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Getting Bashar al-Assad Very Wrong

Daniel Pipes

Specialists on the Middle East display such incompetence, there's even a book-length study exposing their failure.[1] Case in point: the collective swoon that greeted the accession of Bashar al-Assad to the presidency of Syria in 2000.

Some analysts of Syrian politics correctly expressed skepticism about a 34-year-old ophthalmologist's ability to manage the "desolate, repressive stability" that he inherited from his dictatorial father, suggesting that "deep tensions in Syrian society . . . could explode after the long-time dictator's demise."

But most observers divined in the young Assad with his London education and his glamorous wife a decent fellow, if not a closet humanitarian. David W. Lesch, an academic with the impressive title of Ewing Halsell Distinguished Professor of Middle East History at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, led this hopeful pack. Lesch befriended the young dictator, and "met regularly with [him] between 2004 and 2009, in part as an attempt to improve U.S.-Syrian relations."

Those regular meetings led to Lesch's 2005 Yale University Press book, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*, which won a torrent of praise from his fellow academics: Moshe Ma'oz of the Hebrew University found it "very informative and perceptive." Curtis Ryan of Appalachian State University called it "revealing." James L. Gelvin of UCLA praised it as "an extraordinarily readable and timely account." A prestigious Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, hosted Lesch to present his (since removed) findings.

1 Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in Amerca* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001).

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Even in 2005, it was clear who the Syrian dictator was; Lesch should have known better. As David Schenker, the former assistant secretary of state for the Near East, has noted, Lesch's favorable book came

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

The passage of sixteen years since 2005–most of them consumed by Assad's monstrous brutality in the region's most lethal recent civil war–provides an even clearer perspective from which to gauge Lesch's scholarship. Assad responded to the peaceful demonstrations against his regime that began in March 2011 not with reforms but with vicious force. The total number of dead comes to about 400,000 out of a pre-war population of 21 million. Assad's personal barbarism has throughout been the key to this conflict; exploiting his control of the skies, his troops have perpetrated an estimated 90 percent of the war's fatalities, including those detained or disappeared.

According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, over 6.3 million Syrians have been internally displaced and another 5.5 million have fled the country, causing crises in such disparate countries as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Hungary, Germany, and Sweden.

In light of this appalling record, Lesch's account contains many passages of stunning gullibility and incandescent misjudgment. He assessed Assad as though he were an up-and-coming university colleague, deploying such adjectives as "compassionate," "principled," "unassuming," "innocent," and "morally sound." He found Assad to be "a man of great personal integrity" with "appealing sincerity" and "a vision for the future of his country." Those who meet Assad, he informs us, are struck by "his politeness, his humility, and his simplicity." Conversely, "The thuggish behavior . . . associated with his father is not in Bashar's character."

Away from the spotlight, Lesch found Assad to be a model family man: "He changes diapers [and] gets up in the middle of the night to calm a crying child." Indeed, "During the entire first year of [his son's] life, Bashar did not once miss giving him his daily bath."

Westerners can appreciate his advanced musical tastes: "As well as liking music by Phil Collins, he enjoys Kenny G., Vangelis, Yanni, some classical pieces, and 1970s Arab music. He loves classic rock, including the Beatles, Supertramp, and the Eagles, and he has every album by the Electric Light Orchestra."

As for his wife, the lovely Asma, she "certainly seems to share her husband's calling to do everything in his power to make Syria a better place for their children and grandchildren."

Despite this and more fawning praise, Lesch at least acknowledged that things could go horribly wrong, "with regime instability leading to a potential civil war." But he rejected this scenario because "the opposition to the regime within Syria . . . is divided and relatively weak."

Even in 2007, Lesch still believed that Assad "had good intentions, if awkwardly expressed at times." Four years later, after the revolt had already begun, Lesch continued to hope against hope that his estimable friend was not behind the violent regime response: "The crackdown on protesters doesn't necessarily indicate that he is tightening his grip on power; it may be that the secret police, long given too much leeway, have been taking matters into their own hands."

Not surprisingly, Yale University Press quietly withdrew this testament to scholarly credulity and co-option. Then, as though intent to show the complete lack of accountability in academia, YUP in 2012 published another Lesch masterpiece, this one too making an (until now) wrong prediction: *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*. Not surprisingly, the press subsequently also withdrew this chef-d'oeuvre. One shudders to imagine Lesch's third predictive work.

Such is the dismal state of Middle East studies, where a distinguished professor writes books so erroneous, the publisher tries to pretend they never existed.