

Review Essay

The Lion in Spring? Three Takes on Syria through the Presidential Lens

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Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2003; Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2005; David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Since Hafez al-Asad's death in June 2000, Syria has spent more time in the international spotlight than perhaps ever before, due primarily to the Bush administration's interest in the country's relations with four of its neighbors: Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Lebanon. This interest has spurred the publication of several "contemporary issues" books analyzing the country's political situation and aimed at English-speaking policymaking, analyst, diplomatic, and journalistic communities in the United States and elsewhere. Three of the most talked-about analyses are Alan George's *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom*, Flynt Leverett's *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, and David Lesch's *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*. These three books have become well-known "recommended reads" for policymakers working on Syria and have circulated around the European and American diplomatic, non-governmental organization (NGO), and business circles in Damascus.

Like most of the books published on Syria since the 1970s, these three focus on the president, and for good reason: the intense presidential personality cult that characterized Syria under Hafez al-Asad (reigned 1971-2000)

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has continued into his son Bashar's presidency, albeit in a softened form (fewer photos in public places and less frenzied "great leader" rhetoric). Those looking to explain current Syrian policies and to forecast future developments do so by concentrating their analyses on the president – in this case, the son of the legendary and much-scrutinized Hafez. The transition from a regime led by a man about whom decades of information and analysis had been collected to one led by his relatively unknown son has produced a sense of uncertainty and lack of knowledge among American policymakers, foreign service officials, and journalists. For many seeking to understand Syria's present and likely future, the primary questions to answer are: Who is Bashar and what has influenced his development as a political leader? What are his objectives as regards ideological, domestic, and foreign relations concerns? How strong is he vis-à-vis other regime officials, and what capacity does he have to make his objectives prevail?

Published in the past three years – in mid-2003, spring 2005, and winter 2005, respectively – George, Leverett, and Lesch all analyze the regime through this presidential lens. In the case of the first two, the differences in publication dates, analytic approaches (George focuses on the emergent civil society movement; Leverett takes a more holistic view), and George's pessimistic versus Leverett's essentially hopeful attitude regarding the Syrian regime's capacity for change, result in two distinct portraits of the country and two divergent predictions for its future. Lesch's extraordinary closeness to Bashar as his subject results in a more muddled analysis but a sympathetic portrait of Bashar the man, which may be useful in its own way for those trying to puzzle their way through the actions of such a personality-driven regime.

Neither Bread Nor Freedom evaluates the Syrian regime through the "Damascus Spring" of mid-2000 to 2001, the hopeful first months of Bashar's presidency. The first half of the book chronicles the civil society movement's rise, flowering, and ultimate suppression. This loose coalition of secular and Islamist opposition forces united around the promotion of democracy, transparency, and the rule of law. The second half examines the country's civil institutions and their co-option by the regime: the Baath Party; the People's Assembly; the legal system; the print, radio, and televised media; and the public education system.

For the author, the ways in which these institutions have been twisted to help the regime ensure its perpetuation, rather than to serve as state-society mediators, indicate the Syrian political system's bankruptcy. Maintaining itself for its own sake, rather than to serve some larger goal, has become its

raison d'être. Therefore, regime hardliners reject all reforms for fear that any loosening will threaten the entire system. While the continued efforts of civil society activists allows some degree of optimism, there will be little change unless Bashar, whom George sees as a moderate favoring limited reforms, is able to consolidate his power so that he can sideline the hardliners.

Although George's sympathies clearly lie with the civil society movement activists, his analysis produces the sobering conclusion that democracy may be merely a side issue. It is the Syrian regime's ability to provide bread, not freedom, upon which its future depends. Moreover, as he points out, there is no material evidence to prove that economic liberalization either requires or necessarily engenders political liberalization. The steady but slow progress of government legislation regarding banking, taxation, private enterprise, and insurance bears out Bashar's stated prioritization of pursuing economic reforms over and before political reforms.

