

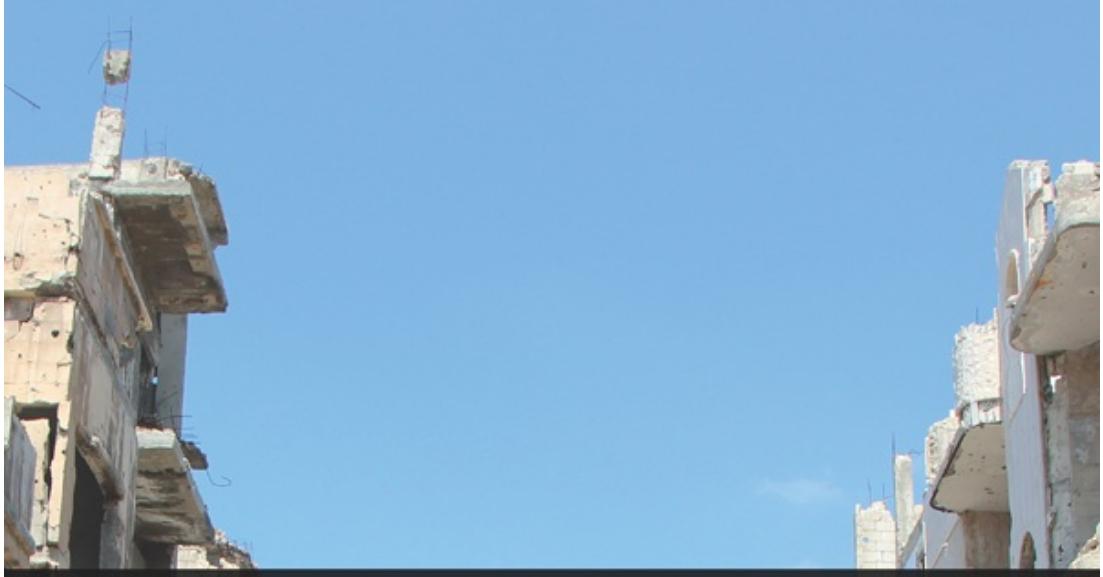


# DAYS OF THE FALL

A Reporter's Journey in the Syria and Iraq Wars

Jonathan Spyer





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*Days of the Fall* takes the reader into the heart of the terrible wars in Syria and Iraq. The book combines frontline reporting with analysis of the deeper causes and effects of the conflict.

Over five years, Jonathan Spyer reported from the depths of the wars, spending time in Aleppo, Baghdad, Damascus, Mosul, Idlib, Hasaka and other frontline areas. He witnessed some of the most dramatic events of the conflict — the rescue of the trapped Yezidis from the attempted ISIS genocide in 2014, the Assad regime's assault on Aleppo, the rise of independent Kurdish power in north east Syria, and the emergence of the Shia militias in Iraq as a key force. The book depicts these events, and seeks to place them within a broader framework. The author notes the ethnic and sectarian faultlines in both Syria and Iraq, and contends that both countries have now effectively separated along these lines, leading to the emergence of de facto fragmentation and the birth of a number of new entities. The book also notes that this confused space has now become an arena for proxy conflict between regional and global powers.

Containing interviews with key figures from all sides of the conflict, such as the Shia militias in Iraq, and even ISIS members, *Days of the Fall* serves as an invaluable and comprehensive guide to the complex dynamics and the tragic human impact of the wars.

**Jonathan Spyer** is a journalist and researcher. He is originally from the UK and has lived in Jerusalem, Israel, since 1991. His research focuses on the Levant, and he has covered events in Syria extensively over the last decade.

# DAY~~S~~ OF THE FALL

A Reporter's Journey in the Syria and  
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*Jonathan Spyer*

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**For Janice Spyer**

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# ABBREVIATIONS

AFP	Agence France-Presse
CW	chemical weapons
Da'esh	ISIS
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GID	General Intelligence Directorate
IDF	Israeli Defense Forces
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISOF	Iraqi Special Operations Forces (also CTS)
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
PKK	Kurdish Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
RPG	rocket-propelled grenade
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party
YPG	People's Protection Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Units

# PREFACE

The following is a record of a number of reporting trips into Syria and Iraq during the period of civil war in those countries. My intention is to depict and describe the process in which the war in Syria metamorphosed, from an uprising against a brutal dictatorship into a many-sided sectarian conflict. This in turn led to the effective demise of the Syrian and to a lesser extent the Iraqi state, and the overflowing of the war into neighboring Lebanon and Turkey. The war became a front in a larger geo-strategic conflict pitting Shia Iran against its Sunni opponents, and drawing in Russia and the US. This was a war for the future of the Middle East, with implications of global importance. It was also a local conflict, or series of conflicts, which tore at the fabric of the societies in which it took place.

The Syrian civil war offered a uniquely challenging environment for journalists seeking to report on it, and this account seeks also to convey some of the difficulties and rewards experienced by those of us who covered it. First Assad, then ISIS sought to impose silence on the areas in which they were conducting their murders. There was a human duty to oppose this. Many who were part of this effort paid a very high cost. This too deserves to be documented.

I am not a Syrian, nor a participant in the war. Only an observer. The war in Syria was not my first experience of armed confrontation. I have covered conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Ukraine as a journalist, and I fought in the 2006 Israel–Hizballah war as an IDF soldier.

The Syrian war, however, was of a different order of magnitude. Those of us who covered it were witnesses to the opening up of a process which has kickstarted the greatest wave of change to hit the Levant and Mesopotamia since the end of the Ottoman Empire.

It is a process in which well-established states are ceasing to be, while putative successor entities, usually organized on an ethnic or sectarian basis, make bloody war against one another over the ruins. This process has consumed many lives and transformed many others. It has rocked the established order in

the Middle East on its axis.

Some of the people depicted herein I now know to be dead. There are others whose fate is not known to me. What will remain and precisely how it will all end is not yet clear. This is only the most preliminary of sketches.

Some western journalists had dreadful experiences in Syria, in which they encountered the human potential for cruelty at its most stark and ugly. My own experience was more mixed. I did indeed see much which reflected the very worst of human possibility. But I also benefitted, learned from and was fascinated by my encounters with many of the people that the reader will encounter in this story – among them Lieutenant Bilal Khabir of Assad's airborne troops and the Free Syrian Army; Jamshid Osman of the YPG militia; the Kurdish activist Zuzan from the city of Qamishli; Muhyia Din al-Qabbani, rebel organizer from Binnish; Mahmoud Mousa, teacher, refugee and oppositionist from Jisr al-Shughur; Zaher Said, opposition militant from Latakia; and Zilan, a YPJ commander in the Yarubiya area.

All these people are participants in the “fall” of the title – the fall being the crumbling of the countries in which they thought they lived, and perhaps some deeper fall into an abyss of violence and cruelty that lurks always not far beneath the surfaces of everyday life. They became soldiers, metaphorically or in reality, in the wars that erupted following the sudden collapse of the long, sclerotic and suffocating regional order. The wars were the conflicts of succession that followed this collapse. I was inspired by all these people and am trying to the best of my ability to convey some of their story, in what follows. Also I remember the little refugee girl who I met among the refugees at Bab al-Salameh in the summer of 2012, whose life was taken by a regime barrel bomb, whose name I do not know, who symbolizes for me the sadness and loss at the heart of all this, and to whom I dedicate this work.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The reporting trips described herein could not have been undertaken without the vital assistance and involvement of a considerable number of individuals. The wars in Syria and Iraq are not yet concluded. For this and other reasons, I am not able to name all of them. Among those who I am able to name, and to whom I express the most profound gratitude, are: David McAvoy, Zach Daniel Huff, Sherzad Mamsani, Mohammed Ibrahim, Perwer Mohammed Ali, Rodi Hevian, Ipek Tasli and Rawand Darwesh. In addition, I would like to thank a number of editors and publications whose commissioning of articles enabled me to support myself while working in the relevant countries. Robert Munks of *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Jennifer Campbell at *The Australian* and Ilan Evyatar at the *Jerusalem Post* and *Jerusalem Report* played particularly important roles in this regard. It goes without saying that any errors and inaccuracies in the following text are the author's responsibility alone.

# 1

## BIRTH OF AN INSURGENCY

Abdullah al-Yasin and Steven Sotloff. Their faces in the half-dark. I am the only corner remaining from that particular triangle of acquaintance. The other two are both dead.

I met Abdullah at the height of the battle for Aleppo in September 2012. I had been interviewing a rebel commander who called himself “Abu Saumar” in a half-derelict building in the Sha’ar district of the city.

Aleppo was a close approximation of hell at that time. The frontline area, the “clashes line” as the rebel activists called it, was a maze of collapsed houses and rubble, with alleys and open areas where the snipers enfiladed. There was constant noise, loud crashes nearby, the intermittent rattle of small arms fire.

A drone, a low hum, always in the air. This was the sound of the regime helicopters circling overhead. The rebels had no defense against anything in the air. The helicopters patrolled in ones, with a blank, insect-like superiority. Every so often one of them would come down and fire a missile or drop a barrel bomb. Death and hysteria would ensue.

We had just survived a barrel bombing at the Dar al Shifa hospital in Aleppo when I met Abdullah. He was one of about 20 men gathered in the room as I interviewed Abu Saumar. Abdullah was thin-faced, short-haired, unshaven. He glowered at me throughout the interview with barely concealed hostility.

Meanwhile, the mysterious crashes outside continued and Abu Saumar of the Afhad al-Rasul brigade took me through his unit’s version of what was taking place. A rebel advance near the Ramouseh highway, he noted, but nothing moving in the Citadel.

At the end of the interview, as we were exchanging pleasantries in broken Arabic, Abdullah came forward. Smiling like a man who has trapped his quarry, he began to speak in fluent English. “I’m responsible for all the journalists in

Aleppo,” he said. “Let’s stay in touch. Do you have a card or something?”

This was not what I was looking for. In Syria, my safety derived from maintaining a certain amount of anonymity. This was because I was based in Jerusalem, and held dual British and Israeli citizenship. A swift Google search of my name would reveal this.

It wasn’t that I had any malevolent intentions toward the Syrian rebels. I was generally sympathetic to their cause. But Aleppo was already full of Islamists. Earlier in the day, we had visited a checkpoint of a new organization called Ahrar al-Sham. The fighters were long-haired, wild-bearded, many wearing a kind of turban.

Still, I couldn’t very well refuse. So I took the proffered scrap of paper and carefully wrote my name and Skype address on it. Sometimes in pressured situations, I suffer from a sudden quickening of the heart rate. This is not something I can voluntarily control. I was happy that day in the Sha’ar district to observe that my hands did not shake and my heart stayed at its normal rate as I wrote my details for Abdullah al-Yasin.

Abdullah spoke fluent English with an incongruous London accent competing with his Syrian cadences. He was ambiguously friendly as we shared details of various British hacks of our common acquaintance. Then he asked me what my further plans were. I told him we planned to try and get back across the border to Turkey from Azaz the following morning.

All that afternoon, I waited in the media center in Azaz, expecting that some search party would shortly arrive from Aleppo, demanding to know where the Israeli was. I even had my Israeli passport with me, which I tried feebly to conceal about my person in a way which would have taken mere seconds to discover.

But no search party arrived. And we made it back across the border the following day, after many delays.

Safely back in Jerusalem, I friended Abdullah on Skype. He accepted my overture. He never quizzed me about the reasons for my location. “troublemaker929” was his name there.

In February 2013, Abdullah al-Yassin was killed. Shot dead. Not by the regime in Aleppo, but in some dispute with semi-criminal elements in the city.

I kept the Skype friendship with him and I would look sometimes at the brooding black and white picture he had placed at his profile. troublemaker929. Still glowing green as though potentially ready to talk. The dead man’s profile no different to those of the living.

With Steven Sotloff, it was a bit more involved. We met when he was an intern at a think tank where I worked in Herzliya, in Israel, at the start of his

career. He had contacted me subsequently a few times for advice or just to chew over things. I saw on his Facebook profile that he entered Syria in early 2013, and that Abdullah al-Yasin had been his fixer.

Steven spoke about al-Yasin in glowing terms that seemed to me naive. Abdullah was an interesting man, but Sotloff, I thought, elevated him to the sort of poet-warrior status which no-one really merits, and which tells you more about the person doing the describing than the described.

What it told me about Steven was that he was an innocent, in an area of the world where being an innocent is dangerous. Steven's career, nevertheless, took off and was impressive. He wrote for *Time* magazine, Christian Science Monitor and other places. And when he passed by Israel, he would get in touch and sometimes we'd chat online. We never got round to meeting a second time. He informed me in the summer of 2013 that he was planning to head into Aleppo again by way of Azaz.

This was highly unwise. I knew Steven knew that, so I didn't tell him. A year earlier, the route from Kielis in Turkey to Azaz and then Aleppo had been a common one for journalists covering the Syrian war. Some of the better-off outlets had their correspondents staying in hotels in Kielis at that time, and commuting in to cover the fighting.

But a lot changed between summer 2012 and summer 2013. Most importantly, the jihadis of Jabhat al-Nusra and the newer organization Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) were now all over the northern countryside. For that reason, the route via Azaz into Aleppo was hardly used anymore. The result was that there was very little remaining coverage of the situation in Aleppo.

Steven's idea was extremely courageous, and extremely foolhardy. It wouldn't have done any good to have tried to dissuade him, of course. In the culture of which we were both a part, he would have enjoyed such admonishments, and enjoyed rejecting them. I didn't offer them.

A month later, I was at a conference on Mid-East matters in a European capital. A Washington friend with whom I chatted in one of the breaks told me that Steven had been abducted. "The State Department's dealing with it, so you shouldn't mention anything." Steven's Facebook page, which he had maintained in the name of "Stove Sotty," remained untouched, unchanged – but un-updated.

In the following months, I picked up occasional tidbits from acquaintances in the security industry regarding Steven. That he was being held with the American journalist James Foley, that they were being kept in Raqqa, that they were not being tortured.

And then, in the summer of 2014, Steven's captivity was blown open, and the world learned about it, from the shocking video of the execution of Jim Foley,

and then the footage of Steven himself, in the desert, an impossibly blue and empty sky behind him. Reading some absurd and scripted statement that ISIS had dictated for him. Kneeling next to a jihadi with a British accent.

And a few days later the rumors began to fly that Steven was already murdered. I was sitting in a bar in Jerusalem with a friend who is a leading US analyst on Syria when we heard the news. “Sotloff’s dead,” he mouthed to me after taking a call while we were having dinner. We stayed and smoked and drank arak until late in the night.

