

# The New Arabists

## *Syria:*

### *The Fall of the House of Assad*

BY DAVID W. LESCH

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Reviewed by DAVID SCHENKER

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**I**N 2000, not long after Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad died and was succeeded by his son Bashar, analogies between the Assads and the Corleone family of *The Godfather* started to make the rounds. While details of the popular metaphor varied, the dominant focus of the comparison was on whether Bashar represented Michael—Don Corleone’s youngest, untrained, and more conventional son—or Fredo, his weak and incompetent eldest. Where analysts came down on this question largely mirrored their assessment of Bashar al-Assad and the future trajectory of post-Hafez Syria.

David Lesch, a professor of Middle East studies at Trinity University, was among the most prominent American Syria-watchers subscribing to the optimistic view of Bashar as Michael. To Lesch, Bashar epitomized a new-generation Middle Eastern leader dedicated to and capable of reforming the autocratic, corrupt, terrorist-supporting, anti-American regime in Damascus. So enchanted was he with the promise

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of the British-trained ophthalmologist who abandoned his medical career and returned to lead Syria, Lesch resolved to pen Bashar’s biography. Not surprisingly, Bashar agreed to cooperate, and met with the academic several times.

The resulting 2005 book, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al Asad and Modern Syria*, set a new standard for obsequiousness. A few snippets give a sense of the tenor. Bashar, Lesch related, was “very much the family man” and “a father, who, as his wife mentioned, is ‘on board’...and changes diapers.” In addition to being a model dad, Lesch pronounces that Bashar

is basically a principled man. He is very unassuming.... He is, at heart, an honest and sincere man.... I believe he is essentially a morally sound individual, someone who has the best of intentions.... People who meet him usually come away struck by three things: his politeness, his humility, and his simplicity.

This was Lesch’s assessment in 2005, after Bashar had systematically decimated Syrian civil society through mass arrests of participants in the so-called Damascus Spring of 2001 and 2002. As Lesch was lavishing blandishments on the New Lion of Damascus, the leading lights of Syria’s nascent pro-democracy movement were languishing in Assad’s dungeons. Meanwhile, the regime was torturing and killing prominent anti-Assad Kurdish cleric Shuway-

hat Khaznawi, and its Hezbollah friends in Syria-occupied Lebanon were assassinating the state’s former premier, Rafiq Hariri.

Seven years on and 18 months into the popular uprising in Syria that has killed 26,000 people, with 40,000 more missing and presumed dead, Lesch has written a new book on Syria. Given his prior uncritical support for the regime, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* should have been an exercise in contrition. Instead, Lesch tells a story of Assad’s promise unfulfilled, a disappointment he largely attributes to a “neoconservative ideological straitjacket” of UN resolutions, international assassination inquiries, investigations into Syria’s “alleged nuclear site,” and U.S. sanctions against the regime bequeathed to the Obama administration by President Bush.

As Lesch tells it, “anti-Syria inertia in Washington”—rather than, say, Assad’s policy of flooding Iraq with insurgents bent on killing Americans—undermined President Obama’s historic “opportunity” to repair relations. Along the same lines, we are told that Assad had made the strategic decision for peace, a dream that would have been realized if not for the Bush administration’s skepticism and Israel’s “heavy-handed” military action against Hamas in Gaza in 2008 and 2009.

No doubt, Lesch’s elision-filled excursion into the Bush years and discussion of the Obama administration’s failed attempt to engage Assad is tendentious, but the remainder of his narrative is by and large devoted to a more anodyne account of the Arab Spring in Syria. Alas, these chapters also suffer from Lesch’s uniquely Syrian strain of Stockholm syndrome. The result is a storyline in which Assad is a tragic hero opposing in vain a divided government, an entrenched bureaucracy, and a powerful secret

service conspiring against reform to repress the popular uprising. “Wherever Assad could,” Lesch argues, “he tried.”

While Lesch’s account doesn’t entirely absolve Bashar of his regime’s murderous behavior even in the waning pages of his book, he does maintain that Assad did not somehow start out as a pathological “bloodthirsty killer” like Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi or Iraq’s Saddam Hussein. “Somewhere along the road,” he says, “Assad lost his way.” That somewhere, according to Lesch, occurred shortly after Assad’s 2007 “reelection” to the presidency, the “first time,” he says, “I felt that Bashar had begun to believe the sycophants—that to lead the country was his destiny.”

At the time, of course, one of Bashar’s leading sycophants was Lesch himself. Consider that even five years after widely discredited nondemocratic polling in an authoritarian state in which no other candidate appeared on the ballot, Lesch still pointed to the 97 percent returns for the president as evidence of the “tremendous mass support for Bashar.” This stunning misreading of the Syrian street may have been a reflection of who Lesch was spending his time with in Damascus (i.e., Bashar’s inner circle and the pro-regime elites). Or maybe his Arabic wasn’t up to the task—to wit, in his two Yale Press Assad books, out of a combined 768 total footnotes, Lesch cites a grand total of two Arabic-language sources.