While it can also be seen as a tool for de-emphasizing the need for political liberalization, this economic focus reflects the reality that the country needs significant foreign investment and enterprise capital to reverse its long-standing decline in living standards and to provide adequate employment for its steadily increasing population. As George remarks, foreign investors require transparency and the rule of law only in the commercial realm. In his conclusion, he states: "Depressing as it may be for lovers of freedom and democracy, it would seem that bread *can* be made without freedom" (p. 171). In short, political reforms may come – but there are no guarantees.

Inheriting Syria analyzes the Syrian regime through the lens of American foreign policy, arguing that a poor understanding of Bashar's leadership objectives and his capacity for action domestically and regionally has produced an ineffectual Syrian policy and, in fact, has caused a serious deterioration in Syrian-American relations. A better understanding of these realities would foster a policy that would allow the United States to realize its goals regarding the ongoing war in Iraq, the Arab-Israeli peace process, the war on terror, and Lebanon – four areas in which Leverett sees a great opportunity for Syria to play a cooperative, rather than obstructionist, role.

The book begins with an explanation of the "Syrian paradox": Why does such a small, economically weak, ethnically and religiously divided country play such a major role in Middle Eastern politics? Its geographic centrality, when combined with Hafiz al-Asad's strategic combination of control over Lebanon, leadership in the Arab-Israeli conflict, cultivation of both moderate and "rogue" states as allies, and maintenance of working relations

with the United States, make it a powerful, if complicated, inheritance for Bashar.

The book considers Hafiz al-Asad's "legacy" (the institutions, patterns of governance, and foreign and domestic strategic objectives that he established) and its influence upon Bashar, whom Leverett sees as balancing two impulses: those of "loyal son" and moderate reformer. A chronological analysis of Bashar's domestic performance shows that he favors gradual change but is unwilling to confront the regime's hardliners when they reject proposed reforms. Regionally, he has attempted to follow his father's foreign policy "script" while adapting to the changing world situation due to the al-Aqsa intifada, 9/11, the war on Iraq, and the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri.

Concluding that Bashar is "engageable," Leverett urges the Bush administration to swallow its reluctance to partner with a long-term state sponsor of terror. He proposes a "conditional engagement" that lays out clear targets for reversing what the United States considers problematic Syrian behaviors, along with tangible rewards for meeting these targets and serious repercussions for not doing so. A careful analysis of Bashar's capacity for action will enable these to be set – and met – without compromising his credibility at home or in the region. The result will be a policy with potential to address the United States' regional objectives as well as those specific to Syria.

The New Lion of Damascus addresses many of the same questions as Leverett's book: It defines Bashar as a man and as a leader, and analyzes what his performance thus far says about his future development as a leader and his ability to weather the current domestic and international crises facing Syria. For Lesch, these are much more personal questions for, as he states in his introduction, his primary interest was to find out first-hand who Bashar really is. Given this approach, his research relies heavily on interviews with the president and those close to him: a mix of "new guard" government figures like Imad Moustapha (current ambassador to the United States) and Bouthaina Shaaban (current Minister of Expatriates), and personal friends from childhood.

The quotes and stories about Bashar at different moments in his life add an engaging human element to the text and are a nice change from the analyses of Bashar's public speeches, particularly his first one as president, upon which all three authors rely. However, they also lead the author to hyper-personalize Bashar's domestic and foreign policy decisions, relating them in an almost pop-psychology manner to influences in his childhood or adolescence. Moreover, Lesch's evident sympathy for Bashar leads him to

overemphasize the virtues of his character (e.g., kindness, moral probity, and sincerity of purpose) while blaming his less-than-liberal turn in the post-Damascus Spring crackdown as the product of heavy pushing by corrupt regime stalwarts. At times, he veers dangerously toward the apologetic, as with his soft-pedaling of the severely repressive conditions that characterized Hafez al-Asad's Syria or his criticism of Syria's stateless Kurdish population for being dissatisfied with the whispers of citizenship laws to come.