Thus was this small and tenuous triangle of acquaintance closed. A Syrian rebel activist, a young American journalist, and me. The other two now dead, along with all the others, and me, left. Along with all the others.

I don’t mean to suggest that I was heartbroken by either death, though I liked both men. Only that their faces remain with me at times.

Steven Sotloff’s Facebook profile disappeared even before his execution. Then it appeared again. As a page in his memory. Abdullah al-Yasin’s Skype profile is still there, too. troublemaker929, empty and green and humming, the same photograph, on my screen.

I came to the war early. I started writing about Syria and its opposition about four years before the outbreak of revolution and civil strife.

Oppositions in exile are by their nature rather hopeless affairs. The Syrians were exceptional even in this company. The Assad regime covered the country with a web of low-tech, pervasive and brutal information-gathering networks and structures of patronage, violent repression, blackmail and corruption. Nothing seemed beyond its reach, or its view. The oppositionists squabbled and waited in remote corners of European cities.

Syria seemed frozen, airless, its regime immovable. Repression was systematic, and absolute. There was no law. A series of severe droughts from 2007–10 had led to impoverishment in the countryside and the migration of around 1.5 million Syrians to the cities.<sup>1</sup> Yet neither my friends from the Syrian opposition nor I expected anything to happen there, in spite of the “Arab Spring” taking place at that time elsewhere in the region. The hand of the regime seemed too heavy. We were caught by surprise.

As soon as the uprising began, I started to bother my Syrian contacts to help me get into the country. I connected with a group of people online who represented the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs). These were the main structure behind the civilian protests that characterized the first phase of the events in Syria – from mid-2011 till roughly the end of that year, when the armed insurgency began to get going in earnest. But the LCC people never seemed to turn their vague promises into anything operational.

There was no chance of getting a visa. I had published extensively against the Assad regime. Anyway I was an Israeli citizen. A journalist, a Middle East analyst easily found in both the Israeli and international media. No point in even trying.

But toward the end of 2011, precariously controlled rebel authorities began to be established in the north of the country. The insurgency was a largely rural, conservative, Sunni Arab affair. The emergence of the rebel areas seemed to open up new possibilities. In the first months of 2012, western correspondents, myself among them, began to try and make their arrangements to enter these areas and report.

There were immediate difficulties. Assad's army was still patrolling the long border between Syria and Turkey. Getting in meant making it past the minefields and the Syrian Arab Army. This in turn involved linking up with one or another of the many smuggling lines taking people and goods across the mountains and into north west Syria.

By February 2012, I had managed through long-standing opposition contacts to navigate this not easy landscape and to link up with rebels in the northern province of Idlib and in the city of Antakya. After negotiations via Skype, I made my way from Jerusalem to Ankara, and then from there to Antakya, ancient Antioch, on the Turkish–Syrian border.

Antakya was one of the great cities of the ancient world, of Rome and Byzantium. A fabled center of early Christianity. But little remained of this former glory. It had become a ramshackle, concrete border town. It had a curious, febrile atmosphere in the first months of 2012. The armed insurgency was still in the process of being born. The hotel cafés were full of members of emerging rebel militias, thin, scruffy and unshaven, meeting with smarter-dressed men – representatives of Middle Eastern governments or private sources of funding.

The regime's information networks were known to be active. This led to a general atmosphere of suspicion.

All this was played out against the background of a dreary, misty winter and near-constant, cold rain. Tawdry intrigue. Malice and paranoia everywhere. The rebels made their offices in rundown apartment blocks on the outskirts of town. The regime structures watched, unseen. The cold seeped into everyone's bones. There had been kidnappings of rebel officers. The ill-intent came wrapped in venality and false friendship.

Many of the supporters of the regime were Christians. They didn't have any fervent love for the Assads. But they had taken a close look at the Sunni insurgency that was fighting against the regime, and had decided that it probably

represented a worse prospect.

In the Liwan Hotel, where I was staying, I made friends with a middle-aged Christian Syrian man called Michel, who worked as a kind of doorman and gofer. The Liwan became a favorite for foreign reporters heading into Syria, of whom there was a rapidly growing number. All the major networks were looking to take advantage of the crack that had opened in Syria's edifice with the emergence of de facto rebel control in swathes of the country's north.

The Liwan Hotel was located in an old house up a narrow road near the center of Antakya. It was a small and friendly place, built out of stone and dark wood. A good stopping off point before going to meet whatever lay across the border. All day long Michel and the other members of staff would be bustling about on various errands.

Michel was a refugee from Latakia. He was big, grey curly-haired, smiling and avuncular. The other employees of the Liwan treated him with an unaffected respect which derived from his age. I liked him and, when I first arrived in Antakya, I tried to hire him to make some calls to the various Free Syrian Army contacts I had.

This was not a success. My Free Army contacts, after a preliminary talk with Michel, warned me that I couldn't bring him as a translator to our meetings. When I asked why, they told me: "This man has the accent of the western coastal area, you understand? Of Latakia. Do you remember Hussein Harmoush? That's why."

Lieutenant-Colonel Hussein Harmoush was a Free Army officer who had been abducted from Antakya in August 2011 – and never heard from again.<sup>2</sup> So I paid Michel what I owed him and sent him home. For some reason, I found myself ashamed to explain to him the reason why his services would not be required. I made up something about my rebel contacts leaving for Istanbul. This episode somehow exemplified the atmosphere in the town.

The meetings with the Free Army took place in their office in a half-built apartment block, with the February rain coming down outside. The man I interviewed, Captain Ayham al-Kurdi, was a recent defector from an anti-aircraft unit of Assad's forces. He was young, clean-shaven, well built and confident.

I interviewed him in the course of a tense day as I tried also to liaise with the smugglers regarding my departure.

Kurdi was a native of Hama, 30 years old. Sitting behind his desk in a room with peeling paint, he described how he had come to the insurgency.

He had been stationed near Daraa, a town close to the Jordanian border and the birthplace of the uprising, in mid-2011. And he had witnessed the use of anti-aircraft munitions against civilian demonstrators in the area, as the Assad regime

sought to murder the revolt in its cradle.

The use of these munitions was intended as a tool of terror. Their bullets killed no more or less than regular ordnance. But from the regime's point of view, they had the additional attraction of setting the bodies of those they hit on fire, turning the corpse into a symbol of deterrence to all who would challenge Assad's rule.

What they had also done was to make Ayham al-Kurdi and others reassess their view of the government they served. Kurdi had made his decision to desert and join the budding insurgency.

Kurdi's assessment of the strategic reality facing the Syrian revolution was grim, and prescient, as it turned out: "If there is no international or Arab intervention, this situation could continue for years."

The revolution had powerful enemies. The captain counted them on his hands, and the reasons for their enmity to the insurgency against Assad. First, Iran: "The Syrian revolution," said Kurdi, "was a shock for the Iranian project. The Iranians want to control the region – Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, the Gulf. The Syrian revolution came to break this dream. So it is natural for the Iranians to help Assad."

But together with the Iranians, there were their Lebanese clients, Hizballah, and beyond this Russia and China, looming and impervious. "A great Arabic and international movement" was needed to oppose them.

I was impressed with Kurdi, in spite of his mistrust of fellow countrymen with western coastal accents. At the time, it seemed to me that if this uprising could pull in men of his type – secular officers, smart, rational and pragmatic – then it had a chance.

The young activists who were supposed to get me across the border, with whom I met later in the day, inspired less confidence. But, as it turned out, they were more representative of the true face of the emergent armed insurgency – rural, Sunni Arab, pious and not especially competent.

I had received their numbers while still at home in Jerusalem. "Ring us when you arrive in Antakya," they had said. No reply, of course, when I had tried to call on my arrival from the bus station in Antakya, at eight in the morning after an all-night bus journey from Ankara and during a freezing rainstorm. It took a couple of days to locate them. Finally, we arranged a meeting.

They came to the Liwan Hotel to coordinate our trip across the border. Two very young men. One about 20, somewhat overweight, with a tight black shirt squeezed shiny across his belly and an attempt at a beard evident on his cheeks. The other one too young even to try for facial hair, very thin, darker skinned and with a scarf in the rebel colors around his neck. The first said his name was

Udai, the second Mohammed.

Michel was at the entrance and watched them come in and approach my table. I saw his old face behind them, looking at me with a sort of regretful disapproval.

I was not enthralled by them either. Not by Udai's attempts to come across as sophisticated and slightly heavy, and especially not by little Mohammed's noisy arrogance. These are the people to whom I am entrusting my life, it occurred to me.

"Tomorrow, we come for you, OK?" said Udai. "Be ready outside the hotel for crossing the border at around three."

So I packed my camera, recording devices and a few spare clothes into a small bag and I waited for them at the allotted time. By 3.20 in the afternoon, with no sign of them, I was starting to become concerned. Michel was there too, walking past me on the narrow road outside the hotel entrance on various of his errands. He smiled doubtfully at me a couple of times as he passed by. Then he told me: "I think you're planning to go across the border into Syria. It's dangerous and you could be killed."

He continued on his way into the hotel. After another few minutes, the two of them finally roared up in an old white car. Udai driving and little Mohammed in the passenger seat.

Mohammed immediately began to try to squeeze money out of me. I found myself paying for petrol, then for food, until, finally, I lost my temper and the demands ceased. Then there was silence.

So I sat in the back as we drove out of Antakya, into green, flat fields close to the border. After about half an hour on the road, they pulled into a muddy yard, next to a large and crumbling house. Mohammed motioned me to climb the stairs to the farmhouse and the two rapidly piled back into their car and disappeared.

The farmhouse was dilapidated. A man of about 30 and his young son seemed to be the only inhabitants. Refugees of some kind. They had made their home in a single room. Two mattresses, and a gas heater. A noisy generator was powering the electricity. Grey and overcast outside.

I was to wait in the house till darkness, when others, presumably the smugglers, would come to fetch me. "You travel on horses," the man said with a smile.

So I stood outside the room and smoked and watched the darkness descending over the lowering mountains opposite. I wasn't afraid. The situation felt too remote to everything else for comparison.

Finally, at around six, another car pulled up. Two men in their 30s in the front.

They motioned me in. They didn't speak. Both were well built and serious. We cruised along the darkened highway. The man in the passenger seat pressed his face close to the window. Then, suddenly, he said something in rapid Turkish to the driver who swiftly pulled up by the side of the road.

Very quickly, the passenger exited the car, pulled open the back door and grabbed me by the arm. It was pitch dark outside and my eyes were still adjusting as the man sprinted across the road and into the undergrowth beyond, pulling me along behind him. We came to a high, rusty barbed-wire fence. This was the border. He motioned me to get down and I threw myself onto the damp ground as he pulled up the lowest rung of the wire.

I crawled forward and through the fence. Syria. The smuggler, now on the other side, motioned me to go forward into the darkness. As my eyes adjusted, I was able to make out a group of men and horses about 30 meters away. I glanced back quizzically and the smuggler motioned again with his hand, indicating that I should join this group.

So I sprinted forward and reached them a few seconds later. A group of men of mixed ages. Some in their 20s, some much older. Small, sturdy horses, laden down with crates on either side of them. A young man handed me a rope bridle.

Suddenly, and without a word, the men and horses began to sprint up the high slope beneath which they were gathered. Assad's army could be anywhere in the vicinity. They evidently wanted to reach the summit as quickly as possible. I tugged on my horse's bridle and began to try to drag it forward.

I soon got into a mess. The horse I was trying to pull seemed to have its own idea regarding how it wanted to get up the mountain. The ascent was covered with smooth, large rocks. I wasn't used to the speed, and soon found myself beginning to fall behind.

I thought about minefields and Assad's army and the torture chambers of his intelligence service as we pounded through the darkness. The ascent seemed to have no end. If you fall behind here, you're going to die, I told myself.

Then, just when I thought I couldn't possibly go any further, the group stopped on a patch of flat ground. An elderly man, hearing how out of breath I was, approached me. "Are you OK?" he asked me in Arabic.

"I'm fine. Have you got a drop of water?" I managed to gasp out.

"We don't have any water. But the ground's flatter now. Climb up on the horse from now."

So I managed to scramble up onto the horse, which was laden with two heavy crates, and we moved off, now in a long line, through the flatter ground and toward the first villages of northern Syria. After a while, a soft rain began. This was good. It meant that only the most committed of Assad's soldiers would want

to be out looking for infiltrators.

The ground was sodden and muddy, and we moved slowly. We kept going like that for about two hours. Finally, an isolated stone house appeared in the distance, still up in the high ground. We climbed off the horses and the men took the crates into the house. We all gathered in a front room, and a small boy brought in a tray of steaming hot glasses of black tea. We lit cigarettes.

I understood little of what was said. My spoken Arabic is poor at the best of times, and these men used a somewhat outlandish-sounding dialect which was halfway between Arabic and Turkish. But I was happy to be in the background. My body ached from the first sprint up the mountain. I watched as the men broke open one of the crates and passed the merchandise, wrapped in cellophane, around for amused appreciation.

Gleaming and black machine gun parts. Brand new. Udai and Mohammed had attached me to a convoy bringing in weaponry for the rebels. Not unexpected. The men laughed and exchanged remarks about the weapons.

After a few minutes, a car pulled up and I was motioned to leave. None of the smugglers acknowledged me as I left. They had been paid, and had performed their duty. The package was no longer of interest.

For the next couple of hours, I was passed on through a series of vehicles, each one driven by lone, taciturn men. We made our way in the darkness further into Syria and away from the border area. We were heading into Idlib province, one of the epicenters of the emerging rebellion.

I tried to engage one of the drivers, a thin, brown-bearded man, in conversation. “So is Assad finished, then?” I suggested by way of introduction.

“Assad is a Jewish dog,” he replied with a smile.

Finally, I was placed in a car where the driver was willing to talk. “Where do you want to go?” the slim, black-bearded and bespectacled young man asked me. “Idlib city,” I told him. This was where I heard the fiercest fighting was taking place. “We’re going to Binnish,” the young man said. “Why not come with us and meet the guys there, and then you can try and go on to Idlib tomorrow.”

I was in no position to refuse. So we reached the town of Binnish, and pulled up outside an old stone house with an iron door. The young bearded man got out and approached the entrance. Something about this young man looked familiar. I realized it was his particular style – very calm, unhurried, coolly polite, which I had encountered before in various contexts. This young man was a Sunni Islamist.

