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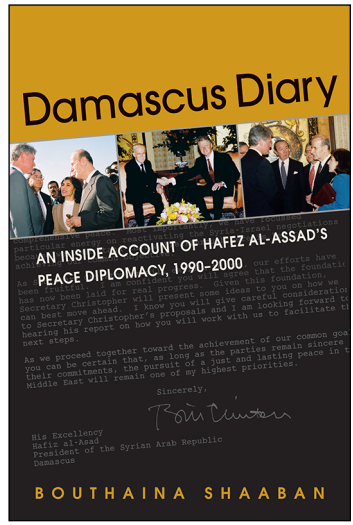
Damascus Diary: An Inside Account of Hafez al-Assad's Peace Diplomacy

Bouthaina Shaaban



ISBN: 978-1-58826-863-1 hc

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Introduction

IN THE SUMMER OF 1971, I MET PRESIDENT HAFEZ AL-ASSAD for the very first time, completely unaware that one day, more than twenty years later, I would work with him for the last ten years of his life. I was an eighteen-year-old girl from a small village near Homs who had finished her baccalaureate exams, ranking first within the entire Homs province, and was preparing to go to college. He was Syria's charming, charismatic, and powerful new president, having been elected to office a few months earlier in March 1971. Assad had launched his famous "Correction Movement" in November 1970, toppling hard-liners within the ruling Baath Party. He served as prime minister for four months, after which he ran for presidential office and won with a landslide victory in early 1971.

The following story, which I have often talked about in television interviews, speaks volumes about my special relationship with President Assad, why he appreciated me, and why I considered him to be such an inspiring father figure—not only to me, but to the Syrian nation as a whole. He is the kind of leader who shows up once in a lifetime and is to Syrians what Winston Churchill is to the British, Ataturk is to the Turks, and Gamal Abdul Nasser is to the Egyptians. I always saw similarities between him—as a historical leader—and South Africa's Nelson Mandela, who is also one of my icons and role models in life.

During the summer of 1971, President Assad had passed legislation that provided grants to top-level students, who could then enroll at state-run universities. However, the legislation was flawed. Despite the fact that I had scored the highest grade point average in Homs and the fourth in the whole of Syria, I did not qualify for a grant and thus would not be able to attend Damascus University as my father could not afford

it. I decided, with no doubt in my mind whatsoever, that I wanted to meet the president and explain to him what was wrong with the decree he had just issued. My father could not send me to university without the grant, but the decree stated that I could only enroll at a two-year college. This did not at all accord with my ambition, which was to obtain a PhD in English literature.

My father thought my idea was insane and shook his head in disbelief that his beloved daughter wanted to meet Syria's new strongman, Hafez al-Assad. Nevertheless, he gave me a generous amount of money to help me on my journey. I took the bus, all alone, from our village, al-Masoudieh, down to Homs where President Assad was supposed to be visiting the Military Academy that summer. It was my first trip outside the village, and in retrospect I now tend to agree with my father that my endeavor was indeed bold and more than a little crazy.

Before going to the academy, I tried to talk with the city's governor, telling him that I was number one in the entire province and that I therefore deserved a grant to enroll at university. "If you can't help me," I warned him, "then I'm going to see the President of the Republic." The governor told me that the president was due to visit the city's Military Academy the following morning and offered to take me to see him if I dropped by his office at 10 A.M. sharp. I arrived at 9:30 A.M., but my heart sank when I realized that the governor had already left his office for an audience with President Assad.

I left depressed, thinking how right my father seemed to be—it was indeed crazy to aim so high. I remember walking from the governor's office to the bus station and realizing that I was in a dilemma about whether to take that day's bus to my village or to stay for an extra day and try to find another way to reach the president. I understood that none of the people I knew or had recently met with were ready to make a very brave decision to help save my future. My initial hunch had been right; only President Hafez al-Assad would be able to help me and change the decree. The problem remained, though, as to how in the world I could reach him. I remember that my neck became stiff as I walked with my head bent downward, in deep thought about my academic future. Then when I looked up, I saw a minibus with a big name on it: "Samoura." I gazed hard at the name and said to myself that wherever that minibus was going, I would ride in it. A minute later, a man near it yelled, "Kullieyyeh" (military college). I took the minibus, and to my surprise it traveled out of town to a forlorn place in the middle of nowhere. This was its last stop. I felt like staying on the bus and returning to Homs, but instead I plucked up courage and got out.

