

the 2011 uprising, Assad said, "Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. . . . When there is divergence . . . you will have this vacuum that creates disturbances."⁴⁶

Both Assad and the traditional opposition proved tragically wrong in the face of a grassroots movement we now call the Arab Spring.

CHAPTER 5

THE UPRISING BEGINS

A huge sculpture of a food vendor's pushcart stands not far from the town center in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. The larger-than-life stone wheels and tilt of the carriage propel the sculpture forward as if it could move without human touch. The artist intentionally spray painted English graffiti at the base: *For Those Who Yearn to Be Free*. The sculpture commemorates the life of street vendor Mohammad Bouazizi, who immolated himself on December 17, 2010, initiating the Tunisian uprising and eventually the Arab Spring.

Bouazizi was protesting the confiscation of his goods and harassment by city officials. His self-sacrifice touched a chord. Workers, intellectuals, small-business people, and other ordinary people had been suffering for decades under the rule of the military dictatorship led by the pro-Western Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Bouazizi's immolation lit a fire that spread quickly. Within a matter of weeks, mass demonstrations forced Ben Ali from power.

When I visited Sidi Bouzid in 2012, the dictator was gone, but the struggle for economic and political justice continued. On the day of my visit, demonstrators at city hall demanded jobs, a key issue that sparked the original demonstrations. Residents said that although they enjoyed greater political freedoms, they continued to suffer from the crony capitalist economic system. "We're just struggling in the same situation," said protestor Alawi Tahrir. "I have a master's degree in English language, and I'm still unemployed for five years."¹ The demonstrators' chants merged with the muezzin's call to noon prayer in this hardscrabble, agricultural city 175 miles south of the capital, Tunis. Islam has deep roots here, and it's reflected in the politics. Conservative Islamists from the Ennahda Party emerged as the strongest single

political force in postuprising Tunisia. Ultra-right-wing Islamists had some popular support. They played a destructive role by blockading streets and assassinating two progressive political leaders.

Unlike other countries in the Middle East, however, Tunisia's leftist trade unions, women's rights groups, and other secular movements also developed a significant political base. They forced the adoption of a constitution that protects civil liberties and restricts the role of Islam in government. While the battle certainly continues, Tunisia has made the greatest strides in the region toward achieving the popular goals of the Arab Spring.

In early 2011, the Tunisian uprising inspired similar protests in Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and other Middle East countries. Conditions were ripe in Syria as well. Poverty and unemployment were on the rise, particularly among young people. President Bashar al-Assad had implemented neoliberal economic policies that privatized state-owned businesses for the benefit of a small elite while ordinary Syrians suffered. They lived under a dictatorial regime where criticism of the government meant jail and torture. Assad allowed no genuine opposition parties, functioning trade unions, or opposition media. Facebook and other social media were banned prior to February 2011. Assad lived in a political cocoon, however, absolutely convinced that he was immune from the Arab Spring. He believed his own public-relations propaganda that Syrians would never rebel against a pan-Arabist, anti-Israel, anti-imperialist fighter like himself.

Rarely has a world leader been proven so wrong so quickly.

The antigovernment demonstrations began in the southern city of Daraa in March 2011. Police had arrested several preteen school children for writing antiregime graffiti on walls of a school. As in the past, police beat and tortured the youths. But this time, the people of Daraa reacted angrily and publically. Over six hundred protestors confronted the local governor, demanding freedom for the injured children. Security forces attacked and killed two protestors.² Daraa is located in southern Syria near the Jordanian border. Local tribal clans remain

strong. Some residents had immigrated to wealthy gulf countries and become prosperous. Residents of Daraa weren't willing to accept the old ways. Word spread quickly via text messaging about the brutality. Syria had its Mohammad Bouazizi, and its Sidi Bouzid was Daraa.

By mid-March demonstrations broke out in Damascus and other parts of the country. The demonstrations were nonviolent and secular. In the northwestern city of Banyas, protesters tried to attract the generally pro-Assad Alawite religious minority by chanting, "Peaceful, peaceful—neither Sunni nor Alawite, we want national unity."³

The regime faced the biggest crisis in its history. Assad cracked down mercilessly on peaceful protestors. Police and soldiers opened fire with live ammunition. Security forces arrested and tortured anyone suspected of participating in the protests. Then, thinking it occupied a position of strength, the regime offered the occasional olive branch. In late March, Assad lifted the state-of-emergency law, which was declared in 1962 and implemented at the time of the first Baathist coup in 1963. The law had been used as an important repressive tool by successive governments. Assad also legalized the status of some 300,000 Kurds who had been stateless since the 1960s (see chapter 9).

On July 10, a number of prominent opposition figures from different religious and ethnic backgrounds tested the parameters of the new political openings by holding a conference in Damascus. They were allowed to raise criticisms of the regime, and the state TV network broadcast the conference live. On July 24, the Syrian parliament passed a law allowing additional opposition parties. Since the early 1970s, the National Progressive Front, a coalition of minor leftist parties, had been legalized as a sort of loyal opposition. The regime planned to open this door a bit wider, but the Syrian Constitution still contained a clause stating that the Baath Party was the leading party. So the new parties had little actual power.⁴

Steps that would have been hailed as tremendously progressive a few years prior had no impact in 2011. The main opposition groups rejected the weak reforms and continued to call for Assad's overthrow. In July, 400,000 people rallied in the central Syrian city of Hama after

security forces had withdrawn. They put forward a nonviolent message inviting participation by all faiths, and the demonstration had a strong presence of women.

In October 2011 I was able to report from Daraa. The government was in nominal control of the city, but antiregime sentiment remained strong. I tagged along with a group of Ukrainian dignitaries and journalists on a trip organized by the government. We drove out of Damascus at about 9:00 a.m. in a large convoy of buses and minivans, accompanied by a police car lettered *Protocol*. While ordinary cars were stopped at military checkpoints along the way, we sailed right through.

Outwardly, Daraa was calm. Its streets had few shoppers, but there were no outward signs of unrest. We met with Daraa governor Mohammed Khaled Hanos and the local attorney general, Tayseer al-Smadi.⁵ These government officials spun a well-developed narrative to explain events. They admitted that people in Daraa and elsewhere began with peaceful protests and legitimate grievances asking for democracy. But almost immediately, extremists seized control of the demonstrations, they claimed. Extremists began a campaign of shooting and violence against security forces.

These agitators were armed and paid by Saudi Arabia and the gulf state of Qatar, according to the officials. The demonstrators were politically and militarily backed by Israel, the United States, and Europe. As a result, over 1,200 police, army, and other security personnel had been killed by demonstrators. The government provided no statistics on the number of civilians killed.⁶

The regime's narrative contained some elements of truth. Syrian demonstrators never adopted a Gandhi-style campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience. When government forces fired live ammunition into crowds, the protestors hurled rocks. On March 20, less than one week into the protests, demonstrators in Daraa burned an office of the ruling Baath Party and the local courthouse. In Damascus I interviewed Mahmoud, a twenty-six-year-old activist in Daraa who asked that only his first name be used. As the repression continued for months, he told

me, "People in Daraa used Molotov [cocktails] and rifles. But it was a reaction to the government arresting and killing protestors."⁷

Mahmoud admitted that tribal groups, who are allowed to own personal weapons, also used them against the government after months of nonviolent marches and rallies. "Daraa is known for big tribal clans. When they use arms, it's to defend themselves. They use them when the government arrests people and invades people's houses. The big families of Daraa oppose the government and they use arms." But local people taking up arms in self-defense is a far cry from CIA/Israeli/Saudi-sponsored rebels attacking the Assad government. Officials clearly exaggerated the violence in an effort to discredit the opposition.

While there were sporadic armed incidents during the first eight months of the uprising, protestors predominantly used nonviolent tactics. They held marches and rallies and spread the word through text messages and sometimes with social media. They relayed developments on the ground to satellite TV stations such as *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya*.

The opposition movement grew as new organizations sprang into existence. The Local Coordinating Committees (LCC) developed spontaneously in many cities as the mostly young activists created grassroots groups unaffiliated with the traditional opposition. The activists included leftists, liberal secularists, and conservative Muslims. They developed an alliance similar to the coalition of secularists and Muslim activists in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

The LCC in Syria wanted no hierarchical structures. The movement ostensibly had no leaders, no common ideology, or even a short-term political program. But they all united on the need to overthrow Assad, hold free elections, and establish a parliamentary system with civil liberties. I had a chance to meet some secular LCC leaders in Damascus toward the end of 2011. I had taken a circuitous route through Damascus's old city to a clandestine apartment, as described in chapter 1.

After a long conversation, we took a break to drink tea. I looked around the apartment. The beds were unmade, the dishes unwashed, and dust balls were scattered around the room. It could belong to a

single guy in his twenties who hadn't done the housework in a while. I found out later it was an LCC safe house paid for by an upper-middle-class sympathizer.

I asked Ahmad Bakdouness how they continued to organize, given harsh government repression. Bakdouness is a civil-society activist who was later jailed and tortured by police. He told me that demonstrators gathered outside mosques on Fridays because that was one of the few places people could still congregate. They used code words over mobile phones to organize demonstrations. "We say, 'We are going to a party' or 'Come to the wedding,'" said Bakdouness. "People know there will be a demonstration on Friday. They know the mosques where people demonstrate. For demonstrations during the week, we know each other and call on mobiles."⁸

Protestors only occasionally used social networking sites because they were closely monitored by the government. They said theirs is not a Facebook revolution. They used Facebook and similar social networking sites only to alert the outside world that someone famous would be participating in a demonstration. I asked Bakdouness how people can demonstrate in the same location each week without being crushed by the security forces. "In the same area, there are a lot of roads. They can't block every road. For the big demonstrations, the government can't enter."