Lesch loses focus midway through the book, with a chapter on Syria as a "rogue state" and its relations with the United States. Like many observers today, he believes passionately that the Bush administration has made numerous policy mistakes with respect to the Arab world generally and to the three related issues of Syria and Lebanon, Syria and Israel, and Syria and Iraq. He devotes pages to analyzing neo-conservative think tank and administration views, policies, and actions vis-à-vis the region, arguing that misconceptions about Syria, coupled with a strong preference among neo-conservatives for Israel to dominate the region, have produced misguided and counterproductive policies. His passion is sincere and his analysis is solid, but this analysis belongs in a different book, one that would focus less on "Bashar al-Asad and modern Syria" and more on American policymaking, as Leverett's book does. A more consistent focus would also strengthen his recommendations, which shift back and forth between changes to American policy and changes in Syrian governance.

The difference in publication dates between the three books gives Leverett and Lesch the artificial advantage of appearing more *au courant* in their analyses. It is jarring, for example, to read in George's book that the self-proclaimed new champion of Syrian democracy, the recently defected vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam, directed the regime's 2001 repression of the civil society movement. However, George's book offers a diagram of how Syrian institutions function, a lucid history of the Syrian Baath party, an insightful deconstruction of the presumed relationship between the economic and political spheres, and the consequences of this for Syria. The longer timeline of Leverett's book allows him to give a comprehensive *précis* of Hafiz al-Asad's foreign policy, strategically and tactically, as well as a cogent analysis of Bashar's domestic and international performance during his first five years as president. Likewise, the additional two years allows Lesch to discuss the effects on Bashar's presidency of the ongoing insurgency in Iraq on American-Syrian relations as well as the impact of Hariri's assassination and Syria's 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon.

George has been criticized for his all-or-nothing assessment, while Leverett has been accused of excessive optimism. The slow but onward progress of economic reform, coupled with the late 2005 signing of several major foreign investment contracts with private-sector players (e.g., the Emirati real estate development firm EMAAR) supports George's decoupling of economic and political liberalization. Meanwhile, the events of the past year may make Leverett seem Pollyannaish on a regime that has seized every opportunity to antagonize (rather than cooperate with) the international community vis-à-vis the Hariri assassination. However, given evidence that sticks alone have not changed Syria's behavior, his prescription for a conditional engagement grounded in a clear and concrete carrots-and-sticks policy provides a proactive and hopefully more productive approach not only for American policymakers, but also for the NGO and business communities active in Syria today.

Lesch's book, with its frequent references to Bashar's personality, life experiences, and character, makes another type of contribution. It presents Bashar as his best self, as seen by Lesch or perhaps the man himself. Such a view may prove useful for those Americans and Europeans trying to work with him and his government in business and politics by providing insight into his character as well as his leadership objectives. At the same time, Lesch's warm relationship with Bashar, which, judging by his invitation to visit Syria even after the book's publication, appears to be both sincere and lasting. Moreover, it may allow the criticisms he makes in it to receive a presidential hearing.

One of Lesch's most cogent recommendations is for Bashar and his wife Asma to seek out opportunities to serve as the public faces of Syria. They should court the international media spotlight as a means of promoting the country in all of its western-friendly aspects, much as King Abdullah of Jordan and his wife Queen Rania are doing. From King Abdullah's role as host of the Discovery Channel's 2002 special on "Jordan: The Royal Tour" to Queen Rania's latest appearance on "Oprah" this May, the Jordanian royal couple has worked tirelessly to present a modern, western, woman-friendly, and religiously tolerant image of the country to the American and the international community. Without being either insincere or facile in their approach, Bashar and Asma could do much the same for Syria. While George and Leverett have each written books to help the American and international communities in their dealings with the president of Syria, Lesch's may be the only one that allows the president to help himself.