

# Demise of Syria's "Second Lady" Shakes Up the Assad Regime

by [Erik Yavorsky \(/experts/erik-yavorsky\)](/experts/erik-yavorsky), [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Jul 15, 2024

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Erik Yavorsky \(/experts/erik-yavorsky\)](/experts/erik-yavorsky)

Erik Yavorsky is a former research assistant in The Washington Institute's Rubin Program on Arab Politics.



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross Senior Fellow in the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



Brief Analysis

**Although separating fact from fiction inside the Assad regime is often difficult, Luna al-Shibl's death is likely a harbinger of further internal changes at a sensitive international juncture.**

**O**n July 5, the Syrian government [announced \(https://x.com/Presidency\\_Sy/status/1809252531283058882\)](https://x.com/Presidency_Sy/status/1809252531283058882) the death of Luna al-Shibl, the head of President Bashar al-Assad's Media and Information Office. Her precise cause of death remains unclear, however—the government [stated \(https://sanasyria.org/en/?p=333511\)](https://sanasyria.org/en/?p=333511) that she "swerv[ed] off the road" during a traffic accident, but other signs indicate she may have been assassinated.

The regime often portrays itself as a protector of minorities in Syria, and Shibl was one of its highest-ranking Druze members. Her public support of Assad's brutal crackdown more than a decade ago led to her meteoric rise within the regime, including portfolios well beyond media matters and a rumored affair with the president himself. With Shibl's mysterious demise and the May announcement that First Lady Asma al-Assad is suffering from acute myeloid leukemia—her second battle with cancer since 2018—further internal changes seem increasingly likely, with potential implications for both the regime's structure and ongoing Arab efforts to engage with Damascus.

## Shibl's Rise and Rivalries

**B**orn in 1975 to a Druze family in Suwayda, Shibl worked as a reporter for Al Jazeera before moving to Syrian television in 2010. There, she caught the regime's attention for her staunchly pro-Assad coverage during the early days of the 2011 uprising. Soon after, she was hired as a press officer by the Presidential Palace, where she

worked for longtime communications czar Bouthaina Shaaban.

Shibl rose quickly through the ranks, expanding her portfolio beyond communications. In January 2014, she was prominently [seated \(https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/07/luna-al-shibl-dies-three-days-after-car-accident-near-damascus/\)](https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/07/luna-al-shibl-dies-three-days-after-car-accident-near-damascus/) behind Syria's foreign minister at the Geneva II Conference on the country's future. Assad apparently also [allowed \(https://syrianobserver.com/who/whos-who-luna-al-shibl.html\)](https://syrianobserver.com/who/whos-who-luna-al-shibl.html) her to liaise with army officers on the ground and advise on military operations.

In 2016, Shibl married Ammar Saati, a member of parliament and known [associate \(https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/al\\_baath\\_brigades\\_new\\_militia\\_university\\_student\\_recruits.html\)](https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/al_baath_brigades_new_militia_university_student_recruits.html) of the president's brother, army commander Maher al-Assad, whose 4th Armored Division often operates alongside Iranian military personnel and militia proxies in Syria. This connection contributed to the U.S. government's decision to [sanction \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1100\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1100) the couple in August 2020, characterizing them as "senior government officials" linked to mass atrocities under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act.

In November 2020, Assad [promoted \(https://x.com/Daraa24\\_24/status/1809261003760185633\)](https://x.com/Daraa24_24/status/1809261003760185633) Shibl to special advisor to the president. As Damascus campaigned to rejoin the Arab League after a decade of diplomatic isolation, she served as one of his most prominent consultants on this issue and [sat behind him \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRf0jRmwcao\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRf0jRmwcao) at the May 2023 Arab Summit in Jeddah when he announced Syria's return to the body. She also played a key role in staffing major international engagements for Assad, [including \(https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/4558516-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9\)](https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/4558516-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9) his 2023 trip to China.

Shibl's rise [reportedly \(https://syrianobserver.com/who/whos-who-luna-al-shibl.html\)](https://syrianobserver.com/who/whos-who-luna-al-shibl.html) created rivals within Assad's inner circle. For years, the president's wife (a Sunni from the prominent Akhras family in Homs) worked to push her out of the palace amid affair rumors and frequent social media references to Shibl as Syria's "Second Lady." And Bouthaina Shaaban, Shibl's first boss in the palace, came to oppose her presence as well, likely viewing her as a younger rival. (Shaaban first rose to prominence as the English translator to Bashar's father Hafiz al-Assad in the 1990s.)

By working for the regime's core, Shibl became a member of the elite herself. In addition to her role in the palace, she opened the luxury Russian restaurant Nash Kray in downtown Damascus in 2022—a notable move given speculation about her other Russia links (see next section). In all, she is [estimated \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2023-01-27/ty-article/.highlight/a-little-war-looming-in-syrias-wild-south-and-israel-might-find-itself-involved/00000185-f1fa-d21e-ade5-f3ff91f00000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2023-01-27/ty-article/.highlight/a-little-war-looming-in-syrias-wild-south-and-israel-might-find-itself-involved/00000185-f1fa-d21e-ade5-f3ff91f00000) to be worth "several million dollars."

