

Assad's Apologist

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FLYNT LEVERETT, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 286 pp., \$27.95.

Writing a living analysis of a dictator and his reign is a tricky affair. All too often, in their quest for objectivity, experts end up singing praises of a misunderstood “man of vision” that are very much at odds with history. In his day, Stalin had his share of starry-eyed supporters in academia and government alike, both in the United States and in Europe. Hitler did as well.

When it comes to the Middle East, this failing can be particularly acute. For many that seek to carve out their niche as experts in regional affairs, rare access to authoritarian rulers can be a powerful narcotic. It is rendered even more potent when that access is granted during particularly trying times—say, the liberation of Iraq and a pivotal period of transition among one of the region's most important states.

Flynt Leverett, a one-time CIA analyst and National Security Council staffer who now works at the Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy, is no stranger to this problem. During his tenure in government, Leverett was entrusted with the task of overseeing the Syria portfolio—a responsibility that he now has attempted to leverage into

an insightful glimpse into a dictatorial dynasty historically shrouded in secrecy and intrigue.

Leverett, however, comes up short. His interviews with high-ranking Syrian officials, including Syrian president Bashar Assad himself, are intended to provide readers with insights into the inner workings of the regime, and they do. But they also lack proper context. Instead of taking the regime to account for its substantial deformities (including support of terror elements in Iraq, Israel, and Lebanon, a burgeoning chemical weapon program and a vibrant missile trade with Iran and North Korea), *Inheriting Syria* paints Assad as a sort of reluctant prisoner, handicapped by a corrupt, non-functioning bureaucracy and an antiquated system of governance bequeathed to him by his late father. The young Syrian dictator, Leverett argues, must move cautiously—and sometimes against his own “reformist” instincts—because of the challenge he faces from an “old guard” that sees little reason to accept substantive changes to the traditional, corrupt political and economic system. He also stresses that Assad must deal with a tenuous geopolitical environment, including the rise of radical Islamist elements in other countries and a resurgence of Islamic conservatism in Syria itself.

In the process, Leverett makes clear that he is no fan of the Bush



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administration. He views its policies as too “black and white,” and ultimately counterproductive. Instead, he proffers his own set of policy recommendations, all fundamentally predicated upon one common precept: that it is possible to work in good faith with the dictator in Damascus to achieve goals mutually beneficial to both Syria and the United States.

As Leverett sees it, engaging Syria strictly through a strategy predicated upon the promotion of democracy is a non-starter. If only the Bush administration would drop its aggressive talk of democratization and its insistence on a moderation of Syrian rogue behavior, a middle ground could be found between Damascus and Washington. In Leverett’s eyes, U.S. and European demands toward Syria—which include political pluralism, a rollback of state support for terrorism, and accountability for the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri—are politically untenable for a new dictator who desperately needs to maintain a strong semblance of authority.

The picture that emerges is profoundly unflattering. Leverett has either fallen for Assad’s wily attempt at what the Russians call *maskirovka*, or become a willing participant in it. A full six years after his ascension to the Syrian presidency, and despite copious rhetoric to the contrary, Bashar Assad has evinced absolutely no indication of reform or moderation, either at home or abroad. Instead, like his father Hafez before him, Bashar has been able to quite literally get away with murder, as well as the proliferation of mayhem far beyond his country’s borders. His strategy for governance so far has been strikingly familiar; generating crises abroad, providing low-level support for an array of terrorist entities, and

entering into strategic alliances with North Korea and Iran, all based on the belief that the West does not have the political will or the desire to seriously involve itself in Syrian affairs.

Yet, in Leverett’s retelling, Bashar is a “Macbeth-like figure” and Syria under the Ba’ath can be a useful contributor to U.S. security aims. The hope that Bashar will prove himself a true reformer and good faith actor reverberates throughout *Inheriting Syria*, and informs much of Leverett’s case for an American strategy of fatal half-measures. All the Bush administration has to do is accede to the point that the regime is central to achieving stability in the Middle East, and therefore should be preserved.

Intended as a primer on a country that is slowly starting to take center stage on the American foreign policy agenda, *Inheriting Syria* offers few insights. At a time when the region as a whole is desperately in need of new and innovative ideas for governance and pluralism, Leverett proffers only tired and failed ones. American policymakers—to say nothing of the Syrian people—deserve far better.

