

SHELF LIFE

by **FREDERICK DEKNATEL**

IN 2003 ANDREW TABLER MET ASMA al-Assad, the young, glamorous wife of Syria's dictator, Bashar al-Assad. A black Honda whisked Tabler away from his apartment in Damascus to the hills above the city, and then to a secret location guarded by sweeping low branches, an iron gate and men cradling machine guns. He remembers the visit as being surprisingly casual. Nobody bothered to check his ID before he entered Asma's office. When he left, he almost called Syria's first lady, a former hedge-fund analyst and investment banker in London, by her first name. Then one remembers what he says her secretary had told him: "We know where you live, Mr. Tabler."

From 2001 to 2008 Tabler was the only Western journalist permanently based in Damascus, partly because of the rarest of things: a multiple-entry press visa. In *The Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle With Syria* (Lawrence Hill; \$16.95) is his account of that time, but it neglects to answer some obvious questions. Why was Tabler granted such access? What of his career change, from observer and consultant in Damascus—he worked for Asma as media adviser for a quasi NGO that she patronized and through which he founded Syria's first English-language magazine, *Syria Today*—to his present post at the hawkish Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank founded by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee? The narrative is a maze of opaque remarks, like this one about a colleague from Damascus: "While Leila didn't like the Washington Institute's position on Syria and was critical of my work, she understood that I was leaving Syria behind."

Tabler worked in Syria during the era of pledged reform, when the Assad regime privatized banks and businesses and courted

European and American diplomats, who had hoped the president's interest in liberalizing the economy might signal a break with Iran and be a harbinger of peace with Israel. It wasn't. Bashar proved to be his father's son. As he entertained dignitaries and cultivated an image of secular pragmatism, he, like Hafez, held out for peace with Israel on his own terms and armed Hezbollah.

Tabler writes of an "expectations gap" in Damascus between the level of diplomatic engagement Assad sought and the cool American response. In Washington there were hopes, never fulfilled, that Assad and the generals behind him—his father's clique—were sincere about domestic reform and regional détente. Today there is a chasm between Assad's speeches about infiltrators and armed gangs and the bloody reality of Syria's months-long uprising. Thousands of Syrians have been killed as Bashar's brother Maher



Entrance to the Souq al-Hamidiyeh in the Old City of Damascus, Syria

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leads his praetorian guard around the country, laying siege to pockets of protest. Tabler insists that harsh diplomacy and harsher sanctions can "teach Assad that Washington will judge him on his actions, not just his words to US officials behind closed doors."

This is wishful thinking. The uprisings in Homs and Hama are teaching Assad about judgment. The regime is scrambling, insisting that as long as Damascus and Aleppo are quiet—thanks to the secret police—it will survive. Tabler's paradox is that his years in Syria, where he saw the limits of America's reach, have landed him in Washington, promoting the power and influence of America over a country where it has so little.

AT THE END OF THE STRUGGLE FOR Egypt: *From Nasser to Tahrir Square* (Oxford; \$27.95), Steven Cook makes a surprising recommendation. "The United States should

greatly lower its expectations of what is possible in the post-Mubarak era and come to terms with the end of the strategic relationship." Cook, who has been visiting Egypt regularly since 1993, is a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and one can't help wondering which of his colleagues—perhaps Elliott Abrams, George W. Bush's Middle East architect?—would be appalled by this advice.

A year ago Egyptians didn't rebel only against Mubarak, Cook argues, but also "against a regime—a political order—that he led," and that he "inherited from Sadat who had inherited it from Nasser." The United States underwrote it, buying Egypt's strategic cooperation while keeping quiet about its brutal faults. "Mubarak was pivotal in creating a regional order that made it easier and less expensive for Washington to pursue its interests," like keeping oil flowing and protecting Israel and American hegemony. In

return, Mubarak and his generals received "approximately \$70 billion in economic and military aid over thirty years and the ostensible prestige of being a partner of the world's superpower."

US policy also ended up bankrolling corruption. In the 1990s, according to the *Washington Post*, a Cairo think tank funded by \$10 million in US aid was formed to champion privatization and free-market reforms, with heir-apparent Gamal Mubarak as its head. Gamal and his cronies are now in jail, accused of profiteering from their position: they traded Egyptian debt and sold state land and companies as if Egypt were their private portfolio. "The sale of Egypt's public assets had recouped just one-tenth of their true value over the 20 years since the [privatization] program began," the *Post* reported.

Cook suggests that to "salvage its position in Egypt," the Obama administration should say the right things about "democracy, tolerance, pluralism, accountability, and nonviolence—and then take a hands-off approach as Egyptians build a new political system on their own terms." Egypt has a parliamentary history, based on its 1923 Constitution, which a future government could resurrect, even if successive Parliaments wallowed under British colonialism before the Free Officers took power in 1952. The United States may not occupy Egypt as Britain once did, Cook writes, but it still "risks playing a malevolent role in the transition if it tries to interfere." ■

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