It may sound like a statement of the obvious in retrospect to note that I came across an Islamist among the first Syrian rebels I met. But, at the time, it was notable. The rebellion, we were told in the media at that time, consisted mainly

of recently deserted members of Assad's armed forces. The cool young men of Sunni Islamism had not yet been widely factored into the picture. But they were there on the ground from the start.

The bearded young man hammered on the iron door three times. Nothing. Then again. After a couple of minutes we heard the door begin to scrape. Then it slowly opened. A very young man carrying a Kalashnikov rifle stood in the entrance. They exchanged greetings and a few quick words of explanation. Then I was motioned to follow the young man into the house.

We took our shoes off at the entrance. And I saw myself for the first time in the light since we had left Antakya. My clothes were caked in mud from the journey. But I had arrived, and had avoided Assad's patrols on the border.

The young man opened the door of a room and we entered. It was a large reception place of the type common in the Arab world, with cushions and mattresses placed all round the walls. The air was thick with smoke. About 40 young men were crammed in the room, talking animatedly and laughing. Many of them were carrying rifles. A medium-caliber machine gun was stacked in the corner. A television turned to a Syrian government channel was playing to itself. A Russian Middle East analyst was being interviewed, speaking fluent classical Arabic.

My entrance was greeted with general hilarity because of the very large amount of border mud that had attached itself to my clothing.

In Binnish that night, however, this didn't do me any harm – it turned me into an instant source of attention and friendly amusement.

As it turned out, I wasn't the only foreign journalist hanging out with the fighters of the embryonic insurgency that night. Amid the hubbub of Arabic conversation, I made out someone speaking British English. A tall, well-built man was crouching down in front of a younger local guy. They were having an argument of some kind.

“We need to get to Idlib tonight – tonight if it's possible.”

“Not a chance to get there. Nobody going. But stay here in Binnish. Is no problem.”

It turned out to be Pete Foster, the chief cameraman of Sky News, who had entered Syria with a small team a few nights before. Alex Crawford, Sky's star war correspondent was there too. Alex had curled up and gone to sleep while Pete remonstrated with a harassed young activist about getting them as soon as possible into Idlib city, where the active frontlines were.

This exemplified one of the key elements of the emergent Syrian insurgency – namely, the acute absence of any centralized control. It would be the main factor in preventing the insurgency from making progress in the years ahead. What it

meant for journalists was that there were immense difficulties in getting from place to place in the rebel-controlled areas. One never knew whether this was really because of the possible presence of Assad's forces on the main roads, or whether it was simply the desire of the particular group of local activists with whom you were working to hang on to you.

At that time, journalists were a novelty in northern Syria, and there remained a kind of magic talisman sound around the very word "sahafi" (journalist in Arabic). This wouldn't last.

The different agendas of myself and the TV crew were instructive. I had no problem with going near the frontlines, but hanging around with the fighters in the villages surrounding Idlib city also suited my purposes. I wanted to speak to fighters, activists and leaders, to take the temperature of the emerging insurgency.

For the Sky crew, however, Binnish and its fighters weren't much use. They needed to get up to the action and film combat. As the South African cameraman who was accompanying Alex and Pete put it, "Your competition is other analysts. Fair enough. Our competition is Fabio Capello [then the England football manager] and how to get our story as first item on the news instead of him."

It seemed a pretty fair account of the differences. So while Pete, Alex and the cameraman went off to lobby further for their trip to Idlib city, I got talking to the young activist who the Sky team had been remonstrating with.

Muhyu Din al-Qabbani was his name, from Binnish. He had been working as a painter and decorator in Beirut when the revolution started. He had returned to take part in it. Muhyu Din was pale, with fair curly hair – a common look in northern Syria. He was 26 years old, and filled with infectious enthusiasm. The departure of Assad was imminent and inevitable, he maintained. "And it will finish here in Binnish, that's what we all say. The last battle will be here." (This turned out to be true, though not quite in the way Muhyu Din meant. Five years and 400,000 deaths later, Idlib would be one of the last strongholds of the retreating rebellion.)

There was a sort of carnival atmosphere about the insurgency in those early days. I know what the Syrian rebellion became and I have no illusions regarding it. But the sheer joy and relief that was evident in that northern Syrian town at the departure of the regime, at least in its visible forms, was palpable and moving.

Muhyu Din and his friend Hamdi had rigged up an absurd vehicle, an old milk float which they had painted in the colors of the Syrian rebel flag. They had put some loudspeakers on it, and they invited me to go for a drive with them across

town. It was about one in the morning. Hamdi was around the same age as Muhyu Din. He was clad in a scarf and a woolen hat in the colors of the rebellion. We crammed into the vehicle and set off into the town.

Authority had evidently disappeared, but in so far as anyone was running Binnish, it was the people I had just been sitting with. Hamdi delivered a non-stop stream of rebel rhetoric via the loudspeakers as we trundled through the night-time streets. At a certain point, an old woman shouted something at us and he turned the volume down.

Official authority had disappeared. By the entrance to the town, a makeshift roadblock had been set up, and some very young men armed with Kalashnikovs were guarding it. They tried to get me to take a picture of them searching a car. It was all oddly innocent. A car entering the town was stopped and the driver with a smile agreed to the “searching” of his vehicle. The young men then tried to look very paramilitary as I photographed them carrying out the search.

Assad’s army was just a few kilometers down the road, with tanks and artillery in easy reach. If the army came to visit, this would be the forward position. And yet somehow all this seemed like play-acting, not entirely serious. Not for long, of course.

“They came here back in October,” Muhyu Din told me. “The regular Syrian army. We all left the town and hid, so they turned our houses upside down. The Shabiha (Alawi paramilitaries) came into my house looking for me. My wife and daughter were there. They smashed the place to pieces. They even broke my bed in two. I don’t know if they thought I was hiding inside it.”

Many of the young men I had met the first night were recent deserters from Bashar Assad’s army. They had heard the news of the violent suppression of demonstrations, and of the bloodbath in the south. So they had taken their weapons and headed for home.

One quiet young man who refused to be photographed told me that he had been a tank driver. “He brought his tank with him when he deserted,” said Ali, the most talkative of the fighters I spoke to. The tank driver, whose name was Khaled, smiled shyly.

Ali was a former infantryman, tall and black-haired, wiry and gregarious. He had been serving on the Damascus–Aleppo highway when he decided to desert. News had reached him that the regime was no longer in Binnish. So he and a friend left their post in the middle of the night and managed to find a driver who brought them into Idlib province.

Fighters, refugees, former soldiers and volunteers. There was an eagerness then to their talk. A clear pleasure that the world had begun to notice. By night, I stayed at Muhyu Din’s house, and by day we would report, all over Binnish, with

the first lines of the regime army a few kilometers away across the fields. It was a precarious free zone. But it was a free zone.

As it turned out, of course, pure anarchy had not taken over the town. Rather, a de facto new authority had emerged under the leadership of a local businessman called “Abu Steif”.

Udai, the plump, shiny black-shirted youth who I had met in Antakya, was one of his sons. Abu Steif’s family were local merchants and businessmen and it was his money which had bought the guns the young men were toting all over the town.

Abu Steif was a big man with a perpetual air of tiredness about him, always fiddling with a set of worry beads that he carried about. Before the revolution the family had mainly traded in foodstuffs to local shops. His eldest son, Mustafa, was a different type to podgy Udai. Mustafa, well built and muscular, was a leading fighter.

But while Abu Steif’s young men spent their days smoking and drinking coffee endlessly in the clubhouse where I had first encountered them, there were also other forces gathering themselves in Binnish.

“The Salafis,” as Muhyia Din called them, were in town. They did not hang out with Abu Steif and his men. “Many of them fought in Iraq,” Muhyia Din told me. We would see them at the house of one of Muhyia Din’s cousins, who was close to them.

Abu Steif’s men were all young, in their early 20s. The Salafis were older, mostly bearded. They had uniforms too, and gave an impression of far greater seriousness. “They know how to make explosives,” Muhyia Din told me. “I didn’t bring the other journalists to meet them.” I didn’t realize at the time, of course. But I was witnessing the key divide that would eventually consume and divide the Syrian rebellion.

I interviewed one of the Salafis shortly after they had returned from an attack on a checkpoint. He was in his mid-30s, black-bearded and with the attitude I was beginning to recognize as typical of the rebel fighters, a gloomy assessment of the balance of forces combined with a kind of generalized optimism.

“We have no support from any country, and we receive no weapons from anyone,” he told me. “The regime, meanwhile, has Iran, Hizballah, Russia and China.” How long until Assad is destroyed? I asked. “I give it,” he said, in the manner of a physician revealing a prognosis, “roughly a month.”

Refugees were arriving from further south. All through the town there was a sense of purpose. There were reports of massacres in the Homs area. In the Salafis’ gathering place, some bearded young men from Homs had shown up, with tales of bombardments of the neighborhood of Baba Amr.

The journalists Remy Ochlik and Marie Colvin were killed at this time, almost certainly deliberately targeted by the regime.<sup>3</sup> It was an early indication of how perilous covering this war was going to become.

There had never quite been anything like this in the Middle East before – a situation where a dictatorial regime had lost control of its borders, while still remaining intact and in charge of its armed forces and security structures. Such a combination was bound to be fraught with danger for all those who elected to cross into the country, while lacking any official permission to be there.

The trip from Lebanon was more hazardous than that from Turkey. Coming in from Lebanon meant arriving much further south into Syria, that's to say much closer to the urban centers, above all Damascus, which the regime had to retain in order to survive. The regime army was still patrolling the northern border, to be sure. But it was a 911 kilometer border, poorly maintained and with remote towns and villages to its immediate south. The most important city of the north, meanwhile, was Aleppo, but the revolution was still far from there in early 2012.

We still had to be lucky, though. And traveling in from the north had its own hazards. Not least of these, as I had already experienced, were the smugglers' rings that the rebels relied on for transporting goods and people across the minefields and under the wire and between Syria and Turkey.

These were unscrupulous men, pursuing a trade that their families had been conducting across these borders since time immemorial. They had little conception of, and less interest in the nature of the work that the strange westerners who had suddenly began to arrive intended to pursue.

They would work for anyone who could pay them. Later, when the kidnappings began, this would lead to disaster for a number of western journalists.

But all this was far away in the future as the first few foreign journalists sought to ply their trade in the chaos of Syria in early 2012.

The Sky crew managed to find their way to Idlib city, where the fighting was supposedly taking place, and disappeared. They ended up getting picked up by the Turkish authorities making the return crossing. This was not disastrous, though – it meant a day or so in the cells and a fine.

In the preceding days in Binnish, however, they barely avoided a lynching when one of the regular Friday demonstrations suddenly turned against them, after a rumor of some kind swept the crowd. I was with them on a roof of a building taking pictures, when we heard hammering from the entrance. An angry crowd was assembled outside. For a moment, it looked like the western journalists would be attacked – before Abu Steif and his men who were stewarding the demonstration managed to calm things down.

“It’s a particular clan, who were connected to the regime,” Muhya Din told me afterwards. “Now they’re making provocations.”

The regime, it was clear, had not really left Binnish – it had simply become invisible. As in Antakya, across the border, its information-gathering networks were still buzzing and its capacity for dirty tricks intact. On the days of the demonstrations, a couple of helicopters would be audibly circling round the town, lazy and invulnerable. Watching. Assad might have ceded some of the ground in Syria. But he had all of the sky.

So the rebel zone in Idlib was precarious. The nascent insurgency had no means to defend itself from air attack or from a frontal ground assault, and it seemed only a matter of time before an additional such assault came. The army was absent from the towns because a small number of soldiers seeking to enter could be expelled or killed. But what if a larger force came?

Binnish also already had its own version of the burgeoning culture of martyrs that is a feature of the region. As Muhya Din and I made our way around the demonstrations, interviewing fighters, photographing, trying to stay out of trouble, I noticed a woman of about 40, in black and with a hijab, and with a long, thin, dark-skinned face who constantly seemed to be somewhere near us, watching, but never quite approaching.

Her presence was not in any way threatening, but when I saw her for the third or fourth time, I asked Muhya Din who this was. “It’s Um Maher,” he replied. “Her son Ahmed was killed in the October fighting. Do you want to talk to her?” I did. My interviews in Binnish so far had entirely been with men. This was not by chance and it reflected the fact that the rebellion was emerging in the most conservative and devout rural Sunni Arab sections of the country. A space in which women were nearly invisible.

In Abu Steif’s center, among his young fighters, the only woman I had seen was Alex Crawford of Sky News. Among the Salafis, there were women coming in and out because their meeting place was also a private house. But they were not to be found in the front room where the bearded Islamists gathered and talked. Occasionally, a young boy would bring in some delicious food or, more often, strong and scented coffee on a tray, from that other realm. But I would certainly not be permitted to go there. So I was keen for the chance to meet Um Maher and her family.

Muhya Din approached the woman and she shyly glanced at me; we followed her to her home. She asked us to wait outside while she fetched her husband and children. A few minutes passed, as Muhya Din impatiently scuffed his shoes against the dust and glanced this way and that for something more exciting coming along.

Then one of Um Maher's sons, a boy of about ten, came and opened the door and we removed our shoes and entered. In the main room, the family had prepared a little welcoming reception for a discussion of their martyred son, Ahmed Abd el-Hakim.

Um Maher and her husband sat in chairs next to one another. A little girl wearing tiny camouflage military fatigues was on the sofa, holding up a portrait of Ahmed, her eldest brother.

I tried to ask questions about Ahmed, who he was, what he had liked to do. The father, a handsome looking man of about 50 with greying hair said very little. Um Maher, with the same shy expression on her thin face as she'd had when she'd watched us in the street, did most of the talking. But her answers were in monosyllables.

Ahmed was 19. He had been killed by a sniper when the army came in with tanks in October. Where? It had been near the graveyard of the town, at a low point in the fields heading toward Sarmin. This macabre detail had been repeated to me several times by others during my time in Binnish – the government forces launching their attack from the town cemetery. Their basecamp among the dead.

After a few minutes, I was continuing to ask questions only because it seemed rude to get up and leave before sufficient time to justify the welcome had elapsed. Then on my cue Muhyia Din and I began to make the first murmurs and shuffles that indicated that the ritual of our departure should begin.

