

# Hacked emails reveal life of luxury as Syria burns

A cache of emails supposedly stolen from Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad was made public yesterday. While Syrians were being tortured and killed in the street, Assad was online shopping.



## HISTORY & POLITICS

**F**ebruary 5th 2012 – a man sends his wife an email quoting the lyrics to a country and western song: ‘I’ve been a walking heartache,’ the message reads. ‘I’ve made a mess of me / The person that I’ve been lately / Ain’t who I wanna be.’

And indeed, not many people in the world have ambitions of being the person Bashar al Assad has been lately. Even as he was copying and pasting the text of his plaintive message, tanks and artillery belonging to his authoritarian regime were shelling civilian buildings in the besieged city of Homs, killing more than a hundred men, women and children in a single day.

Around 8,000 Syrians have been killed altogether, in a year-long uprising against the Assad regime. When peaceful protests were met with arrests and torture, demonstrators became armed rebels, and calls for reform became open civil war.

Now, a newly published collection of leaked emails, which appear to have been written by Bashar al Assad and his wife Asma, has revealed the extraordi-



Bashar al Assad and his wife Asma in happier times © Getty Images

nary bubble in which the ruling pair have been living while their country crumbles around them.

For Bashar, priorities over the past year have included getting hold of the latest *Harry Potter* film, and the whereabouts of a chocolate fondue set, ordered online. The President did pay some attention to global outrage over his actions – when he had to dodge a US trade embargo in order to download music on iTunes.

Asma, meanwhile, has been spending thousands of pounds on jewellery, designer furniture and crystal encrusted Christian Louboutin shoes. The blood-soaked chaos in Syria does sometimes force its way into this gilded existence: one of Asma’s more practical potential purchases was a luxury bullet-proof dinner jacket for her husband.

Sometimes the two do seem to feel a certain strain. ‘If we are strong together, we will overcome this together,’ Asma writes in December. Bashar gets some tough political advice from his allies in

Iran and Lebanon.

But the dictator is as likely to send his wife a link to a funny Youtube clip as an update on his efforts to crush the Syrian revolution.

### THE BANALITY OF EVIL

For some observers, it is surprising how much the emails give the impression of Bashar al Assad as a very ordinary man – apparently more concerned with buying pop songs than tanks and guns. Dictators are supposed to be monstrous and psychotic. Assad, on the other hand, is the kind of leader close advisors privately call ‘the dude’.

Others are less surprised. All through history, they point out, some of the worst atrocities have been carried out by men who were, in many ways, very normal. Even Adolf Hitler was famously nice to his secretaries. Evil people are disturbing, the argument goes, not because they are freaks but because they are so much like everyone else.

## Q & A

**Q** Bashar al Assad’s music taste is hardly going to change the world!

**A** Well – getting some insight into his music taste might help the world understand what makes him tick, and that might help in the effort to persuade him to find a peaceful

resolution to the Syrian crisis – and save thousands of lives.

**Q** He does seem to like his music – shall we say – sentimental!

**A** Indeed. It’s not that unusual among authoritarian leaders. Saddam Hussein, for example, loved chessy romance novels, and even wrote a few himself. And Stalin, when

young, like composing bad poetry about nightingales and flowers.

### SOME PEOPLE SAY...

**‘Assad is not evil. He is a victim of circumstances.’**

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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### WORD WATCH

**Country and western** – Country and western is an American music genre, known for its family-friendly themes and cowboy attitude. Other Assad favourites include hip hop star Chris Brown and 90s British pop duo Right Said Fred.

**Leaked emails** – Passwords for the email addresses, used by Assad and his wife, were – apparently – given to Syrian opposition activists by someone within the Syrian government. *The Guardian*, which has gained access to the emails, has confirmed that many of them, if

not all, are genuine.

**Youtube clip** – One clip sent by Assad is a crude reenactment of the bombardment of Homs by tanks, mocking peace emissaries from the Arab League. Another is simply a clip from *America's Got Talent*.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Do you think the Assad emails make them more or less scary?
2. Who has the capacity for evil? Is it something people are born with or is it learnt?

### ACTIVITIES

1. What is 'evil'? Write a philosophical definition of the term.
2. Compose your own imagined email exchange between any

world leader and his wife (or indeed her husband). What do the world's most powerful people say when they think no one is reading over their shoulder?

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