Protestors adopted innovative tactics to reach the public. One day, activists wrote the word "freedom" on five thousand ping-pong balls. They went to a hilltop in Damascus and dumped the balls on the heavily trafficked park below. Leen, another LCC leader at the safe house, chuckled as she explained that the security forces spent the rest of the day chasing their balls.

The heady, early days of the uprising saw Syrians reexamining many of their political values. But the society remained deeply conservative in cultural matters. Syrians continued to hold antihomosexual attitudes, even among many opposition activists. That didn't stop a few brave gays from joining the uprising, as I found out when I met Mahmoud Hassino.

Hassino knew he was gay at age twelve. He wasn't attracted to girls, but he was very interested in his male friends. Later, as a teenager growing up in Damascus, his mother figured out his sexual orientation and gave him what he later realized was good advice. "Don't admit your homosexuality," she cautioned. "You will have trouble finding work and socializing with people." Despite tight cultural restrictions, Hassino told me, he had no problems finding gay partners. "There are gay men everywhere," he said with a quick smile. "You just had to have good gaydar."

Hassino joined millions of other Syrians in the uprising. He marched in demonstrations and participated in underground meetings. Dozens of gay men and lesbians were killed by security forces during the uprising, but most Syrians were unaware of their sexual orientation. Hassino eventually fled to Turkey because of his antiregime activism. He later got word that his Damascus apartment had been destroyed in a government attack. But he continued to write about his homeland in an effort to shine light on its gay subculture and to support the opposition movement.

Homosexuality remains a criminal offense in Syria despite promises of reform by President Assad when he took office in 2000. In March and April 2010, the government arrested groups of gay men who were having parties at private houses in Damascus. Three of the men were arrested on drug charges. Others were kept in jail for three months "until their families and everyone in the neighborhood knew," said Hassino. After their release, "some had to flee Syria to other countries." Hassino said that while gay men undergo harassment, lesbians face even more difficulties. When the family of one lesbian friend found out about her sexual orientation, they "forced her to marry an older guy," recalled Hassino. "Now she's living like a maid, taking care of him and his children."

In recent years, gays organized in an attempt to change the law and educate their fellow citizens. In 2009 some two hundred gays organized a group called I'm Just Like You. "I'm gay and I have a right to my opinion," gays wrote in an appeal, as quoted by Agence France Presse.

"I belong to this society, and it owes me some respect. I'm gay—I don't come from another planet."¹⁰

While homosexuality remains illegal and gays must lead double lives in Syria, a 2011 UN Office for Human Rights report noted that other Middle East countries are far worse violators of gay rights. Four Middle East nations proscribe the death penalty for homosexual acts.¹¹ As a result, Hassino concedes, some gay men and lesbians still support Assad. They fear that if conservative Islamists come to power, they will face even more repression. Hassino wanted to reach out to gays who are pro-Assad or on the fence. He started an online, Arabic-language magazine, *Mawaleh*, which means "nuts"—a reference to the food, not a double entendre. The magazine attempts to reach lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered Syrians regardless of their political views. "We all want a secular Syria," says Hassino. And those who support Assad, he argues, "must have a backup plan" in case he falls.

But as the fighting intensified, the secular forces within the opposition were losing strength. And Hassino's views were very controversial, even among the secular opposition. Miral Bioredda, a secular leader of the LCC in Al Hasakah, a northeastern Syrian city, told me he personally views homosexuality as a private matter, "but Syrian society would say 'no way' if gays rose to claim their rights. Developing a civil society will take time."¹² Others are less tolerant. Interviewed in Turkey, Nasradeen Ahme, who considered himself part of the secular opposition, told me: "If I was in charge, I would enforce tougher laws against homosexuals. If someone said homosexuals should be stoned to death as in Iran and Saudi Arabia, I would not object."¹³

As extremist rebels seized control of some cities, persecution of gays intensified. Rebel leaders from Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, two groups affiliated with al-Qaeda at the time, made homosexuality punishable by lashing or even death. Some fifty gays were executed by those groups, according to Hassino.¹⁴ He had moved to the border city of Antakya, Turkey, but was forced to relocate to Istanbul after extremist Syrian rebels threatened to kidnap him. Hassino acknowledged that homosexuals face an intense challenge,

whoever wins Syria's civil war. "This is a bigger problem than the law now," he said. "Social traditions are influenced by the religious traditions. Most people reject homosexuality." Hassino argued that fighting against Assad and for the right to organize will benefit all Syrians and eventually help gays as well. "The intelligence services arrest people if they're discussing any kind of social or political change," he said. "Without freedom of speech, we can't address these issues."

People such as Hassino and the LCC leaders represented only one sector of the opposition in the early months of the uprising. A friend offered to introduce me to another kind of Assad opponent. He typified the shady characters who once supported the government and later joined the opposition. After a few hushed phone calls, we met in an outdoor Damascus café. We sat far away from other customers, and he positioned himself with his back to the wall.

He called himself "Bashar," a pseudonym adopted to mock Bashar al-Assad. His demeanor was half-dissident, half-thug. He represented the opportunist opposition, someone who didn't initially support the uprising, joined it when it seemed about to win, and might just return to the Assad camp if the wind changed. With a thick neck and bushy mustache, Bashar looked like a bodyguard. That's because he used to be one. He was vague about whom exactly he guarded, but he bragged of close ties to Syrian security agencies and the police.

To prove his opposition bona fides, Bashar opened his camera phone and showed me photos of him with a very famous exiled Syrian leader. Other photos showed him at Damascus demonstrations. "I'm an agitator," he told me proudly. When I pointed out the questionable practice of keeping a cell phone full of incriminating photos, he said, "I don't care."¹⁵

Beginning in the fall of 2011, he said, some opposition activists armed themselves with hunting pistols and rifles, which they use when police come to make house arrests. He denied that demonstrators shoot during demonstrations: a foolhardy act given the superior weaponry of the army and police. Some sectors of the opposition were now car-

rying out targeted assassinations of Mukhabarat (Military Intelligence Directorate) agents, informers, and government supporters, Bashir said during our interview in October 2011. Islamist forces in the city of Homs had set up roadblocks and created areas where the security forces dared not enter.

I obtained confirmation of the difficulties facing the Mukhabarat from an unexpected source. I visited a friend of a friend in Tartus, a city on Syria's western coast near Lebanon. One man turned out to be a member of the feared Mukhabarat. He was a staunch supporter of Assad but admitted that even eight months into the uprising, the security forces had lost control of some cities.

"We can only go to parts of Homs in large numbers," he told me. He asked to remain anonymous, fearing possible reprisal by the rebels. He told me the conservative Muslim rebel forces controlled the Sunni neighborhoods at night. They knew where police and secret police agents lived and weren't afraid to assassinate them. He had been based in Homs and admitted that the opposition was so well entrenched it might take a year for the government to prevail. That was a stark admission coming from a member of the security forces. Two years after our conversation, the rebels continued to control parts of Homs.

The shift away from nonviolent protest and toward armed struggle took place gradually. Peaceful protest became increasingly difficult. Security forces surrounded mosques on Friday afternoons to prevent marches. Any attempt to hold a rally was quickly and violently dispersed. Some in the opposition accused the regime of intentionally releasing Islamic extremists from jail in hopes they would take up a divisive, armed struggle.

In July 2011, defectors from Assad's army announced formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Both sides began to engage in targeted assassinations. On October 2, 2011, the government accused extremist members of the opposition of murdering Sariya Hassoun, son of Syria's grand mufti, the country's most important Sunni religious leader. A few days later on October 7, a government hit squad murdered Syrian Kurdish leader Mashaal Tammo.

In November, the FSA attacked the Harasta Air Force Intelligence Base near Damascus, the first such major battle. By December armed rebels bombed an important security complex in Kafr Soueah Square in Damascus, killing both soldiers and innocent civilians. As armed struggle quickly replaced mass demonstrations, political leadership of the uprising also changed. Political Islam came to the fore. The uprising was becoming a civil war.

In current discourse in the United States, Islam is often equated with extremism and terrorism. "Not all Muslims are terrorists," goes the often-repeated maxim, "but all terrorists are Muslims."¹⁷ My, how we show our ignorance. Terrorist tactics have a long history that has nothing to do with Islam. The first modern-day suicide bomber detonated a hand grenade to kill the Russian czar in 1881. The assassin was Christian. The first car bomb was exploded by extremist Zionists fighting the British occupation of Palestine before 1948. The same group, known as *Lechi* or the Stern Gang, also had the distinction of mailing the first letter bombs in an attempt to kill members of the British cabinet.¹⁸ The list goes on. But you get the idea.

Islam is a religion of peace, as is Christianity, Judaism, and all the religions I know of. Some extremists in the United States have murdered abortion doctors or blown up a federal building in the name of Christianity, but we know their actions are anti-Christian. And so it is with political Islam. Opportunist leaders try to seize power quoting passages from the Koran, but their actions are anti-Islamic. To analyze Islamic extremists, we must focus on their politics, not their religious rhetoric. So I describe them using political terms such as *progressive*, *conservative*, and *ultra-right-wing*. I stay away from the term *moderate*, which in translation usually means "acceptable to the United States."

