

THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

The World After
the Arab Spring

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For Bhavna

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Optimus est post malum principem dies primus.
The best day after a bad emperor is the first one.
TACITUS

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spectacular ancient ruins that could attract millions of tourists from around the world.

Libya may just work. In other parts of the region and in other parts of the world, after the shine of previous revolutions has worn off some have hankered for the old days. But life under Gaddafi was absurd. Any future nostalgia can be quickly cured by flicking through the increasingly rare copies of his Green Book. There will be periods in the coming months and years when that optimism looks wildly misplaced, but Libya has a clean slate on which to build a new nation and the income to do it. Year Zero is probably the best place for it to start.

Syria: The Arab World's Broken Heart

The village sat nestled among cornfields and green pastures where sheep grazed in the crushing midday sun under the watchful eye of local shepherds. A dusty little road wound its way up through the surrounding fields to the small grey-brick homes sitting on a rocky outpost overlooking the countryside. As I entered the house from the dazzling light outside, it was difficult at first to understand why my boots were sticking to the ground in the dark little room. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom I saw scattered shoes and fallen cups lying on the floor. The room was silent but for the flies, which had found the evidence of the massacre before I did. Their soft drone led to the corner of the room where a small squeegee mop was propped against the wall, the kind often used to scrape soapsuds off a window. It was not up to the task it had last been used for, so it stood abandoned in a thick pool of dark red blood.

A man pushed into the room beside me and lifted from the floor a blue and white-chequered tablecloth. Each square had a little posy of flowers printed on it. What he wanted me to see though was the clump of skin and flesh stuck to the top. As I instinctively stepped back he thrust it forward into my face and a small piece of someone's brain fell from within it and landed on the floor.

I went outside to catch my breath, and as I squinted in the shimmering light, shapes that had before blurred and merged into the barren landscape came into focus. The white horse lying dead in the

shade of the stables, the two dusty-coloured sheep shot by the chicken coop. The carcasses left to rot where they fell.

To understand what had happened in the Syrian village of Qubair it was necessary to walk to the house next door and submit your senses to the stench of burnt flesh. You had to make yourself understand that the piece of meat you had just stepped over once belonged inside a person who had lived, worked or played in the fields outside. You had to acknowledge that men had walked into this village with the intention of killing every living thing in it. People who could look into the face of a child, perhaps one just like their own, listen to his or her cries for mercy and then butcher it.

'I can't tell you who I am, I fear for my safety,' said a young man with a red and white scarf wrapped tightly around his face to reveal only his black eyes:

The army surrounded the area and then the militia from the neighbouring villages came in and killed the people and then burnt them so no traces of the bodies would remain. They have killed everyone in the village, only three people are left. They did it because they wanted to take the land. They were protected by the army. They killed everyone, they destroyed everything. They even killed the children, they slaughtered them with knives.

The revolt was well into its second year, and these tales of atrocities no longer surprised anyone, because by now the Assad regime had dropped the charade.

At the beginning of 2011 so little was known about the reality of Syria in the wider world that Bashar al-Assad and his family were the subject of perhaps the most ill-timed puff piece in the history of magazine publishing. As the country began its slow slide towards civil war the March edition of *Vogue* magazine printed a fawning profile of Assad's 'glamorous, young and very chic wife' Asma. She was, purred its headline, 'A Rose in the Desert', the first lady of 'the safest country in the Middle East'. Her husband was a man who 'takes photographs

and talks lovingly about his first computer'. He had been 'elected' in 2000 after his father's death with what the magazine described as 'startling 97 per cent of the vote' because 'in Syria, power is hereditary'.¹ The piece didn't mention that the national assembly had to change article 83 of the country's constitution before he could be 'elected' by referendum because at the time Bashar was six years younger than the minimum age of forty required to ascend to the presidency.

In person Bashar al-Assad was an unlikely dictator. We had met a few months earlier at his Presidential Palace in Damascus, his slight limp handshake and quiet lisping voice much more suited to the mild-mannered ophthalmologist he had once trained to be, than to the tyrant he had become. But for a long time he had managed to persuade the world that he was different from the other dictators with speeches that kept promising reform. Even Hillary Clinton thought it worthwhile to say in the same month the *Vogue* article appeared that: 'There's a different leader in Syria now.' She added that: 'Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he is a reformer. A few days later she distanced herself from her own remarks, saying she had 'referenced the opinions of others'.²

Assad was not like his father's generation of dictators. He is not a brutish self-made man who fought off challenges to take control of the state using violence and guile. He does not strike fear or awe into those who meet him. Even now, though he holds what is left of his father's throne, he is still a prince, not a king. He did not look, did not talk, he does not even shake hands like a dictator. But he has proved to all those who had high hopes for the reformer that he knows how to act like a dictator.

After *Vogue's* remarkable profile, which it has now deleted from the Internet, that 'tall, long-necked, blue-eyed' man began to perpetrate sickening violence against his own people. His secret police sent back children's bodies smashed and beaten, with their genitals cut off.³ H

military massacred whole communities. Anyone caught using their computer to tell the outside world what was going on disappeared into a torture chamber. The Syrian state had been abusing and murdering its people for years, but eventually even the fashion world could not ignore something that was now being done on an industrial scale.

The conflict between the Syrian people will not end with the death of Assad or the removal of his regime. Nor if the guns are put away and a new government is formed. It can only end when the atrocities of the war are lost from living memory, because they will not be forgiven. Syria's struggle within must wait for its end because of the way it started. People make rules of war to slow the inevitable descent of their societies into savage violence. Assad's regime broke the rules on day one.

In March 2011 fifteen schoolchildren were arrested and tortured for writing on a wall the words that were echoing across the Arab world: 'The people want the overthrow of the regime'. The boys were all from the southern city of Dera'a, and on 18 March the people of that city gathered after Friday prayers to express their revulsion for this act of cruelty. The security forces opened fire and killed four people. They did the same thing at the victims' funerals the following day and another person died. The city rose up. The army's Fourth Armoured Division, commanded by the president's brother Maher, attempted to crush the revolt with tanks and troops. They failed in that but they did provoke a furious reaction to their brutality across the country in Homs, Hama and the suburbs of Damascus. In the capital small demonstrations against the regime had started on the 15th. Those countrywide uprisings against the regime never stopped.

'The government compensated for a lack of smartness with an excess of force,' a Syrian government official told me privately. 'Without that mistake in Dera'a it would have stayed quiet for six months and by that time people would have seen what was happening in Egypt and would have thought five times before doing anything.' He was right about the former, wrong about the latter. The Syrian people

were as sick of their lives under dictatorship as everyone else in the region. They knew it was not going to be easy.

'I remember my father when we used to talk in the house, *in the house* he used to whisper,' Zubaida told me.⁴ 'He knew people were listening because even the air was controlled. This is what kept us silent boys and girls.' Zubaida is an Alawite who lived in Damascus, where we were talking on a cool summer's evening after the crisis had moved into its second year. She comes from the same sect as the Assad regime but is not among its supporters. That truth may not make any difference in the Syria that emerges from the conflict. Stating that fact may not protect people like her. Too much blood has been shed for words to matter any more, even though it was words in the mouths of those that brought the conflict to life.

In the old Syria, in the old Middle East, no one really knew what the truth was in the society that existed before the civil war. How would they be able to judge it afterwards? Right from the start Assad said that the truth was that his regime was fighting an opposition riddled with al-Qaeda-linked violent jihadists. His regime then set about nurturing an environment that would bring that truth to life. And it did it, so it also systematically created an equal to the opposite.

'I've been following this from the beginning because I am Alawite,' Zubaida told me:

When [the uprising] began the Alawites said: 'Yes, I want to be part of this because I am part of society.' And then the army did something very smart. They would go to an Alawite village and they would put a red X on the doors of the houses and the Alawites got a little scared. It took them five or six months to really make them scared, because in the beginning they were not nervous. They said: 'This is a revolution for us also, like in Egypt,' but they started sending them some very smart messages to say: 'No, this is a Sunni revolution against all Alawites.' They would go into a very poor village and they would say these Sunnis are coming to kill you and they gave them some weapons. They would pick a village and send

back some of their children cut into little pieces and say those people [in the neighbouring village] killed your son. So you'll find so many young men are ready to come and join [the government militia, the Shabiha]. I'm not saying they are not good people, it's that they are more vulnerable in the villages because they are not in daily contact with the other sects. They don't really understand other communities so it's easier to play with their heads. Every two hundred years there is a slaughter [of Alawites], so they have inside them this fear and it's easy to bring it out again.

Town by town, village by village Assad's men picked away at the scab that barely covered the wounds of his minority sect. 'The Assad regime is holding its own community hostage,' Professor Bernard Haykel told me. He was born and grew up in neighbouring Lebanon, so he has seen first-hand how sectarianism corrodes societies. 'Like the Jews they have this history of persecution, and they see history coming back to haunt them. The opposition, whether it's the Free Syrian Army or the opposition in exile, has just not done enough to counteract that impression, so the Alawis are terrified.'

It was always hard to say what being Syrian actually meant. The civil war made it harder. Like many European creations that would eventually crumble into violent disorder, the country felt more like a concept, created from a few stray thoughts left over from some big colonial ideas. Modern Syria had the Alawites, a branch of Shia Islam, at the top of the social order. They are the largest religious minority in Syria and make up around 12 per cent of the 23 million people in the country. The vast majority of the population are Sunni Muslims who comprise around 75 per cent of the nation's people. Around 10 per cent of the Sunnis are Kurds. The rest of the population's patchwork is mainly Christians, with smaller numbers of other splinter Shia faiths like Ismailis and Druze. There are also half a million Palestinian refugees.

The reason the Syrian revolution took so long to play out was that the quarter of the country who are in the non-Sunni minorities were not sure if they would be any safer under a new government. They had

looked across the border at Iraq and seen how minority groups suffered waves of bomb attacks or were driven out of their homes by ethnic cleansing. They wondered whether a post-revolution Syria would hold the same fate for them. Some, mainly the younger generation, joined the revolution but many others held back because they feared for their prospects under whatever rule emerged from the conflict.

'A friend of mine who is a Franciscan monk went to a friend of his who is a very moderate sheik and he asked him whether he could guarantee his people would not take revenge on other sects,' said Ahmed, a Syrian journalist I met in Damascus.' 'The sheik said: "Yes, I do guarantee that, but not in the first one hundred days." No one can guarantee the streets in the first three or four months. People will be crazy and there will be deaths and there will be revenge.'

