

Book Review: Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad

by blog admin

January 24, 2013

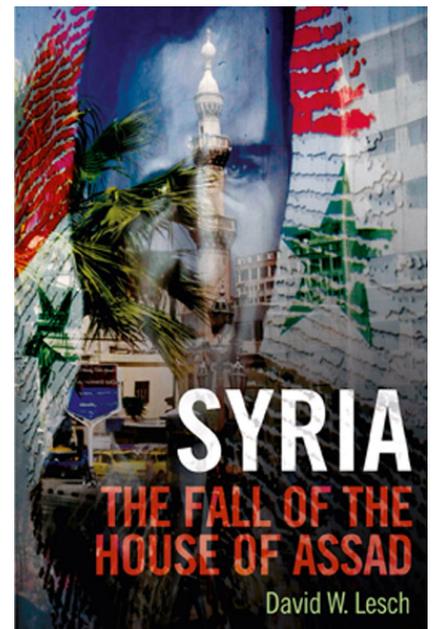
Author **David Lesch** explores Assad's failed leadership, his transformation from bearer of hope to reactionary tyrant, and his regime's violent response to the uprising of his people in the wake of the Arab Spring. **James Moran** thinks this a first-class account of the Syrian uprising.



Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad. David W. Lesch. Yale University Press. August 2012.

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In the tumult of an ongoing historical event, such as the Syrian uprising, it is extremely difficult to gain a sense of context. Barraged as we have been recently with dribs and drabs of disconnected information – the UK's possible lifting of the arms embargo, the regime's use of ballistic missiles, Assad's reemergence on national TV – we find it difficult to gain a broader narrative of the history which is unfolding. [David W. Lesch](#), professor of Middle East History at Trinity University, San Antonio, has provided something that is therefore doubly impressive. He gives us a rigorous sense of narrative context of these unfolding historic events, explaining the key players' motivations as well as the broader socio-economic factors behind the events. But more than that, he writes it all in such a genuinely lucid and fascinating manner that one almost forgets one is reading non-fiction.



Lesch has had arguably more personal contact with Bashar al-Assad than any other Western scholar or journalist. This account of the uprising in Syria, the regime's response to it and its possible outcomes is therefore littered with gripping anecdotes of the leader. Lesch gives a convincing portrait of Assad beyond the typical portrayal of just another stubborn Middle East dictator clinging to power, or at least he shows, Assad was once something else. Lesch explains how Assad is a people person, an example being how he invited ordinary Syrian families up onto his balcony during celebrations of his (arranged) re-election. Assad's attempts at reforms – piecemeal and stuttering as they were – is put into sympathetic context as Lesch outlines how Bashar had wanted to be an ophthalmologist, but was forced into leadership by the death of his charismatic older brother.

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But Lesch's book reaches its greatest insights when he marries this anecdotal, personal information with his in-depth but clear exposition of the broader social factors at work in Syria. An issue that has been explained over many painstaking pages in other books – why Alawites came to dominate a majority Sunni country – is dealt with in a few paragraphs. Lesch explains how Alawites had signed up disproportionately to fight in World War Two while Syria was under the French mandate, meaning that they were heavily over-represented in the military when Syria gained independence. Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad (himself an Alawite) was therefore able to find built-in wellsprings of support during the intra-Baath party coup of 1966. Lesch then later explains how the largely Alawite government played on the fears of other minorities of a Sunni takeover to further secure its grip. The account is clear, interesting and detailed – a rare triad. It also puts the conflict into a context that better explains the support the regime still continues to enjoy from sections of the population.

Lesch identifies the arrest of a group of schoolchildren all under fifteen years of age in the city of Deraa, as the catalyst for the uprisings in the country. To “be mischievous”, they had graffitied “down with the regime” on their school wall. The security services arrested the children, mistreated and perhaps tortured some of them. Lesch is right to be cautious in his account, details of this event should be treated with scrutiny, something lacking from many newspaper accounts at the time. But their arrest was enough to ignite a small protest, which was suppressed violently, leading to an even larger protest. Thus the back-and-forth of protest and suppression began, and Assad is presented as being impotent or frustratingly unseen in the decision-making process. This is perhaps the most relevant part of the book for those seeking an easy-to-read but informative guide to the ongoing crisis in Syria.

However, readers seeking a much broader historical perspective may be disappointed. Lesch gives implicit criticisms of the social-democratic system that emerged in Syria after it gained independence, and how bloated the state became. However, his account rarely stretches back very far in history to explain such problems, and the West’s responsibility for much of the Middle East’s trajectory in the 20th century (and its economic fragility) is largely unexplored. Lesch’s grip on more recent history is so informed that this it doesn’t inhibit the reader learning something of the true nature of Syria. His agenda is not to apportion geopolitical blame – Western or Middle-Eastern – for the Middle East’s problems. He does, however, give a very frank account of what he sees as the shortcomings of US policy in Syria, particularly under the administration of George W Bush. He gives one account of a very senior Bush official saying dialogue with Syria was a distasteful idea because “they’re killing our boys [in Iraq]”. Lesch then gives a thoughtful analysis of how consistent pressure from the US left Assad no choice but to seek support from nationalist factions in his own country, including ones that identified strongly with the insurgency in Iraq. From this perspective, turning a blind eye to insurgents crossing the borders makes more sense – though the Bush official did not, apparently, agree.

This is a first-class account of the Syrian uprising. Bashar al-Assad is presented as deeply flawed and responsible for potentially some of the worst crimes of the Arab Spring, and yet, also once a great hope for the country. The wider reasons for the Arab Spring are dealt with briefly and powerfully. This is a must-read for anyone wishing to understand the ongoing history that is the Syrian uprising.

James Moran is a former researcher at the Gulf Centre For Strategic Studies. Having worked previously at PoliticsHome.co.uk, James now writes about politics for the Huffington Post. [Read more reviews by James.](#)