For many years, the Muslim Brotherhood seemed to be the most influential opposition group in Syria. But during the first weeks of the uprising, the brotherhood was caught with its pants down. Its leaders had been jailed or driven into exile during the harsh government repression of the 1980s. The brotherhood was out of touch with the younger

generation, whose members spearheaded the events in early 2011. It initially opposed the uprising as being too provocative and likely to fail.

“At the start of the uprising, the brotherhood appeared hesitant to become involved in the conflict,” wrote Aron Lund in a publication by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “This probably reflected doubts about the uprising’s chances of success, an awareness of the brotherhood’s own weakness inside Syria, and a deliberate choice to maintain a low profile while the regime was trying to portray the revolution as led by Islamists.”¹⁹

The brotherhood had transformed itself politically in the 1990s in an effort to reverse its isolation inside Syria and to gain international legitimacy. It wanted to show that it wasn’t a terrorist group—particularly after the events of September 11, 2001. It called for Syria to be ruled as a Muslim nation under a modern form of Shariah (Islamic) law but emphasized the need for elections, human rights, and pluralism.²⁰ Its 2004 program rejected a strategy of armed struggle and called for peaceful political change.

The group’s leader at the time, Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, cultivated a modernist image. For example, he disagreed politically with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood when it declared that neither a woman nor a Coptic Christian could become president of Egypt. And he rejected the idea of forming a religious council to determine if secular laws adhered to Shariah. At the same time, the brotherhood maintained conservative cultural views on alcohol, women’s rights, and popular entertainment. As Arab nationalists, its leaders refused to recognize the rights of Kurds or Assyrians, two minorities with their own particular demands.

The brotherhood leaders hoped to return to Syria as a tolerated opposition group, which made them initially reluctant to endorse the uprising. As the rebellion gathered steam and appeared that it could topple Assad, however, the brotherhood shifted course. In March 2011, it published the Ten Point Pledge and Charter aimed at showing Syrians and the Western powers that it could govern Syria. It mentioned Islam only in the preamble as being a guide. It called for an

elected civil state, a pluralist political system, and no discrimination based on religion. Mohammad Farouk Tayfour, a brotherhood deputy, said, “The brotherhood will not monopolize power in the political arena and in managing the coming period.”²¹

Brotherhood leaders had cultivated extensive ties internationally, particularly with the Islamist government of Turkey. Those leaders became major players in the formation of the Syrian National Council based in Istanbul. The SNC, which had the backing of the United States and its allies, was supposed to be a civilian coalition representing the entire opposition. As the Assad regime continued its repression and other groups took up armed struggle, the brotherhood created an armed militia, the Commission of the Revolution’s Shields, in May 2012. But they failed to gain traction inside the country.

Omar Mushaweh, a brotherhood leader living in Istanbul, told me that his group favored a moderate version of Shariah law. He said the new Syria would model itself on modern Turkey, which is governed by a parliamentary system and respects different religions. Minority and women’s rights would be protected, he argued. “We will not force women to wear the *hijab* [head covering],” he said. “It will be by choice.”²²

Some secular Syrians don’t trust the brotherhood’s rhetoric, however. Miral Bioredda, the LCC leader we met earlier, told me that the “Islamists say they want a democratic country, but I don’t believe them.”²³ But the ex-bodyguard calling himself Bashar typified the views of many when he acknowledged that the Muslim Brotherhood no longer called for a conservative, Islamic state as they did during the 1980s. “They favor a civic [nonreligious] state,” he told me. “People won’t accept their old, extremist ideology.”²⁴ The brotherhood continued to be a significant player in the Syrian opposition. Meanwhile, conditions were changing rapidly inside Syria as people took up arms. Let’s take a look at some of the major armed groups.

In July 2011, seven Syrian army defectors publically announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In the following months, the FSA tried to bring under its wing the disparate militias springing up

throughout the country. The FSA became the armed wing of the SNC and its successor group, the National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

The United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar backed the FSA. The State Department officially allocated \$15 million to provide nonlethal aid, such as medical supplies and communications equipment, although the actual figure was much higher (see chapter 11). The “nonlethal” category continued to expand until it included pickup trucks, night-vision goggles, and flak vests—a fact exposed when an FSA depot was looted in December 2013.²⁵

The FSA had some initial successes. Affiliated militias captured some towns in the northeast, near the Turkish border. They also took control of towns in central Syria around Homs and Aleppo. But it was difficult to assess the actual popular support for the FSA because local militias frequently changed affiliation. We know for sure that ultra-conservative groups grew in strength as the FSA declined.

By the spring of 2012, the FSA faced a crisis. Rebels in the field complained that they lacked effective weapons, such as shoulder-fired missiles capable of bringing down aircraft. The CIA refused to provide such weapons, fearing they would fall into the hands of extremist groups. The CIA and Turkish authorities established a control room in Istanbul to coordinate military activities and funnel arms to favored groups. By controlling the arms flow, the United States hoped to direct the rebellion politically and lessen the influence of the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. The CIA still didn't provide Stinger missiles but did improve the quality of assault rifles, sniper rifles, RPGs, and ammo (see chapter 11).

In December 2012 the Free Syrian Army announced the formation of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), which would try to coordinate all the militias in Syria. It was led by Brigadier General Salim Idris. Idris's plain features and receding hairline make him look more like a professor than a general. That's because he's both. His father was a farmer when Idris was born in 1958 in Mubarakiyah, south of Homs. Idris entered the Syrian army, was sent to study in East Germany, and

returned with a PhD to become a professor at the Academy of Military Engineering in Aleppo. He taught there for twenty years and became dean. Idris defected to the rebels in July 2012.

In many ways, Idris fit the profile of a pro-United States strongman who could eventually rule Syria. He was a military man who promised free elections, opposed extremist rebels, and remained vague about what kind of government would replace Assad. He courted some powerful American friends. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) sneaked across the Lebanese border into rebel-held Syria and met with Idris. “General Idris and his fighters share many of our interests and values,” the senator said later in a statement.²⁶ Critics disparaged Idris's fighting skills, noting that he showed more prowess meeting with foreign donors than he displayed on the battlefields of Syria.²⁷ As head of the SMC, Idris immediately faced problems.

The CIA and Turkey wanted to focus training on defecting Assad's soldiers. Conservative Islamists considered the defectors traitors if they worked with the CIA. The SMC, which was supposed to be a general command, failed to incorporate the other major armed groups. The SMC became just one more fighting group. “Every time they set up a council to oversee the war effort, it turns into a militia,” wrote one rebel in Deir Ezzor.²⁸

Another group, Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), formed from the September 2013 merger of dozens of smaller militias, mostly in the Damascus area. It was led by Zahran Alloush, son of Sheikh Abdullah Mohammed Alloush, a well-known Saudi-based religious scholar. The Assad regime released the younger Alloush from jail at the beginning of the uprising, along with other ultraconservative political prisoners. Al-Islam received funding from Saudi Arabia.²⁹

Leaders of al-Islam claimed to be carrying out the principles of Islam. Military decisions are made by a *shura* (council) consisting of Shariah law specialists, military officers, and Alloush.³⁰ Al-Islam is one of the extremist groups claiming that Syria is being overrun by Iran and Shia Muslims. In a YouTube video, Alloush said, “The jihad-

ists will wash the filth of the *rafida* [a slur used to describe Shia] from Greater Syria, they will wash it forever, if Allah wills it."³¹ Al-Islam refused to negotiate with the Assad regime, a stand consistent with other ultraconservative groups. Al-Islam flies the black flag of jihad rather than the Syrian flag.³² At the end of 2013, al-Islam helped form the Islamic Front.

Al-Islam and al-Nusra participated in a massacre of dozens of civilians in Adra, an industrial city just outside Damascus. In December 2013, both groups rounded up Alawites, Druze, and other minorities to execute them with pistol shots and beheadings, claiming they were Assad supporters. "Zahran Alloush has committed a massacre," one antiregime activist told Reuters.³³

Ahrar al-Sham (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant) was one of the largest militias in Syria. In this context, *Levant* refers to Syria and Lebanon. Founded in 2011 by ultraconservative former political prisoners, it operated mainly in the Idlib Governate (province) in northwestern Syria next to the Turkish border. It also had fighters in the cities of Hama and Aleppo. Al-Sham is led by Hassan Aboud. Another leader, Abu Khalid al-Suri, admitted to being a longtime member of al-Qaeda.

Al-Sham sought to overthrow the Assad regime and establish a Sunni Islamic state. It differed from some of the other ultraconservatives by acknowledging that Syrians weren't currently willing to accept such a state. So al-Sham urged a go-slow approach. It initially cooperated with the SMC but later broke with General Idris and the US-backed militias.

As an indication of how complicated on-the-ground alliances became, some wealthy members of the Muslim Brotherhood funded al-Sham. That helped create a link between the two groups. But al-Sham also received funding from ultra-right-wing religious leaders in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. By 2012 al-Sham broke with the brotherhood politically and ideologically.³⁴

In November 2013, al-Sham joined with other conservative groups

to form the Islamic Front, which opposed both the SMC/FSA and the al-Qaeda-affiliated groups al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. The Islamic Front charter rejected a representative parliamentary system, saying only "God is sovereign." The charter proclaimed that secularism is "contradictory to Islam."³⁵ By early 2014 the front emerged as one of the strongest rebel alliances and may have caused the Obama administration to recalculate its strategy in Syria (see next chapter).

