




The Assad emails

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Assad emails: the key correspondents

A cache of purported emails reveals a small but influential group of people in contact with the Syrian president

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The list of those who corresponded with the sam@alshahba.com email address was small but influential, activists believe. It was used as a primary source of strategic advice by Assad's fledgling media team, especially his hand-chosen advisers, whose access to the president became increasingly regular throughout the second half of last year. Significant people included in the email archive are believed to include:

Bashar al-Assad

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The Syrian first lady emailed from the ak@alshahba account. The "ak" in the address is believed to refer to the family's confidante Alia Kayali Marouf, but emails to this account are frequently addressed to "Dear Asma" and signed Asma or with her initials, as well as with the name Alia. Activists believe the real Alia had no access to the account. Unlike her husband, Asma al-Assad was not in the habit of deleting emails, making them easy pickings for the activists who had the couple's usernames and passwords. The email exchanges between the pair reveal a close marriage under the strain of a heavy workload. However, they do not reflect the violent nature of the battle for Syria going on outside the palace walls.

Sheherazad Jaafari

In her early 20s, Jaafari is understood to have been an intern at the New-York-based PR firm Brown Lloyd James for three to six months after graduating from a US college. Afterwards she moved to Damascus where she was recruited as one of Assad's top media advisers. "It seems like she got into the inner circle," a former associate told the Guardian. "She was in the communications office, setting up interviews for the president."

She soon emerged as the 46-year-old president's key aide, heading a small team of inexperienced personal media advisers all of whom were young and clearly fond of him. Established regime aides, such as the senior acolyte Buthaina Shaaban, were not part of Assad's hand-chosen inner sanctum, a fact that stirred resentment in the information ministry as the new team's influence grew.

Jaafari kept in touch with former colleagues at Brown Lloyd James intermittently, on several occasions forwarding emails from Mike Holtzman, the BLJ executive she described as "my previous boss", to Assad. A Brown Lloyd James source suggested she was using her connection to the firm to bolster her PR credentials in the eyes of Assad.

In one exchange, [Jaafari sent Holtzman a YouTube clip of Assad](#) addressing a crowd and Holtzman replied: "How are [Assad and his wife] doing? Feeling more confident in the outcome?" Jaafari replied: "They are doing great and yes the outcome will be shocking to everyone. I have always told you. This man is loved by his people." Holtzman replied: "Great. I'm proud of you. Wish I were there to help."

A BLJ source confirmed that the emails had been sent by Holtzman but said he was

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A second media adviser who supplemented the work of Jaafari. She took an interest in daily media coverage and developed a close relationship with Assad, giving him regular feedback on how his speeches were being perceived by supporters. She passed on requests for interviews from journalists deemed to be acceptable to the regime.

Luna Chebel

The third media adviser and a former al-Jazeera anchor. She gives strong support to Assad and takes perhaps the hardest line on how to tackle media dissent. She also offers counsel on how to keep the uprising under control.

Khaled Ahmad

A key player in the correspondence. He provides a regular overview of the deteriorating situation in Homs, which, as a former senior regional official, he is tasked with supervising. He is believed to have links to the Syrian Socialist Nationalist party, a political party/militia that has remained staunchly supportive of the regime for more than 40 years. He reaffirms the regime narrative that Islamic terrorists backed by foreigners are responsible for the uprising.

Hussein Mortada

The head of the Iranian-backed al-Alam satellite channel, which gives an Arabic-language Iranian perspective on the Arab world. Boasts of links to Hezbollah and Iran and offers strong advice, which he claims represents them both. A key figure in spreading the regime narrative.

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