I asked him whether Syria's social fabric could be saved. 'No. It will need a decade or two to repair the damage. Rebuilding the infrastructure is easier than rebuilding the society, and the damage to the social fabric has already been done.'

The little Sunni Muslim village of Qubair was surrounded by equally tiny villages populated by Alawites. These villagers had stopped the United Nations ceasefire monitors from getting to the site of the massacre for twenty-four hours. They had surrounded their cars and blocked the roads. Shots had been fired. It was a long enough delay for the evidence to be dragged away or destroyed by the Syrian army and the local Shabiha.

There was no justice for the families killed on 6 June 2012. But that doesn't mean there was no retribution. The last words somebody must have heard before a bullet went into their head or a knife slashed through their body were 'This is for Qubair,' because by this time the world had to acknowledge Assad's truth. There were now violent Islamist fighters in Syria. These men had been encouraged and funded by two of Washington's closest allies in the Arab world: Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

I was told by UN officials in Damascus that at times, as the US called for peace and reconciliation, these two states were deliberately sabotaging local ceasefires negotiated by the monitors. The Salafists were mainly

getting their funding from Saudi Arabia. Qatar funded fighters linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. But it was clear that the Qataris were not fussy who they dealt with if it produced the desired result. 'I am very much against excluding anyone at this stage, or bracketing them as terrorists, or bracketing them as al-Qaeda,' said the Qatari minister of foreign affairs, Khalid bin Mohammad al-Attiyah. 'We should bring them all together, we should treat them all equally, and we should work on them to change their ideology, i.e. put more effort altogether to change their thinking. If we exclude anything from the Syrian elements today, we are only doing worse to Syria. Then we are opening the door again for intervention to chase the monster.'⁶ Their differing objectives meant that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were, behind the scenes, at each other throats over Syria. The US tried, and failed, to get them to cooperate.

The Israelis were contemptuous of the mismanagement of the mess on their doorstep by the US and its allies in the Gulf. 'Nobody is running the opposition in Syria. That's the problem,' a senior Israeli defence official told me.

There is an Arabic phrase which translates as 'You peel the onion and you keep finding more heads'. [In the opposition] you have many leaders, I could give you all the names, but if you ask me: 'Who is *the* leader? Who are the elders that Qatar and Saudi Arabia are supplying with dangerous weapons?', my answer is there is no one. Which means there is a vacuum, and that vacuum means al-Qaeda for the first time in history is in Syria. We think Bashar al-Assad is a terrible guy because he had unprecedented cooperation with Iran. He's a murderer, but the Golan Heights was the quietest area in the Middle East. Now what is the address of the person the Qataris and Saudis are cooperating with? Who is this leader? Who is responsible for making sure tomorrow they don't use these SA-14s [Russian shoulder-held missiles] to shoot down a British Airways plane?

That last bit was clearly said for my benefit, because Israel's security concerns are focused solely at home.

That is why on 30 January 2013, for the first time since they attacked the Syrian nuclear plant in 2007, twelve Israeli air force jets struck in Syria again. Their target was a convoy carrying the more advanced SA-17 anti-aircraft missile launchers. The Israeli press quoted anonymous, which were probably military sources, to assert that the attack happened to stop 'game-changing' arms being sent to Hezbollah, which in return had sent in fighters to help the regime. I was told by a senior figure in the UN that by late 2012 the bodies of Hezbollah men were regularly being brought back across the border for a quiet burial in Lebanon. By then though there was already some division within Hezbollah about its involvement in the war. So its leadership framed the group's military action to its men as protecting Shia communities and shrines in Syria from the Sunni Salafists rather than fighting for Assad, even though they were fighting alongside his forces.

In the months that followed the January strike Israel regularly had to respond to incoming fire from across the Golan Heights. Tensions steadily increased on the once quiet border. Israel knew nothing would have pleased the Assad regime, and Hezbollah, more than dragging it into the conflict so Syria could then try to rally wider Arab support around it. Tensions in Lebanon were growing as Hezbollah's increasingly public involvement in the war and the influx of Syrian refugees disturbed the country's religious equilibrium. Then in the summer of 2013 Israel again carried out air strikes in Syria on arms shipments that were destined for Hezbollah, adding to fears that the conflict was spreading. But while Israel did not want to play into Assad's hands the airstrikes were making it clear that the generals in Tel Aviv did not have to ask for international blessing to intervene to serve their interests over the strife in Syria. The United Nations did.

'Any proxy war is destructive, but particularly this one,' a United Nations official at its headquarters in New York told me. 'But even though there is a proxy war it isn't coordinated. All the parties are supporting their own proxy war. The Turks are supporting theirs, the Qataris are supporting theirs, the Saudis are supporting theirs. It's very destructive.'

I asked whether they had a common goal. 'Absolutely not.'

The Syrian opposition had been constantly criticised for failing to get its act together and present a united front. This is partly a consequence of the nature of the uprising. Syria's, like those in the rest of the region, was leaderless too. When the United Nations got involved its first act was to try to shepherd the opposition groups together under one umbrella. But as it did so it found 'we had all these parallel and competing agendas at the same time' tempting them back out again.

It wasn't only the political leadership of the opposition that could not present a united front – neither could the forces behind them. In a parallel with the early stages of the war in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980s, the funding for the opposition in Syria first came from wealthy individuals in the Gulf. Money and arms were handed over to the head of each Syrian opposition group. But then two relatives leading an opposition group found that if they split into two groups they could both get funding. The decentralised funding model encouraged division within the opposition just as the United Nations was trying to encourage the opposite. 'It wasn't intentional,' the UN official told me, 'but it was very reckless.'

The United Nations secretary general Ban Ki Moon summed up the mood of the organisation during a visit to the memorial for the victims of the Srebrenica massacre in the former Yugoslavia: 'I do not want to see any of my successors, after twenty years, visiting Syria, apologising for what we could have done now to protect the civilians in Syria – which we are not doing now.'⁷

It was this legacy of failed UN missions, General Robert Mood told me the following year, that drove his decision to end his mission when it became clear that neither side in the Syrian civil war was ready to stop fighting:

I remember vividly we had many discussions about 'remember Rwanda, remember Srebrenica', remember how the UN has on several occasions become a silent witness, almost protecting the status quo,

being accused of becoming very close to complicit. We made the choice . . . it better serves the integrity of the UN to scale down the presence to a minimum, rather than to continue the mission.

When I asked an official in the State Department in late 2012 where the resistance to America taking the lead was coming from, the answer was unequivocal: 'The President.' The contrast between the lofty word in Cairo and his inaction over Syria was a symptom of the 'innate ambivalence of this President'. Obama's unwillingness to act even after it was clear that Syria was going to descend into chaos confounded and frustrated people in the State Department under Hillary Clinton. Those who have left, like Anne-Marie Slaughter, who is now the president of the US think tank New America Foundation, told me publicly what I had heard others still serving say privately: 'This is just insane! I just find it stunning that a president who came to power wanting to forge a new relationship with the Muslim world is squandering a clear opportunity, but also risking a whole other generation of people who are going to come into power believing that we say one thing and do another. Or worse, that we absolutely betrayed them.'

There is no risk of that. It has already happened.

All four major outside anti-Assad players in the Syrian conflict – America, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar – misjudged the staying power of the regime. They assumed that Assad would last months, not years, even though the diplomats on the ground were telling them he was still in control. That is because they underestimated how much his regime would sectarianise the fighting. The Turks, encouraged by the Americans, spent the early months of the conflict giving the impression that they were going to play an active role trying to solve the crisis. When it dawned on them both that it was not going to be quick or easy, and that neither Ankara nor Washington could control the outcome, their enthusiasm waned. The Turkish public also soon grew jaded over the trouble on their doorstep and did not want to get drawn into it any further.⁸

From late July 2012 the Syrian airforce had begun 'deliberately and indiscriminately' killing civilians.⁹ Senator John McCain, Obama's o

rival on the stump, had called that spring, when the death toll was around 7,500, for the US to 'lead an international effort to protect key population centers in Syria . . . through airstrikes on Assad's forces'. Airstrikes then might have made a difference, but by the following spring the death toll was already ten times higher. By then it had become difficult to know which among the fractured opposition fighters to root for, and whether the country they were fighting over would last.¹⁰

'Everybody missed the train on this crisis,' a diplomat in Damascus told me. 'The UN did not show up, the Europeans and Americans did not show up. They left it all in the hands of the Arab League. Then the Arab League started messing it up from day one. They are the ones who radicalised it.'

Before the uprising began the Syrian regime had had high hopes for the year 2013. It was also looking forward to lots of international attention. There was going to be a kind of coming-out party. Even Mickey Mouse was invited: a 22-million-dollar new home was to be built for him in 'Disney Syria'. The tourism ministry had plans for a big promotional push in 2013 to put Syria on the map. 'Every place tells a story' was its catchphrase.¹¹ If Mickey had moved in he would have had a lot to write home about, because he was due to live in Homs. The story of Homs changed the conflict. Homs was where the wider world first learned of the savage brutality of the Assad regime and then realised it didn't care enough to do much about it. Homs was where the world began its betrayal of the Syrian people.

In February 2012, and for the first time in the Syrian revolution, it was possible to watch the regime bombard civilians live on air. It happened in the Baba Amr district of Homs, and watch was all the world did. 'Yesterday the Syrian government murdered hundreds of Syrian citizens, including women and children, in Homs through shelling and other indiscriminate violence . . .' said President Obama on 3 February. 'Assad must halt his campaign of killing and crimes against his own people now. He must step aside and allow a democratic transition to proceed immediately.'¹² The previous August he'd

said exactly the same thing, insisting: 'For the sake of the Syrian people, time has come for President Assad to step aside.'¹³ None of these statements, nor any that followed, made any difference, because none of them included an 'or else' if Assad didn't stop the slaughter. Even those who broadly supported Obama have judged that his passive response will haunt the region. 'I do think the question that is going to nag at the world after the Arab uprisings is the lack of response on Syria,' Ambassador Barbara Bodine told me.

The self-styled Baba Amr Brigade had not run away when they had the chance. They had stood and held their ground with a few light weapons. A small group of activists decided that they would set up video cameras to broadcast the conflict. They were trying to recreate the 'Benghazi moment', a point at which the international community would be forced to act to stop a massacre taking place in a large city by well-armed troops attacking almost defenceless civilians. But this time the United Nations did not leap into action. As President Obama observed, the massacre was allowed to take place.

'We thought that when we started the live stream and the rocket began falling down that there would be a "no-fly zone" or that they would come immediately and stop this.' As he said these words Omar Shakir began to chuckle. He was suddenly amused at his own naivety. Before the uprisings Omar, at the age of twenty, thought he had his life all mapped out. He was going to study medicine. He had started to learn German because he had a place in a university there. He ended up crammed inside a room with twenty people hoping that the shell wouldn't come through the roof.

