

*Transcript*

# What went wrong with the Bashar Al-Assad Presidency?

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**Dr Christopher Phillips:** Thank you very much, Fawaz [Gerges]. Can you hear me okay? Thank you. Firstly, allow me to say, how absolutely honoured I am to be here. It's very, very important for us, as Fawaz says, that we really look into the Syria conflict in depth. It something that's dealt with in a very superficial manner by large segments of the media and it's very important that good people such as yourselves are coming together and having the proper debates so that we might be able to find some kind of way out of the current crisis. I would also like to say how honoured I am to be sharing this panel with such eminent company. I feel very humbled that I am being asked to take on the question of what went wrong with the Bashar al-Assad presidency first of all. As Ghayth [Armanazi] commented to me just before we started, this kind of question could in fact take hours if not days to investigate and therefore I will attempt to sort of to give some kind of summary within 15 or 20 minutes but obviously not everything will unfortunately be covered such as the complexity of the subject.

Today, Bashar Al-Assad is betrayed in both the Western and the Arab media as a bloody tyrant. But it is often forgotten especially in the current media that his exceptional power in the year 2000 was actually greeted with a great deal of optimism. He was only 34 when he took office. He was educated for a few years in London and he soon married a British-born Syrian wife and it was hoped both home and abroad that he would modernise Syria away from the state socialist autocracy that he inherited from the his father, Hafez, and maybe even some hoped would initiate a democratic process.

Twelve years later, with Syria gripped by crisis and descending into civil war, it's quite clear to all those that these hopes have not been realised. Indeed far from reforming Hafez is brutal but stable state, the Bashar presidency has overseen arguably the greatest disaster Syria has seen since independence and the very future of the Syrian states is now arguably in doubt.

So what went wrong? Already, there's been a debate among scholars and analysts, even before the regime has actually fallen. Some are focusing on the systemic causes suggesting that the tight autocratic state that Bashar inherited from Hafez was unreformable. Others are placing the blame more squarely on Bashar himself suggesting that opportunities did present themselves that he did not take.

Now, this presentation which offers a general overview of some of the failures of the Bashar presidency, that hopefully would be built on in a bit more detailed throughout the day by other speakers, aims to take a middle ground between these two arguments. It suggests that while the divisions and the difficulties inherited from Hafez certainly hampered Bashar, he has never really attempted a serious proactive reform programme. In fact, Bashar's presidency not only initiated the violence that began the current crisis, but its long-term political economic and social policies from the year 2000 created the conditions that leave Syria today so divided and turbulent. Indeed, the truly remarkable feature of the Assad presidency I would argue is how he

has been able to sustain a popular image as a reformer and a moderniser right up until and even to some extent after the outbreak of the unrest in 2011 despite a decade of relative failure.

As some lost faith in Bashar at different times before 2011, some after the failure of Damascus Spring or putting down Damascus Spring in 2001-2002, some after the failure to reform after the withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 and others after the uncontested election of 2007 that was clearly a farce. But the very fact that there was so much expectation and consequently disappointment of Bashar of a speech that he made on the 16<sup>th</sup> April 2011, there was an expectation that he would actually reform from the majority of the Syrian public suggests that this image of a reformer actually had been considerably built up and believed by a large number of people. Obviously, this spell has subsequently been broken by the violence that we have seen. It does tell us a lot about the nature of the propaganda regime really of the regime on Bashar.

So what I am going to look at in this presentation is try to sort through some of the long-term and the short-term causes of the uprising of 2011-2012 and look at Bashar's role in those and Bashar presidency and in particular, I would like to look at this issue of creating the conditions for division, not necessarily the immediate triggers which I will talk about as well, but about encouraging, whether intentionally or unintentionally divisions among the Syrian public that are now being played out in his politics. Firstly, I look at the house that Hafez built as I recall it and look at the different sort of divisions that were fostered under the surface in the Hafez state. I will then move on to look more specifically at Bashar's long-term mistakes from 2000-2011, particularly looking at the political, economic and social policies of the Bashar presidency. And then finally, I will briefly discuss the short-term triggers in 2011 that pushed things over the edge into the current crisis.

What I am going to try to suggest throughout and, will also perform my conclusion, is that Bashar Al-Assad above all should be seen as a reactive leader. He was not proactive at any point. He lacks the political instincts and the political skill either to successfully reform Syria in the 2000s or indeed to deal with the crisis when it came in the wake of the Arab Spring. His one skill, I will suggest, actually was that of propaganda. He was able to maintain this image right up to the moment of the outbreak of violence that he was some kind of frustrated reformer and I think that's something that should be looked at by historians in the future and actually really focus on how he was able to maintain this image.