The huge iron door of the Homs Military Academy was closed, with three fully armed military officers standing beside the door. The sentry guard posted outside looked at me with raised eyebrows, surprised that a girl of my size and age was standing amid a colorful array of oversized men in uniforms decorated with stars, stripes, and large war medals. "I want to meet President Hafez al-Assad," I said, strongly articulating my words, which were definitely beyond my years. He turned me away with the brush of a hand, falling just short of saying, "Shut up before anybody hears you!" I begged him, in fact insisted, claiming that if he let me through, my meeting the president might change my entire life. Eventually the young sentry guard sympathized with my request and indicated that I should walk into the military complex. He then asked me not to tell anybody how I got into the building. What I recall more than anything else was how large the premises were; they stretched for miles, having housed and trained many generations of Syrian officers since the 1940s. Needless to say, I got lost and had to ask for directions as to where the president might be found. I was told that he would be having lunch at noon, "around the swimming pool."

I waited patiently beneath the burning sun around the pool, to find President Assad approaching at midday, accompanied by Air Force commander Naji Jamil, wearing a white military uniform. Heavy security formed a chain around the president, and his top lieutenants surrounded them. I rushed up to Assad but was prevented from getting close to him by security. With his back turned toward me and without looking at me, one of the security officials hit me with his elbow, and I almost fell to the floor. President Assad then signaled to his security officials to stand back and asked me to step forward. I ran toward him so quickly that my head crashed rather violently into his chest. I was embarrassed but didn't want to lose such a precious moment. Ignoring the collision, I began to speak politely, carefully articulating my words: "President Assad, I am Bouthaina Shaaban, from al-Masoudieh village. I got my baccalaureate, ranking first in Homs and fourth in Syria, but your recent decree has not done me justice. My father cannot afford to send me to university, and my future is therefore in your hands!" Young as I was, I thought that al-Masoudieh was the center of the universe and that by inserting its name into my plea I would immediately attract the president's attention. Young people do crazy things, I now say to myself as I look back at that episode forty years later. The president looked at me and smiled. "Don't worry, my daughter; you will get what you want!" he said. I was told to go home and wait to hear from the Presidential Palace.

The call from Assad's office came much sooner than I expected—in fact, the very next day. We did not have a telephone where we lived, so the Presidential Palace phoned the village chief's office, asking that I come to Damascus the following morning for an audience with the president. I prepared for the long trip to the Syrian capital, which I also took by bus, wearing clothes in loud, red colors that I vividly remember. It was my first trip ever to Damascus, and, needless to say, I was very excited about seeing the capital of my country and meeting the president yet again, this time at the Presidential Palace. Yet again, my father was uneasy about the trip and doubtful about the consequences.

I arrived at the Muhajreen Palace, located on the slopes of Mount Qassiun, with a panoramic, splendid view of Damascus. President Assad had set up base there shortly after coming to power. Various Syrian presidents had used the palace since the 1940s, and it remained Assad's base until 1978, when he moved to another one that was far less extravagant, located at Rawda Square. The president's director of protocol, Khalil al-Saadawi, said that I had no more than ten minutes to tell my story, from A to Z, to the president. I nodded—I would have accepted any condition just to meet Hafez al-Assad again. All I needed, I said to myself, were two minutes.

Assad walked into the room where I was seated, tall and charming as I had seen him two days earlier at the Military Academy. He was wearing a blue suit and radiated power and confidence, as he often did on TV. He began by inquiring about my particular problem and then asked questions about my village, including whether we had electricity and phone lines. I answered no to each of his questions, prompting him to extend the meeting by a good forty minutes. He was clearly eager to know why Syrian villages in the second half of the twentieth century were still living in darkness. While sitting with him, all I could say to myself was, "Bouthaina, you must be crazy! He is the president of the Republic. Why in the world does he need to sit here and listen to your stories?" The meeting ended cordially, and before walking out, he asked me to pass by whenever I happened to be in Damascus.

While I was being driven back home on the bus, the driver tuned into Damascus Radio. The first item of news was that President Assad had amended his earlier decree related to grants given to high achievers. I felt a shiver down my spine—the president of the republic had not waited a day to change the law; he must have signed the new decree right after I'd walked out of his office! I wanted to tell everybody on the bus: "Did you hear that? The president has changed the law because of *me*!" But I managed to contain myself and waited until I'd reached al-

Bouthaina Shaaban (seventh from left) while a freshman at Damascus University, pictured with President Hafez al-Assad in 1971.

Masoudieh before I began to shout with joy, where family and friends were already celebrating, coining the new law "Bouthaina's decree"!

As a result of the change in the law, I enrolled at Damascus University that summer, where I studied English literature. Along with a group of classmates, who had also benefited from the decree, I paid yet another visit to the Presidential Palace to thank the president for granting us the opportunity to complete our university education. I then did my MA and PhD studies in the UK, where I also studied English literature.