I could see that Um Maher didn't want us to go, but I was quite at a loss as to what more I could ask. So I thanked her and said that we should be leaving. She nodded and then glanced at my recorder, which was still on, as if to say that she wanted to make one further point. "For 40 years we've lived like this – no law, no rights," she began rapidly, in a low and insistent tone. "We live with terror. We are made to live differently from all other people in the world by this regime. So we're proud of our son, who was trying to end this. He was brave." All this while clutching the large picture of 19-year-old Ahmed Abd el-Hakim to her breast, her son.

We left shortly after. Muhyia Din was in talkative mood. He described the tanks bucking and roaring up from the graveyard in October, and how the fighters had tried to stop them in the first alleyways of Binnish, and then how they had fled.

Then he told me that we would be leaving Binnish that evening for a meeting with a commander of the emergent "Free Army" in the neighboring town of Sarmin.

This was good but also worrying news. In Binnish itself, after a day or two, one got used to the idea of the rebel free zones, and began to feel secure. That

was partly an illusion. The regime had eyes and ears in the town. And an attack could arrive at any moment.

But there was also something to it. The chance of running into a patrol or a roadblock of the army or pro-regime irregulars inside the town was nil. And these were the most likely ways that one would be caught.

On the roads, however, and especially on the main highway, the regime still ruled, and we would have to be lucky.

So, that evening, as the darkness descended, we finished a quick meal in the Qabbani family house, and then left for Abu Steif's center. There Muhyu Din took a Kalashnikov rifle and he, I and another young man who would be driving us got into the van to make for Sarmin.

Muhyu Din sent another young activist to drive out onto the highway first, and signal back that it looked clear. Then we set out. Green roadsigns with white writing, just like Israel and all across the Levant. The signs told us that we were on the way to Damascus, several hundred kilometers to the south.

But Sarmin was just a few kilometers away, and we reached it in a quarter of an hour or so. The armed presence there of the rebels was immediately apparent and more impressive than in Binnish. These men were wearing green Syrian army camouflage. They were all in their late 20s or early 30s and looked like experienced fighters.

We were shown into a half-built building, where a single very white light lamp was burning, reflecting onto some grey blocks. We seated ourselves there. An old, bearded man in a camouflage jacket was waiting for us.

I thought for a moment that it was him we had come to interview. I began to ask him questions regarding his opinion of the state of the uprising. Muhyu Din glanced at me strangely for a moment, then began to translate. The old man launched into a disquisition about the Arabic language, and the differences between the spoken and classical versions, and what this meant.

After a few minutes of this, three fighters of the Free Army entered and briskly introduced themselves. The one in the middle, of average height, slim and with a parachutist's wings sown onto his camouflage uniform, was clearly the man we had come to see.

This was Bilal Khabir, a local commander of the Free Army and a former officer of one of Assad's elite airborne units. Khabir had deserted from his unit some weeks previously, after seeing the suppression of demonstrations in the Dera'a area. The precipitating factor was the execution of one of his friends by Iranian personnel attached to the unit, after the friend had refused to fire on demonstrators.

An officer of his quality was evidently still fairly rare among the emergent

insurgency and he was treated by everyone with great respect. He had the quick and graceful efficiency and boy scout enthusiasm that is typical of a certain type of officer from prestigious units everywhere, and probably from all times. Khabir had let his beard grow for a few days to give himself a more local look, but his crisp uniform and its wings betrayed his origins.

I liked him straight away, not least because I could see from his eyes how tired he was. He was clearly fairly exasperated at the motley crew around him from which he was trying to build his rebel army, but he responded to them with the patience that officers of his type always do. This patience is born from the essential and usually quite wrong belief that at root everyone must surely be as committed to the mission as the officer himself is.

“The FSA is the real Syrian army. Law and justice is with our side. We will fight to the end. And beyond it.” That was Khabir.

The outlines of his own story, and the reasons he joined the FSA, were by now familiar.

He and his unit were deployed in the south in the early months of the uprising. They were told that armed Israelis had crossed the border and that they were to engage them. On closing with the “enemy,” they had discovered that it consisted of unarmed Syrian civilians. The troops were accompanied into the engagement by non-Arabic-speaking men, who Bilal later discovered were Iranians. These men were responsible for the execution of one of his brother officers, who refused to fire on civilians in the Dara'a area. Khabir made his way in June 2011 to the Free Syrian Army, days after the killing of his friend.

Bilal Khabir wore his Syrian army paratroopers’ wings on his FSA uniform, and was careful to explain to me that he did this because he regarded himself as part of the legal army of Syria. “I am with the law, not against the law. The regime is fascist and criminal.” Nor did he have any illusions about what was to come. “We expect what happened in Homs (the bombardment and slaughter of civilians) to happen here. But even with our simple weapons, we are ready to fight. Either Bashar stays, or we stay.”

As for what could bring victory, again, the demands were by now familiar – above all, a buffer zone. A place to which refugees could flee, and from which fighters could organize. Without this, he saw no end to the situation.

And a curious rumor: Three times, he said, three times, in his clipped, officer’s way, the regime has used chemical weapons and pesticides against protesters in the Homs area.

“Freedom is the promise of God on earth,” Khabir concluded. So if international help didn’t come, he and his men would hold the Sarmin free zone for as long as they could, and afterwards fight, he said “like Peshmerga.” The

regime, he told us, “has the heavy weapons, but the people are with us.”

A buffer zone and a supply of weapons from the West. The FSA would do the rest. The “real Syrian army”. I remember with peculiar vividness the white light shining into the half-built room. The officer, and his fighters gathered around him. One very thickset, brown-bearded man with an RPG 7 next to him.

This was the Syrian insurgency at its birth. Lots of chaos. Lots of hope. A genuine desire for a free and a better life. All this was present. It wasn’t just a dream invented by western publicists for the rebellion. And then, of course, the sectarian hatreds and the presence of the Salafis and the Sunni Islamists. They were always most likely to come to dominate it, and so they did. Was some other possibility lost? Could it have been different? Perhaps not substantially. Is it tragic? It is.

The interview with Khabir was the last I conducted in Idlib province. I left Binnish the following day. There was much commotion among the young media activists on the day I left. They were getting ready for the arrival of another journalist, a big fish from the *New York Times*. “Antonio”, his name was, they told me.

“Antonio”, as it turned out, was Antony Shadid, who was coming over with the same group of smugglers I had entered with, and who would die on his way out, in circumstances that have never been adequately explained.

My own departure was farcical rather than tragic. Muhyia Din forgot that I was supposed to leave that day. After much messing around, they got me to the border area, where I was placed in a car with two CBS journalists, Clarissa Ward and Ben Plesser. We waited in the darkness, smoking and talking for several hours.

Once we started moving, things went wrong. The guide was inept and lost his way and we wandered around in the darkness in the border area for a while. The night was bright and starlit. The fields were turning into a quagmire from the recent heavy rains and the mud squelched up to our knees. If we had run into a patrol we would have been doomed. No chance to move quickly in that mud. But luck stayed with us. We encountered neither minefields nor Assad’s army.

We had to wade through a flooded irrigation trench that blocked our way at one point, though. Up to our necks in the freezing water. I jumped in after the hapless guide. Out of my depth at a certain point and swimming. Finally, soaked and shivering from the cold, we made it to the highway, and Turkey. I arrived back to the Liwan Hotel soaked to the skin. It was a Friday night and a party was going on.

Michel spotted me straight away, and ducked out of sight. For a mad moment, I thought he was going to report me to the Turkish police. Then he reappeared,

strode quickly toward me, and gravely handed me a bottle of Efes Pilsen beer and a pack of Camel cigarettes. He avoided noticing that I was soaked to the skin and once more covered in river mud. The Turkish revelers at the Liwan found me hilarious as they strode outside in their gaudy provincial finery.

I left for Ankara and my plane home the next morning. Three weeks later, Bashar Assad's army came up the road from Idlib city and rampaged bloodily through Binnish. It was part of a more general attempt to crush the emergent rebel-controlled zones. But when the army passed on, the nascent rebel power re-emerged, and resumed control of the town. Both the structure established by Abu Steif, and the more shadowy Salafi network survived the onslaught. In the end, it would be the latter, aided from outside, that would really establish itself as the successor authority. I got back to Jerusalem and back to work. Syria was a door that had opened.

## Notes

- 1 Henry Fountain, "Researchers link Syrian conflict to a drought made worse by climate change," *New York Times*, March 2, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com>
- 2 Ivan Watson, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Hussein Harmoush," CNN, October 14, 2011. <http://edition.cnn.com>
- 3 Josie Ensor, "Veteran War Reporter Marie Colvin was 'tracked and deliberately targeted' by Assad regime before her killing in Syria," *Daily Telegraph*, July 10, 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk>

## 2

# THE BATTLE FOR ALEPPO

In the summer of 2012, the Assad regime began the large-scale bombing of populated areas in the parts of Syria it had abandoned. It was a crude, immensely cruel tactic. Whole villages and neighborhoods were destroyed and a large-scale exodus of refugees began. From the dictator's point of view, it was also effective. No coherent alternative administration would emerge in the area below the target sights of Assad's aircraft.

The war continued, and the armed rebellion appeared still to be gaining ground. On July 19th, rebel forces opened fire on government soldiers in the Salahedine neighborhood of Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city and the "capital" of the country's north. The battle for Aleppo had begun.<sup>1</sup>

Through July, the rebels continued their advance into Aleppo. By the end of August, most of the eastern section of the city was in the hands of the insurgency. Then the advance slowed. Assad rushed 20,000 soldiers to the city and the rebel push into the city center ran aground. The two sides settled in for a bloody battle of attrition. Soon, the area separating the forces, the "clashes line," as rebel activists called it, had become a wasteland of makeshift barricades, ruined houses and sandbagged positions, as the two sides faced each other, often only tens of yards apart.

For journalists, the Aleppo battle and the regime redeployment from the border in July 2012 offered an opportunity. The rebellion was now in control of a number of border crossings, including Bab al-Salameh, due north of Aleppo. The rebels also controlled the road leading from the border and the town of Azaz down into the eastern part of Aleppo city. For a while it became possible for reporters to "commute" to the battle lines, from hotels in the town of Kilis, on the Turkish side of the border.

I decided to make a trip to write from the battlelines in Aleppo in late August.

My idea was not to do the commute, which struck me as probably disorienting and excessively strange. When in areas of conflict, I preferred to stay immersed, and then surface at the end. Going backward and forward means playing a trick on your psyche, for which there is a price in terms of stability. It means that each morning, you will have to go through the trauma of immersion once again, rather than doing it once and then staying on the other side.

The thing about the combat zone is that it too has its moments of lightness and kindness and humor. So you take your human solace from those, and adjust to a different reality for the duration of your time there.

I arranged to stay in the Azaz media center, north of the city. It would be quieter than staying in Aleppo itself, a little further away from the regime lines. The only danger being the ever-present one of bombing from the air. But it would enable me to make an early start each morning and to spend the day traveling the rebel frontlines of the city.

I arrived again at Antakya, and stayed the night in the Liwan Hotel. Not a great deal had changed. The town was still teeming with refugees and still had the same strange and febrile atmosphere about it. Michel was still there. He greeted me like an old friend, and we remembered the night I had returned soaking wet from the border area.

I set out with my new fixer, Zaher, in the early hours of the morning from Antakya in the direction of Kilis. The plan was that we would make an illegal crossing of the border later in the day. The Turks, it seemed, took a somewhat tolerant attitude to the traffic of refugees in both directions.

Zaher was 27, a refugee from Latakia province in western Syria. He was a slim and athletic young man, a former champion distance runner. Zaher had a lustrous sheen of carefully styled, combed-back straight black hair of which he was proud, and which marked him out from the disheveled country boys that mainly populated the rebellion.

He was also possessed of a keen and shrewd political understanding. “I didn’t believe in the rebellion taking up arms,” he confided to me as the bus made its slow way along the borderline from Antakya to Kilis. “It’s too late now, anyway, but it was a mistake.”

He had many of the prejudices that I was getting used to as mainstream among Syrians of all persuasions. Zaher had studied media and was keen to pursue a career of some kind in the field of communications. On the bus ride up to the border I asked him what lay behind his interest in it. “Well, you know, the media today has such power, so it’s important to understand how it works,” and then he nodded reflectively before continuing, “especially the Zionist media.”

Zaher was, in a way, precisely the kind of young Arab that the western media

had been enthusing about when the “Arab Spring” began in 2011. He was a Sunni Muslim, but professed himself hostile to sectarianism. He was permanently online on Twitter and Facebook via his smart-phone. He constantly monitored various rebel and opposition websites and accounts, messaging and debating with his friends. These were mostly other young Syrian refugees with an inclination toward media work.

But, of course, in another way, Zaher was precisely an example of why the western initial understanding of the events in the Arab world was seriously wide of the mark. He and the other civil opposition activists from within the country had been unable to formulate a clear response to the Assad regime’s simple and brutal strategy of frontal confrontation with the rebellion. Their sophistication and knowledge of twenty-first-century communications turned out to be of limited application against the iron and steel of the regime.

So when the Sunni Arab heartlands of the revolt began to arm themselves against the assault on them, out of simple necessity, activists like Zaher had found themselves dragged along by the current. Now, he was traveling in and out of the Aleppo killing zone, trading his media knowledge and his courage in return for cash.

We reached Kilis at about 9am. Remembering my trek over the mountains into Idlib, I was somewhat apprehensive about the journey in, but it turned out to be easier than I expected. The main difference was that the regime army was no longer patrolling the border. Assad’s army had carried out a general redeployment to new lines further south in June and July, at a stroke leading to the birth of more secure rebel- and Kurdish-held zones.

So there was no mortal threat. The only problem, Zaher explained, was that if the Turkish soldiers who were deployed along the border suspected that I was a journalist rather than a Syrian refugee, they would demand a higher price for letting me pass, and might even confiscate my camera and equipment.

I gave thanks, once again, for my “local” Mediterranean-type appearance. Unshaven for a few days and with the right clothes, I was indistinguishable from any of the other people crossing back and forth across the Syrian border.

We got off the bus in Kilis and strolled in the direction of the border on foot. We wandered toward a dusty grove of fruit trees. Then Zaher crouched down and started running. I followed him and we ran like that for a few minutes, crouching and up and down the dusty banks between the trees. Then we came to a large field, with the border fence at the end of it.

I could see a group of refugees, men and women, walking toward the fence. The sky blue and cloudless above and the summer heat just getting going in the morning. A hole had been cut in the fence and people were ducking down and

crawling through it. But there were two Turkish soldiers standing about 20 meters in front of us. “Keep walking forward, I’ll speak to them and say we’re refugees. We might have to pay them something. Don’t say anything,” Zaher said.

