, it is concerned with suppressing the internal political threat to its rule posed by the working class.

The liberation of the Arab masses and the achievement of democracy and social equality require a new perspective and a new leadership, the basis for which is being laid by economic conditions now emerging in the Middle East which will ultimately strengthen the social position of the working class, and help Arab and Jewish workers overcome the destructive legacy of Zionist oppression and national-religious enmity.

The working class, Arab, Jewish and Iranian, must establish its political independence from its capitalist rulers. It must transcend the narrow framework of nationalism and set itself the task of uniting all of the oppressed masses of the Middle East in a socialist federation. This is the only viable strategy for overcoming Zionism, ending the national oppression of the Palestinian masses, and securing the social interests of all working people in the region. It must be fought for as an integral part of a world-wide struggle for socialism, alongside workers in the US and the other imperialist countries.



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