If you heard a voice in English on TV or radio from Homs during the fighting then it would have been Omar's. Along with a small group of activists he created what they called a 'media centre' to get the story of their city to a world outside that he thought would care

I feel disappointed because we heard rumours that they will attack us and that they will use every possible gun. So we brought a good camera, a MacBook, all the equipment to make a live stream [of

images]. I came out after twenty-one days. And as I came out of the [escape] tunnel I thought Bashar al-Assad is going to stay until 2014, because he was shelling us with rockets, tanks, field artillery, mortars, he carried out crimes, he raped the women, and I thought with this live-stream camera something big will happen . . . I don't know what more he has to do. After Baba Amr he did the whole city. So three months of shelling the city and they [the international community] were still talking about what they want to do.

One of Omar's group had studied management, so he organised the eclectic mix of youngsters into teams, each with a different task. Most were students like Omar. One sold cigarettes, another was an IT graduate. One youngster called Jedi sold vegetables. Jedi filmed the most dramatic images because he was willing to take the greatest risks. They started with mobile-phone images and then used their savings to buy cheap cameras and then borrowed money from their relatives to get better ones.

At this stage those images were much more dangerous to the regime than anything the fledgling Free Syrian Army (FSA) could muster. The regime finally stopped Omar and his friends on the nineteenth day of the bombardment when a round hit the media centre, killing among others the journalist Marie Colvin from *The Times*.

'At the beginning of the revolution, if you carried a weapon it's OK, maybe they will arrest you for one or two months and then they will release you,' said Omar. 'But we had a friend from the beginning of the revolution, they arrested him in May 2011. Over the following year they broke his arms and his fingers and every time it healed they broke them again. Even now he is in prison. Anyone filming and sending to the outside, those people were the most wanted.'

After Homs many of the young revolutionaries began to put down their video cameras and take up guns. When the rebel fighters finally fled Baba Amr, after four weeks of bombardment, most of Omar's group also made it out alive. By this time though three had been killed. Jedi escaped to Aleppo. It was there, while the city was

still under the control of the government, that he was arrested. The young man considered by his friends to be the bravest of them all was tortured until he gave up the names of dozens of other activists.

Homs was where the Arab Spring woke up to the reality of the New Middle East it had created. As Syria began its civil war it became clear that the narrative had changed from the uprisings of the previous year. When it began, the protests in Syria were about the same causes that had brought about change in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya: democracy, equality, and a chance to shrug off the dictatorial regime of Bashar al-Assad. By the time the uprising had entered its second year the dynamics around it had changed. The protesters wanted the same things, but the Gulf states, and in particular Saudi Arabia, sensed an opportunity. They sought to exploit the turmoil in Syria to diminish the influence of Iran. By its third year the Syrian civil war had gone beyond anyone's control. It wasn't even clear what kind of Syria there would be when the fighting ended. 'Something has been broken in Syria, and it's not going to be put back together perfectly, immediately, anytime soon – even after Assad leaves,' said President Obama.¹⁴

The patchwork of religions and sects in Syria reflected the broader fragmentation of the region along sectarian lines. The Pandora's box of Sunni–Shia sectarianism had been opened by the American mismanagement of post-invasion Iraq. It had allowed the Iranians far more influence in their neighbour's affairs than they could ever have dreamed of. Saudi Arabia wanted to turn the clock back. The head of the US military's Central Command, General James Mattis, told a Senate hearing that 'the collapse of the Assad regime would be the biggest strategic setback for Iran in 25 years.'¹⁵

The first attempt to unify the opposition had focused on Syrian exiles. In December 2011 Hillary Clinton met with, and thus anointed, a group of exiles calling themselves the Syrian National Council, SNC. After their discussions in Geneva the State Department declared: 'The United States considers the Syrian National Council to be a leading and legitimate representative of Syrians.'¹⁶ Then together with the EU, the Arab League and other largely

like-minded countries and institutions they all met under the banner of the 'Friends of Syria' in Tunis the following February. It was a pointless meeting because the Syrian exiles were made up of largely irrelevant people with no influence whatsoever over the fighters inside the country. To illustrate its worthlessness the Saudis walked out, complaining that too little was being done to support the Syrian rebels on the ground.

The Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, while sitting in a meeting with the American secretary of state Hillary Clinton, responded to a question from the media about arming the Syrian opposition with the words: 'I think it's an excellent idea.' So they did. A few days later Hillary Clinton, in a mild rebuke to the Saudi statement, said:

We have a very dangerous set of actors in the region; al-Qaeda, Hamas and those who are on our terrorist list to be sure, claiming to support the opposition. You have many Syrians more worried about what could come next . . . but I want to make clear for anyone watching the horrible massacre that is going on to ask yourself 'OK what do you do?' If you bring in automatic weapons which you can maybe smuggle across the border, OK what do they do against tanks and heavy artillery?¹⁷

However it emerged the following year in public testimony to Congress that by the summer of 2012 Hillary Clinton, the defence secretary Leon Panetta and the then director of the CIA David Petraeus had all supported arming the rebels. They presented a plan to the president. He rejected it.¹⁸ The White House was furious its internal divisions had been laid bare at the Congressional hearing.¹⁹

So in 2012 the US administration's policy was to wait and hope that economic sanctions imposed by the West and the Arab League would provoke either the regime's collapse or an internal coup. 'There is no plan B,' a Western diplomat I met in neighbouring Lebanon told me that summer. Throughout the year food and fuel prices did shoot up, factories closed and jobs were lost, but the regime still

managed to cling on by digging deep into its foreign currency reserves. Those Syrians who could started to send their families and their money over the border into Lebanon. Iraqis who had earlier fled to Syria during the civil war there started drifting back home. Iraq was far from stable and still suffered from regular massive suicide bomb attacks, but the level of violence in Syria far outstripped that of its neighbour even during Iraq's most wretched days.²⁰

Those losing the most in the economic crisis were on the same side of the sectarian divide as those trying to bring the regime down. Much of the business class was drawn from the Sunni Muslim community. They had worked within the system and profited from it. They were thought to be an influential force in the country, and the Western governments hoped that as sanctions bit they would be able to place pressure on the regime from within to resolve the crisis by adopting the so-called 'Yemeni model'. This was supposed to play out with Assad stepping aside, as Yemen's President Saleh had done, and then perhaps going into exile with some of his ill-gotten gains.

'Saddam Hussein lived under sanctions for ten years. What was the result?' said Wa'el as we sat in his still air-conditioned office in Damascus during the war. 'The sanctions on the country are affecting the poor people, not the rich. It's not affecting the regime.' Wa'el was one of those Sunni businessmen who had managed to make money under the regime. This didn't mean he was some kind of collaborator, though he was far from a revolutionary. Everyone had to work within the system if they wanted to stay out of jail, get their kids into school and provide for their families. Everyone in Syria recognised that. No one believed before 2011 that anything was ever going to change. The Assad regime had a hold on everyone because it knew all their secrets. Corruption was not a by-product of the regime, it was integral to it, because it was a tool of suppression and it touched every aspect of a Syrian's life.

'It's an unbelievable system,' Wa'el told me. 'You have to do it even when you give birth to a child, starting from the moment you take your wife into hospital. The nurse does not work unless you give her extra, the cleaning lady in the hospital does not clean the room unless

you give her extra. So you start living with the system from the day you are born without knowing it.' He gave a big belly laugh. 'Somebody did it on your behalf!'

And like most of the other dictatorial Arab regimes, corruption in Syria evolved into a system of state-sponsored entrapment. 'There is always a sword hanging over you and they can at any point use it, and legally. The system has been built in such a way that you cannot apply the rules and regulations. You have to operate illegally in anything you do. Today if they come to my office and only take the papers on my desk and nothing else' – he waved his arms over the neatly stacked piles of documents in front of him – 'I'll be in jail for the next five years, because their rules do not allow me to act in the regular proper way.'

When I started working I had the fax machine in the drawer and I made a hole in the side for the wire because it was a crime to have a fax machine until 1995. How can you operate a business if you do not have a fax machine? Companies would laugh if you don't have a fax machine, but we used to tell our suppliers the fax time is from three to four p.m. We would send them a telex (through the government post office) saying: 'We have turned on the fax machine, send the faxes!' And the [Syrian officials] knew everyone had a fax machine because they were the ones involved in smuggling it to begin with from across the border.

So you have the fax machine and so you become a threat to national security because of your fax machine. The whole system is built for you to do something wrong so that they can cut your head off any time they want to. Corruption is everywhere. Dubai, Saudi, are full of corruption but they did build their countries. The difference here is we have been in a standstill for the last thirty to forty years.

From his base in Damascus Wa'el was funding humanitarian supplies for the opposition. The following year, in early 2013, Wa'el was kidnapped by a group of local Shabiha masquerading as a violent

Salafist group. They demanded a ransom. He was eventually released after some of his contacts in the regime's security apparatus intervened on his behalf.

'Can a body live without a heart?' Bashar al-Assad had demanded as he tore into the Arab League in January 2012 for what he saw as its betrayal of his nation and his leadership after Syria was suspended from the group. 'Who said that Syria is the throbbing heart of Arabism? It wasn't a Syrian, it was President Abdel Nasser, and this is still true . . . without Syria the Arab League is no longer Arab,' he declared.²¹ By the time he was saying these words the heart of Arabism was already broken. Throughout his address, after his regime had finally lost legitimacy in the eyes of an institution it had once championed, Assad evoked the call of Pan-Arabism. Most of the rest of the region had buried the idea with Nasser, but decades later Assad still called it the 'symbol of our identity'. That was because of all the countries that once embraced the idea, Syria needed it most. Of all the people looking for an identity the Syrians were the most lost. Assad was standing in Damascus in one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on earth. But as he stood raging at his podium he was lying to the world about what was happening in a country that had itself been born of deceit.