So we strolled nonchalantly and humbly toward the soldiers. I did my best to look like a Syrian refugee, assuming what I imagined to be a tired and dignified expression. Zaher began to speak to the men in broken Turkish. The Turks were amused by us, with a manner combining superiority with a certain affection. After a couple of minutes, Zaher murmured to me “Start walking toward the fence,” and I detached myself from the little scene and began strolling in the direction of the border fence.

I must have appeared more hasty than I’d thought, though, because as I was still about 30 meters from it my phone bleeped and I looked at the message. It was from Zaher, and it read “Sloly.” I tried not to smile and kept walking. There was the hole in the fence before me and I went down into the powdery red dust and crawled through it. On the other side, I crouched and waited, looking back at Zaher and the two soldiers, who were now tiny figures in the distance. After a while, I saw Zaher begin to walk slowly toward me, and we greeted each other on Syrian soil. “OK,” he said, “we’re in. Now we go to meet our driver with the rebel fighters in that grove over there.”

We made our way to another grove on the Syrian side of the border; there was a makeshift encampment. A portable toilet and a few tents in a clearing. Rebel fighters gathered in a circle, cradling their AK-47s and drinking from the endless rounds of sweet tea in small glasses which were a staple of the Syrian war.

The fighters greeted Zaher with friendly familiarity. We sat with them for a while, and then an old blue car came rolling into the clearing and stopped; a small, moustachio’d man in civilian clothes got out. This was “Meysoun”, from Azaz, the driver I’d hired. He, Zaher and I had a quick planning meeting before setting off. The idea was to head for Azaz, a few kilometers south of the border; Zaher and I would leave our stuff in the media center there. Then we would head for Aleppo city and the fighting. Meysoun, Zaher told me, was well connected with the Tawhid Brigade and with Northern Storm, the two main rebel fighting forces in Aleppo at that time.

Meysoun was in his mid-30s. He was stocky, quiet, self-contained but friendly, often smiling under his black moustache. A local man from Azaz and one of the earliest activists of the revolution, he gave the immediate impression that he would be a calm and reliable presence in a tight spot. This would soon be tested.

He and Zaher were a study in contrasts. Though only a few years younger,

Zaher carried with him an atmosphere of youth. Meysoun, by contrast, was a married father of four children, and had a sort of homely, middle-aged calm about him.

Azaz was littered with the remains of regime military hardware. Assad's forces had been expelled from there only a couple of months earlier. On the main street, we passed an almost intact T-72 tank, painted in green and sandy camouflage. We climbed up and inspected it. There was a neat entry mark on its side where an RPG must have penetrated it.

In the media center, we quickly arranged ourselves. Meysoun's family were still in Azaz and he was staying at his home. The center had beds available for 20 journalists, but I was the only foreign reporter there.

One of the interesting elements of the Syrian conflict is that, even at its height, the number of journalists covering it was always relatively small. By the summer of 2012 a number of reporters had already been killed.

So that afternoon, Zaher and I planned the week ahead, looking at the neighborhoods that were in rebel hands, which brigades were where and who we could visit. The eastern section of the city was in the hands of the rebels, while the regime held the west. We planned a route that would take us through the frontline neighborhoods, while avoiding the areas controlled by the jihadis of Ahrar al-Sham and the Kurdish neighborhood, Sheikh Maksoud, which was controlled by the Kurdish YPG militia. Neither Zaher nor Meysoun had contacts with the Kurdish fighters, who they did not like or trust.

We spent the day at the media center and hung out with the activists there at night. Then, bright and early the next morning, we began the ride into Aleppo city.

The regime was still on the main highway, so we took the side roads. There were rebel checkpoints every few kilometers. The ones belonging to the Tawhid Brigade were smart and professional-looking.

As we pulled into the city, I had a sudden lurch of fear in my stomach. It was the first time I had felt afraid in Syria. It was seeing the great city of Aleppo there before me, with an enormous picture of Bashar Assad still on a billboard that the rebels hadn't yet taken down. I was a foreign journalist, and an Israeli citizen at that, on Syrian soil illegally and with no paperwork. The city looked huge and forbidding. In the rural backwaters of the rebels near the Turkish border, it felt natural not to be noticed. But, heading into Aleppo, I felt exposed, as though for the first time I was truly in Syria.

I don't think the others noticed this moment. I didn't say anything. For them, in any case, the issue was very different. They were both participants. It was their war. And it reached us sooner than any of us had expected.

As we entered the Sha'ar neighborhood, there was noise from planes overhead. Meysoun decided we should get out of the car. We stopped opposite a hospital called Dar al Shifa, ordered coffees and lit cigarettes. Three young men who were clearly employees of the hospital were standing next to us and we began to talk to them.

Two of them were doctors and one a hospital orderly. All were Syrians but one of the doctors, who introduced himself as "Amin", said he had been working in Saudi Arabia when the uprising broke out. He had returned and offered his services to what he called "the revolution".

Amin spoke fluent English and had the dry humor which seems to be a staple of a certain type of physician everywhere. The other doctor, Khaled was more intense, younger, tall and slim.

The owner of the café was an older man, thin and grey-moustached and smiling, and he brought us more coffees. The doctors described how they were on a break after dealing with casualties from a barrel bombing.

These primitive and fearsome weapons had just appeared on the Syrian battlefield. They were oil barrels, filled with TNT, metal bolts and fragments. They were designed to do massive damage to the human body, as the barrel exploded on impact and sent the metal fragments shooting off in every direction.

"Tangers," the men called them. They were being dropped all over rebel-controlled eastern Aleppo. The intention was to make life impossible. Zaher gave an impassioned demonstration of the noise they made as they came down. Then I asked the medics if I could go with them into the hospital and witness the final stages of the emergency first aid to the victims of the bombing.

They agreed and we trooped into the hospital.

Inside was a vision of something close to hell. There were people with torn bodies lying on trolleys and strewn around the hospital reception room, which was also filled with family members, crying and talking rapidly. In one of the rooms, two young orderlies were mopping up an enormous torrent of human blood on the floor as a wounded man lay on his front on a gurney.

I took my camera out and began to take some shots. One was of a man who was having stitches applied to the stumps that were all that remained of two of his fingers. A metal fragment from the barrel bomb had sheared them off. He was looking at what remained of them with a sort of indifferent and mild interest. But he reacted with a sudden astonishment as I snapped the picture and I felt ashamed. Amin said, "Don't take pictures of the faces."

It seemed to be the closing stages of the incident. The last of the wounded were being evacuated from the hospital. A very old man, with a primitive device for supplying oxygen inserted in his mouth, was being taken out of the hospital

on a trolley. A fighter in combat fatigues and carrying an AK-47 was accompanying him, making gestures to the old man who seemed only semi-conscious.

Then, from outside in the street, a sudden change of atmosphere. There were shouts, rising in pitch rapidly and spreading. Zaher found me among the crowd and grabbed my arm. "It's the plane," he shouted. "It's on its way back..."

People began running toward the entrance to the hospital. One of the orderlies who we had spoken to in the café took me by the arm and pulled me violently toward a staircase that seemed to lead toward a basement. A mad rush down the staircase was taking place. For a moment, my camera satchel got caught on the railing. I tugged at it furiously for a few seconds as people jostled past me. Then it came free.

I was just below the level of the floor when I heard a deafening roar, as one hears when an airliner takes off but many times louder. This was the aircraft, at the bottom of its run. Then, as I followed the crowd down the stairs, there was the explosion in the street, and the sound of broken glass and crushed masonry, and then a rapid punctuation of groans and screams.

I found myself in a small, packed basement. There were orderlies from the hospital there, women young and old in traditional Islamic dress, old and young men. No-one was talking. Some of the women were moaning softly. We were waiting to hear if the plane would make another bombing run.

We were in the basement of a six-story hospital building. This meant that if a bomb was dropped on the building itself, this would become our tomb. If, on the other hand, another bomb fell on the streets outside, we would be safe.

The wait seemed to go on for a few minutes. Everyone was listening intently for the sound of the plane's jet engines returning. Then, suddenly, the lights went out, plunging the basement room into utter darkness. A sort of cry of dismay went up. It occurred to me that I could be living my last moments. For some reason, an impulse gripped me and I began snapping pictures randomly into the darkness, hoping I was capturing something.

Then one of the doctors who we had met outside, the thin young man called Khaled, turned on a torch and shone it on his own face. He was wearing a surgical mask, perhaps as a protection against dust, should a bomb land close or directly by the entrance to the hospital. With the light shining on his face, he began to lead the people in the basement in a Muslim prayer chant.

"Allahu Akbar," he yelled out, and the crowded throng in the basement yelled back, "Allahu Akbar," and then again, and then a longer Muslim prayer. I snapped some pictures of the young man's face and the light reflected on the wall.

After a few minutes of this call and response, we heard an explosion some distance away. This seemed to indicate that the plane had moved on to one of the other rebel-held neighborhoods. Slowly, the packed throng in the basement began to shift and move its way back up the stairs. I found the orderly that we'd met in the café as we made our way back up. He was a big, very dark-skinned young man wearing green medical scrubs. As we passed each other, for a moment we gripped each other's arms very hard.

Everything seemed to be moving in a kind of slow motion. Then the tempo quickened. Zaher was waiting by the entrance to the hospital, evidently trying to find me. We identified each other at the same moment. "Come on," he shouted, and turned and began to run away from the hospital. I ran after him, out into the street which was now filled with rubble. Dazed people were milling about. I thought I saw bodies in the rubble but I wasn't sure as I was running as fast as I could to get to Meysoun's car so we could head out.

When I got to the car both Zaher and Meysoun were already in it, with Zaher signaling desperately at me to hurry up. He obviously wanted to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the Sha'ar neighborhood. It was an entirely understandable impulse.

I was shocked by the appearance of the car. The windscreen was entirely missing, having been smashed by fragments of the bomb that had landed in the street. The car itself was covered in pock marks from the metal fragments. It still moved, though, and Meysoun gunned the engine into gear, superbly indifferent to the drama of the scene; we lurched and then sped out of the neighborhood, down the battered streets and away.

It was too soon to think about anything. We reached the Bustan al-Basha neighborhood and a position held by fighters of the Tawhid Brigade and we left the car. There was still gunfire all around, and loud, unidentifiable crashing sounds that I soon came to identify with Aleppo. Constant noise. The Tawhid fighters offered us tea and cigarettes and we sat around their position.

"What happened with the car?" I asked Zaher, after a few minutes.

"Meysoun was almost killed," he replied. "When we heard the plane coming we ran inside. After the bomb came down Meysoun made to run out straight away to check if the car was OK. But he didn't know that these things don't always explode on impact. Sometimes they hit first and then explode a few seconds later. One of the people at the hospital entrance recognized from the sound that the bomb hadn't exploded so he held Meysoun back. A few more seconds and it went off. If he'd left the hospital he would have been killed. The car is damaged but still working."

The Tawhid Brigade men had a small guitar at their position. It was woefully

out of tune, but for some reason I had an urge to play it, so I spent a few minutes tuning it up, and then, for no apparent reason whatsoever, I played “Rock ‘n’ Roll,” by Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground.

It was an absurd scene, of course, and I was aware it was absurd, but playing the guitar in Aleppo – with the gunfire and strange crashing all around and with the lone planes in the sky – a few minutes after the bombing at Dar al Shifa made me feel happy; I was happy, absurdly, insanely, that afternoon in the Bustan al-Basha neighborhood.

We ran into Dr. Amin of the dry sense of humor a few days later at the hospital in Azaz and shared breakfast with him. It turned out that the café where we’d been having coffee before entering the hospital had been badly damaged in the bombing. The old man who had served us coffee had been killed by the fragments of the barrel bomb.

“He saved your life, then,” Zaher said to Amin, pointing at me. This seemed to offend the doctor’s sense of the proper order of things and he indignantly denied that I had done any such thing. “No – I saved his life,” he retorted, though it was not quite clear what he meant by this. I suppose in a way he was right, since, if he had refused to let us enter the hospital, we might have been sitting in the café when the bomb landed.

We spent the days ahead traversing the frontline positions along the “clashes line” that separated rebel-held eastern Aleppo from the government held western half. The scenes were of utter desolation. The city, one of the great urban centers of the Middle East, had had the heart torn out of it. The frontline was a lunar-like area of smashed houses, rubble, broken cars and rock-strewn streets.

In this area, the frontline positions of the two sides faced each other. This was before the advent of the jihadi groups Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The main rebel units were Tawhid, Ahrar al-Sham and Northern Storm.

In numerous small rooms in ruined houses, Zaher and I interviewed fighters and commanders, with the gunfire and the sounds like collapsing buildings outside.

How are things going in the battle for Aleppo? I asked Abu Ahmed, a gravel-voiced commander of the Storm of the North battalion, at a frontline position back in Bustan al-Basha.

Gaunt Abu Ahmed, who was clearly exhausted, described an attempt by the regime army the previous week to regain control of the neighborhood. “First they started shelling, so we evacuated the civilian population from here,” he said. “Then they came in with tanks and soldiers and Shabiha [the Assad regime’s paramilitary forces] guiding them in the first line. It was heavy fighting

for two days. But in the end they had to fall back. Then they started the shelling again – and the bombs from the air, of course, and the rockets. But we're in control here."

Who's winning? I asked. I expected a propagandistic reply. Instead, Abu Ahmed acknowledged a stalemate: "We're pressing them all the time, but the regime is gathering its strength in the center of Aleppo, at the Citadel, which it knows it has to hold."

Abu Saumar, the big, slow-talking commander of the Afhad al-Rasul battalion in the Mashad district of the city, acknowledged the rebels' shortage of weaponry and ammunition. "In general, we're on the attack," he said. "We control the Salah al-Din neighborhood now. We're near the Ramouseh highway. But the problem is equipment and bullets."

The rebel forces in Aleppo consisted at that time of a large number of independently constituted battalions, each gathered around a particular neighborhood and a particular commander. Saumar noted that commanders of all battalions met daily to coordinate operations. He and Abu Ahmed were both Sunni, neither of them Islamist. Both described themselves as loyal to the Free Syrian Army.

Neither commander professed loyalty to the notional overall leadership of the FSA, however, at the time still based in Turkey. "I'm a field commander," Saumar said, "and I'm part of the Aleppo Military Council. But I'm not part of any external group, and I don't see them as authoritative."

