

Book review by Dr. Nikolaos van Dam, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, Nr. 3-4, 2007

ZISSER, E. – *Commanding Syria. Bashar al-Asad and the first years in Power*. I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2007. (24 cm, X, 230). ISBN 978-1-84511-153-3. £ 39,50.

Professor Eyal Zisser's *Commanding Syria* provides a detailed record of what has been published in various Arab, Israeli and other mass media about president Bashar al-Asad's first five years in power in Syria. It is interwoven by a personal analysis of Zisser, who is the head of the Department of Middle East and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. Being an Israeli citizen, Zisser notes that "researching the subject of Syria's ruler and the regime he heads without the possibility of visiting that country undoubtedly constitutes a considerable drawback. Nevertheless [he goes on], compensation is to be found in: a wealth of primary materials – the press and electronic monitoring services during the period under review ...; and, of course, discussions and interviews with Syrians, other Arabs and Westerners who are permanent residents of Syria or who lived there in the past. Wide use was also made of secondary sources about Syria" (p. x). His own study, *Asad's Legacy* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2001), is the most frequently quoted book.

Although Dr. Zisser undoubtedly has done an elaborate and painstaking job in doing his research, it could be questioned whether he has succeeded in achieving the academic standards and objectivity, which, for example, his "guide and monitor", Professor Itamar Rabinovich, who operated under similar restricted circumstances, has shown in his main academic work on Syria. Unfortunately, Zisser falls short of his master's standards. Upon taking a closer look, Zisser's book turns out to be a strange mixture of academic, pseudo-academic, Israeli tinted, political and polemical statements, as well as a sometimes tendentious analysis, in which the author does not always clearly distinguish between the opinions of his own and those of quoted others, leading the more specialized reader to question repeatedly what the value or reliability of the provided texts and views really is. It is as if Zisser is sometimes out of touch with Syrian or other more general realities. Although the book undoubtedly contains a lot of valuable material, it is so much overshadowed by such inadequacies, that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the lay reader to always clearly distinguish between fact, fiction, scientific reality or politically coloured statements.

The political tone of the book is set from the beginning when Zisser refers without further comment to "a series of blunders" in president Bashar al-Asad's "handling of the Syrian-American relationship" (p. viii). According to Zisser, "the story of Syrian foreign policy in the Bashar era was ultimately the story of the country's failure to deal with three major events in the history of the world and the region: the events of September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq and the Lebanese crisis" (p. 125). Zisser, throughout the book, tends to negatively compare Bashar with his father, but Bashar's policies concerning Iraq and the US intervention in 2003 were probably not much different from what they would have been, had president Hafiz al-Asad still been alive. They were not a result of Bashar's so-called "lack of experience", if only because the main presidential advisors, such as 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam and Faruq al-Shar', at the time were still there. Moreover, Syria's position was clearly motivated, and some of the policies of president Hafiz al-Asad were continued under president Bashar, taking into account new circumstances.

Zisser surrealistically suggests that Syria was not really led by Hafiz al-Asad during the latter part of his life, by noting that the Syrian president by the 1980s "stood at the top of the Syrian governmental pyramid, keeping a firm hold on the reigns of the regime. Yet whether he actually ruled, or, rather, whether in practice he managed the affairs of the state he headed, is

doubtful” (p. 3), and “essentially he was non-functioning during the last decade of his life” (p. 11).

Zisser uncritically quotes (thereby suggesting that he implicitly agrees with) Israeli intelligence sources as claiming “repeatedly that the image of an active, energetic president was a façade, and that Bashar relaxed frequently by playing computer games and watching television. Former head of the Israeli Mossad Ephraim Halevi even described him as a ‘young man who suffers from mental problems that do affect his political as well as personal behaviour.’” Zisser adds that “even if his daily schedule was indeed crowded, Bashar did not differ in this respect from many other Arab leaders, including his late father albeit secluded from the public eye, or the late King Husayn or his son, King ‘Abdullah II” (p. 54).

In the *Conclusion* of the book Zisser notes in even stronger terms that “reports in the Western [he does not mention which Western sources] and Israeli press indicated that Bashar spent most of his time ... in ... pursuits unrelated to the management of the affairs of state” (p. 198). Elsewhere Zisser bluntly generalises that “the task of government in Arab countries is not necessarily to run the country’s affairs but to ease pressures on the president or the monarch and protect them from public criticism. This is why many rulers tend to have frequent reshuffles. It seems that Bashar is no exception” (p. 69). If such tendentious and stereotyping remarks about Arab practices of government were justified, one wonders what was the use of making such an effort in writing an extensive study on Bashar al-Asad’s first years in power.

Whereas Hafiz al-Asad is being contradictorily described as “revered by the Syrian people and respected abroad ... whose most definitive achievement was the establishment of a strong and stable regime – some would say a highly effective repressive regime” (pp. vii, 204), Bashar is described by contrast as a ruler who was not only not admired, but also “showed himself an inexperienced amateur in conducting Syrian foreign policy” (p. 126). Bashar is portrayed as “naïve, emotional, impulsive, lacking in maturity”, “unbaked dough”, “who lacked the killer instinct” (pp. 146, 151, 168, 200), etcetera. At the same time, however, Zisser maintains “that Bashar was perceived by wide sectors of the Syrian public, especially intellectuals, the business community and the younger generation, as someone who could bring about change and even a turnabout in the Syria reality” (p. 45).