## Mysterious Demise and Regime Response

On Syrian social media, independent news outlets and individual citizens have been speculating about Shibl's cause of death since it was first announced. Some claimed that her BMW was [rammed \(https://x.com/HalabTodayTV/status/1809255277981790622\)](https://x.com/HalabTodayTV/status/1809255277981790622) by an armored car, forcing it into the middle of traffic; others argued that the leaked photos and official description of the wreck indicated a cover-up for an

assassination. Suspicions were also raised over reports that she died in the hospital after being treated for head injuries.

Thus far, no hard evidence has emerged to confirm exactly how she passed, in keeping with past deaths (and assassinations) of core regime members. Most of the plausible explanations for why she might have been targeted can be filed under two categories, though unresolved questions and contradictions still abound:

**1. Iran-Russia rivalry in Syria.** Shibl's brother Brig. Gen. Mulham al-Shibl disappeared three months ago, allegedly (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>) after leaking information

(<https://www.syria.tv/%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9>) about Iranian military activities in Syria. The general formerly served as a military attache to Russia's close ally Belarus, but his current role is shrouded in secrecy. His disappearance followed a spike in Israeli attacks targeting senior Iranian and Hezbollah figures throughout the country, including the high-profile April 1 strike next to the embassy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>) in Damascus. He and his wife have yet to resurface.

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-israeli-air-strikes-and-two-syrian-mothers-and-sons>)

Meanwhile, Luna had developed her own relationships with top Russian officials and reportedly (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>) sought to relocate her entire family to Sochi in recent weeks. Like her brother, some sources claim (<https://www.newarab.com/news/assads-media-advisor-luna-al-shibl-dies-after-car-crash>) that she leaked the contents of Bashar's meetings with Iranians on military matters. Others speculate that her husband's proximity to Mahar al-Assad gave him close access to intelligence on Iran, spurring the palace to isolate the couple over the past three months and fire him (<https://www.syriaahr.com/en/337886/>) from his post at Damascus University in June. According to this line of thinking, Assad or his Iranian backers may have viewed Shibl and her family as counterintelligence threats amid continued Israeli strikes.

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

(<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1xkiepp0>)

other regime figures were in sight, and no Syrian flag was draped over her coffin as is the custom for deceased senior officials. Official and unofficial regime media have barely covered the accident and its aftermath, and Bashar has yet to release personal remarks about Shibl, in contrast to his habit after other top officials passed. She was quickly [buried \(https://x.com/all4syria/status/1809654122242797964\)](https://x.com/all4syria/status/1809654122242797964) in Damascus rather than her home province of Suwayda, where Druze protests have called for Assad's ouster since August 2023.

## Implications

**A**lthough separating fact from fiction inside the Assad regime is often difficult, Shibl's death likely presages further changes at a sensitive juncture, when Arab countries are more formally reengaging with Damascus and Washington is preparing to renew the Caesar sanctions before they expire in December. For one, her demise is a reminder that other non-Alawite figures who were brought into the core of the Alawite regime after the 2011 uprising could soon exit the scene—one way or another. Among them is First Lady Asma, whom Bashar tapped to manage the regime's economic activities in 2019, replacing his cousin Rami Makhlouf. She is now in treatment for her second bout with cancer.

To be sure, Shibl's death by itself is unlikely to stoke sectarian tensions—she was buried in Damascus in part because Druze protesters in her Suwayda home province [regarded her \(https://x.com/RamiSafadi93/status/1809633435343888457\)](https://x.com/RamiSafadi93/status/1809633435343888457) as Assad's pawn. Yet the continued exit of non-Alawite figures could increase the sect's distribution inside the regime to pre-uprising levels, potentially stoking wider unrest down the road.

Shibl's death might also be a warning shot from top regime elements and/or their Iranian backers, possibly linked to Israel's uptick in strikes earlier this year. Or perhaps she simply knew too much about the president and his circle and needed to be eliminated for other reasons. Either way, such assassinations could be intended to ensure internal discipline as Arab countries, Turkey, and even Europe engage with Damascus on a laundry list of issues, and as Washington mulls a potential withdrawal from northeast Syria.

*Erik Yavorsky is a former research assistant in The Washington Institute's Rubin Program on Arab Politics. Andrew J. Tabler is the Institute's Martin J. Gross Senior Fellow and former director for Syria on the National Security Council. ❖*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [The Netanyahu Visit, U.S.-Israel Ties, and the War on Hamas](#)

Jul 15, 2024

◆  
Stuart Eizenstat,  
Morgan Viña,

Dennis Ross

(/policy-analysis/netanyahu-visit-us-israel-ties-and-war-hamas)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [A Globally Integrated Islamic State](#)

Jul 15, 2024



Aaron Y. Zelin

(/policy-analysis/globally-integrated-islamic-state)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Injecting New Blood into Militias: The Gradual Takeover of Iraqi Higher Education by the Popular Mobilization Forces](#)

Jul 12, 2024



Jawad Mahdi

(/policy-analysis/injecting-new-blood-militias-gradual-takeover-iraqi-higher-education-popular)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)