Seated opposite me was a thin-faced, unshaven young man with short brown hair who said nothing throughout the interview, as Saumar spoke in Arabic and Zaher translated in his somewhat hesitant English. This was Abdullah al-Yassin, my acquaintance whom I described earlier.

On March 2, 2013, Abdullah al-Yassin would be killed in Aleppo. The precise details of why have never really come to light. As the frontlines froze, so the rebellion began to turn in on itself. But that day in the summer of 2012 all that was far ahead. And it was hard not to be impressed by the rebels in the dusty, bombed neighborhoods of eastern Aleppo: by the determination and the sparse resources and the improvisation and optimism that pervaded everything. Just for a moment.

The two most noticeable rebel units in Aleppo, and the only two who appeared to transcend the general arrangement of local FSA-affiliated battalions, were the Tawhid Brigade and the Ahrar al-Sham group, both of which were tied to the Islamist current. Checkpoints affiliated with these groups were at the most prominent entrance points to the city, testifying to a sort of hierarchy of units, in which these featured close to the top.

Ahrar al-Sham fighters, in their mode of dress and their slogans, clearly identified themselves as Salafi Islamists. Their checkpoints and positions flew white, black and green flags with slogans from the Koran written on them. They were rumored to be supported by Saudi Arabia and to be affiliated with al-Qaeda. My own contacts did not extend to this organization.

Tawhid fighters, by contrast, did not markedly differ in their appearance from the FSA groupings. But the brigade, doubtless the largest single rebel group operating in the Aleppo area at that time, maintained a separate leadership structure from the Aleppo Military Council and the FSA.

We met with one of Tawhid's leaders, in the Saif al-Dawli section of the city. The man, middle-aged, ginger-bearded, from the al-Bab area north east of Aleppo, described himself as one of the five commanders of the brigade. Hadji al-Bab, he called himself. He was frank regarding Tawhid's differences with the FSA and the Aleppo Military Council. "At the moment the Military Council has cut support from us. But we believe it will be restored in the near future."

What was the reason for the cut in support? I asked. "Fear," he said. "Fear of the Islamic states." (Tawhid was rumored to be a major beneficiary of aid from Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood.) And was this fear justified? Was Tawhid receiving aid from Islamic countries and movements? I didn't expect a straight answer and was not disappointed. "Relief materials only," he replied.

In contrast to the FSA fighters and field commanders that I met, the Tawhid leader had no hesitation in describing his political ambitions for Syria. "All the forces want one thing, one thought – an Islamic state, but with protection for minority rights."

He was predictably dismissive of the Syrian National Council, describing it as a "spokesman" for the Syrian people, rather than a political authority. "The real leadership is inside Syria, in the field – not in Turkey."

"We know that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards are here. Our forces have captured and killed non-Arabic speakers. There are Russian advisors in Hamdaniyah in the north of the city."

He had the usual cool politeness and optimism of the Islamists. And his parting words to me combined strategic optimism with tactical concern. "The rebels trust in their own motivation and in the help of God. But what we need right now is anti-aircraft weapons."

All the while, the planes and helicopters like lazy insects droned overhead. Nothing to fear, and they knew it.

When I interviewed Khaled, the doctor, he had echoed the Tawhid commander's words, issuing a plea to the West to send not drugs and not medical equipment, but "anti-aircraft weapons."

The developing shape of things was clear. The rebellion was taking on clearly Islamist colors. The discrepancy between the poorly organized and disunited secular fighters and the disciplined and strategically minded Islamists was apparent. Anti-aircraft weaponry would not be forthcoming. Morale, nevertheless, seemed high.

Thus the days passed. We would drive from Azaz down the highway in the early morning, and spend the day between the frontline positions. The fighting was sporadic. For long periods, the rebel fighters sat around their positions, watching, sleeping, talking. Then they would receive reports of a regime foot patrol or tanks setting out from the government positions, and everything became tense as they observed the regime men's progress. Sometimes a single tank carried out an attack on a rebel position, blasting away with shells and then lurching back.

It was a war of nerves. Snipers regularly fired on anyone who ventured too far into the rubble of no man's land. All around there was the distinctive smell of the frontline – an acrid mixture of rotten food, burning and excrement.

In the evenings, we hung out at the media center in Azaz, or sat outside drinking tea and smoking. I was sharing a room with Zaher and, at nights, when he thought everyone was asleep, he would call his girlfriend in Turkey on his mobile and the two of them would have long, seductive conversations. I lay there trying to sleep and unwillingly listening as Zaher shared intimacies with his girl in smooth and velvet Arabic tones.

There was more evidence of the new authorities emerging in the regime-abandoned areas. And the Islamic nature of the new order in the civil area too was becoming clearer. In Azaz, we met with a member of the emergent "Sharia Court". Yusuf al-Shawi was a personable young man in his late 20s, who had distinguished himself in the fighting that had expelled the regime forces from the city. He was part of a de facto alliance of rebel officers and local Sunni Muslim notables which was emerging in the areas the government had vacated.

Shawi, who was one of the first men in Azaz to take up arms against the Assad regime, told me that the town, after regime forces were forced to leave, was like "an empty ship". The old structures of policing and law enforcement had collapsed. So the Sharia council was formed, bringing together FSA commanders with senior Imams in the town, to fill the vacuum.

"The new law," Shawi said with a smile, "is Sharia." The council was in daily contact with similar committees in Aleppo and Damascus. The intention was to create a Sharia council to hold authority over all Syria.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, in Azaz, Shawi said that the council was the final arbiter in legal matters, and had the power also to judge FSA men if they were considered to have committed

crimes.

Yusuf al-Shawi, like the Tawhid Brigade fighters I met, was not a Salafi. Indeed, he stressed his criticism of what he called “extreme” and “Takfiri” interpretations of Islam. Rather, the orientation he represented, very clearly, was that of Muslim Brotherhood-type Islamism.

With the absence of any coherent political leadership or real military unity in the revolt, it was not surprising that Sunni Islamists were moving in to fill the administrative vacuum. This was a rural, conservative, Sunni Arab revolt. Its main backers were Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood. As I had seen in Idlib, the Salafis had, in any case, been there from the start. The West, which might arguably have been able to really build an effective and non-Islamist insurgency, preferred to keep away.

After a week, I had sufficient material and Zaher and I decided to pull out. By this time, Azaz had become a kind of peaceful haven for us. There had been no air raids during our stay there and, compared to Aleppo city, it was serene. The regime army was far to the south, and at that time rebel infighting had not yet begun in earnest.

On our final night, Meysoun bought and slaughtered a chicken and we had a grand feast, followed by a long sleep and then an hour or so smoking water pipes on Meysoun’s veranda. The little driver spoke no English, so we conversed using my broken Arabic. We had formed an elemental sort of friendship, based I think on a certain mutual appreciation and perhaps also on shared danger. I interviewed him on the final morning for the articles I wanted to write about the Dar al Shifa bombing. Then we set off for the drive north and the trip across the border. I was hoping it would be as smooth as the entrance. There was no way of knowing for sure.

Zaher advised that we make for the area around the Bab al-Salameh border crossing and speak to the fighters of the Northern Storm Brigade, who ran the crossing from the rebel side. There was no way I could get through the Turkish side, because I had no exit stamp from Turkey. But we expected that we could connect with smugglers through the rebel fighters and, anyway, the sight of a rebel-controlled border point was itself of interest to me.

On the way out of Azaz, we passed a village which had been decimated in a recent air raid. The bombing, in which around 75 people were killed, had reduced a whole neighborhood to rubble. An old man was moving what remained of his property from the ruins of his former dwelling. Two of his nephews had died in the bombing. He worked himself into a fury as we asked him about the details. “Neither the Jews, nor the Americans, nor the French, nor the British ever did anything like this,” he said, counting off modern Syria’s

fabled enemies on his fingers.

Something about this episode summed up for me the wretchedness of the situation in Syria. The man working himself up to a pitch of righteous fury, uselessly, before a foreign journalist whose reports and warnings would change nothing.

The details of foreign policy-making had produced an utter indifference to the great crime that had been visited on this man's community.

And so we left him by the ruins of his house – his rage spent and he old and abandoned – and we headed toward the border. The Bab al-Salameh border crossing was teeming with refugees when we arrived. They had established themselves in makeshift tent encampments surrounding the crossing. There were no international agencies on the Syrian side of the border, only a few Islamist volunteers from Turkey. The refugees were mainly from Aleppo itself and from Azaz. Their intention was to get as close to the border as possible, since Assad's air force was cautious about clashing with the Turks and was thus less likely to bomb border areas. They had left their homes and almost all their possessions. A thronging mass of humanity, spilling out into the olive groves that surrounded the crossing. Lacking any infrastructure, or any assistance.

We approached one of the encampments. When the refugees saw our cameras and recording equipment, they began to crowd around us excitedly, seeking to tell their stories. A thin, ginger-bearded man who said he was a former schoolteacher from Azaz described how his children became hysterical whenever they heard the sound of aircraft. He was trying to get them out of the country – to Turkey, and safety. They were halfway there.

Another man, dark-haired, tall, with a three-day growth of beard, handed me a roll of pills. "These are anti-depressants," he said. "I was prescribed them. Keep them. You'll be wanting them when you get home."

Then a third man, smaller, with a moustache, wearing a white shirt, pushed through the crowd which seemed to willingly part for him, and began to speak. His family had been trapped in a bombing close to Azaz, he said. Some of his children had been wounded. This man spoke very quietly and did not look into my eyes. I noticed after a moment that he was weeping as he spoke, though his tears were not accompanied by sobs or contortion of his face. I saw that the children who had thronged around us and who had been trying to catch my attention became quieter and more subdued in his presence.

Then the crowd parted again and a boy entered, carrying in his arms a little girl, of not more than four years of age. This child was obviously severely brain damaged. She squirmed and wriggled in her brother's arms, her mouth opening and closing.

“This is my daughter,” said the man in the white shirt. “She was hit by a fragment from a barrel bomb, which went into her head.” And the boy carrying the little girl stepped forward, a strange nervous smile on his face, and the father showed me the tiny scar in his daughter’s head where the fragment had entered.

This was the one moment in my reporting in Syria where I found it hard to keep talking. The sweltering summer sun, and the parched red earth, and these people, bereft and without defense. These were civilians. They had not chosen rebellion. They were not political activists. They had happened simply to be living in an area of northern Syria controlled by the rebels rather than the regime.

The regime had an air force and total air control. The rebels had no anti-aircraft capacity. So these people’s government had set out to destroy them. Physically. From the air. Here was the result. A small child, turned by a single tiny metal fragment into this pitiful, squirming, wriggling creature, unaware of her surroundings, and with who knew what lying ahead. Homeless, without protection, without medical attention. Abandoned to nature.

I did not, of course, remain with the refugees to do what I could for them. And nothing I could have done would have been enough, except staying for the rest of my life. So I thanked the white-shirted man for his time and averted my eyes from him and his small and destroyed daughter. I told myself that the stories I would write were what I could do for the refugees, and Zaher and I left them there and went to talk and drink coffee with the commanders of the Northern Storm Brigade.

The Northern Storm men wanted to question me on the issue of a new film supposedly insulting to Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam, which was all over the world news at the time. “How can you allow people to insult religion in this way?” they asked me. “Is this civilization? In our culture, it would never be allowed.”

We made it across the border that night, though it took a while. The Turkish soldiers deployed at the holes cut in the border fence were amenable to bribery as the darkness came down.

After a long time waiting at a tent close to the fence, Zaher and I were put on motorbikes that sped across the darkened fields to an agreed point and then we quickly ran and crawled in the dry earth through a hole in the wire. A siren went off at a close-by gendarmerie base, but we kept running and made it to the highway. Once we were there, no-one could prove anything and we were fine.

A flourishing trade in goods and people was evidently taking place between the Northern Storm rebels and the Turkish troops.

I was back at the Liwan Hotel by two in the morning. No great sense of

catharsis this time. Zaher fell asleep in the minibus crowded with refugees that we took from Antakya, and forgot to tell me when to get off. Too many late and virtual steamy nights with his girlfriend. The Liwan was quiet as I entered. I had the cold Efes Pilsen that I had been dreaming of alone by the bar. I took the bus for Ankara the next morning.

I remember the morning that I had to leave Antakya for Ankara as utterly blissful, gloriously sunny. I stood by the entrance to the Liwan and smoked and drank coke and watched the life going by. Normal life had, in the space of a week, come to seem something nearly miraculous. Miraculous, and very fragile. I took a wander in the old market of Antakya and picked up a secondhand copy of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* to read on the long bus journey ahead.

When I arrived back to Jerusalem, I got straight to work composing the articles that would pay for the trip.

Then, when they were finished, an emptiness descended. I found it difficult to get the images from Dar al Shifa hospital and from the border out of my mind; I was affected by fatigue and a certain sense of foreboding.

I compared my two visits to northern Syria, in February and in September of 2012, and thought about the differences in the situation. In February, when the armed insurgency was still just taking shape, the role of secular former officers of the Syrian Arab Army was very apparent and very prominent. The Salafi Islamists were already there, of course, and the rebellion was very clearly based in the rural Sunni Arab heartlands of Syria. But the prospect of some kind of salvaging of the situation with the country intact by the early defeat of the regime still seemed possible.

But when I went over the things I had seen in Aleppo the signs were ominous. Not only because of the scale of the suffering, though this was terrible enough. Also because of the underlying political direction of events. It was clear that western help was not coming. The forces that were moving in, that were supporting such new and effective units as Liwa al-Tawhid and Ahrar al-Sham, were Turkey, the Gulf countries and, most importantly the intelligence services of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, along with the vast private resources of pro-Islamist Gulf sheikhs. The result was that the insurgency was beginning to take on more and more of the colors of an openly sectarian, Sunni Islamist revolt.

I thought about the scene in the basement in Dar al Shifa, as we had waited in the darkness to see if the bomber would make another run. The way that the doctor, Khaled, had launched into a prayer chant and the people had responded. Only with such powerful medicine could death be confronted, it seemed.

The old and spent secular ideologies could offer nothing by way of comparison, of course. But it seemed that the West and its lifestyle and ways

also had but little purchase. Primordial loyalties and communities were the thing to which people returned. Sectarian and ethnic markers were ascending to prominence as the state began to recede.

This process was exacerbated by the feebleness of western policy, where it could be located at all.