Many years later, when I was a professor at Damascus University and adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara asked me to ride with him in his car "for an important meeting." That was strange, since Shara had never previously asked me to accompany him on any such meeting. While en route, he told me that the president's interpreter had been taken ill and that Hafez al-Assad needed someone to translate for him because he was receiving a delegation of US members of Congress. I was overcome with fear as I thought of standing by the president's side at an official meeting. A million ideas went through my head: *What if I made a mistake*? *What if I stuttered*? *Would he remember me*? *What if I disappointed him*?

When we walked in, Assad greeted us without indicating whether he recognized me from our previous meeting twenty years earlier. It would be a miracle if he did, I said to myself, given how many people he must meet every day. I was just another Syrian citizen, one of an

enormous number of Syrian citizens whom he had met during the early months of his first term in office. I was very agitated, and this clearly showed on my face. President Assad, always the gentleman, patted me on the shoulder and said, "Don't be afraid. If we make a mistake, we'll just repeat what we are saying. It's no big deal." By saying, "If *we* make a mistake," he was actually politely saying, "If *you* make a mistake."

When the meeting ended and right after his American guests had left, President Assad turned to me and said, "What would have happened to us if we had not sent you to university? We would have sat here today without an interpreter!" He had remembered me! It was remarkable for a man of his standing and power to be so thoughtful, sharp, and considerate. It was—and remains—one of the most memorable days in my life because it was right there and then (as he confided to me much later) that I earned the president's trust and respect, from that day in 1991 until his passing on June 10, 2000.

President Assad took pride in me as a university professor and a writer and always treated intellectuals and writers with great respect. During ten years of serving as his interpreter, I had a hunch that he was hoping I would record the true events of this period. He never said anything to me, but any time a mention was made of posterity or how he was going to be remembered, he would cast a very meaningful look at me. He often spoke about future generations, stressing that he wanted them to embrace and defend the decisions he was making. Once he died, I started to recall his remarks about posterity and how his eyes shone when they looked at me in connection with remarks made about this issue, although I stress again he never, ever mentioned it directly to me. I remember I appeared on television with our well-known novelist Colette Khoury, and he later said to me that he'd seen me on TV with Colette and that I seemed to be a good match for her, even though she was much older than I was. Here again, I felt he was celebrating me as a writer for the same reasons mentioned above: his admiration for men and women of letters, seeing them as invaluable to Syria.

About a year after his death, I saw him in a dream. He said to me, "Bouthaina, why have you still not written about the period when you worked with me?"

I replied, saying, "Because I didn't know where to start and what kind of book I should write. Do I have to write about your childhood, your youth, your family, or your career?"

He said, "No, no! You don't have to write about all that. Four chapters would be enough." He explained that they should focus on Syria

and the West, his relationship with the West, his role in the peace process, and finally, "Hafez al-Assad and Bill Clinton."

I understood that he wanted me to write the truth about him and to dispel the huge misconceptions in the West about his reputation and his role in the peace process and also the misconceptions of Bill Clinton's role, whom he trusted completely. Thus I decided to write my own impression of the Syrian-Israeli peace process, especially after reading what US and Israeli participants had already written. I felt I owed it to my country and to students interested in the Middle East to provide them with a Syrian perspective that has been recorded to the best of my ability, as I witnessed and best remember it.

From 1991 until 2000, I was dedicated to bringing peace to our region and putting an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I had to live the heartache of leaving my family, including my two daughters. In 1995, I gave birth to my son, Rida, and took a trip to Washington, D.C., when he was only two months old. I took him to a nursery and talked to "Mama Nadia," as we called her. I kissed him and explained that I was leaving him in my endeavor to try to ensure he lived in a better and more peaceful world. Both he and I were crying. I said to him, even though, of course, I knew he wouldn't understand, "Please don't think that I'm a bad mother leaving you here; it's for a better future for you and for all other children that I'm leaving you today." His tears still hurt me even today and the beautiful eyes of Nahed and Nazek beseeching me not to leave them are forever stuck in my memory. I was hoping I would be able to tell them I left them to make their world and that of their children a happier and more peaceful one, but sadly, for reasons elaborated in this book, peace between Syria and Israel was not achieved. What a waste! Not only the waste of efforts of very many people, who sacrificed years of their lives for this endeavor, but also what a waste of the lives of people who are still being killed, uprooted, or displaced on account of the lack of peace in the region. My only consolation is that I have devoted all the time required and have used up all my energy needed for a noble cause. I hope that current and future generations will never give up and will try again and again to make peace, just as our greeting always starts with "As-sal mu 'alaykum"(Peace be upon you). Peace is the most precious commodity for us humans. Enemies of peace are enemies of humanity, whereas those who try to make peace know that even if they fail, someone else will pick up the torch. Thus, "Blessed be the peace makers," whether or not they succeed.

The important thing is to keep trying and never give up.