'The Sykes-Picot Agreement is a shocking document. It is not only the product of greed at its worst, that is greed allied to suspicion and so leading to stupidity; it also stands out as a startling piece of double-dealing.'²² These are the conclusions of the historian George Antonius on the backroom deal in May 1916 that carved up the old Ottoman Empire after the First World War and led to the creation of what is now Syria. It was drawn up in secret by Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Georges Picot of France, who coloured the map of the region into blue bits for France, red bits for Great Britain, and a brown bit, Palestine, where would 'be established an international administration'. Sykes ended up playing his role in this enterprise by what he called 'extraordinary luck' and what others deemed a large amount of guile. He had given the impression to the British prime minister of the day

that he was not only an expert on Middle Eastern affairs but that he was also fluent in both Turkish and Arabic. He could not speak either language.²³

The Sykes-Picot Agreement was signed in secret because the British had already offered to recognise the same land as an independent Arab state led by the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein Bin Ali, in return for him leading a revolt against the Ottomans during the First World War. The present King Abdullah of Jordan is a direct descendant of Hussein Bin Ali. He would also be the first Arab ruler to call for Bashar al-Assad to step down. The European powers did not honour their commitments to King Abdullah's ancestor; instead the modern state of Syria came into being as a French mandate. When they finally withdrew in April 1946 they left behind something that could only be properly called a 'country' in geographical terms. In response to this European imperialism there emerged, in the early 1940s, the Ba'ath Party, which sought to transcend cultural differences with a form of secular Arab nationalism. Ba'ath means renaissance in Arabic.

There was nothing about Syria that united the people within its borders. They were of different religions and different ethnicities. They had different regional and class identities. So it was not surprising that the nation was completely unstable. Ba'athism sought to give its people a common secular Arab identity. After Syria's independence there was coup upon coup upon coup, until the Ba'ath Party itself came to power by means of a coup in 1963, and it stayed. When it seized power it introduced a state of emergency, which lasted until it was lifted as a gesture by Bashar al-Assad in April 2011, by which time the country really was in a state of emergency.

As in neighbouring Iraq, under the Ba'ath Party most government jobs and all key posts went to its members. Because it was secular it offered no impediment to progress for the Alawites. It was functional but it wasn't inspiring. The inspiration to realise the Pan-Arab dream came from Nasser. The last putsch in Syria took place in 1970 and brought Hafez al-Assad to power. He had risen through the ranks of the air force and the Ba'ath Party. He was feared, not loved. Along

with Ba'ath Party membership, membership of his Alawite sect also became increasingly important for government jobs and patronage. That concentration of power mainly in the hands of Alawites only increased under Bashar. The son was bequeathed what the father had spent his life creating.

The name Alawite means 'follower of Ali', the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. It is a relatively new term, dating back only to the French mandate. Many of their practices are carried out in secret. They follow the Shia custom of Taqiyya, which allows people to hide or even deny their faith to protect them from persecution. Because very little is known about the Alawite customs their religion has been censured as heretical by many Muslims, because they see in it the deification of Ali. The sect itself, like the Druze and the Ismailis, derives from the wave of Shia Islam that swept through the region a thousand years ago. Since then they have been regularly persecuted by all comers, including the Crusaders, the Sunni Mamluks and the Sunni Muslim Ottomans.²⁴

The French, like other European colonialists, wanted to use the downtrodden minorities as their tools to manage the majority. In Syria this meant the Alawites. Most importantly it led to the disproportionate recruitment of Alawites into the French-run military force. This cemented the Alawites into a military tradition that extended beyond the departure of the French and created the dominant officer class of the Syrian army that emerged. It remains that way today. The historian Daniel Pipes wrote that: 'An Alawi ruling Syria is like an untouchable becoming maharajah in India or a Jew becoming tsar in Russia – an unprecedented development shocking to the majority population which had monopolized power for so many centuries.'²⁵

Hafez al-Assad rose to his position with skilful ruthlessness, and it was this trait he brought to both the domestic and the foreign arenas. His key foreign policy aim was to curb Israel's, and therefore America's, influence in the region. That meant maintaining at least arm's-length control of Lebanon, and finally in 1976 deploying his troops there and running the country as an extension of his own state.

Lebanon has one of the most complicated societies in the Middle East and the most obscure political system. Like Syria it was carved out of the Ottoman Empire and was given to the French in the European bargaining after the First World War. It got its independence in 1943, when it also got its power-sharing system, which divided up key posts based on religion. The president was always a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of Parliament was Shia. The sectarian tensions bubbled along until 1975, when they exploded into a civil war that lasted fifteen years, killed or injured hundreds of thousands and laid waste to the capital Beirut. Hafez al-Assad used the war as the justification for his 1976 invasion.

The Lebanese war finally ended when a deal was reached called the Taif Agreement, named after the city in Saudi Arabia where it was signed. This agreement states that seats in the parliament will be divided equally between Muslims and Christians, and proportionately between the denominations of each sect and each district. It is the glue that holds the country together. It states as its aspiration the 'abolition of political sectarianism'.²⁶ Despite its fragility and failings, which enable groups like Hezbollah to wield huge political influence, the system that was worked out in Lebanon may end up as the framework for an agreement in Syria. Lebanon's deal was reached only after all sides exhausted themselves in fifteen years of civil war. 'I don't know how long it will take the Syrians before they are tired of killing each other,' a diplomat in Damascus told me in February 2013. He was clear that while either side thought it could win it would be hard to make progress with dialogue. And it was 'dialogue, not negotiations', the Syrian minister of information, Omran Ahed al-Zouabi, told me the same month. 'Negotiations,' he said, 'are held between equals.'

The uprising that broke out in Syria in 2011 was not the country's first major revolt. In February 1982 Hafez al-Assad conducted a scorched-earth policy to end a Muslim Brotherhood-led rebellion in the predominantly Sunni Muslim city of Hama. It was the culmination of a violent six-year countrywide struggle with the group that

began after Hafez suggested a new constitution should mandate a secular state and that a non-Muslim could be president. In 1976 the Muslim Brotherhood began their insurrection against what they saw as the 'heretic' Alawite rulers.²⁷ In June 1980 Hafez was almost assassinated when Islamists attacked him as he waited for a foreign dignitary. Two hand grenades were thrown at him and he was targeted with machinegun fire. 'He kicked one grenade out of harm's way while a guard threw himself on the other and was killed instantly.'²⁸ The regime responded by massacring Brotherhood members already held in jail.

The conflict got nastier until its climax at Hama, when the army surrounded the city and simply pounded it into submission with tank and artillery fire. Then Assad's troops went in and carried out mass executions and rape. The assault went on for three weeks and was considered to be the single bloodiest attack by an Arab leader on his own people. At least 10,000 people were killed in Hama; some estimates put it at up to 30,000. A quarter of the city was flattened. It ended the Islamic insurgency.

Neda's father was a doctor in Hama and stayed throughout the military operation.²⁹ He sent his family away when a Syrian army officer searching the houses enquired whether Neda's fifteen-year-old sister was married.

My uncle was a bank manager. They bombarded his area and destroyed his office, badly injuring his left leg and knocking him unconscious. When he woke up the soldiers had stacked him up in a pile of bodies. When they left he hid in the rubble of his office for two days. When he finally managed to get help and was taken to my father his leg was so bad it had to be cut off.

Neda recounted a whole series of stories about friends and relations who lost family members. Her family's maid had her seven sons taken from the house, never to return. An entire class of college students were killed because their teacher happened to be a member of the

Muslim Brotherhood. 'My brother's friend was killed in his house and they dragged his body around the street and then left it in the road. His mother went mad after that. She went along the whole street washing away his blood.'

The son had a hard act to follow, but follow he did. And it was clear, talking to his senior supporters in 2013, that it was still the Brotherhood – now supported by Qatar – rather than the Salafists supported by Saudi Arabia, that the regime hated the most. The Brotherhood though had been decimated by his father's regime, and while it was a heavy presence among the exiles in the opposition it did not have a significant presence among the fighters on the ground.

When his father was busy murdering people in Hama the Arab League was not up in arms and imposing sanctions. The bonds of the old world that Bashar al-Assad inherited were broken during the 2011 uprisings because the League had had its own small revolution. But when he had railed at the League, Bashar al-Assad had been right to say Syria was at the heart of the Arab world. The old Middle East's political fault lines all converged in Assad's Syria. So while the regime was loved by no one it was vital to everyone. It won quiet applause from the Americans because it kept the border with Israel nice and quiet. The Iranians were happy because the Assad family let them run guns to their proxies, Hezbollah, in Lebanon. Its credentials in respect of the Palestinian cause were second to none, and it housed and so protected key Palestinian militant groups in the capital Damascus, the most important of which was Hamas.

Like the other dictatorships, the Assad regimes always had ample amounts of something that successive American presidents did not have. Time. When they came across a political leader they couldn't deal with, the Assads just watched the clock. Despite supposedly being a pariah state and a founding member of the US's list of 'State Sponsors of Terrorism', they could always find bits of the world that would deal with them. The European Union, for example, was Syria's biggest trading partner. The Assads knew that Western and particularly European policy took regular big swings from left to right and

back again. 'We as Westerners consider that when something is happening it will have an end, so we look for a logical timeline to that end,' a Western diplomat in the region told me.

[The Syrians] tend to believe that: 'One day you are with us the next you are against.' You don't have to go back very far, just to 2005–7. Rice was saying after the assassination of [Lebanese prime minister] Hariri: 'We are in an era of regime change.' Then after the election of Sarkozy it was back to business: 'This is a regime that can be modernised, can be amended.' And the way they think is that this is temporary and they just have to wait it out.

That's what the West intended to try this time. It hoped sanctions would bite so hard that after a while the regime would just fall apart. It didn't work, and neither did the opposition group that Secretary Clinton had championed.

The SNC, which was dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, proved itself to be a disastrous mix of self-serving, disorganised individuals who expended all their energies fighting with each other – at one stage quite literally, when a gathering in Cairo descended into a brawl.³⁰ Syria ground on into civil war and people died in their thousands. The Obama administration was concentrating on getting re-elected rather than doing anything serious about it. So in the absence of an alternative plan the Gulf states did what they always do when confronted with a complex political dilemma. They opened their wallets and threw money at it.

The secular groups like Omar's friends had no sponsors. They lost influence, as well as new recruits, to the groups that were getting the Gulf's arms and cash, smuggled in across the northern border. 'You could see a lot of convergence between the Turks and the Qataris [around] the Muslim Brotherhood,' a UN official in New York told me. 'The Qataris are pushing towards, in the context of Syria, to have another Islamic state run by the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a different situation altogether with Saudis and the Salafists. The Saudi

government are more concerned about Iran, that's their biggest monster in the equation. What happens afterwards when it comes to Syria is almost immaterial.'