It doesn’t help that Lesch’s understanding of Syria appears to be largely informed by a cadre of English-speaking Assad-regime acolytes and employees. Oklahoma University professor Joshua Landis, editor of the Syria Comment blog, is a favorite. Landis is married to a Syrian from Assad’s minority Alawite sect whose father served

as an admiral in Assad’s navy, and his writings have long been sympathetic to the regime. In March 2011, he wrote that the Arab Spring would “stall in Syria.” Assad himself had so much confidence in the academic that in 2005 he allowed Landis to blog—purportedly without censorship—from Damascus.

Lesch is also a big fan of Sami Moubayed, a professor with a reliably pro-Assad column in the *Asia Times*, whom he describes as one of Syria’s “foremost commentators.” Interesting, that although Lesch says he knows Moubayed “quite well,” he doesn’t know, or doesn’t choose to highlight, that Moubayed was a paid political and media adviser to the regime—a widely suspected relationship that was confirmed in 2012 by hacked emails of senior Assad regime officials. No matter. Neither Lesch—nor the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where Moubayed is employed—find this of concern.

The list goes on. To Lesch, Nir Rosen—who was compelled to resign from a fellowship at New York University when he came under fire after belittling Lara Logan’s brutal sexual assault in Tahrir Square—is “a widely respected journalist.” Like Moubayed, Rosen also appeared prominently in hacked regime emails, missives in which regime officials advocated allowing the journalist privileged access to traverse the state because, as of nine months into the uprising, he was “writing some positive articles on Syria” and “trying to represent the Alawites in a good way.”

Notwithstanding the legion quibbles, to his credit, Lesch gets a few things right. His account of developments within the hapless Syrian opposition is detailed and useful, as is his chronology of failed United Nations and Arab League diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis. He also makes an important

contribution by pointing out, correctly, that the revolt has not yet been hijacked by Islamic extremists. Overall, however, it’s difficult to get past the disappointment in his friend Bashar that permeates the book.

Lesch is not alone among scholars who premise their work on repressive states on access to elites. Academics and analysts studying ruthless authoritarian regimes routinely rely on inside sources to distinguish themselves from their peers. The problem, of course, is that the regimes keep track of the author’s publications, and, if the coverage is not suitably flattering, future access is curtailed.

A full generation of U.S. scholars of Iraq was denied entry into the Republic of Fear for writing critically about Saddam. Syria scholars, too—myself included—have long been banned from Damascus in retribution for their articles. Indeed, dictators often sponsor trips for experts—including meetings with the autocrats themselves—with the unspoken quid pro quo of subsequent good press. The academic Marilyn Booth chronicled her junket to Saddam’s Iraq in the mid-1980s in an article titled “When I met Saddam Hussein,” written on the eve of the 2003 U.S. invasion. “My encounter with Saddam Hussein,” she wrote, “helped me to understand why he might command loyalty even from outside those implicated in his rule, despite his ruthlessness.”

Among those scholars with unparalleled access to Assad’s ruling clique was Joshua Landis. In the aftermath of his unprecedented experience in Syria courtesy of Assad, Landis’s pro-regime blog came to be described in NPR and other media circles as “influential.”

Former NSC staffer Flynt Leverett also came away from his post-government audiences with

Assad with the impression that the “Syrian president is, for U.S. purposes, ‘engagable;’” recommending a Qaddafi-like deal to rehabilitate Damascus in his 2005 book *Inheriting Syria: Bashar’s Trial by Fire*. To be fair, even before meeting Assad, Leverett apparently had a predilection for Middle East authoritarians. As one former U.S. government official familiar with Leverett’s work in the State Department’s intelligence and research division once quipped, “He never met a dictator he didn’t like. From Assad, to Arafat, to Ahmedinejad. And those are just the A’s.”

It’s not a coincidence that in 2005 Landis took his sojourn in Damascus and Leverett’s and Lesch’s Syria books were published. That year, Assad was under extreme international pressure for his presumed role in the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri and a handful of anti-Syrian politicians. The outreach to these individuals was an orchestrated regime public-relations campaign that contributed in some small way to Assad staying in power.

Lesch’s works on Syria have earned him a place among the pantheon of analysts who were either, at a minimum, charmed by Assad or, more nefariously, given access in exchange for positive press. While *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* is a slightly more sober account of the hell that is today’s Syria, taken together, Lesch’s books stand as a cautionary tale for analysts hoping to study authoritarian societies. 🍷