Another rebel group, Jabhat al-Nusra (The Support Front for the People of the Levant), was initially funded and armed by an al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, although that was kept secret at the time. The Islamic State of Iraq, also known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, helped form al-Nusra in an effort to expand its influence into Syria. But al-Qaeda operates more like a franchise system than a centrally controlled group, and as we'll see below, even al-Qaeda's top leader can't control the franchises.

Al-Nusra is led by Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, who had fought against both the United States and the Nouri al-Maliki government in Iraq. Rather than support a parliamentary system, al-Nusra advocated a religious regime that would implement a harsh interpretation of Shariah. Al-Nusra "has a plan to consult Muslim scholars to establish the rule of Islamic law," Jolani told the *New York Times*. "We want the Islamic Shariah to prevail."³⁶ An al-Nusra spokesperson was even more explicit during an interview with CNN: "In the period after the regime falls, our main goal is to create an Islamic state that is ruled by the Koran," he said. "It can have civilian institutions, but not democracy."³⁷

In December 2012, the US State Department put al-Nusra on its list of terrorist organizations because of its ties to al-Qaeda. Other rebel groups, including those backed by the United States, strongly objected, arguing that al-Nusra played an important military role in the fight against the regime. The SMC-affiliated militias continued to cooperate with al-Nusra in the field.

But within less than a year, rebel criticisms of al-Nusra began to

surface publically. In May of 2013, Ahrar al-Sham issued a statement, posted on its webpage, criticizing al-Nusra for sectarianism and weakening the rebel cause by openly affiliating with al-Qaeda. Al-Sham said al-Nusra was going too fast toward creating an Islamic state and lacked the legitimacy to provide Islamic rule. The statement "is written in the tone of honest advise for an ally who has committed a damaging mistake," according to Syria expert Aron Lund.³⁸ Within a few months, al-Sham broke with al-Nusra altogether.

By far the most extreme of the major Islamist groups is the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), sometimes translated as Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant (known as *Da'aash* in Arabic). It's headed by an Iraqi rebel named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and was initially affiliated with al-Qaeda. The group began in 2007 in Iraq as part of the ultra-right-wing movement opposed to the United States occupation of Iraq but also calling for an Islamic state. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (ISI), as it was then known, was largely defeated during the US-Iraqi "surge" in 2007 and 2008. ISI had alienated itself from fellow Sunnis by killing and torturing other anti-US rebels with whom it disagreed. The US State Department labeled Baghdadi a "Global Terrorist" in 2011 and offered \$10 million for his capture.

After the US Army withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the Maliki government in Baghdad alienated many Sunni groups by trying to monopolize power. ISI became reinvigorated. When the Syrian uprising turned toward armed struggle in 2012, ISI set up shop on both sides of the porous Iraq-Syria border and changed its name to ISIS.

ISIS had some military successes against the Syrian army. Using fighters and weapons smuggled from Iraq, it was able to capture several towns. It played an important role in overrunning the Mennagh military airport outside Aleppo in August 2013 after a nine-month siege. ISIS received financing from wealthy gulf donors; from businessmen in Anbar, Iraq; from border tolls; and by "taxing" Syrians in areas under its control. ISIS provided protection to Christians, for example, provided they paid money to ISIS leaders.

In April 2013 Baghdadi formally announced the existence of ISIS

and claimed that he had merged al-Nusra and ISIS, which would have created one of the largest political-military groups in Syria. Both ISIS and al-Nusra called for a transnational Islamic state governed by a strict interpretation of Shariah law. Both have reputations for opposing criminality and corruption, unlike some of the SMC brigades. ISIS tried to win hearts and minds by, for example, establishing bakeries and selling bread at below black-market prices.

But al-Nusra criticized ISIS's sectarianism and its desire to dominate the entire movement. ISIS saw itself as an established state on the way to forming a united Muslim caliphate in Syria and Iraq, not just one rebel group among many. Al-Nusra took a slower approach, realizing that it had to build support over time to achieve the same goals. Baghdadi's announcement of the proposed ISIS-al-Nusra merger reflected the arrogance and sectarianism of ISIS. "It is time to announce to the Levantine people and the whole world that Jabhat al-Nusra is merely an extension and part of the Islamic State of Iraq," Baghdadi said.³⁹

Rifts appeared immediately as al-Nusra continued to use its own name and fight under its own banner. Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri sided with al-Nusra and criticized ISIS. By the end of the year, the proposed merger had fallen apart as al-Nusra and other rebels took up arms against ISIS. In February 2014, Zawahri formalized the split by cutting ties completely with ISIS.⁴⁰

Both al-Nusra and ISIS attracted a large number of foreign fighters, but ISIS has the reputation for being almost exclusively composed of foreigners. While the leaders and special forces are largely foreign, ISIS foot soldiers are mostly Syrian. Nevertheless, ISIS appeared to be fighting fellow rebels more than the Assad regime. In various northern and central cities, as well as in Aleppo, ISIS seized the headquarters of other rebel groups. It detained, tortured, and murdered some of the leaders.

Meanwhile, ISIS stepped up activity in Iraq. It took advantage of the increased unpopularity of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and seized the city of Fallujah. In June 2014, ISIS, along with Sunni allies, took over the city of Mosul and several crossing points near the Syrian and Jordanian borders. ISIS changed its name yet again, this

time to the Islamic State (IS), and declared the existence of an Islamic caliphate that stretched from Syria to Iraq. The IS continued its sectarian attacks on other rebels in Syria, insisting that they join IS as the only legitimate revolutionary group. Syria's internecine fighting and extreme right-wing ideology was hurting the rebel cause. But nothing would impact the rebel movement like the chemical-weapons controversy, as we'll see in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

CHEMICAL WEAPONS, MILITARY OFFENSIVES, AND STALEMATE

The videos shocked the world. Hundreds of bodies lay on the floor of makeshift morgues in and around the town of Al Ghouta on the southeastern outskirts of Damascus. Early in the morning of August 21, 2013, sarin gas killed hundreds of men, women, and children. Survivors reported seeing rockets hitting the ground and then spewing out a strange, green mist. Victims suffered horrible deaths, going into spasms and gasping for air. The videos, produced by the rebels, blamed the Syrian army.

The world reacted with anger and indignation. The Obama administration strongly condemned the Assad regime and over the next few weeks prepared to bomb Syria in retaliation. The Syrians had crossed the "red line" created by the administration on the use of weapons of mass destruction. The rebels hoped the American bombing raids would destroy Assad's air force and lead to an opposition victory.¹

But not everyone accepted the administration's claims. The Assad regime argued that the rebels, not the government, had fired the chemical weapons in order to provoke a US assault on Damascus. UN weapons inspectors eventually issued two reports on the use of chemical weapons. Investigative reporters cast doubts on some of the Obama administration's claims. The controversy deepened over time.

So the question remained: Who used chemical weapons and why? First, the official US government version.

On August 30, the White House issued a "government assessment" about the Al Ghouta attack. It stated that the sarin gas killed

temporary respite from a devilish leader but presented the possibility of ultra-right-wing Islamists gaining influence. They continue to fear democratic reforms in the Middle East. "We are a minority in the region," explained history professor Zisser. "Minorities always prefer a strong authoritarian regime rather than a popular regime backed by an unreliable majority."⁴⁹

Palestinians said such a view dooms Israel to isolation and paranoia. "The Israelis are afraid of Arab democracy," said political leader Barghouti. "Israel is shortsighted because democracy will come to the Arab world."⁵⁰

This argument reminded me a lot of the discussion I had with Rabbi Zeldin in 1967. Back then, Israel had to ally with dictators such as the Shah of Iran and leaders of apartheid South Africa because if the masses took over in those countries, they would oppose Israeli policies. Memo to Israeli leaders: maybe Israeli policy is the problem, not the people of the world.

CHAPTER 11

UNITED STATES, RUSSIA, AND OUTSIDE POWERS

I got lost on my way to the State Department. I showed up at the main headquarters, a massive, fortresslike building taking up several city blocks in downtown Washington, DC. But guards at the building had never heard of who I was supposed to meet. Turns out I was at the wrong place. My meeting was in an annex across the street and down the block.

A young woman employee in this section had been after me for months to talk with her colleagues about what was wrong with US policy in Syria. I was openly skeptical about any impact my definitely outside-the-box views might have. But she was very insistent. I finally agreed but only if I could also get a State Department interview to use in my articles and in this book. We struck the deal. I put on my nicest sport coat and conservative tie, got on the metro, and headed to Foggy Bottom.

At the time of our interview, in April 2012, the State Department was officially supporting the nonviolent resistance in Syria led by the Syrian National Council (SNC). The State Department wanted the American people to believe that the SNC represented the major Syrian opposition groups. Its leader, Radwan Ziadeh, had lived in the United States, spoke fluent English, and promised democracy and pluralism for the new Syria.

I sat down with an official State Department spokesperson, who, under Washington rules, wouldn't allow his name to be used. When asked which group in the SNC actually provided a democratic alternative to Assad, he paused for a full fifteen seconds. "We continue to encourage and cajole them to lay out a vision. It's a work in progress."¹

So even after working with internal and external opposition groups for over a year, US plans weren't going so well.