At first Israel advised America that it did not want Assad to go. Then when it was clear that his days were numbered they wanted it over with fast. They got neither outcome. According to a senior Israeli defence official, what worries Israel now is not just the geographical setting of a new jihad, but a change of focus that it says it detects since Ayman al-Zawahiri took over al-Qaeda following the killing of bin Laden: 'The al-Zawahiri al-Qaeda from our point of view is worse than the Bin Laden al-Qaeda, because Bin Laden believed in a Global Jihad. He said: "Let's destroy Washington and then we'll deal with Israel." Zawahiri says the opposite. He says: "Let's destroy Israel, it does not stop us destroying the United States, but let's focus on the Middle East."'

The Arab Spring was at first an ideological catastrophe for al-Qaeda. It fundamentally undermined one of the key planks of the Global Jihad philosophy, which was that the West will not allow peaceful change, so it must first be dealt a mortal blow before work can begin on the model Islamic society. The peaceful overthrow of the American-backed dictator in Egypt by the people in al-Zawahiri's own home town destroyed that argument. The chaos in Syria gave groups like al-Qaeda another chance.

After the US had spent more than a decade at war with al-Qaeda in the region, the conflict in Syria led to the unedifying spectacle of America and Osama bin Laden's followers being on the same side, albeit with starkly different visions for the post-conflict era. As that fact became more public and embarrassing Washington tried to distance itself from the nastier consequences of its failure to take a lead on the crisis. In December 2012 it formally declared that one of the more effective elements of the armed Syrian opposition groups, the hard-line jihadist Nusra Front, was an alias of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and thus a terrorist organisation. The announcement was made with

little fanfare. That was because to have left the way open for al-Qaeda to reconstitute itself on the border of America's most important Middle East ally, Israel, was a massive failure of US foreign policy. That money would start flowing from the Gulf states to back jihadist groups fighting in Syria was entirely predictable. It was also easy to move them there. They were just a car ride away in neighbouring Iraq. And they knew the route because it was through Syria, and with the help of the Assad regime, that they had got into Iraq in the first place.

The Nusra Front, also known as the Jabhat al-Nusra, first declared its presence in the conflict in January 2012.³¹ The group has claimed to be behind most of the large bomb attacks that have taken place in the country, which unsurprisingly have mirrored those in Iraq. By the beginning of 2013 it was thought to number several thousand. However an arms smuggler in Lebanon's northern Bekaa valley on the Syria border told me that the Nusra Front was 'a kind of trademark that a lot of people are using to scare their enemies. A lot of people who claim to be Jabhat al-Nusra are not, but they think it's a better brand name than being the "First Brigade" of somewhere or other.'

The Nusra Front have seen their support grow because they are better, more experienced, more disciplined fighters than those that loosely form the FSA. While many Syrians felt intense disillusion with the West over its failure to act in their country the way it acted in Libya, by contrast the Nusra Front do not want to see Western intervention, because their aim, like Al-Qaeda in Iraq's, is a fundamentalist Islamic state in Syria. In July 2012 the Al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi was saying that the Syrian state should be wiped off the map. He called for 'applying the *sharia*, uniting the *ummah* [Islamic community] by demolishing the borders implemented by the Sykes-Picot [agreement], eradicating filthy nationalism and hated patriotism, and bringing back the Islamic state, the state that does not recognize artificial boundaries and does not believe in any nationality other than Islam'.³² The following April he claimed his group and the Nusra Front had come together as the 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant'.³³ Al-Qaeda in Iraq made a mess of its game plan

by attacking minorities and fellow Sunni Muslims with unspeakable brutality. When you are in a fight to the death you will often take all the help you can get but even the Nusra front balked at being too closely associated with its Iraqi brethren. Syria's jihadists responded by saying they would follow al-Zawahiri but distanced themselves politely from the damaged goods, even by al-Qaeda standards, of the extremists in Iraq.³⁴ However having to publically declare an allegiance to al-Qaeda central, just to keep the even more hard-line group in Iraq at arm's length, was an own goal for the violent jihadists. There was no ambiguity anymore about their purpose in Syria and that undermined the support they had at that stage won from the local population for their more restrained actions on the ground. It also added to the fears of the country's religious minorities. The new wing of this violent extremist franchise had been trying to get it right, second time around, in Syria. But, even without having to show their true colours, in the long run they are unlikely to succeed because just like the other Arab revolutions, Syria's was not led from the mosque.

That means that not every young fighter you saw shouting 'Allahu Akbar' to the TV cameras was an Islamic fundamentalist, though they were often clumsily portrayed that way in some of the Western media. Christian soldiers invoke the Almighty before they go into battle, so what is odd about young Muslim men doing the same? But what was clear to the young activist from Homs, Omar Shakir, was that the failure of the Western powers to get involved and offer an alternative was accelerating this radicalisation.

I'm against those people, as are all the Syrian people who support the revolution. People in Syria, some of them pray, some of them they don't. People don't ask: 'Are you Alawis, or Sunni, or Shia?' or whatever, and we never had these jihadist people. But now because in this revolution the international community is not doing anything these people enter the country and the problem is they are affecting both sides, not just the regime. They will kill you if you defy them, if you don't follow them. The problem is that there

are so many people in Syria who want revenge. Revenge is controlling them. People are beginning to lose their minds. When I came out I had time to rest and to think. But that's impossible inside Syria. You can't think because of the shelling.

The prospect of Islamic extremists getting a foothold in the country finally provoked President Obama to declare under what circumstances he was ready to intervene. 'We cannot have a situation where chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people,' he said in August 2012. 'We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.'³⁵ It was a stark admission of just how much else the Assad regime could get away with. His remarks were prompted after Syria's Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi accidentally admitted for the first time that the regime even had them when he promised they would not be used: 'Any chemical or biological weapons will never be used, I repeat, will never be used in the Syrian crisis, no matter what the internal developments in this crisis are,' he had told reporters. But by the summer of 2013 the Europeans, the Israelis and finally the Americans all said there was some evidence that small amounts of chemical weapons had been used in the conflict. There were new calls from the US Senate for action to be taken. The question then became how thick Obama's red line was, and what standard of proof would be required for a more robust intervention in the crisis. In a clear reference to the intelligence failures ahead of the Iraq invasion the White House wrote to John McCain that while 'Our intelligence community does assess with varying degrees of confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria, specifically the chemical agent sarin . . . Given the stakes involved, and what we have learned from our own recent experience, intelligence assessments alone are not sufficient – only credible and corroborated facts that provide us with some degree of certainty

will guide our decision-making.³⁶ Obama had boxed himself in by drawing a red line in front of a regime that didn't know when to stop. Not taking action once it was crossed would mean undermining the authenticity of the red line he had drawn for Iran's nuclear ambitions. Taking action against the country's chemical weapon stockpiles though was not easy.

One of Israel's senior military commanders told me:

It's almost mission impossible to destroy Syria's chemical weapons. In order to destroy them you have to control them, and that's a long process. If something is dug into underground tunnels you might be able to block it in but if you hit some of it then you've put it out there [released the gas]. So it is very difficult. This doesn't mean you can't do anything, but you can't be sure of dealing with all of it.

What worried Israel and the West the most was that these weapons might find their way outside the Syrian arena. The wild card was the jihadists among the opposition fighters.

Makdissi's blunder led to criticism of him within the regime. He is a Christian and was clearly considering his position when I met him in the summer. By then his family was already in Beirut. He fled the country in December. His Damascus home was ransacked by the Shabiha and his beloved collection of Syrian art was looted. He issued a statement a few months later from an undisclosed location saying: 'I left Syria because of the violence and polarisation that left no place for moderation and diplomacy.' He added that division in the country had reached a 'destructive' level.

The longer the fighting went on the more damage was done to Syria's fragile society. The UN's General Robert Mood told me while in Damascus that the massacre in Qubair and two weeks before that the larger one in Houla were 'the beginning of the sectarian aspect of the conflict'. The UN investigated both incidents, but the clean-up of any evidence in Qubair ruled out clear conclusions. Its report

published the following August said that most of the people murdered in Qubair belonged to the al-Yatim family. The team found that since the uprisings had begun there had been tensions between the Sunni Muslim villagers and their Alawi neighbours in Al-Twaime. After one of the residents of Qubair had a row with his Alawite neighbour the Sunni villagers had sought protection from a handful of local FSA fighters. When the government found out, they surrounded the village, shelled it and then sent in troops and the militia. Somewhere between forty and seventy-eight people died, including women and children. The UN report found that 'reasonable suspicion exists that unlawful killing of civilians occurred at the hands of pro-Government forces, including *Shabbiha* from neighboring villages'.³⁷

In Houla, where 108 people died, most of them women and children, the UN were more certain as to who carried out the massacre. These murders were thoroughly investigated by the UN, and 'little evidence was collected suggesting that anyone other than Government forces and *Shabbiha* committed the killings'.³⁸ It was the first big sectarian atrocity of the conflict. There was lots of talk at the time that it might mark a turning point in the conflict by provoking international intervention or stir diplomatic solution. It did not. 'I kept thinking we've hit the bottom, then we went deeper,' said a Syrian woman I met in Damascus the following year. 'Now I'm worried where the bottom will be.' The Houla massacre was the first time the outside world could see clear evidence that the government tactic of setting sect against sect was working, but Professor Haykel says that the sectarian edge to the war showed itself earlier, in Baba Amr:

Homs seems to have been a battle that was part of a strategy by the government to evacuate as many Sunnis from the city as possible so that they can create a zone so that Homs can link up to the Bekaa Valley. There's this idea of creating a zone where you have Shiites in Lebanon connecting to Alawites along this belt west of the Orontes River all the way up through the Alawis' heartland.

The fighters of the Free Syrian Army had been hoping to make history repeat itself by holding their positions in Homs, but greater forces were determined that it would not. 'We are paying the price for Libya here,' a diplomat who was then in Damascus told me. 'It will take a while before others in the Security Council believe us again. We have shot ourselves in the foot.' He was referring to the legacy of the 'all necessary measures' clause that President Obama had championed to save Benghazi.

[The Russians and the Chinese] did not believe the British, the French and the Americans would have what the Israelis call the *chutzpah*, to do it! The Russians have been completely hurt by this, there is [real] mistrust. I have had comments from my Russian counterpart, though he is very Soviet and doesn't stray out of the [diplomatic] lines, he said: 'We were betrayed' and it's played into the hands of the Syrians. This has gone beyond a matter of [the Russians'] interests it's a matter of ego.

By contrast, Chinese diplomats rarely talk to their opposite numbers in the West. Beijing lets senior academics in government-controlled universities express their unvarnished views on events on its behalf. 'We felt we were cheated,' Zhu Weili, the director of Middle East Studies at Shanghai International University, told me:

As an expert, I feel that we have been cheated. Regarding the establishment of the no-fly zone in Libya, China abstained from the voting and allowed the resolution to pass, but the Western countries took this opportunity to launch fierce attacks there. The Western countries hoped that what happened in Libya would happen in Syria. But they know very little about Islamic sectarian policy. Syria is not Libya at all. The situation in Syria is much more complicated.