It was still summer in Jerusalem, and in the evenings I'd go out to all my favorite old haunts. The city, as usual, was full of journalists and military contractors. One evening, drinking late with an acquaintance, a British former special forces soldier, I made some remark about the reports of western training facilities for the rebels in Turkey. "Not Turkey, Jordan," he said. "That's where some of my friends have been heading."

It was just a throwaway remark but I remembered it and asked a few other contacts over the next few days. And so a blurred picture of a very limited and specific western aid program emanating out of Jordan became clear in the days ahead. From what I was given to understand, it was run by the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate (GID), with help and input from the British, French and Americans. (As it turned out, there was a similar facility in Turkey.) It was very little, and it was getting late.

But raging against the inaction didn't help. What mattered was to try and grasp the underlying reasons for it.

I was haunted by the helpless and abandoned refugees along the border, left alone to face the ferocity of Bashar's air force. Their fate, it came to seem to me, showed the emptiness of the talk about a liberal world order. It seemed forever to be absent just when it was needed.

The refugees at Bab al-Salameh were an object lesson in what happened when a people were cast out by terrible fortune from one or another of the ships of statehood and sovereignty, which alone had proved the best, if imperfect vessels, for guaranteeing a measure of human security.

They were left in the state of nature. It was a terrifying, appalling place. In the Middle East, for an increasing number of people, the barriers to chaos afforded by the existence of the state, even the very repressive state, were being removed. The notion that there was some other trans-national set of safeguards which would take hold if and when the state failed or went insane was being tested and found wanting once again.

The whole rigmarole of the "international community" and the power of the mass media to cast a light on events which would surely awaken the conscience of the world and the celebrities posing for photographs and the concerts and all the rest of it, all were exposed in all their noisy emptiness and uselessness.

Instead, what was happening was that people were organizing at a sub-state

level, on the basis of more primordial and older communities and identities. State collapse and contraction, it appeared, did not lead to more universalist forms of organization, but rather to more particularist ones.

Bashar Assad and his allies had, in effect, raised the banner of the methods of the mid-twentieth century against the supposed practices of the twenty-first. His was a world of undisguised brutality, sectarian self-interest and military force. His Iranian and Russian backers saw the world in a similar way. To the astonished West, such methods seemed hopelessly retrograde. Hadn't Assad heard that one couldn't do such things anymore because the internet would, in real time, cast a spotlight on your activities?

Assad was apparently aware of such claims and was unmoved by them. In the response of this regime and its backers, it became apparent that this "liberal world order" was built on a certain balance of power – namely the unchallenged domination of the USA – which no longer applied. Assad, Iran and Russia tested the will of the tired hegemon, and it was found wanting. The result was horrifying, and instructive. The global balance of power was on the move. Its movements shifted in complete indifference to the lives crushed beneath them.

In my own advocacy at the time for the buffer zone and western intervention, and in the attempt I had made to raise the alarm over the Dar al Shifa bombings and the refugee situation, I was able to salve my own conscience a little and tell myself that something of my own humanity remained. But, of course, the activities of myself and other journalists and witnesses were, ultimately, less than even a footnote in the developing reality. We were, it appeared, shouting in the dark. More powerful and fundamental processes of exhaustion and disengagement in the West caused things to move coolly on by.

We would discover, later, over the use of chemical weapons, just how much our witnessing was worth to the political powers of the West.

The Syrians were on their own. And they were organizing for survival, on the basis of primordial community, self-interest and mobilization.

So the Syrian war, like other civil wars before it, was proving a testing ground in which a changed international balance of power would be made apparent. The exhaustion and rudderlessness of the US became clear, as did the determination, ruthlessness and clear thinking of the authoritarian regimes in Teheran and Moscow.

The obverse side of this coin was that none of the forces engaged in the free for all war in Syria was proving strong enough to defeat the other. Instead, the roughly evenly matched sectarian factions were set to slaughtering one another.

Dar al Shifa hospital was finally destroyed by a direct hit from a missile fired from one of Assad's Mig fighter jets on November 21, 2012.<sup>3</sup> The structure was

turned to rubble. Fifteen people were killed, many more wounded. Kidnappings of journalists had begun too, making it yet more dangerous to report from the country, despite the retreat of the regime army from northern Syria. And, in the course of early 2013, new forces began to appear on the battlefield.

On January 23, 2012, the foundation of the Jabhat al-Nusrah li-Ahl ash-Sham (Support Front for the People of the Levant) had been announced.<sup>4</sup> Usually shortened to Jabhat al-Nusra, this was the official franchise of the al-Qaeda network in Syria. Led by Sheikh Mohammed al-Jawlani, it quickly gained a reputation for military effectiveness and particular ruthlessness.

Then, in May 2013, in the course of a dispute between the Nusra leadership and the leadership of the Iraqi franchise of al-Qaeda, a faction began operating in Syria under the name of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, or ISIL). Little noticed at the time, this jihadi group was set to transform the Syrian conflict, with dire consequences both for the rebellion and for the people of Syria.

## Notes

1 “Battle for Aleppo: Syrians React,” BBC Online, July 23, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk>

2 Asaad Hanna, “Syria’s Sharia Courts,” *Al-Monitor*, February 11, 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com>

3 “Syria – The Bombing of Aleppo’s Dar al-Shifa Hospital,” *Vice*, November 27, 2012. <https://www.vice.com>

4 Charles Lister, “Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra,” Analysis Paper no. 24, Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World, July 2016, 13. <https://www.brookings.edu>

# 3

## ROJAVA

### The Kurds Alone

The emergence of the Salafi organizations to ever greater centrality in the rebellion was a symptom of a larger process.

The regime's retreat from the north in the summer of 2012 ushered not two areas of control into existence, but three. In addition to the government- and rebel-controlled zones, the Syrian Kurds had also established a self-rule area of their own. This area was under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD was the Syrian franchise of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party),<sup>1</sup> an organization which had been fighting a guerrilla war against the Turkish authorities since 1984.

In the course of 2013, a conflict within the Syrian conflict broke out in northern Syria, between the Kurds and the Islamist rebels, including Nusra, ISIS and other less radical groups. This fight was initially seen by many as a localized "sideshow", distracting from the main fight between regime and rebels. Wrongly. In retrospect, this largely neglected front was a sign of things to come, and of the shape that events would take in Syria and then Iraq. Both the Kurds and the Sunni Arab rebels saw themselves as successors to the vanished state authority. They were fighting over the ruins.

The difficult plight of the Kurds of Syria had received little international attention prior to 2011. Numbering between 2 and 3 million, they had suffered the severest discrimination at the hands of the Arab nationalist Ba'athist regimes.<sup>2</sup>

In 2004, the Kurds had risen up against the regime in the northern city of Qamishli. The revolt was rapidly suppressed, with great cruelty.

As a result, the Kurds were slow to join the uprising of 2011. From the start,

they were suspicious of its emergence from the religious and traditional Sunni Arab heartlands of north west Syria.

Khalaf, a Syrian Kurdish friend of mine who lived in London, indignantly reacted in April 2011 when I asked if he was attending an opposition demonstration outside the Syrian embassy in Belgravia Square. “There’s no revolution and no uprising,” he said. “There is a civil war between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood backed by Turkey, that’s all.”

It was a sentiment I was to hear again and again when reporting in Syrian Kurdistan. There was a considerable measure of truth to it, as it turned out, though it jarred in the early optimistic days of the uprising.

The Syrian war remained a major news story in early 2013. But there was hardly any reporting from inside the three non-contiguous Kurdish enclaves of Jazira, Kobani and Afrin.

This was partly because they were remote and relatively difficult to access. The Turkish authorities adopted an entirely different policy regarding the parts of their border adjacent to the Kurdish-controlled areas when compared with their approach to Arab areas.

The Arab rebel areas benefitted from a relatively lax attitude, as I had seen in my passages across the border. The Turks were backing the rebellion, so arms convoys made their way across the mountains into Idlib, as I had witnessed. Refugees, meanwhile could find their way back and forth in return for relatively modest bribes.

The borderlines facing the three Kurdish autonomous zones, by contrast, were tightly monitored, with a large complement of Turkish soldiers and paramilitary police stationed there. They were assisted by the latest in detection technology. This meant that entry into these areas from Turkey was virtually impossible.

Entry into the Jazira enclave from the Kurdish autonomous zone in northern Iraq was also not as easy as might have been expected. This was because of the fractured and rivalry-ridden nature of internal Kurdish politics. The Kurdish areas in Syria were controlled by the PYD, the Syrian franchise of the PKK, as noted above. Northern Iraq, meanwhile, was ruled by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Masoud Barzani.

These two very different movements were rivals for the leadership of Kurdish nationalism. For the PKK, the three enclaves in northern Syria offered them their first chance in actually exercising power. They were in no mood to share it. Barzani, meanwhile, had a close relationship with the Turks. So, in turn, the last thing he intended to do was to jeopardize this by cozying up with a movement at war with Ankara.

For journalists seeking to enter Kurdish north east Syria, this presented a

problem. The single border crossing into the area was controlled by Barzani's forces and the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG's) policy there was unpredictable. Sometimes reporters (and others) were allowed in. Sometimes the crossing area was hermetically sealed.

I had some contacts with both KRG people and with the PKK because of my previous work on the subject, so I hoped that I would be able to negotiate either entering through the border crossing or finding some way to steal across with the PKK/PYD types.

One concern I had about reporting in what was then the fairly virgin territory of the Kurdish areas was the somewhat ambiguous relationship of the new Kurdish authorities with the Assad regime. The PYD were opposed to Assad's rule, but they weren't exactly at war with the regime. What this meant was that Assad's army had a presence in parts of the Kurdish-ruled areas. In particular, in the main Syrian Kurdish city of Qamishli, they maintained quite a strong deployment.

There were regime roadblocks at that time at the entrance and exit points from the city. Assad's police and army were still there, along with a number of military and intelligence facilities.

So I landed in Erbil, the Iraqi Kurdish capital, in February 2013, with the intention of figuring some or all of this out and getting into the largest and eastern-most Kurdish enclave, Jazira.

Erbil had changed since I was last there, in 2010. Things were moving up. It had acquired the unmistakable feel of a boom town. The oil industry had come to town. There were SUVs everywhere and brand new shopping malls springing up. New restaurants, smart hotels, a growing expatriate presence.

In the days that followed, I sounded out my KRG contacts about entering Syrian Kurdistan. Their responses were not encouraging. It was too dangerous, they said, and there was no way to make an illegal crossing. As for the official border at Fishkhabur – it was closed to foreigners and reporters.

But while sounding them out, I was also in contact with sources from the PKK, who seemed more encouraging, though the days passed and nothing concrete emerged.

The PKK had a sort of semi-underground status in Erbil. Barzani's security services largely left it alone, but it wasn't allowed to openly manifest itself. Barzani didn't need trouble with the Turks. This added a slightly absurd cloak and dagger aspect to my activities as I flitted about the city, meeting with KRG officials, and PKK and PYD men, drinking vast amounts of black tea, in various offices and restaurants – and mainly getting nowhere.

On one occasion, I mistimed the meetings, with the result that a KDP official

was walking out of the hotel as I waited in the lobby just as my next guest, a PKK man, was walking in. They glanced at each other in polite mutual loathing as I sat mortified watching the scene.

The contrast in the styles of the two movements was fascinating. The KDP/KRG types were richer, obviously, but this wasn't the main thing. Their style mixed a tribal and conservative flourish with a clearly pro-western and pro-American outlook. All this reflected their origins as the party of the Barzani family, local Kurdish aristocracy. Many of them had clearly made money out of their closeness to the ruling authorities. They were full of happiness, loving food and tea and hospitality. Many of them had grown an enormous happy girth to go with this.

The PKK types were different. They looked self-consciously proletarian – old jeans and battered suit jackets and shirts. The general sense was one of ascetic devotion to an ideal. A strangeness about them that was hard to define. A cult-like devotion to their captured leader Abdullah Öcalan. A wariness. One had the immediate impression that any military force organized by such people would form a formidable presence.

The PKK type of approach – of poverty and devotion – was not unusual in the Middle East, of course. But in our time it usually came in religious wrapping of some kind. The PKK and PYD, though, were entirely secular, having emerged from the ferment of the radical left in Turkey in the 1970s. They were unique, possible only among the Kurds, a testimony to the fading flimsiness of any idea of "Syrian" or "Iraqi" nationality.

The PYD representative in Erbil was a thickly built, black-moustached man called "Dr. Wijdan". PKK activists invariably had more than one name, and the one they were known by within the movement and in their political activities probably wasn't the real one. Dr. Wijdan was polite but non-committal as I tried to gain concrete details for my entry into Syria.

Two and then three days passed. Finally, nearing despair, I contacted a former senior intelligence officer of the KDP, whose number I had been given, to beg for help. We met in his office in town, which was full of boxed computers (he had gone into the import/export business). S. was a small, black-haired, rather handsome and well-dressed man. He had survived four assassination attempts by the Assad regime, my friends had told me. His body was full of metal from the attempted murders. He had a curious false plastic left hand which looked like it had been taken from a tailor's mannequin.

I had been told to contact him only if I needed help. He was not interested in being interviewed.

In the event, however, S. was a far less ominous figure than all this suggested.

Small, elegantly suited and tied, slim, he spoke no English. We conversed instead in broken Arabic.

But for all his urbane charm, S. was no help in getting me across the border. He reiterated gently that Syria was anyway too dangerous at this time, and proposed that instead I stay in Erbil and interview officials from the KDP. At another time, this would, of course, have been interesting. But it was not what I had come to northern Iraq for. I insisted that I wanted to get into Syria. Finally, he relented and agreed to set up a meeting with his friend, a PKK man operating in the semi-underground way favored by the movement in Erbil.

We met with the PKK man in the incongruous setting of Erbil's largest shopping mall. The man had an impressive grey moustache and the usual tatty attire of the movement. We drank tea and S. spoke to him in Kurdish. For a long time. I sat there trying to smile and look both positive and harmless. The upshot was unpromising. The PKK man explained gravely that he agreed with S. that there was no way to get across and that I should forget about it.

Back at my hotel that evening, I began to have the distinct feeling that the trip was going to be a failure. Then something changed. At 8pm an anonymous caller from the PYD got in touch and told me to make for the city of Dohuk in the morning, where I would meet with one of their men who would arrange for my crossing of the border. We were in business.