Another State Department source, we'll call her "Kathy," explained the US conundrum. She didn't want her name used, fearing retaliation for her critical views. She said the Obama administration had provided \$100 million for salaries and equipment to the SNC as of April 2012. "But the SNC is faction-ridden," she told me. We're trying to find a horse we can ride but we're not having much luck."²

The official spokesperson admitted that Syria provided unique problems for the United States. Syria has a Sunni majority but also many minority groups. He insisted that the SNC was inclusive of all of these groups. He admitted, however, that they had little in common beyond favoring the downfall of Assad. "Once the common enemy is removed, that's when the divisions occur." He added, "We do understand this is a long haul."³ However, the Obama administration had no idea how long the "long haul" would be.

In practice, the SNC was never able to gather broad support within Syria. By October 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared the SNC a failure. The United States finally acknowledged that the SNC didn't represent the struggle inside Syria and lacked participation by minority groups.⁴ In November, the SNC was replaced by a new coalition, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. That coalition also failed to develop significant support inside Syria, while conservative and ultraconservative Islamists continued to grow (see chapters 5–6).

Meanwhile, the Obama administration was pursuing a secret, military track. The CIA began overseeing arms shipments to the Free Syrian Army no later than June 2012 when it leaked the story to the *New York Times*. The CIA began directly arming and training rebels in early 2013 (see chapter 5).

Proclaiming support for nonviolent resistance while arming rebels was not seen as a contradiction, according to State Department critic Kathy. She said State was populated with "humanitarian intervention-

ists," people who favor one or another form of military intervention by claiming it will, in the end, protect civilians. "But we never discuss the legality of such attacks, let alone the morality," she told me. Controversial policies are sent to the legal department for review. "They'll always find a way to justify whatever policy is decided."⁵

State Department officials insisted that Syrians would benefit from US policy in the long run. The spokesperson acknowledged that ordinary Syrians were hurt by American economic sanctions, which had caused a massive drop in their standard of living. But, as if admonishing naughty children, the spokesperson told me Uncle Sam would make it up to them. "Once the behavior changes, once we have the Assad regime step down, we will make good on making sure this is an environment where Americans can do business."⁶ There's an interesting logic here. He assumed that the solution for economic collapse is American business investment. What's good for American business, apparently, is good for the Syrian people.

Similarly, the State Department saw no contradiction between criticizing Assad's human-rights record and supporting pro-US regimes elsewhere in the region also committing abuse, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The State Department simply assumed that US allies can and will change while enemies will not. The spokesperson explained that allies may abuse human rights, "but we work with them."

Peter van Buren, a twenty-four-year veteran foreign-service officer said the State Department excelled at such "clever use of words." Van Buren wrote a blog critical of US foreign policy that brought down the wrath of State Department officials. He retired in 2012. Word games about human rights "only carry weight here in the United States," he told me. "In the real world, none of these words mean anything. If you're in Saudi Arabia and you speak out against the government, you're going down. You'll not be found again. If you're in Syria and do the same thing, you'll be a freedom fighter as you go down."⁷

I hopped in a taxi to visit a former diplomat now living in Bethesda, Maryland, an upper-middle-class enclave bordering DC. Henry Precht

was a career foreign-service officer, deputy ambassador to Egypt, and officer in charge of the Iran desk in Washington in the 1970s. The desk officer is the main State Department official following day-to-day activities in any given country.

Precht helped deflate a few popular myths about how US foreign policy is made. He told me that the much-ballyhooed secret intelligence that the public is not allowed to see was, in fact, not terribly insightful or useful. "If you read the *New York Times* and had some familiarity with how the government works, you'd be as well-informed as if you sat on the desk and read the classified cables," he told me.⁸ In general the country desks, including the Syria desk, don't have better sources than those of a good journalist. On occasion, he said, "there were CIA reports that did an outstanding job," providing unique sources and analysis.

I asked Precht a question frequently asked of me in my Mideast travels: What would Americans think if Syria was training and arming dissident groups in the US? Does the State Department ever hold itself to the same standards demanded of others? "Certainly not," replied Precht. "We set the standards for the [people of the] world, and they better get in step," he said with an ironic smile. "If they don't, they'll be damned in our human-rights report." The State Department issues an annual human-rights report that inevitably finds the most severe abuse is perpetrated by countries considered hostile to the United States.

Precht did have some positive comments about Foggy Bottom. He said there are many dedicated foreign-service officers. Policy makers listen to advice from these professionals, he said. They don't just cherry-pick intelligence to bolster a preconceived policy. "If you have a good case, it's welcome." That doesn't apply during crises, however. Voicing contrary views during a run-up to war, for example, "might mean the end of your tenure. I had two kids to educate; I wasn't going to take that risk."

When I first became a student activist in the 1960s I discussed a similar issue with my dad. He urged me to get an education, join the government, and make changes from within. I argued that only massive pressure from the streets would change US foreign policy; individuals

only get swallowed in the morass. My meanderings around Washington over the years confirmed my view from the 1960s. Very intelligent people wrote highly sophisticated analyses that often got ignored at the highest levels when pertaining to critical issues such as war and peace. US foreign policy is made by a political, military, and economic elite who care little about the grunts in a State Department annex, as my friend Kathy eventually found out. She quit the State Department and now resides in academia, where she can join those bringing pressure from the street.

The State Department, the CIA, and other government agencies claimed that the United States must be involved in Syria to protect American national interests. But what exactly are those interests, and do they benefit ordinary Americans? US Middle East policy relies on the bedrock principle that the United States is different from other powers. Russia and China are resource-greedy giants willing to support dictators when it's to their commercial advantage. Even close allies Britain and France have been known to advance their business interests at the expense of human rights. But the United States is exceptional because it operates out of concern for humanity and promotion of democracy. This notion of American exceptionalism was well-articulated by Obama in his 2013 speech to the United Nations. "Some may disagree, but I believe that America is exceptional—in part because we have shown a willingness through the sacrifice of blood and treasure to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all."⁹

That would come as a great surprise to the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt, and Syria—to name a few recent examples. But by claiming that America protects the interests of all countries, American exceptionalism disguises the US ruling elite's real motives. The United States has considered the Middle East critical since the first oil fields began pumping in Iraq in 1927. US oil companies were given 23.75 percent ownership of the oil consortium that controlled the fields, part of the imperialist division of the region after World War I (see chapter 3). After World War II, the United States became the dominant power in the region. Its

oil companies controlled vast wealth either directly or through joint agreements with local elites. The Persian Gulf region—which includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates—is responsible for some 30 percent of the world's oil production and 55 percent of its reserves.¹⁰ Protecting those oil supplies—and the profits they generate—has become a vital part of the American national interest.

Of course, US leaders don't mention the profit motive. They always argue that the United States is protecting the region from outsiders who are intent on disrupting the world's oil supplies. For example, Obama said, referring to the Middle East, "Although America is steadily reducing our own dependence on imported oil, the world still depends on the region's energy supply, and a severe disruption could destabilize the entire global economy."¹¹

But who exactly can promote stability? Well, we certainly can't depend on oil companies owned by Russian, Chinese, or other suspicious countries. So we have to rely on companies owned by the United States and its close allies. Halliburton and Schlumberger must be able to drill for the oil and build the pipelines. Chevron/Texaco, Exxon/Mobil, BP, and other Western oil companies are the only reliable businesses to pump or distribute the oil. And while these patriotic companies are protecting the national interest, one cannot deny them a profit, can one?

Lest you think I'm just some incurable radical, an oil-industry-hating journalist, look at some of the US government documents leaked by Edward Snowden. The National Security Administration (NSA) spied on foreign leaders such as Brazil's president Dilma Rousseff and on the state-owned oil company Petrobras. Most of the NSA's spying on foreign leaders had nothing to do with suspected terrorism but focused on finding commercial advantage for US corporations. The NSA collected inside information about upcoming deals, trade negotiations, and new technologies.¹² Done by anyone else, it would be called industrial espionage.¹³ Done by the NSA, it's protecting our national interests.

Syria has no strategic minerals and produces relatively little oil. It has no important seaports or military bases. But it has something any

real-estate agent would envy: location. Syria borders Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan. Iran flies arms into Damascus, which are then transported over land to Hezbollah in Lebanon. So whoever holds power in Syria will have significant, long-term impact on the region.