If the opposition groups collected a dollar for every time a foreign player reminded the world that 'Syria is not Libya' their revolution

would have been self-funding. But both sides of the divide in the Security Council used that excuse to justify their position. For Russia though it was complicated. Its support for Syria dates back to the Cold War era, a period in which the US was building its alliance with the Gulf states. In the first year of the conflict it sold \$1 billion worth of arms to Syria.³⁹ In June 2012 it tried to ship refurbished Mi-25 military helicopters to Syria, causing a row with the US. Russia also has huge private investments in energy, tourism and infrastructure projects. Syria's deep warm-water port in Tartus is a strategic asset for Moscow, which has a naval facility there. Western diplomats told me Tartus was where, by 2013, the Russians were delivering regular arms supplies for the Assad regime. But for Moscow, which has fought a brutal war against its own Islamist rebels, Assad was seen 'not so much as "a bad dictator" but as a secular leader struggling with an uprising of Islamist barbarians'.⁴⁰

So important was Syria to Russia that the Israelis tracked the movement of Russian advisers to serve as a litmus test for the regime's stability. They watched for the moment when the Russians were ready to head for the door en masse because they assumed it meant the exit of the regime was not far behind.

However, says Professor Joshua Landis, the director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma and a Syria specialist, there was no incentive for Assad's troops to think about suing for peace. 'The militaries in North Africa could turn against their presidents because they knew they'd all be hired by the next guy that came along,' he told me.

But in Syria, when Assad gets booted out and a Sunni takes over he is going to purge the entire structure from top to bottom, like they did in Iraq. So the Alawite officers are fighting not only for their jobs, but for their lives. There is no good solution. If they put down their guns and surrender they are likely to meet a very bad fate. The rebels have said they want justice and that anybody with blood on their hands is going to pay for it. And so many of them have blood

on their hands, almost every Alawite family has some soldier who has got blood on his hands. They are not talking about five hundred people going to jail, they are talking about tens of thousands of people going to jail. And the more brutality this regime uses, the more people have compromised themselves.

Even a bomb in the heart of its security headquarters in July 2012 didn't stall the military establishment. It killed the defence minister and three other senior officials, one of whom was Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law. Other top officials, including the intelligence chief and interior minister, were injured. Bashar al-Assad appointed a new defence minister, General Daoud Rajha, and the killing just carried on. That may have been because the real military power was concentrated in the hands of the extended Assad family, including on his mother's side the Makhloufs, not the public officials. But there was another possible explanation. The talk in the capital Damascus was that the men might have been plotting a coup, and were assassinated by the regime before they could carry out their plan.

President Obama opposed acting without international sanction, and that sanction was not forthcoming. The State Department under Hillary Clinton was ready to push harder, but President Obama made it clear that he was not. He told them America would participate but he did not want to take the lead on Syria because he could not see a happy ending. He was also conscious of a sense of American overreach with regard to Afghanistan and Iraq, and he wasn't ready to do that again in Syria. Another key factor though was that he did not want to own a problem in an election year when success would be measured by differing degrees of failure. But even when the election was over, his view that there was no good outcome in getting too involved didn't change. Syria festered, and so did the mood in the Security Council.

'It's very poisonous,' said a United Nations official to me of the atmosphere Syria had created. There was huge frustration among the UN people working on the Syrian issue, because while it was obvious

that all the Permanent members wanted to avoid the inevitable consequences of doing nothing, still they 'couldn't get their act together'. The entire Security Council feared the nightmare scenario that Israel was talking up, but bad blood, big egos and first the Russian and then the US electoral cycles were all factors in not wanting to be seen to be conceding ground.

When Kofi Annan resigned his role in August 2012 as the joint envoy he blamed everyone involved. The Europeans and Americans privately briefed that when Annan said everyone he really meant the Russians. He did not. He said everyone because he meant everyone. His most enduring achievement before, as one UN official put it, the 'Security Council members dumped him' was the agreement reached in Geneva in June 2012. It at least established agreement within the Security Council that a political transition should occur. Assad's supporters in Iran said he should remain in power until presidential polls were held in 2014.⁴¹ Annan's replacement as joint UN-Arab League envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, tried to build out from the Geneva agreement. It was an impossible task. Eight months later he was ready to quit. 'I haven't resigned,' he said. 'Every day I wake up and think I should resign. One day perhaps I will resign.'⁴²

A few months after the uprisings began a group of army deserters announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army. As the conflict moved into its third year the 'Free Syrian Army' was still little more than a label for the mass of people who were fighting against the government but who were not part of the Salafist trend. The title existed in splendid isolation from any kind of real central command and control structure, even though it had what was called its headquarters across the northern border in Turkey. The US and Europeans had tried to help the fighters coordinate better by providing among their non-lethal assistance the same type of communication equipment I'd seen suddenly appear in the hands of Libyan rebels during the height of the fighting there. But two years after it was supposed to have been created the Free Syrian Army was still more of an aspiration.

In July 2012 the Red Cross formally declared that the entire

country was embroiled in a 'civil war', which meant both sides were now subject to the Geneva convention regarding war crimes.⁴³ That drew more attention to the actions of the rebels. Videos began to emerge of opposition fighters abusing and executing captured government soldiers, though the UN said their abuses 'did not reach the gravity, frequency and scale of those committed by Government forces and the Shabbiha'.⁴⁴ But what they did do in the eyes of opponents to the regime was something worse. They started abusing the people they were supposed to be fighting for.

By the early winter months of 2013 the war-ravaged northern city of Aleppo was largely in the hands of the opposition fighters, despite the army's use of air power and Scud missiles to try to hold on. That ancient city, which had been inhabited for millennia, was in parts reduced to rubble. Having taken control the rebels had no idea what to do with it. Inflation had gone sky-high and no one had a job. There was no electricity, water was scarce and rubbish was piling up in the streets. Families were forced to sell their possessions for food and heating oil as the bitter winter set in. People stood for hours in bread queues, leaving them vulnerable to incoming government rounds. So, faced with these challenges, some of the fighters from the Free Syrian Army decided to rob the city. They stole Aleppo's flour supplies for themselves.⁴⁵ 'Welcome to Free Syria' said a resident sarcastically to one of my colleagues, pointing at the destruction in the city.⁴⁶

The contest for Aleppo was a disaster for the Syrian opposition. They fought a totally uncoordinated battle that did as much damage to their credibility as it did to the city. Many of the fighters came from the surrounding rural areas, not the city itself, and saw Aleppo as a prize to capture, not to protect. The chaotic failures of the FSA enhanced the reputation of the much more disciplined Islamist fighters. If Homs was where the opposition realised they were going to have to fight this war alone, then Aleppo was where they realised what fighting a war actually meant. They learned the lesson Makdissi had finally grasped, that it is hard to rule an angry people. And the citizens of Aleppo were furious with the mess the FSA had made of their city.

There was anger too across the northern provinces because of the fractious nature of the opposition. Criminal gangs flourished. The Islamist fighters became a law unto themselves. The FSA could no seem to get its act together.

In October 2012 Lakhdar Brahimi tried to organise a brief truce to mark the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha. The UN hoped to use the pause to send around seventeen truckloads of aid to the city of Homs. They wanted to get to three areas of the city, starting with the al-Khalidiya district. They spent fourteen hours trying to gain access but nobody on the opposition side could guarantee the safety of the convoys. That was because there were twenty-one disparate FSA brigades inside this small quarter alone. 'You had to deal with twenty-one chiefs, and each of those twenty-one had totally different ideas and policies. And each one of them wanted to dictate the rules,' a aid worker told me. The trucks had to turn back.

Part of the issue though was that the UN personnel in Syria were bearing the brunt of the abuse from the opposition fighters which should have been directed at the Security Council member. But those members were not present on the ground, and the UN were, and were constantly hampered by a mixture of suspicion and FSA incompetence when trying to get aid for civilians into rebel-held areas.

Meantime the opposition in the capital looked with dread at the mess in Aleppo and beyond. They believed the regime would have no qualms about smashing their own ancient city. This meant that the battle for the heart of Damascus was much more protracted and lengthy. The opposition tried to wear the regime down with tactical strikes to cut the city off. That did not mean there was not misery and destruction. When I drove around the suburbs of Damascus in February 2013 I saw that large areas of the city had been flattened by artillery fire. Checkpoints choked the roads, manned by members of the seventeen different internal security services operating in the capital. They also sealed off the rebellious neighbourhoods that I had been able to drive around freely the year before. There was the regul-

'crump' of shells landing and puffs of smoke dotted the skyline. People queued in hundreds for bread. Electricity was sporadic and the people were exhausted. The slow capture of the outskirts of the city from the regime followed a regular pattern. The security services would fight the FSA with small arms until they began to lose ground. Then they pulled out, surrounded the area and shelled it. By this time the Shabiha had been formed into a single fighting force, which was much more hated and feared than the army.

In the capital these men ran their local fiefdoms under the banner of newly created 'Popular Committees', though they were not popular with anyone outside their membership. 'Area 86' is the Alawite suburb where many of the security personnel and Shabiha live with their families. It sprawls its way across the base of Mount Qasioun, which towers over the city. Higher up the mountain was where the army placed its artillery. It then fired across the city into the suburbs on the other side. To get to the heavy weapons the opposition would have to fight their way through the Alawite security forces who were not only protecting the state but also their own families. The regime had put its soldiers' women and children in front of their last line of defence.

The United Nations had hoped it would never reach this stage. They had been trying from the start to resolve the conflict before the civil war became 'destructive beyond the point of repair'. The problem was that they really had no idea who to talk to, because the so-called unified opposition represented by the SNC spoke only for themselves. They never had any control over the people fighting under the banner of the 'Free Syrian Army'. So by the end of 2012 the Obama administration abandoned the SNC. By then the SNC had received forty million dollars, half from Libya and the rest from the Qataris and the UAE. There was nothing to show for it.⁴⁷

'We've made it clear that the SNC can no longer be viewed as the visible leader of the opposition,' Hillary Clinton said in October 2012. She then acknowledged, obliquely, that the international community had wasted a full year on a group of exiles who were

totally divorced from the reality on the ground. She said the opposition group that came next 'must include people from inside Syria and others who have a legitimate voice that needs to be heard'.⁴⁸

It felt as if, now the US election season was over, the Obama administration was suddenly aware as 2012 drew to a close what a terrible mess it had allowed to fester around the Syria crisis while its attention was focused elsewhere. In November it oversaw the formation of a new opposition grouping, the 'National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces'. The leader of the coalition was Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, a former imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and one of the few figures outside Syria who had credibility within the opposition forces who were doing the fighting. In December President Obama announced: 'We've made a decision that the Syrian Opposition Coalition is now inclusive enough, is reflective and representative enough of the Syrian population that we consider them the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime.' 'It's a big step,' he said.⁴⁹ It made little difference. This coalition included the old SNC as a block, so it still held huge sway. The new grouping often ended up being referred to in shorthand as the 'Syrian National Coalition' or SNC. The name barely changed, nor did its nature. The reorganisation did little to stem the infighting among the exiles. The coalition was still seen by opposition activists and fighters on the ground as a Trojan horse, backed by Qatar, for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's domination of the post-Assad political arena.