So starting on briefly, just looking at the state that Hafez built, if you look at the state that Bashar inherited, he inherited a state that was surprisingly stable as seen by his successful succession to power without many challenges. Given how turbulent Syria had been in the pre-Hafez era prior to 1970, this was an achievement in itself. But he inherited a state that was autocratic, but stable. I think it's worth noting that all of the stability that we see that was established by Hafez is one of the reasons and,

Fawaz touched on this point, why the regime has not yet fallen. Hafez made a very big point of trying to make his regime coup-proof. He effectively made a deal between the merchant classes and the military to provide stability but not democracy. He placed loyalists largely from his own Alawi sect in the military and in key positions and he initiated a large number of different security agencies that all spied on one another to make sure that there was no powers that emerged within the state as it happened in the past. He had a broad base of support not just as people would have argued since from the Alawi sect. He had, as I said, members of the Sunni merchant class on his side. Also through his socialist policies, he was able to foster support from the peasantry and the working class who were largely Sunni and that's important.

However, at the same time under the surface, Hafez did foster some divisions in Syria. Syria was already a colonial construct as is known with different ethnic and religious groups there. He did attempt to form some kind of Syrian national identity but it was deliberately ambiguous. It was deliberately flexible, sometimes based on Arab identity, sometimes based around Syrian state identity, sometimes occasionally based on Islamic identity, so it could ebb and flow according to Hafez's foreign policies of the time. Alongside this, whether it was intentional or not, there was no real effort to desectarianise Syria. There was no attempt to allow Syrian identity to completely and permanently outstrip other sub-state ties in Syria. Now, this might have been done formally, so for example Hafez may never have had to change the Personal Status Law which effectively change and made the legal status of Muslims and Christians and to an extent the Druze separate. Then more importantly informally certain groups emerged as the winners and the losers of Hafez's state largely around their ethnic and sectarian identity. So the Alawis were the clear winners. A lot of them gained government jobs as a consequence of Hafez's rule and the emergence of small and modest economic elite at the time. Similarly the Kurds clearly emerged as the big losers of the Alawi state, who are deliberately discriminated against by the government.

So the state that Bashar inherited in 2000 was one that was stable, but did have these under-the-surface tensions there, not necessarily bubbling, but the potential existed. So moving on to Bashar himself, it was expected or hoped, as I said in the beginning, that he would reform this state. Yet, the balance sheet would actually argue that he far from reforming actually made matters far worse and exacerbated those tensions that had been under the surface in the Hafez state. Politically, he talked about reform, but effectively he entrenched dictatorship. He crushed the Damascus Spring or his people crushed the Damascus Spring in 2001-2002. He spoke of liberalising, but only really liberalised the economy and didn't really do that very well either. As I said before, he was an excellent propagandist. I think that actually whilst people talk about the Hafez cult – Lisa Wedeen has written a wonderful book on the Hafez cult is saying how incredible the Hafez cult was that it made people avow the absurd and actually speak as *if* they believed it. I think what

was more impressive about the Bashar cult, based on research I did in 2007-2009, was that people didn't even realise there was a cult a lot of that time and you would ask people, "Is there a cult?" and they said, "Oh no, no, no. We love the president. He is changing, he is modernising, he is reforming." That's impressive - that you can actually effectively have a cult without making people realise that it is a cult.

Most importantly, on the political issues, Bashar narrowed the base of his support. So if you look at some of the political reforms he did make behind closed doors such as the Ba'ath Party Congress in 2005, he actually stripped away a lot of the oldest Sunni support that Hafez had relied upon. His break with Vice President Khaddam was an example of this. Khaddam was, along with Tlass, is one of the most important Sunni families that backed up the Assad regime and gave it a sort of Sunni legitimacy. The break with some of those families in 2005 was an important move, especially when he then moved in a lot of his own family members and extended family members and more members of the Alawi sect into powerful positions in 2005. So actually, far from reforming the political system, he actually made it more entrenched of the sectarian nature by placing even more Alawis than Hafez did in important positions. I will add just that point, those political reforms again were reactive. It was a consequence in 2005 of the force withdrawal from Lebanon that made him bring about those changes. It was not something that he was actively doing beforehand. So it is an important point that he is a reactive leader.

Economically also, reforms made in the 2000 were largely reactive. Prior to 2005, most of the economic reforms were superficial, things like allowing in satellite television and the internet. No real set of reforms of the structured economy. It wasn't until the loss of Lebanese black market in 2005 when the troops were forced out that they had to open up the economy more broadly and even then, most people would agree that the economy was not fully reformed. In fact, it was barely partially reformed and actually what emerged is a form of crony capitalism in Bashar's Syria where the modest economic elite that has existed under Hafez thrived into a major and very visible economic elite again, often or largely drawn from members of the Alawi community and the present family most notably, of course, Rami Makhlouf, who emerged asset and as the 'Mr 10% of Syria'. So what you saw with his economic reforms was again increasing the divisions because you saw a far more visible economic elite emerged which, especially being largely the Alawi community, encouraged some resentment.

