



## The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria

On March 9, Trinity University history professor David Lesch spoke at CSIS about his new book, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*. He argued that both Damascus and Washington have missed opportunities for rapprochement and cooperation since September 11, 2001. In the next year, Lesch suggested, Bashar al-Asad will need to make a fateful choice between pursuing a political and economic opening or consolidating his power further.

Lesch offered a unique perspective on the Syrian regime, having had unusually close access to Bashar and several members of his inner circle for several years. He noted a fundamental divergence between Damascus and Washington immediately following September 11. Syria had assumed that the United States would turn a blind eye to its support for Palestinian rejectionist groups, its manipulation of Lebanese politics and its relationship with Iran, provided that it cooperated in the war on terror. The Syrian regime felt U.S. actions reinforced its worldview in the months leading to the 2003 war in Iraq, during which Syrians believed that the United States sent mixed signals—alternately praising Syria’s cooperation with U.S. intelligence agencies and criticizing its closed political system. In this environment, Syrians made a basic miscalculation of how much September 11 had changed the U.S. approach toward the world, and pursued their traditional strategy of minimal covert cooperation with the United States accompanied by overt assertions of independence. Syria found itself prominently in America’s sights as a consequence.

As Lesch argued, Syria and the United States share a common enemy in al-Qaeda. They could have used 9/11 as an opportunity to strengthen bilateral ties, especially because the relatively inexperienced Bashar had been outspoken about his reform agenda for Syria. Lesch suggested that the United States should have seen the uncertainty unleashed by September 11 as an opportunity to entice Syria to integrate into the global economy and begin to open its political sphere. Instead, the United States chose to isolate Syria further, publicly using threatening language toward Damascus before and immediately following the fall of Baghdad. U.S. rhetoric has only intensified since the extension of Emile Lahoud’s presidential term in September 2004 and the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, with relations hitting a low point when the U.S. recalled its ambassador from Damascus immediately after Hariri’s assassination.

Lesch said he believes Bashar’s disavowal of prior knowledge of Hariri’s assassination, based both on Lesch’s own assessment of the Syrian leader as well as interviews with Bashar’s associates going back to the president’s childhood. He noted, however, that Bashar has shrewdly used Hariri’s death to win internal power struggles and to consolidate his own power. Bashar now seems more fully in control than he was previously; he has involved himself more intimately in overseeing the security services

and the military and has also shuffled members of the cabinet. More importantly, Lesch said, hostile rhetoric towards Damascus from Europe, the United States and the UN has in fact consolidated Bashar's position at home. Drawing a parallel to the current international dispute over Iranian nuclear proliferation, Lesch posited that leaders such as Bashar and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are able to manipulate hostile rhetoric from the United States to enhance their nationalist credentials and appear strong domestically and regionally.

As the regional situation has become increasingly unstable in the year since the Hariri assassination, Syria has grown stronger, Lesch said. The U.S. is overwhelmed in Iraq and the UN's attention has turned toward Iran, leaving Lebanon and Syria on the periphery. In the Palestinian territories, Lesch suggested that Hamas's victory will give Syria more leverage in any future Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations. More importantly, however, it strengthens the theory that Islamists would come to power in Syria should Bashar's secular Ba'ath Party fall, causing observers in Israel and elsewhere to argue against regime change in Damascus. Syria seems to have weathered the immediate storm, which has given the regime more confidence to maintain its distance from the United States and its allies.

With this recently strengthened position, Bashar now faces a fundamental choice: he will either continue to consolidate his power or will initiate a program of liberalization. Lesch remains optimistic that he will choose the latter option. Bashar, he argued, understands that a country's success in the post-Cold War world is measured by economic growth, technological innovation and a population's standard of living rather than by military power and ideology. Bashar's ultimate goal, Lesch said, is in fact to carve a specialized niche for Syria in the globalization process much in the same way India has. Lesch suggested that Bashar will have to make this choice in the next year, and it is a choice that the international community will use to decide whether Bashar's presumed desire to reform is genuine. ■--*MJB*