Syria's location also puts it in jeopardy. Syria fought two wars with Israel and has continued a cold war with that country ever since. It became Iran's only Arab ally and a key supporter of Hezbollah. Israel and the United States had tried over the years to break Syria away from Iran. Had they been able to do so, Assad's other faults would have been forgiven. But Syria's continued alliance with Iran became one of the main justifications of Western attempts to overthrow Assad. Tom Donilon, President Obama's national-security adviser, said in 2011 that the "end of the Assad regime would constitute Iran's greatest setback in the region yet—a strategic blow that will further shift the balance of power in the region against Iran."¹⁴

Syria's location also came into play with plans to build a new natural-gas pipeline. Qatar wanted to construct a pipeline from its gas fields, through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and ultimately to Turkey. It would have provided a new source of energy for Europe and potentially competed with Russia's gas exports. Assad refused to sign the deal in 2009, and instead in 2012, inked an agreement with Iran for a different pipeline.¹⁵ It would cost \$10 billion and carry Iranian gas through Iraq, Syria, and possibly Lebanon.¹⁶ Although the civil war has made construction impossible, the Obama administration and its Middle Eastern allies were not pleased that Iran would have a potentially new and lucrative source of income.¹⁷

US leaders had plenty of reasons to get rid of Assad, given his alliance with Iran and hostility to US corporate interests. But when the uprising started, the Obama administration denounced Assad's repression but did little else. Like the Israelis, US leaders preferred the devil they knew. The United States feared militant Islamists would seize power and pose an even greater danger than Assad. After all, in the name of Islam, militants had tried to shoot up the US embassy in Damascus in September 2006.¹⁸

But as the uprising continued for months, the administration calculated that Assad would be overthrown soon or at least significantly weakened. As with Libya, the United States opportunistically shifted strategy and threw its support to the opposition. In August 2011 Obama made it official by famously declaring, "The time has come for President Assad to step aside."¹⁹ The administration debated whether to create a no-fly zone in which the US Air Force would guarantee protection to civilians in an area near the Turkish border. Some exiled Syrians favored such outside military intervention. But most opposed it, according to the leaders I met. I interviewed Ahmad Bakdouness, the civil-society activist we met in chapter 1. Referring to exiled leaders, he told me, "He who has not suffered cannot speak. They can say whatever they want, but not many people agree with them. I oppose the Libyan model. Even with a no-fly zone, we would still be weak."²⁰

Leen, another civil-society activist we met previously, admitted that some rebels were so desperate that they favored foreign military intervention. But she and her friends had closely watched Western interference in Libya and Iraq. "Libya will have a new dictator," she said. "We don't want another dictator with American backing."²¹ But the opinions of civil-society activists mattered little in Washington's corridors of power.

The Washington debate on Syria revolved around tactics, not goals. Everyone agreed the United States should help overthrow Assad and install a pro-US regime in Damascus. They just couldn't agree on how to do it. Hawks argued that Obama was weak and indecisive. He should have armed moderate rebels sooner and set up a no-fly zone. Doves argued that Obama's policies made sense given difficult conditions on the ground. The administration was arming moderate rebels and had forced Assad to dismantle his chemical weapons.

Some Americans believe that the military industrial complex drags us into war. Under this theory, arms manufacturers consort with generals to start wars and make profits. The military are high-flying hawks advocating war while the State Department diplomats coo for peace like doves. In reality, the military is often the most cautious. The Pentagon flatly opposed establishing a no-fly zone or any other ongoing military

presence in Syria. General Martin E. Dempsey, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said creating an effective no-fly zone would require as many as seventy thousand American troops because of Syria's "sophisticated anti-aircraft system." He argued that such massive deployment was needed to permanently ground Syria's air force and to prevent retaliatory attacks on US forces. The generals understood that bombing Syria, short of a full-scale invasion, would have limited impact without reliable US allies on the ground. Dempsey realized the United States had no such support. "The side we choose must be ready to promote their interest and ours when the balance shifts in their favor," he said. "Today they are not."²²

The military's reluctance to bomb Syria stemmed from its experience during the Vietnam War. The United States had overwhelming military superiority in Indochina but lost the war because the US Army had no reliable allies on the ground and had lost support at home. The US Army had tried to create a South Vietnamese military force capable of fighting the enemy, but it quickly fell apart as US troops withdrew toward the end of the war. The United States managed to repeat the mistake in Afghanistan and Iraq. Of course the military is prepared to go to war; its leaders just want to make sure that strong Syrian allies "promote" American interests, as General Dempsey so aptly said.

The State Department and the CIA advocated a different set of tactics. They argued for "limited" military action very early in the war. In their view, arming rebels and/or creating a no-fly zone could win the war without significant US casualties or cost. The civilians at State are always enamored of quickie military solutions that never quite work out. CIA director David Patraeus and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton favored increased training of rebel militias. Clinton said the United States should get "skin in the game."²³

Obama was cautious about the plan, given the disastrous Libyan intervention. He was well aware of "mission creep," whereby limited military action expands and the United States is drawn deeper into the struggle to avoid losing. But by the end of 2013 hawks and doves within the administration reached a consensus: they would step up arms and training of rebels while holding off on direct US intervention.

The administration debated whether to have the Defense Department openly do the arming and training. Some White House officials pointed out that publicly supporting Assad's overthrow violated international law. The United States could have simply canceled this illegal program. Instead the administration kept the CIA in charge of the covert program and could thus claim not to be officially involved in attacking a sovereign state.²⁴

Some conservative Democrats and Republicans advocated for more-aggressive military intervention. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) called for creating a no-fly zone. Two right-wing analysts sketched out such a plan in a *Wall Street Journal* opinion essay. Jack Keane is a former vice chief of staff of the US Army, and Danielle Pletka is an analyst with the conservative American Enterprise Institute. They argued for limited attacks to ground Assad's air force, which might then expand to a no-fly zone. "Outfit moderate rebel units vetted by the CIA with man-portable [shoulder fired] antiaircraft missiles," they wrote. "If American forces use standoff cruise missiles and B-2 stealth bombers for these strikes, they will be out of the enemy's reach." They admit that airfields can be repaired. "These operations would need to be sustained for a period of time to preclude repairs."²⁵

Such limited military engagements sound good in Washington because no Americans are likely to die and the bloated defense budget will hardly miss the billions it will cost to execute. Aside from the immorality of waging war in which civilians will inevitably die, the plan won't work. In Libya a similar scheme took seven months to depose Kaddafi, only to leave the country in the hands of warring militias.

The failure to develop a viable rebel coalition and general public opposition at home to another war bolstered factional splits in the Republican Party. Libertarians and isolationists criticized Obama and opposed his plans to bomb Syria after the chemical-weapons incident. They defied their own Republican House and Senate leadership.

Many Libertarians hold a consistent antiwar view when it comes to the Middle East. Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Libertarian Cato

Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He wrote, "What if the United States helps blow up Syria? Washington will have no control over the outcome. But if the result is increased regional instability, terrorism, and civil conflict, highlighted by brutal revenge killings, murder, and ethnic cleansing of Alawites, and mistreatment of other minorities, the United States government will bear direct responsibility. If Washington intervenes, it will own the result."²⁶

Right-wing isolationists, on the other hand, used anti-interventionist rhetoric to push a racist and xenophobic agenda. Isolationism has a long history in the United States (see chapter 3). Its advocates oppose America getting politically or militarily involved outside the Western Hemisphere. Conservative isolationists opposed US involvement in World War II, thus objectively helping Nazi aggression. Today political commentator Pat Buchanan carries the isolationist banner. He was a speechwriter and adviser to three American presidents, and he twice sought the Republican nomination for president himself.

Buchanan argued against bombing Syria in September 2013 by accusing the military of being in the pay of Arab sheiks. "The Saudis and Gulf Arabs, cash-fat on the \$110-a-barrel oil they sell US consumers, will pick up the tab for the Tomahawk missiles," he wrote in a column. "Has it come to this—US soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen as the mercenaries of sheikhs, sultans, and emirs, Hessians of the New World Order, hired out to do the big-time killing for Saudi and Sunni royals?"²⁷

Buchanan made both a populist and a racist argument. He blamed Arab rulers for what, in fact, is US corporate/military policy. He expressed no concern for the people of Syria who would become victims of US aggression, while fanning racist images of Arab plutocrats. It reminded me of how right-wing populists blamed Jewish bankers for starting World War II. The ultimate in right-wing isolationism sprang from the lips of former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who managed to combine populism, hatred of Obama, and Islamophobia. "Let these radical Islamic countries . . . where both sides are slaughtering each other as they scream over an

arbitrary red line, 'Allah Akbar,' I say until we have someone who knows what they're doing, I say let Allah sort it out."²⁸

Just as Syria has generated conservative anti-interventionists, so, too, has it produced liberal interventionists. Famed *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, for example, is a master at finding liberal justifications for war. He was a leading apologist for the occupation of Iraq until the policy obviously failed.²⁹ And he did it again on Syria. It's worth quoting his views on Syria at length:

I believe that if you want to end the Syrian civil war and tilt Syria onto a democratic path, you need an international force to occupy the entire country, secure the borders, disarm all the militias, and midwife a transition to democracy. It would be staggeringly costly and take a long time with the outcome still not guaranteed. . . . My view is that anything short of an external force that rebuilds Syria from the bottom up will fail. Since there are no countries volunteering for that role (and I am certainly not nominating the United States), my guess is that the fighting in Syria will continue until the parties get exhausted."³⁰

Friedman managed to propose an outrageous plan for imperialist occupation and then slip out of it with a rhetorical flourish. Who could occupy Syria for a long time other than the United States or European powers? He made the racist assumption that Syrians and Arabs can develop a decent society only through occupation. Excuse me, Tom, but didn't that argument go out with the death of colonialism?

