

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

David Lesch is Professor of Middle East History at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas and is probably one of the world's foremost experts on Syria.

Choosing this book's title in 2011/12 must have been a courageous exercise, though Lesch acknowledges the risks involved in writing about a state of affairs that is still to happen. Lesch divides his work into nine chapters: The Hope; Surviving; Syria is Different; No, It's Not; The Regime Responds; Opposition Mounts; The International Response; All In; Whither Syria?

He writes on the basis not just of his historical knowledge but also of his direct, personal experience with the Assad family, and Bashar al-Assad particularly. Initially he had hopes that Bashar was capable of reforming and restructuring the country whose leadership he assumed following the death of his dictator father, Hafez, in June 2000. In the thirteen years that have followed, early attempts at reform failed to yield the profound reformation of Syrian society, its openness to external support and influence from other nations being hampered by an almost pathological fear of the outside world.

The dawning of the Arab Spring, and its impact in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen boded badly for the Assad regime, and so it proved as opposition to the government, and the brutalist Alawite Shia sect, from which Assad originates, intensified and turned into a civil war that at the time of writing still rages.

Lesch considers the origins of the internal conflict, though the book was published before recent allegations of acts of cannibalism and the use of chemical weapons. He also devotes space to the actions and responses of other nations, from the region and from the broader world, and non-state players, and ponders the multi-layered difficulty of achieving a solution which prevents a fight to the death that takes Syria back to pre-modern times and infects the entire region with instability at best and a wider war at very much worse.

His conclusions are not optimistic and reflect the view that there was an inevitability to what we are witnessing in Syria, as the apparently modernist Bashar fell under the spell of the Alawite/regime stranglehold on and suspicion of everything, and proved himself to be truly his father's son.

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