

Book Review

Syria: The fall of the house of Assad. By David W. Lesch. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-300-19722-8 (pbk). Pp. 304.

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The problems confronting Syria need to be analysed to make a sense of the context. David W. Lesch, a professor of Middle East History at Trinity University, San Antonio, provides a narrative context of the unfolding historic events of the Syrian uprising and explains the role of the key players and the broader socio-economic factors contributing to the events surrounding Syria. *The Fall of the House of Assad* is an updated version of the author's 2012 hardback version and is written in a clear, lucid manner. Benefitting from his personal contact and interviews with President Bashar al-Assad in 2004 and 2005, Lesch provides anecdotal, personal information as well as a clear exposition of the broader social factors at work in the uprising in Syria, the regime's response to it and its possible outcomes. The title of the book does not signify that Assad's regime has toppled or will be toppled soon. It is intended to illustrate that Assad has lost his mandate to govern. Lesch makes this clear in the very first page of the book: "Whether or not he remains in power, Bashar Al-Assad, in my mind, has already fallen" (p. vi).

In nine chapters, with short titles, Lesch covers the period from Assad's ascension in 2000 to the time at which the author finished writing the book. The first chapter is titled "the hope", the term used by the Syrian people for Bashar al-Assad "even before he assumed the presidency" (p. 2). Lesch provides a portrait of Bashar al-Assad as a politically moderate who reluctantly took power after his elder brother, who was groomed for the job, was killed in an accident. Assad was studying ophthalmology in London when he was called, in 1994, to be trained so that he can take control of an oligarchic regime that his father Hafiz had built over the past 30 years. When Assad assumed the presidency in 2000, Syrians and outsiders alike hoped that the popular young doctor would better the conditions of people and would lead the autocratic and terrorist-supporting country toward democracy. David Lesch himself expected this to happen and hence he wrote in 2005, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Assad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press). In it, he painted Assad as a principled man characterized by politeness, humility and simplicity. Lesch did not know that Assad would disappoint him in every respect.

Against the backdrop of his hope for Syria, the author describes the subsequent events, the Bush invasion of neighbouring Iraq in 2003, the murder of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 and Syria's subsequent withdrawal of troops from Lebanon that characterized Bashar's presidency. Lesch points out that the US invasion and Hariri's assassination heaped international pressure on Damascus, with thinly veiled threats of regime change. The fact that Bashar al-Assad made it through those episodes gave him the feeling of invincibility. This and his re-election in 2007 referendum worked together to transform Assad, the ophthalmologist into al-Assad the authoritarian dictator. In Lesch's words, "I noticed something in him that I had not detected before: self-satisfaction, even smugness" (p. 31). Since then, al-Assad resorted to all mechanisms to secure his political longevity at all costs. The author, however, fails to provide enough evidence to justify the correlation between the two events and the metamorphosis of Assad into a tyrant.

Chapter three to six examine the development of protests in the context of Arab Awakening, as well as how the Assad regime thought it was immune to the "Arab Spring." The Syrian Uprising is definitely puzzling. It was predicted by scholars and observers that Syrians would not follow the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt for the simple reason that institutions and mechanisms that could enable people to organize and mount an assault on the regime did not exist. The inability of Syrians to mobilize in the weeks following the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt seemed "to confirm the almost universal predictions of analyst, commentators, diplomats and scholars (including this one) that the Arab Spring would not come to Syria any time soon or in any significant way" (p. 54). However, on March 25, 2011, large demonstrations in Syria spread nation-wide falsifying all the predictions on Arab Spring in Syria.

Chapter four, titled "No, It's Not", reminds that the regime was not immune and hence the two subsequent chapters detail how the "regime responds" and the "opposition mounts." Chapter 7, "The International Response," examines the countries and groups which either supported or opposed the Assad regime. The author details quite effectively the inconsistencies in the international response to repression carried out by various regimes in the Middle East. The Syrian crisis, according to the author, was "... a regional cold war between Iran and its allies ... and Saudi Arabia and its allies" and "a new Middle Eastern cold war at the international level, between a US-led bloc that includes the European Union, and a Russian-led bloc, which included China and emerging powers....(Pp. 122-123). Lesch points out some yawning hypocrisies in the Syrian crisis: the irony of Iran backing the Egyptian and Tunisian protesters, yet supporting Assad government's

brutal suppression and killings of thousands of its citizens. Likewise, America calls for the dismantling of Assad regime while backing King of Bahrain's dictatorial oppression of the protesters demanding rights.

In the last chapters, David Lesch discusses the developments in Syria until 2011. Chapter nine, "Whither Syria," discusses three basic ways in which the Syrian uprising may play out depending on the international response. One, Bashar al-Assad could fall from power; two, he could stay in power; and three, the crisis could turn into a protracted stalemate or civil war (p. 215). Lesch argues that a negotiated settlement is improbable and that the opposition is divided to effectively negotiate a peace with the Assad regime. The fall of Assad, Lesch argues, is the only way to mollify the opposition.

In conclusion, Lesch writes, "Assad desperately needed to break out of the stifling, anachronistic box of Syria politics-as-usual and to embrace a transformational role in his country" (p. 241), a role which Assad could not or did not assume. Assad hangs on to power by creating a "favourable stalemate," a civil war dominated by superior regime power. The book contains a map which ought to have been followed by a chronological table of events which is missing. This updated edition contains an epilogue of 25 pages detailing the events in Syria between 2012 and 2013. The Syrian coalition, the use of chemical weapons, the involvements of al-Qaeda and Jihadist groups in Syria, the Geneva Communiqué plan for the future of Syria, and the human cost of the on-going Syrian conflict etc. require much more space than is provided. The epilogue does not do justice to the topics covered which need to be treated with scrutiny. The book also has a 22-page "Notes" section which contains references largely to web pages rather than to books.

Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad contains valuable information for those interested in understanding the current situation in Syria. It is slightly difficult to follow the narrative as the author jumps back and forward in time. However, the language is lucid which makes it accessible to academics and non-academic readers. The book does not go back far in history to explain the emergence of the social democratic system in independent Syria and how it became transformed into an outright dictatorship. It also does not explain the role played by the Western powers to transform the state into what it actually became. Finally, the quality of the book would have improved if it contained a bit more on the individual atrocities and massacres perpetrated by the Assad regime. These drawbacks do not inhibit the reader learning something of the true nature of the Syrian uprising. The conceivable scenarios for the resolution of the Syrian conflict are also well worth pondering.