Some Syrian Americans and progressives made a more sophisticated argument for humanitarian intervention. They are justifiably outraged at the tactics used by the Assad regime. With the full backing of Russia, the Syrian army laid siege to rebel-controlled areas. Food and medicine were kept out. City services such as water and electricity were shut off. As a tactic to isolate the rebels, civilians were left to starve and die of disease. Some on the left have called for humanitarian military intervention. Danny Postel and Nader Hashemi, of the Center

for Middle East Studies at the University of Denver, wrote in a *New York Times* opinion article that if the Assad regime didn't lift the sieges, "an external, international force must be introduced to guarantee the safe passage of food and medicine to starving Syrian civilians. . . . The sieges must be broken by any means necessary."³¹

Postel and Hashemi invoked the UN doctrine of Responsibility to Protect, which they define as "the principle that if a state fails to protect its populations from mass atrocities—or is in fact the perpetrator of such crimes—the international community must step in to protect the victims, with the collective use of force authorized by the [UN] Security Council." They recognize that Russia would likely veto any such authorization in the security council. Therefore "if a multinational force cannot be assembled, then at least some countries should step up and organize Syria's democratically oriented rebel groups to provide the necessary force on the ground, with air cover from participating nations." In another article, Postel made clear that he opposes US intervention. He wrote that some countries that might participate included France, Australia, Jordan, and Luxembourg. Without international action "hundreds of thousands of Syrians" will be consigned to starvation, he wrote.³²

I have great respect for Postel and Hashemi, who have done important work in support of the Syrian people, and before that, in support of the 2009 popular demonstrations in Iran. But I profoundly disagree with the concept of humanitarian intervention. In the foreword to this book, Noam Chomsky discussed the origins and flaws in the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. What powers have the military capability and political will to spearhead an attack on Syria? We can safely eliminate Luxembourg and Jordan. Australia is too far away. That leaves France as the main protagonist, with possible token support from other countries. France had sent troops to fight in its former colonies in central Africa. France might be willing to attack Syria, also a former colony.

First France would have to disable the Syrian air force by bombing airfields and aircraft. Then it would have to land paratroopers into the city under siege and facilitate delivery of aid, presumably by the

United Nations or other international agencies. It would have to fight off attacks from the Syrian army in some areas and by extremist rebels in others. Even assuming this can be done with a minimum of civilian casualties, it's a difficult military operation. If significant numbers of French troops are killed or equipment destroyed, it would signal defeat. And, from the French perspective, defeat for intervention would be worse than no intervention at all. So the French military would have to mobilize a very large force. As noted earlier, the Pentagon said up to seventy thousand troops might be needed.

And if by some miracle all of this were accomplished with relatively little violence, would the French troops withdraw? If they did, then the Syrian regime would resume attacks on civilians with a vengeance. So the troops have to stay to prevent future civilian atrocities. You have the classic military mission creep with two stark choices: stay in Syria indefinitely or overthrow Assad and install pro-French rebels in Damascus. There is no humanitarian intervention without regime installation.

We don't have to speculate. What I describe for Syria actually happened in Libya. Civilians in Benghazi faced a vicious attack by Muammar Kaddafi's forces, although claims of impending massacres were intentionally exaggerated. The UN Security Council passed a resolution calling for limited intervention to protect the people of Benghazi.³³ France, Britain, and the United States then violated the resolution by waging a seven-month war, functioning as an air force for the rebels. When Kaddafi finally was murdered, a prime minister backed by the West was put in power. But he proved inept, and warring militias took over the country.³⁴

Stephen Zunes, professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco and coordinator of its Middle Eastern studies program, strongly opposed humanitarian intervention in Libya and Syria. He noted the Libyan intervention backfired, in part, because it empowered "al-Qaeda-aligned groups, like the one responsible for the deaths of four US officials, including the ambassador" in August 2012. Referring to Syria, he added, "Even large-scale direct foreign intervention will not lead to a quick collapse of the regime."³⁵

You've heard my sharp-tongued critiques of various groups on the left and right. What, you may ask, should the United States do?

I oppose all outside interference in Syria, whether from the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or any other country. The United States, in particular, should stop all military support to the rebels. The United States should join with other nations to provide humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees inside and outside Syria, to be done peacefully, not by force of arms. Both the United States and Russia could play a positive role in reaching a diplomatic solution, possibly through the United Nations. But so far neither country has the credibility to act as an honest broker. Conflict over Ukraine will likely make diplomatic agreements on Syria even more difficult. Eventually, however, there will have to be a political settlement to the civil war.

I also support programs in which Americans directly help the people of Syria. Such people-to-people activities include political support to those Syrians seeking to establish an inclusive, parliamentary system. Groups such as the American Friends Service Committee³⁶ and the Friends for a NonViolent World³⁷ have publicized the work of Syrian activists fighting both Assad and extremist rebels. Other groups are providing food, medicine, and humanitarian aid to civilians in Syria. Sometimes the aid gets through to rebel areas because of local cease-fires with the regime, other times through neighboring Jordan or Turkey. These groups advocate for short-term, local cease-fires that would allow aid to reach civilians under siege.

But no solution will be forthcoming in Syria without Russian cooperation. And Russia's role is what we explore next.

From the opening months of the uprising, the Obama administration blamed Russia for supporting Assad, claiming Russian arms and intransigence at the United Nations have kept Assad in power. Secretary of State John Kerry, in a typical statement, blasted the Russians for continuing to arm Assad. "They are, in fact, enabling Assad to double down, which is creating an enormous problem."³⁸

Without doubt, Russia has backed Assad, enabling the regime to

brutally repress its own people while maintaining Russian influence in the region. And like the United States, Russia has its own perceived national interests at stake. The former Soviet Union allied with Syria back in the 1960s because of a common antipathy to Israeli and US policies in the Middle East. There was some ideological affinity between the nationalist and anti-imperialist Syrian Baathists and the Marxist-Leninist leadership of the Soviet Union. In 1971 the two countries signed a military pact, and the Soviet Union established a naval base in the port city of Tartus. It consisted of little more than a pier and ship-repair facilities, but it represented the Soviet Union's only Mediterranean naval base.

Over time, military and economic ties grew. The Soviet Union resupplied arms to Syria during the 1973 war with Israel. Soviet leadership regularly supported the Arab cause in the UN Security Council while criticizing Israel. Hafez al-Assad briefly broke out of the Moscow orbit in 1990 as the Soviet Union was collapsing. Syria sent troops to support the United States in the Gulf War. Assad had hoped that his new alliance with the United States would lead to the return of the Golan and resolution of the Palestinian issue. That never happened. So Syria stepped up its alliance with Iran and reestablished good ties with Russia.

By the 2000s Russia agreed to forgive three-quarters of Syria's Soviet-era debt, or \$9.8 billion of the \$13.4 billion total. By the time the Syrian uprising began, Russia had \$20 billion in trade and investment with Syria, \$8 billion of which was arms sales. "Russia is now a business-oriented country, and the Russian government obviously wants to protect the investments made by its businessmen in Syria," Yevgeny Satanovsky told the *Christian Science Monitor*. He was president of Moscow's Institute of Middle Eastern Studies.³⁹

The *Moscow Times* reported that Russian companies had big investments in Syria infrastructure, tourism, and energy industries. Arms going to Syria accounted for about 10 percent of Russia's total arms sales. The Syrian regime bought MiG-29 fighters, Pantsir surface-to-air missiles, artillery systems, and antitank weaponry, much of which was later used to attack rebels and civilians.⁴⁰ "Syria has been a tradi-

tional ally and arms importer from Russia, and so Russia has a very different view from the West's hope of overthrowing the ruling regime there," Igor Korotchenko told the *Monitor*. He's director of the Center for Analysis of World Arms Trade in Moscow. "Therefore, Russia has put its stakes on providing political and military support for the Syrian regime, and Russian leaders believe this corresponds to the long-term national interests of Russia itself."⁴¹

Russian leaders, like their American counterparts, also saw Syria in a geopolitical context. After the devastating collapse of the Soviet Union and decade of turmoil in the 1990s, President Vladimir Putin had campaigned on promises to make Russia strong again. Russia had been steadily losing influence as some countries of Eastern Europe joined NATO and/or became part of the eurozone. Russian leaders were particularly wary of the rose revolution in Georgia and the orange revolution in Ukraine. While the West supported these color revolutions as struggles for democracy, Russian leaders said they were manipulated by the West to further weaken Russia.

Russians thought the Syrian uprising was cut from the same cloth. Alexander Golts, a military expert at *Yezhednevny Zhurnal*, an online newspaper, wrote, "Putin has a real paranoia about colored revolutions." Such uprisings are the "result of Western conspiracies. The attitude is, we're not going to be fooled anymore."⁴²

Russian leaders also thought they had been suckered by the March 2011 UN vote on Libya. Both China and Russia abstained on the UN Security Council vote to establish a no-fly zone to protect civilians in Benghazi. Kaddafi had purchased billions in Soviet/Russian arms, and the two countries had close relations at one time. His overthrow resulted in huge Russian losses economically, politically, and militarily. "We made a big mistake on the Libya vote," one Russian diplomat told me. "We won't make it again on Syria."⁴³

In the early days of the uprising, Russian leaders worried that Assad might not survive. But by 2013 they had poured in weapons to Syria and gave full political support to the Assad regime. Russia vetoed or threatened to veto every UN Security Council resolution

critical of Syria. The Russians had firmly cast their lot with Assad. "We see serious reasons to believe the Assad regime can survive," said Georgi Mirsky of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow. "Even if it's discredited, it could still hold on for a number of years. So there's no sense of urgency in Moscow to change policies."⁴⁴

Following a circuitous route from Saudi Arabia up through Jordan or Turkey and then crossing a lawless border, thousands of young Saudis have secretly made their way into Syria to join extremist groups fighting against the Assad regime. With the tacit approval from the House of Saud, and financial support from wealthy Saudi elites, the young men took up arms in what Saudi clerics called a *jihad*, or holy war, against the Syrian regime.