On the other side of the coin, economic reforms also lead to a large cutting of subsidies in Syria. So, whereas Hafez had actually fostered support from the largely Sunni working class, peasantry class, Bashar's reforms actually cost them a lot of their livelihood. It took away a lot of their subsidies and made life much tougher. On top of that, it was not necessarily initially the regime's is fault, but the drought of the late 2000 caused major troubles within the agricultural communities of Syria and it was hugely mismanaged by the regime. This led to huge numbers of people of rural background flocking into the cities, emerging shanty towns and places like Homs and

Damascus and it was interestingly among these communities, the recent migrants where the first demonstrations took place in Syria and indeed, from which the majority of the opposition was originally drawn. So it's important that the mismanagement of economic policies clearly have some link to the development of the opposition in 2011. The final of economic error as such that was made was the youth workforce, the huge and glut of youth that emerged in – sort of came late around 2000. There was no practical attempt to absorb them into the economy. In fact, it was quite the reverse. The attempted marketisation or social market as it was called by [Abdullah] Dardari actually cost jobs and so there were an increased number of unemployed people because of the economic policies right at the very time when there was a glut of youth emerging demographically, so further mistakes made.

The final mistakes or the final policies that I will focus on were the social policies of the regime and two in particular I will focus on. One is the mishandling, you might say, of the emergence of a more conservative form of Sunni Islam in the 2000s. This was a regional trend that we've seen across the Middle East, but whereas Hafez had taken a very strict stance towards Sunni Islam among the population. Bashar had an interesting strategy which argued that you could allow an increased conservative form of Sunni Islam to take place at a social level as long as it never had a political expression. This allowed them to welcome back various imams and so on and certainly I know Thomas Pierret has written some very good work on this which I'm sure we will speak about later on but allowing a lot of previously banned conservative Sunni religious groups coming back into Syria and allowing to practice freely meant that a lot of these often poor, often unemployed Sunni citizens became more conservative and were increasingly buying into a regional narrative promoted by Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries of Sunni dominance and Sunni importance and that certainly highlighted more and more the contradictions of the Syrian state whereby this increasing sort of dominant group led, but not exclusively, led by the Alawis was somehow against Islam or against the Sunni traditions and not right.

The second major social sort of fault or policy made by the regime was that they actually reduced the size of the state in rural society and the society in general. Not only was the Ba'ath Party which had been the pillar of Hafez's state, in terms of management if not power, was cut back. The funding was cut and the importance of the party was reduced. That meant that Sunni party offices no longer have the same importance to the rural areas and often religious, these sheikhs and so on, stepped in to fill the traditional party role of the arbiter in dispute, increasingly important to the religious establishment, decreasing the importance of the state. And secondly, seemingly minor issues such as cutting the length of military service meant that the population were exposed for a less time to the state's vision of what being Syria was and the emergence of rival visions of what being Syria was did emerge particularly from religious leaders.

So, I would argue that these sort of keys of the mistakes made by Bashar were a consequence, as I said, of him being a reactive leader and each time he was reacting to a global phenomenon or a local phenomenon and trying to plug the gap often in the wrong way, but actually by doing so, he was fostering divisions at a local level. And so, that brings me nearly to the short-term triggers of the uprising. I would say there were two short term triggers. The obvious one is the Arab Spring or the Arab Awakening. It's highly questionable whether in spite all of these divisions that I've talked about and sort of the tensions growing within the Syrian society, whether or not we would have seen a Syrian uprising as we did had it not been for activities in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and so on. I would argue that it would seem unlikely. I think that that power of the possible was very, very important in motivating the opposition and we saw that in the way that they borrowed other revolutionaries' tactics and slogans. 'The people want a fall of the regime,' for example, the naming of different Fridays after different leaders to try to encourage people to come along was borrowed from Egypt and many of the tactics used, such as YouTube and Facebook, again seemed to be emulated from the other revolutions. So the Arab Spring was an important short-term trigger.

But I would argue that probably the most important trigger for the Syrian uprising was the violent reaction of the regime. I think that more than anything else, that is what shattered the image that Bashar had somehow impossibly been able to maintain himself. Based on research done on Syria by myself, I would argue that throughout the 2000s, the majority of Syrians still have some faith in Bashar even if they had lost faith in the regime. The divisions that I've talked about, people would blame on the regime or the party or the elite, but not necessarily on the president himself. I think their violent reaction, his refusal to make any changes in his two speeches, most notably on April 16<sup>th</sup>, is what pushed things over the edge and made people realise finally that the hope, the optimism had been shattered and this was not someone who was going to reform.

And so, I would conclude – I would argue that the main reason that took place was because, Bashar Assad himself, is not a politically skilled operator. He is someone who inherited power, who unlike the former strong man, Hafez and so on, did not have to struggle to gain power. He inherited straight away and proved himself only to be a reactive politician. And his only real skill, I would argue, is that of propaganda and that he somehow managed to maintain this illusion of being a modernising reformer all the way through to 2011 and arguably, some in the sort of the hard core supportive still inside Syria now, perhaps still believe it. Although I would argue --this is a closing point -- that actually the games, the situation has changed and even those who support Bashar now do not really believe that he is this reforming moderniser but they are motivated by fear of what will follow next.