In March 2013 the National Coalition chose Ghassan Hitto, a Damascus-born IT specialist who had spent the previous decades living in the US, as the prime minister to head a government in rebel-held areas. 'I've met him twice,' the US ambassador to Syria Robert Ford told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that month. 'He struck me as more Texan than Muslim Brotherhood, frankly.'⁵⁰ Neither was much of a qualification to unite a divided nation or a divided opposition. His appointment prompted more infighting and infuriated al-Khatib, who said he would resign. A few days later the

National Coalition was formally given Syria's seat at the Arab League, which had been vacant since its suspension from the group in November 2011, until new elections were held in the country. The decision was pushed through by the Qataris just days before the League's annual summit, which was being held in their capital Doha. It was hailed at the time as a hugely symbolic moment, but when you stood back it was clear the excitement just reflected how little else had been achieved. It was interpreted by Brahimi as an attempt by the Arab League to close the door on a negotiated solution with the regime.¹¹

Maintaining stability within Syrian society after the civil war is not going to be easy. There is no doubt that the system under Assad was hugely skewed towards the Alawite community, but that didn't make the vast majority wealthy. In Damascus there are large Alawite slums. They did get government jobs, but these paid only a minimum wage. People in the capital complained that government institutions were often packed with the people from the Alawite community. They also dominated the army officer class and eventually the government militia, the Shabiha. But when the conflict deepened no effort was made by the opposition to make the Alawites feel they had a future in the Syria that emerged from the conflict, so many came to take it for granted that on the 'day after' they would simply lose everything.

'It shouldn't be a winner-and-loser game. We should keep the nature of the Syrian society. One in three of the Syrian population one way or another supported this regime, so we cannot throw them away.' These views, expressed by the Syrian journalist Ahmed, were increasingly rare in a society losing sight of what was worth keeping of their old lives.

I am definitely against any kind of deba'athification or dissolving the army. The minorities are scared. We are talking about around a million and half people in the Alawite community in Damascus. The majority of them are under forty, they didn't know any president but Hafez Assad and then Bashar. They didn't know any

situation apart from the situation they are in where they have the privilege to come from the village to Damascus and to find a job and to survive. So now there is a revolution that wants justice, but justice is hard for them so they will feel scared.

In the long run Professor Landis believed that allowing Syria to fight for its future, even if that meant a long and bloody civil war, was perhaps a better way of ensuring its stability in the future, because leaders would eventually emerge with revolutionary credibility. 'Because this is a problem of nation building and identity formation the Syrians have to figure this out for themselves,' he told me.

Nobody can impose a solution. We tried to do that in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and Obama just doesn't want to get involved. The Syrians have to find their own George Washington in a sense. America can't do that. We tried to do that in Iraq with Chalabi and now with Maliki. We tried to do that with Karzai, but you can't select somebody else's leader, they [have to] emerge. You could make the argument that war is a national building process, in a horrible way, and especially in these multi-ethnic countries where it's very hard to find a formula. For America to jump into that and to try to play cop is a fool's errand.

The war slowly destroyed most of the country's businesses, but a few did start to thrive. One was ad hoc kidnapping for ransom, which was dominated by the Shabiha, though there were many such incidents in opposition-held areas too. A variant of this became a big new money-spinner for the government, which industrialised the extortion. The regime ransomed off the captured FSA fighters held in its jails. The going rate, as the conflict passed its second anniversary, for the families of opposition fighters to get their loved ones back was 500,000 Syrian pounds, which was then equivalent to around US\$5,000. The government rounded up rebels, sold them back to their families and then rounded up some

more. It was an endless circle of supply and demand. The cost of a bribe to get anything done in the city had also gone up tenfold from the previous summer when I had visited the city.

The people who could not buy their way out of jail were the organisers of the first peaceful protests. Releasing some of the young fighters did not scare the regime, because these men suited its narrative of the opposition as bunches of violent terrorist gangs. But it saw the peaceful disciplined activists as much more of a threat. If they were released and got together with the fighters then the government might suddenly have been faced with a credible internal political opposition combined with a more organised military wing. That prospect scared them.

The question next door in Israel and among the Western nations is whether, after the war, Syria becomes a base for Sunni extremists to destabilise the wider region. 'Syria is a new opportunity for Global Jihadists. There is a repetition of what happened in the Eighties in Afghanistan, the Nineties in Bosnia, and the conflict in Chechnya. Now we have it in Syrian society,' says Professor Olivier Roy, who is one of the world's leading scholars on modern religious movements.

But I think the Bosnian scenario is the most likely, that once they win they will expel the Salafi jihadists, so these guys will have to go elsewhere. We'll have a problem, but with nomadic jihadists. I don't believe Syria will create a strong hub for them. We tend to have a territorial approach and we fear the creation of sanctuaries for jihadists. Actually sometimes that is not a problem, because they are an easier target when they settle somewhere. The worst jihadist is the guy who looks European, travels by plane, has a British passport and operates like that.

And it may turn out that many of the Islamist fighters will prove not to be very committed to the jihadist cause beyond the fall of the regime. The money to support the opposition fighters was coming

from the Gulf, and to get that money you needed to show some Islamist credentials. Previously clean-shaven fighters started to grow beards and adopt the dress code of the Salafist movement because it won them funding and arms. 'I don't think many of them are fanatics at all,' a woman very involved in the opposition movement in Damascus told me. 'I went with ten people to meet the Nusra Front people in Damascus, and three of us were women. Me and one another woman came dressed like this' – she gestured to her uncovered hair and tight Western-style clothing – 'and these men didn't care at all. They shook my hand. They've just grown beards to get money that's all, because they are funded by Qatar.'

There were also signs that while the regime leadership and opposition leadership in exile could not work out a way to talk, on the ground at a very local level, deals could be done. When the opposition groups took over parts of Syria's small but vital oilfields they looted the offices but they looked after the wells. When they realised that they didn't know how to run them, I was told by people involved in negotiating the deals that they leased them back to the local regime representatives in return for royalties. That way the oil kept flowing, the opposition got funding for its war, and so did the regime. FSA activists working from Lebanon told me their fighters even did deals with Syrian army units to buy ammunition. They assumed that the local commanders kept the money themselves. The same kind of local arrangement was made over opposition fighters captured by the Shabiha. Often the national army would act as the intermediary between the two sides to settle the ransom demands.

By the spring of 2013, in total, more than a million people had fled to neighbouring states to escape the chaos in Syria. Over half of them were children.⁵² Many of the children were traumatised, having seen family members killed. Some had been themselves subjected to torture.⁵³ By then UN aid workers I'd met inside the country had told me four million people had been displaced. They said the health care system in parts of Syria had collapsed and in others hospitals were carrying out major surgery without anaesthetic.

By then Jordan already had 460,000 Syrian refugees in the country. It was by far the largest number anywhere. 'How are you going to turn back women, children, and the wounded?' said King Abdullah. 'This is something that we just can't do.'⁵⁴ But he warned that by the end of the year the number would have gone much higher. Many were fleeing because the rape of men, women and children, largely by the Shabiha militias, had reached epidemic proportions.⁵⁵

Jordan was already fragile after the Arab revolts because of a resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood and the ever-present tensions between Jordanians and the Palestinian refugee community, two million strong, and most of whom have full Jordanian citizenship. The fate of Jordan was a major concern for the US because it was a major concern for Israel. 'God save the king,' joked one of Israel's senior generals to me as the internal pressure in Jordan built up. The US based a team of its own military officials to try to insulate Jordan from the growing turmoil along its long border after there were skirmishes between Jordanian and Syrian troops. Assad warned the Jordanians there would be consequences for supporting the process of arming the opposition. 'The fire will not stop at our border,' he said, 'and everybody knows that Jordan is exposed as Syria is.'⁵⁶

Young Omar Shakir had thought to himself when he emerged from his tunnel after the escape from Homs that Assad would survive until 2014. Few others thought so at the time. When I went to Damascus in the summer of 2012 everyone seemed to think the regime was staggering towards its end. When I went back the following summer Omar's prediction looked a lot more likely. As darkness fell and the streets emptied, the previous year's sound of a vibrant nightlife was replaced by the regular thud of artillery fire landing a few kilometres away in the Damascus suburbs. In 2012 I had had to drive several hours from the city to find the war. The following year the war had come to me. Yet Assad's supporters in the capital still believed they could hold on to what they had got out of the regime. 'I told him recently, you are our agent for change,' one of Assad's friends told me. 'I told him we have invested so much in you. Only

you have the political maturity to see the country through the transition.' His supporters believed he would be vindicated in the presidential polls promised for 2014, though how they were going to hold this election in the middle of a civil war was less clear.

Even though it was now in the third year of its fight against the Syrian people the regime still didn't think it was necessarily going to lose though it knew it couldn't win. But European patience with the status quo had begun to run out.

The jihadist fighters never had a problem getting a regular supply of arms, an Arab diplomat told me, because wealthy, mainly Saudi, individuals in the Gulf funded them. The Syrian businessmen who initially funded the FSA had, two years after the uprising, largely exhausted their reserves. However an EU diplomat told me that by the spring of 2013 Britain was helping to supply arms to the non-Islamist rebel fighters but with enough distance from the process to maintain deniability. But that supply waxed and waned depending on international diplomatic manoeuvrings. A senior FSA activist also told me the British were helping to arm them by working with the Saudi government. The US had made it clear it was now not going to try to convince them otherwise.⁵⁷ The diplomat said all three countries, though predominantly the Americans, had set up a camp along the border in Jordan to train rebel fighters in tactics and arms, essentially building an FSA officer class. Broader European enthusiasm for maintaining their strict arms embargo was also on the wane.