The Saudis were part of an inflow of Sunni fighters from Libya, Tunisia, and Jordan that constituted a significant problem. Analysts in Damascus told me that over 100,000 foreigners were fighting in Syria. The Assad regime wildly inflated the numbers in an effort to discredit the rebellion. However, the thousands who did arrive were particularly dangerous because they joined extremist factions, according to Aaron Zelin, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute. "Most of the foreigners are fighting with al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham," Zelin told me⁴⁵ (see chapter 6). The Saudis hoped to weaken their regional competitor Iran, which is backing Assad. Saudi officials also hoped to divert demands for democracy at home by encouraging young protesters to instead fight in Syria, according to Saudi government critics.

The government sought to "diffuse domestic pressure by recruiting young kids to join in another proxy war in the region," said Mohammad Fahd al-Qahtani, a human-rights activist and economics professor at the Institute of Diplomatic Studies in Riyadh. He told me they are joining ultraconservative groups who "definitely are against democracy and human rights. The ramifications could be quite serious in the whole region."⁴⁶ Saudi authorities have a strategic goal in Syria, he said. "Their ultimate policy is to have a regime change similar to what

happened in Yemen, where they lose the head of state and substitute it with one more friendly to the Saudis," Qahtani said. "But Syria is quite different. It will never happen that way" because the Syrian army has remained unified.

In March 2013 a Saudi court sentenced Qahtani to ten years in prison for sedition and providing false information to foreign media. Human-rights groups immediately defended Qahtani, saying he was being persecuted for his political views and human-rights work.⁴⁷

For many months Saudi officials denied any knowledge of their citizens fighting in Syria. But then, at the end of 2013, they admitted that some 1,125 Saudi citizens went to Syria over the previous two years and about 180 had died.⁴⁸ Those numbers look suspiciously low to me, but at least the government admitted for the first time that significant numbers of their citizens were fighting with the rebels.

And sometimes, Saudi authorities were directly responsible for sending the young fighters to Syria. In one case I documented, a Saudi judge encouraged young antigovernment protesters to fight in Syria rather than face punishment at home. Twenty-two-year-old Mohammed al-Talq was arrested and found guilty of participating in an antigovernment demonstration in the north-central Saudi city of Buraidah. After giving nineteen young men suspended sentences, the judge called the defendants into his private chambers and gave them a long lecture about the need to fight Shia Muslims in Syria, according to Mohammed's father, Abdurrahman al-Talq.

"You should save all your energy and fight against the real enemy, the Shia, and not fight inside Saudi Arabia," said the father, quoting the judge. "The judge gave them a reason to go to Syria." Within weeks, eleven of the nineteen protesters left to join the rebels. In December 2012, Mohammed al-Talq was killed in Syria. His father filed a formal complaint against the judge late last year but received no response.⁴⁹

Saudi officials deny that the government encouraged youth to fight in Syria. They point to a religious decree (*fatwa*) issued by Saudi Arabia's grand mufti, Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al ash-Sheikh. He urged youth not to fight in Syria, noting that aid to rebels should be sent

through “regular channels.” But Saudi authorities also admitted they have no control over people who legally leave the country and later join the rebels. Fighting with the rebels in Syria is illegal, declared Major General Mansour al-Turki, a spokesperson for the Saudi Ministry of Interior. “Anybody who wants to travel outside Saudi Arabia in order to get involved in such conflict will be arrested and prosecuted,” he told me. “But only if we have the evidence before he leaves the country.”⁵⁰ That position gave the Saudi government plausible deniability, according to Randa Slim, a scholar with the Middle East Institute in Washington. The Saudi government purged the country of young troublemakers while undermining a hostile neighbor, she said to me. “In the name of a good cause, they are getting rid of a problem.”⁵¹

Qahtani argued that Saudi support for extremist rebels resembled their aid to the *mujahedeen* fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Back then Osama bin Laden was a scion of a Saudi construction magnate who transferred his inherited wealth out of Saudi Arabia and into what came to be called “The Base,” English for *al-Qaeda*. Both the United States and Saudi Arabia encouraged the flow of Arab fighters and arms to Afghanistan, part of a proxy war against the Soviet Union.

Saudi authorities set up networks to support the *mujahedeen*. “They recruited kids to fight there,” Qahtani said. “They financed them and provided them with [airplane] tickets.” When the Soviet-backed regime fell and the fighters returned to Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, some engaged in terrorist bombings and assassinations in an unsuccessful effort to overthrow the government. A nascent form of *al-Qaeda* began to take shape, metastasizing throughout the region and eventually lining up against the Saudi and US governments. Qahtani said he hoped history was not repeating itself in Syria.⁵²

At the beginning of the uprising, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey cooperated to fund and arm the rebels. For example, in May 2012, a Saudi and Qatar-financed shipment of small arms landed in Turkey and was trucked to the Syrian border without interference from Turkish author-

ities. The shipment included AK-47 assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and small-caliber machine guns.⁵³

Initially all three countries, along with the United States, helped supply militias led by the Muslim Brotherhood and similar conservative Islamist groups. But the funders complained that the brotherhood’s leadership was out of touch with activists inside Syria. Its brand of populist Islam also conflicted with the austere, promonarchy views of the Saudi princes. They saw the brotherhood as a threat. Vali R. Nasr, dean of the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, wrote: “Since Saudi identity is wrapped tightly around a puritanical interpretation of Islam, and Saudi nationalism draws on the centrality of Mecca and Medina to the Islamic faith, secular democracy has yet to find a large Saudi following. But the Brotherhood’s populist Islamism, which promises justice and equity, and empowerment of the individual in religion and politics, does resonate with the many unemployed and restless young Saudis.”⁵⁴

So, for both ideological and practical reasons, Saudi Arabia shifted support from the brotherhood to ultraconservative groups such as Ahrar al-Sham. By the end of 2013, Saudi leaders threw their support behind the newly formed ultraconservative Islamic Front, led by Ahrar al-Sham. And by the spring of 2014, the government had officially declared the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, al-Nusra, and the Muslim Brotherhood to be terrorist organizations.⁵⁵ The change would have a profound impact in both Syria and the entire region. The US and Saudi governments couldn’t agree on which moderate groups to support, or, indeed, who the moderates *were*.

Qatar, on the other hand, continued to support the brotherhood. With only 200,000 citizens and some two million expatriate workers, Qatar is a small nation. It juts out on a peninsula bordering Saudi Arabia. The country’s leaders had played no significant international role until recently. It was mainly known as a staunch US ally, home for an important US military base. Qatar is the world’s third-largest producer of natural gas and perhaps most importantly, home to the *Al Jazeera* TV

network. Since 2011 *Al Jazeera* Arabic became an unapologetic supporter of the Arab Spring uprisings and of the Muslim Brotherhood parties in Syria and Egypt. Qatar leaders combined the news outreach of *Al Jazeera* with fabulous wealth to become a significant regional player.

For a time, Turkey also supported the brotherhood, which had close ties to its ruling Justice and Development Party. Both groups shared common roots in political Islam and had a similar populist ideology that separated them from the Saudi sheiks. But Turkey eventually soured on the brotherhood's lack of success and shifted its support to more conservative rebels.

The regional divisions came to a head over developments in Egypt. In June 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood won presidential elections and also gained a plurality in parliament. Brotherhood leader Mohammad Morsi became president. When the West balked at continuing to finance the Egyptian government, Qatar pledged \$8 billion. The brotherhood was unable to resolve the country's severe economic problems, however, and Morsi adopted authoritarian policies that angered ordinary Egyptians. Mass demonstrations broke out in June and July of 2013, which the military used as an excuse to seize power.

Qatar and Turkey denounced the coup. Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Bashar al-Assad all supported the military because it removed the brotherhood from power. In November 2013, Turkey and Egypt reduced their diplomatic relations. In March 2014, the regional divisions deepened as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt withdrew ambassadors from Qatar. The machinations and divisions among the various foreign powers have only made resolving the Syrian crisis more difficult.

In the course of writing this book, I reported from Washington, DC, and ten countries in the Middle East. I met with leaders, rebels, analysts, and ordinary people. Most agreed on the basic facts about the Syrian uprising. Spontaneous, popular demonstrations broke out against Assad as part of the wider Arab Spring. Harsh repression fol-

lowed; Syrian opposition forces turned to armed rebellion. The longer the fighting continued, the more foreign powers interfered. Russia sent massive amounts of arms and provided diplomatic cover for Assad's repression. Iran sent arms and military advisors, and it facilitated the entry into Syria of Hezbollah and Iraqi militias. The United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel all backed the rebels. The CIA trained selected rebels in Jordan. Foreigners bolstered the ranks of al-Qaeda-affiliated and other extremist rebels, further complicating matters.

At the time of this writing, Syria remained in a military and political standoff, with neither side strong enough to prevail. Foreign powers seem determined to fight to the last Syrian. Israeli analysts were perhaps the most cynical, but by no means unique, when they hoped the war would go on indefinitely to take Arab minds off Israel.

But the Syrian war will end. Lebanon experienced a horrific civil war from 1976 to 1990. Despite the carnage, the Lebanese were able to resolve their civil war and rebuild their country. The Taif Accords, which ended that war, offer some interesting insights for a possible future settlement in Syria. The accords called for a cease-fire, disarming of all militias, withdrawal of all foreign troops, and establishment of a parliamentary system to include protections for minorities.⁵⁶ However, the accords were never fully implemented and Lebanon is certainly no model. Lebanon shows, however, that horrific civil wars can eventually end despite outside meddling.

Palestinian leader Hannan Ashrawi told me Palestinians stand in solidarity with the people of Syria. That makes sense to me. The people of Syria—with their tradition of tolerance—will ultimately prevail.