Zisser’s Israeli tinted political points of view clearly transpire when he maintains that Bashar’s “pragmatic strategy toward Israel, including his recognition of the fact of its existence and possibly even of the historic necessity eventually to reach a political settlement with it, obscured several other components of his perception of Israel and the conflict with it, namely ... viewing it as an artificial and alien entity in the region, lacking historical roots. The territory on which Israel was established, Bashar claimed, was stolen from the original inhabitants of Palestine, who were dispossessed of their land and driven out of their homes” (p. 152). Here one gets the impression that Zisser, whose book was translated from Hebrew, forgot to adapt his English edition to a wider and more critical international audience. The fact that large parts of the Arab population of Palestine during the 1947-1949 war were expelled by the Israelis from their lands in operations, some of which would today be described as bearing the characteristics of “ethnic cleansing”, is not any longer really disputed in respected Israeli academic circles, as is illustrated by the studies of Benny Morris and others.

Dr. Zisser notes triumphantly that he clearly predicted that President Hafiz al-Asad had made up his mind to hand over the reins of leadership to Bashar, just as he had done before when his elder son Basil was still alive. Zisser claims that the head of Vice-President Khaddam's office conveyed a message to him that research he "had published earlier about the accelerated promotion of Basil in the Syrian leadership had been far-fetched" and that he "was repeating this mistake in the case of Bashar, for 'Khaddam is the successor'. [According to Zisser] Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi, as well, continued to present himself to foreigners as 'the number two man' in Syria". But a practical part of the Syrian political system was and is that for obvious reasons there is no real number two.

The well-known expert of Syrian and Lebanese history Elizabeth Picard is provokingly (and incorrectly) quoted by Zisser, as having "believed that 'the thought that Bashar might become president of Syria one day is foolish', which [Zisser continues polemically and somewhat pedantically] only shows the limitations of Western researchers and academicians who may have difficulty moving past their empathy for the object of their lifelong research" (pp. 29-30). Zisser refers to an "interview" in London in October 2005, i.e. more than five years after Bashar took over as president, which therefore cannot be correct. Worse still: when I checked with her, it turned out that Elizabeth Picard never has given Zisser anything like an "interview".

Some of the developments or events described by Zisser's sources should have been dealt with with great caution, or should at least have deserved some additional comments, instead of just quoting them. In some cases Zisser refers to "Western sources" or to "Syria watchers", without, however, identifying them. He also describes some crucial developments (pp. 31, 35) without providing any source. Zisser quotes the Lebanese News Agency as saying that president Hafiz al-Asad died "during a telephone conversation with the Lebanese president Emile Lahhud" (p. 39). But one would have expected here that such an important development would have been confirmed afterwards by at least other sources considered to be reliable.

Zisser notes that "the English transliteration of Arabic names and terminology follows the accepted academic style, with some simplification for the benefit of the lay reader" (p. x). His transliterations generally distinguish between 'ayn and hamza, which is, however, of no use to the lay reader. More important is that they contain so many mistakes that I cannot avoid mentioning some of them here. Partly, these mistakes seem to be a result of inaccurate editing or of using the spelling control consistently in the wrong way, thereby causing similar mistakes to occur repetitiously (such as "sl-Surriyya" twice on p. 217). Sometimes Arabic words in transcription appear correctly in the main text but incorrectly in the index, or the other way around. Even mistakes in English are apparently a result of the wrong spelling control being applied (such as "the Middle Each" on p. 58). I think Zisser's praise "for the devotion with which the manuscript has been prepared for publication" by I.B. Tauris (p. x), a publishing house usually applying high editorial standards, therefore seems unfortunately unjustified in this particular case. Various names or words are not only misspelled, but also incorrect, such as Daghram (for Dirgham), Mahyani (for Mahayini), 'Adw (for 'Udw), al-Muwassali (for al-Musilli, i.e. from Mosul, the double *lām* originating from the Turkish suffix -lı, indicating a geographic origin), Haytham al-Mani' (for al-Manna'), 'Izjat (for 'Izzat) Ibrahim al-Duri, the not existing name of Tah (for Taha), Firuds (for Firdus or Firdaws), etcetera.

The website www.shrc.org is not of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (p. 216, n. 49) but of the Syrian Human Rights Committee.

Finally, Zisser claims that president Hafiz al-Asad, in contrast to president Bashar, never visited some of the major population centres, such as the city of Aleppo, “during the entire span of his rule” (p. 32). But people in Syria still remember his visits to various provinces, including to Aleppo, having in mind the dozens of sheep that were sometimes slaughtered on the road to welcome him.

I started reading this book with great enthusiasm, but closer examination exposed it as a disappointment.

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