On Syria the US wasn't 'leading from behind', it was not leading at all. On his first trip to the Gulf as secretary of state John Kerry had to stand next to the Qatari prime minister and listen to him gently chide the Obama administration over its reluctance to arm the opposition. 'There is a change in the international position and the American position in this regard. They're talking about weapons,' said Sheik Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani through a translator. 'We hope that this had happened sometime ago before, because this would have maybe lessened the death and destruction that took place in Syria . . . I'm not an expert on arms, but if there is some rocket-propelled grenades

or RPGs or anything provided, this will not threaten the world order.'

In response the secretary of state could only say: 'We had a discussion about the types of weapons that are being transferred and by whom. We are aware of what people are doing . . . we did discuss the question of the ability to try to guarantee that it's going to the right people and to the moderate Syrian Opposition Coalition.'⁵⁸

The previous day in Saudi Arabia Kerry had acknowledged that in Syria 'bad actors, regrettably, have no shortage of their ability to get weapons from Iran, from Hezbollah, from Russia,' and then he had to listen to a lecture from its foreign minister Saud al-Faisal about how 'what is happening in Syria is a slaughter . . . and we just can't bring ourselves to remain quiet in front of this carnage.'⁵⁹ Unfortunately for Secretary of State Kerry US policy towards the Gulf meant he could not point up the contradictions in all their positions. The Gulf countries couldn't remain quiet about the violence, but they all kept quiet about the aspirations behind the original revolts because what they did not support was the democracy and human rights most of the Syrians were fighting for.

The first year of the conflict saw the West trying to negotiate Assad out of the country. From the second year, once it was clear that Assad was not going to go in a matter of months and that there was no appetite among the US public for military engagement, the Obama administration sought to stop the violence spilling out elsewhere. The US has not been trying to resolve the situation in Syria, it has been trying to contain it.

In an election year you can't answer the question 'What are you going to do about these massacres?' by saying 'Nothing.' The Obama administration was criticised for having no policy towards the violence in Syria, and that criticism was unfair. It did have a policy. It was a 'We're not getting involved' policy, but it couldn't spell that out until 2013.

If the Obama administration was reluctant to play a leading role during the fighting it also hinted it might take a back seat when the regime finally collapsed. When he was asked by the Senate committee

if there were plans for stabilisation operations for the end of Assad's rule General Mattis said the Arab League and the GCC states 'may be able to take this on'.⁶⁰

Syria was one of the rogue nations Obama had tried to engage with. In 2011 he sent in the first US ambassador to Damascus for six years. The post had been withdrawn after the assassination of Rafik Hariri in neighbouring Lebanon, which Washington blamed on Syria. Obama had sought to engage with Syria before the Arab Spring because it was strategically important. It could destabilise Jordan and Lebanon. It could threaten Israel. It was a player in the Middle East peace process, and the US hoped to woo it away from Iran.

All of those issues have been overtaken by events. If the war goes on much longer the country may break down into fiefdoms. That will guarantee chaos for years to come. And while the fighting goes on, the only policy the US needs, now that the strategic value of Syria has disintegrated, is to stop the mess spreading. It is one also signed up to by Syria's neighbours.

The one way that Syria might, after all, end up being a bit like Libya is if Assad should also choose not to make his last stand in the capital but in his community's heartland. In Gaddafi's case it was the desert city of Sirte. Assad's instincts are likely to take him to the coastal mountain area that forms the Alawite homeland. Hence his men fighting so hard to keep hold of the main motorway heading out of Damascus through Homs and up towards the coastal mountain area. To retreat down this road would be to return to the statelet first granted to the Alawites by the French in 1922 around the port city of Latakia.⁶¹ If he does that, how long he can last out there would depend on how organised and cohesive the Sunni militia are. If by then the country has descended into warlordism and the FSA brigades are busy wrangling over the spoils with the Nusra Front, his group might be able to hold on and recreate an Alawite state. Opposition activists in Lebanon told me they were resigned to the fact that the jihadists, like the Nusra Front, were likely to keep control of the north. FSA fighters were likely to hold the

south. Before the war was over rebel fighters were carving out territory they intended to keep. The same could also happen with the Kurds in the north-east of the country.

A retreat to the Alawite homeland might actually prove the best-case scenario for the West too, because it would allow the war to wind down. If the Syrian leadership was all simply to be wiped out in a bomb attack, or all to get on a plane, the nature of the conflict now suggests there could be a widespread slaughter of the Alawites who remain, a fury of retribution. They would probably flee the country. But if the state falls apart they won't be the only ones running for their lives. Anyone with a family, but without the protection of a militia, will contemplate doing the same.

Turkey, like Jordan, has the capacity to build a 'safe haven' for a surge of refugees on the Syrian side of its border, and if the regime collapsed that is what it would probably do. Few Syrians will go to Iraq. That leaves Lebanon. The most fragile, most complex society in the Middle East would have to take most of the impact from a collapse of the Syrian state. It is the least equipped to do so. Many Alawites would probably end up in northern Lebanon if they found nowhere safe in Syria.

The Israeli military leadership does not believe that Assad will flee the country. They think he takes his responsibilities to his Alawite sect seriously and so will, as a last resort, try to build a new Alawite stronghold. 'The Alawites need a place to run to or be butchered by the rebels,' is the Israeli assessment.

An Alawite state would also enjoy the full support of both the Russians and the Iranians. The Russians would get to keep their warm-water naval facility in Tartus. The Iranians could still send guns to Hezbollah if they help Assad hold the land all the way to the Lebanese border. Militarily, defending an Alawite state is a much more viable option than trying to rule the whole country. The Alawites could probably even get the international community on board by claiming that without their own state they would be annihilated. The only people who would not be happy would be the Syrian opposition – but they are likely to be exhausted – and of course the Gulf states.

The analogy for the sectarian mess in Syria is the sectarian mess in Yugoslavia. Both countries were created out of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The disintegration of Syria has followed the end of the Cold War dictatorships in the Middle East, and the end of the Cold War dictatorships in Europe led to Yugoslavia's collapse too. And so complicated were events in Yugoslavia that it was impossible to label Clinton's foreign policy strategy. There was no clear 'Clinton doctrine' like there is no clear Obama doctrine. But in February 1999 President Bill Clinton outlined what *he* thought foreign policy was for:

The true measure of our interests lies not in how small or distant these places are or in whether we have trouble pronouncing their names. The question we must ask is, what are the consequences to our security of letting conflicts fester and spread? We cannot, indeed, we should not, do everything or be everywhere. But where our values and our interests are at stake and where we can make a difference, we must be prepared to do so. And we must remember that the real challenge of foreign policy is to deal with problems before they harm our national interests.⁶²

The Syrian conflict does not harm America's national interests.

President Obama said in January 2013:

As I wrestle with those decisions, I am more mindful probably than most of not only our incredible strengths and capabilities, but also our limitations. In a situation like Syria, I have to ask, can we make a difference in that situation? Would a military intervention have an impact? What would be the aftermath of our involvement on the ground? Could it trigger even worse violence or the use of chemical weapons? What offers the best prospect of a stable post-Assad regime? And how do I weigh tens of thousands who've been killed in Syria versus the tens of thousands who are currently being killed in the Congo? Those are not simple questions. And you process them as best you can. You make the decisions you think

balance all these equities, and you hope that, at the end of your presidency, you can look back and say, I made more right calls than not and that I saved lives where I could.⁶³

In similar circumstances the last two Democrat presidents reached similar conclusions. Eventually Bill Clinton decided after four years of conflict that he *could* make a difference in the former Yugoslavia. Perhaps President Obama will reach the same conclusion, and by that time we may also be talking about the former Syria.

Before he even boarded the campaign bus to run for the White House, Barack Obama had thought long and hard about the use of American power overseas. His words in 2013 were an echo of those he wrote in 2006 in his book *The Audacity of Hope*, in which he criticised the framing of US foreign policy.

Instead of guiding principles, we have what appear to be a series of ad hoc decisions, with dubious results. Why invade Iraq and not North Korea or Burma. Why intervene in Bosnia and not Darfur . . . Are we committed to use force wherever there's a despotic regime that's terrorising its people – and if so, how long do we stay to ensure democracy takes root?⁶⁴

President Obama is wrestling with those questions today. That guiding principle still seems to be eluding him. The younger version of himself suggested:

a revised foreign policy framework that matches the boldness and scope of Truman's post-World War II policies – one that addresses both the challenges and the opportunities of a new millennium, one that guides our use of force and expresses our deepest ideals and commitments . . . To begin with, we should understand that any return to isolationism – or a foreign policy approach that denies the occasional need to deploy U.S. troops – will not work.⁶⁵

For now today's President Obama has made it clear he does not think the US can easily end the bloodshed in Syria. Iraq, in his own mind, taught him the folly of trying. It also showed him America's limits and priorities. The Arab Spring has revealed to him that America cannot manage the region any more.

As he began his fifth year in office, academics and policy wonks still could not work out what label to hang on President Obama. They too had not discovered his guiding principle. Obama's outgoing secretary of state was asked at a gathering of foreign affairs specialists: 'Is there an Obama doctrine, is there a Clinton doctrine, that somehow ties together, gives a sense of priorities, helps explain what it is we should do and not do and how we should do it in the way that other doctrines historically have played that role?'⁶⁶ They wanted to know: is Obama a realist, or an idealist, or a pragmatist? The answer to those questions is yes.

The world now knows much more about Syria than it did when *Vogue* sent its fashion photographers to take snaps of Assad playing with toy cars with his kids. The world knows exactly what is going on in his country. The nations of the world are outraged by the human suffering in Syria, but not enough to send any of their own people to suffer with them. Secretary of State Kerry had promised not to keep the opposition 'dangling in the wind', but with the conflict in its third year that is where many felt they still were.⁶⁷ That fact may come back to haunt the West. 'The sense of betrayal from the civilians, from the weak, from the victims of the violence in Syria is justifiably such that it could easily have a negative impact on the relationship between, not only the Syrians, but also the other young people in this part of the world, and the Western powers for generations to come,' believes General Robert Mood. When Assad is driven from Damascus the Western world will hope to put in train all those contingency plans it never did have ready for the day after in Iraq. The post-Assad era may therefore be less bloody and chaotic than the post-Saddam era, once the initial lust for revenge has been sated. Equally likely though is the prospect that the

bloodletting may not stop, plunging the country into a prolonged sectarian conflict.

If the Arab Spring and the years that followed have been a revelation to the world, then it has been an education for the Syrians too. The most important thing they have learnt is this. While the war rages there will be no foreign cavalry coming over the horizon. Until the fighting ends the Syrian people are on their own.