An hour or so later, S. also called – to tell me of some meetings he was arranging for me the next day. I felt bad as I pretended to go along with these, unable to inform him of my actual plans. Nothing to be done. I suggested that we meet up, but he told me that his wife didn't want him to go out that evening. It seemed a nice touch from the fearsome Barzani intelligence man with the body full of metal. The last time I met him, as we were about to part, he opened a button of his shirt and revealed a silver Star of David. And smiled shyly. It took a while to find out what this had meant. S., a year or so later, became prominent as one of the Iraqi Kurds of Jewish origin who pioneered relations between the KRG and Israel.<sup>3</sup>

I hadn't time to consider this strange occurrence at the time. The next day I left the hotel in Erbil and set off in a crammed taxi for Dohuk and the Syrian border.

The farcical element that seemed to have characterized my efforts in Iraqi Kurdistan until that point was not yet over. I had been told to wait for the PYD contact in Dohuk by a rundown-looking old hotel somewhere close to the center of the town.

Dohuk was a teeming, slightly dilapidated place, set amid beautiful green rolling hills. I found the hotel easily enough.

But my contact from the PYD did not show up at the appointed time. After I had been hanging around outside the hotel for about two hours, the locals began to become suspicious. One of them approached me and spoke to me in rapid Kurdish. I replied in my broken Jerusalem Arabic. Unfamiliar Arabic speakers were, unsurprisingly, not welcome in Iraqi Kurdistan and my questioner rapidly became aggressive. People gathered round and, for a moment, I had visions of being lynched as a Ba'athi agent by angry Kurds in Dohuk. Eventually, the situation defused. I continued to wait.

Finally, after about four hours, the contact arrived. He was a small, unshaven middle-aged man with a three-day stubble and greying hair. He did not apologise for his lateness, but rapidly motioned me toward an old and creaking yellow car. Once inside, he handed me a cigarette and we began to drive.

After a few minutes, he asked me in Arabic, "Are you hungry?" I was, by this point, quite famished and told him so. "No time for food. We're going straight to the border," he responded and laughed out loud as though this were a terrific joke.

It was growing dark as we approached an enormous car park filled with oil tankers close to the border. Godforsaken, I thought to myself. The word seemed invented for such a place.

"The people you meet are close to here," my companion confided to me, and began to busily dial on his cell-phone.

We waited by the oil tankers, in the pitch darkness. The man sent obscure messages on his cell-phone and grew more agitated. After a while, without saying anything, he pulled out of the large parking lot and back onto the highway. We drove for a few hundred meters and then he turned off the road and stopped, leaving the engine running. That was how we stayed for a few minutes. Then a white van pulled in front of us. The man pointed and said quickly, "That's your friends." The back of the van opened. A young man leaned out and beckoned to me. I ran and climbed in.

There were about eight young people in the back of the van. All were wearing camouflage fatigues and all were armed with AK-47s. These were fighters of the YPG, the new Syrian Kurdish militia. They were not allowed to operate in Iraqi Kurdistan, hence the clandestine arrangements.

The van started up and began to move. After a minute or two, the young man sitting close to me said, "You speak English, right?"

The accent was not what I expected. This young fighter was speaking fluent and cheerful English, in the accent of inner city London. "Yes. Are you from England?"

"I'm from Kurdistan, but we lived in Hackney for quite a while. Anyway, I'm

commanding this lot. We're going into Rojava. So we're going to have to cross the river and then get up to a camp of ours. You're all right with that, yeah?"

I supposed I was. I had forgotten that the Tigris River marked the border between Iraq and Syria in this area. Anyway, there was no getting out of it. After a while, we turned off the road and the van begun to lurch across a dry field in the pitch darkness. Then we stopped and the door opened. It was a clear, moonlit night. I had no particular anticipation of danger. I doubted very much that the YPG and Barzani's Peshmerga forces wanted to shoot at each other. I assumed we'd be playing cat and mouse and that would be that.

We walked for a long time in military formation. It took me back to my soldiering days and I was happy to see that I could still easily keep up with these young guerrillas. Every so often we stopped and the commander would peer ahead using some kind of night-vision equipment, and then quietly speak through his communications. We were watching for Peshmerga patrols.

The discipline and cohesion of these YPG fighters as we moved across the countryside was immediately impressive.

The going was fairly easy, across fields of dry earth. Finally, we reached some high grass and then beyond it – the river. I watched as a blue rubber dinghy was produced and inflated and the fighters rapidly stacked their weapons in it. Then they piled aboard and I followed. The Tigris was smooth and calm, the moonlight reflecting it. The commander from Hackney gave me an encouraging smile as the dinghy neared the Syrian side. I think he was slightly surprised that I hadn't failed to keep the pace.

The going got tougher on the other side, though. We had to climb up a sharp ascent in the dark. My eyes aren't so good in the dark and I nearly lost my footing a couple of times. Finally, after about 20 minutes of climbing we reached our destination – a YPG position high in the hills.

I basked in the elation that only successfully concluded route marches can provide – a wonderful feeling remembered from the army, and which I have never quite found anywhere else.

After a while, a jeep pulled up and I was motioned in. We drove for about half an hour, heading into Syria. Finally, one of the fighters and I were deposited in a village along the road. The name of the village was Kafr Souss.

In the morning, I awoke early and opened the wooden door of the room to get some air. A lunar strangeness confronted me. Kurdish north east Syria is one of the most impoverished and remote parts of the country. Its villages are built according to basic and traditional styles.

Earthen bricks and grassy roofs, some covered with black bags meant to absorb rain.

The war felt far away. Everything felt far away. The young fighter in whose house I had been left had departed with the dawn. The door was open and I wandered outside for a bit. The sound of roosters crowing. Cold February sunlight.

This trip had not proved as easy to put together as my previous ones. That reflected an important difference between the Arab rebel areas and those of the Kurds. Among the Arabs, working with the media had rapidly turned into a free market. Among the Kurds, everything was centralized.

You couldn't just make a deal with a private fixer and start wandering around the Kurdish-controlled area. Everything needed to be cleared with the rudimentary authorities that the PYD/PKK were in the process of setting up. But these authorities, as I was finding out, were themselves only in the first stages of getting organized.

After a couple of hours, I started to think that perhaps they had forgotten me. Then a van roared up through the dust and pulled up outside the house; a young woman in PKK-type green uniform called out to me, "Hello, do you want to come to Derik with us?" I did, and I climbed aboard.

The young woman was a PKK activist from south east Turkey. She had been sent into Syria by the movement to help with the "organizing" of the area. This was the Marxist-type language that the cadres of the movement used. "I'm here to help organize the students in Derik," she told me. She had lived in Germany for a few years, and spoke both German and English. Arabic, however, she did not know.

She was friendly and happy, in the typical PKK way. PKK members often came across as slightly automated. Their responses ideological, always positive, as if learned by rote.

But while this would be easy to parody, the movement produced fierce, highly disciplined fighters and an administration that had succeeded in carving out the most peaceful and most tightly governed part of non-regime Syria.

They dropped me at the media center in Derik. This was a room in a former school, with a number of laptop computers and a constant stream of young activists speaking Kurdish. After a while, a smiling young man called Mohammed Ibrahim offered to show me around the town. But first, he said, we had to get the permission of the "Asayish", the police and security force established by the new authorities in the Kurdish areas.

So we went to the office of the "Asayish". It was the former base of the State Security, one of Assad's dreaded intelligence structures, in Derik.

"We used to be terrified of this place," Mohammed said. "Our parents used to tell us to keep our heads down when we walked past it and not even look at it.

They used to run the town. They used to torture people there.”

Now things had changed. The place was in the command of the rough-looking men who formed the local branch of the nascent Kurdish security services.

I was interested to see what the inside of a former regime intelligence base would look like. But it was nothing special – as dilapidated as the rest of the country. Bare corridors, echoing rooms, ancient furniture and peeling paint.

The Asayish men hanging around the entrance seemed amused by me and slightly bewildered. They were mainly in their 30s, working-class, tough-looking men. The PYD/PKK, as a socialist movement, sought to build its support among the poorer strata of the population.

We received permission to report, and Mohammed and I spent the day wandering around Derik and conducting interviews.

The last regime elements had been pushed out of the town in November 2012. It was a bastion of PYD exclusive rule. The movement’s symbols – red stars, pictures of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan – were everywhere.

PYD officials that I spoke to were, nevertheless, keen to dispel claims that they were a franchise of the PKK. “The PYD and the PKK are not one party,” Talal Yunis, a slight, black-haired teacher by profession, told me as we sat on the rooftop of the party’s building, until recently the headquarters of another of Assad’s intelligence branches, the Political Security. “Here in Syria,” Yunis told me, “there is only the PYD.”

But this was fairly obviously not true. The tight, efficient and comprehensive PYD-dominated administration in the town was clearly not the work solely of the activists of a small, harried local party in existence only since 2003.

Mohammed, in the course of the day, confirmed that both the civil and military setups in the town were established under the guidance of PKK fighters and activists who arrived in the course of the summer. Mohammed was strongly behind the PYD, but saw no reason to obscure its links with the PKK.

The PYD stressed its Syrian identity and downplayed its ties to the PKK for two reasons. First, the PKK was designated a terrorist organization by both the United States and the European Union. The PYD had no such troublesome designation. Second, PYD spokesmen were keen to emphasize that the party was not seeking to split Kurdish majority areas off from Syria. Rather, the PYD officially sought to preserve Kurdish self-rule within the context of what it hoped would be a federal Syria. Its membership in a pan-Kurdish alliance might suggest otherwise.

I had heard from both Kurdish opponents of the party and Arab rebel leaders that the PYD was working in cooperation with the Assad regime. A leading member of the Azadi party, one of the many small Syrian Kurdish parties

opposed to the PYD, told me in my hotel in Iraqi Kurdistan that “the PYD is a tool of the regime. There is an agreement that the PYD works on behalf of the government.”

PYD supporters indignantly rejected these charges. As proof, they pointed to the regime’s brutal suppression of their movement prior to the uprising and subsequent civil war. They also noted the many instances of combat between their forces and regime troops. PYD supporters in Derik said that the regime had not left the town of its own free will in November, but rather had been driven out by a Kurdish mobilization.

Derik was fascinating, but my idea wasn’t to spend the whole time in the border areas. I wanted to get to Ras al-Ain (Sere Kaniyeh), the furthest edge of the Kurdish Jazira enclave. It was in this town that the fighting was going on between the YPG and the Arab rebels and jihadis.

I had imagined that the people in Derik would know that I was coming, and that they would have been briefed regarding my trip. This was not the case. None of the local men at the Asayish office seemed to have the faintest idea who I was.

Mohammed, meanwhile, disappeared for another appointment in the late afternoon. A young Kurdish activist at the media center, where I was left sitting around, took pity on me and decided to help. Mainly, I think, he wanted to practice English. By the evening, a steady rain had begun to fall; we traipsed around to the houses of various supposed officials. None of them could give me the elusive permission to go to Ras al-Ain.

The young activist, Hugir was his name, was likeable but a bit of a liability. Very thin, with straight brown hair, he was possessed of a kind of relentless determination that was bound to result either in us achieving our objective or irritating the authorities beyond measure, with unclear consequences. His bluntness extended to me, too, despite his determination to get me to Ras al-Ain.

“Do you know,” he said, as we trudged through the rain to yet another activist/official’s house to seek the elusive permission to head west, “if they paid me 1,000 dollars a day, I still wouldn’t do your job.”

Finally, after a number of fruitless visits, Hugir bowed to the inevitable, and said, “All right. There’s only one way to solve this. We need to go see the Asayish.” The nascent security service clearly had the final word. So we trooped into the Asayish offices again. It was about midnight by now, but, of course, the police facility was still open. We were led into a small office, with the TV silently showing images from the war in the corner; Hugir began to make my case to the officer on duty, a ginger-haired, moustachio’d man in his mid-30s.

This man, it was evident, rather enjoyed the sense of power inherent in his

position. It soon became clear, however, that he had little knowledge of any procedures related to media coverage, and probably didn't have the authority to grant or even refuse my request.

After experiencing Hugir's utter relentlessness for about ten minutes, the ginger-haired man began to grow agitated. I could see that playing policeman was ceasing to entertain him.

Hugir had the dangerous habit of taking his translation duties too seriously. If I said something under my breath that was intended only for my own hearing and to express my frustration he would translate it. At a certain point the ginger-haired man's patience visibly reached its limit.

"Anyway," he suddenly said, "how do I know you're a journalist? Anyone can arrive and claim to be a journalist. But we have to be careful of spies. Do you have any documentation from the PYD in Erbil to prove your story? How do we know you were even in contact with them?"

I had an easy response. "Tell him," I said to Hugir, "that I have the phone number and name of the head of the PYD mission in Erbil, and I am happy to give them to him. The name of the person is Wijdan, and he is welcome to call him right now and confirm my identity." And I pulled out my battered diary and read the name and number there.

For a moment this seemed to satisfy the man and he sat back and thought about it. Then a new idea occurred to him. "But how," he asked, "do we know that this is the real number of Dr. Wijdan? Maybe you've simply appropriated his name and if we call this number, someone else will answer and claim to be him!"

There was no answer to this question, obviously, and we carried on in pointless circles for a few minutes.

I had a bad feeling because I had experienced before in the Middle East how atmospheres could suddenly change and, once changed, they would build on their own negative momentum of suspicion and then hostility. Difficult to reverse this process once it has started, and my absence of any means of communication other than a translator lacking in social skills wasn't going to help. Language is everything in such situations. And language was something I did not have.

Things seemed to be going from bad to worse. Then the situation took a new turn as the door burst open and a huge, dark-skinned man strode in, with a suspicious look on his face, barking something out in Kurdish. The ginger-haired man and Hugir began speaking at once.

The ginger officer's face took on an expression resembling that of a little boy caught by his father in some act of mild mischief. The big man was accompanied

by a slim, younger guy with a pistol at his belt who spoke good English and immediately took over translation duties. The bigger one was Garzan, the local strong man of the Asayish, as it turned out. Garzan listened intently to my account of who I was and what I wanted. It seemed to satisfy him.

“But you know that the regime is there in Qamishli, right? And we don’t have another way to get to Sere Kaniyeh, because south of Qamishli is rebel country which we can’t pass through. Are you OK with that?”

“There’s no other way at all to get there? Isn’t there some road north of the city close to the border?”

“None at all. The city stretches right up to the border and the regime control a border crossing there.”

“Well, I guess that’s how we’ll have to do it, then.”

The atmosphere slowly returned to something resembling normality. The slim man announced that I would be staying in the home of one of the Asayish officers that night. Hugir departed with a smile of accomplishment. The ginger man sheepishly shook my hand. The slim officer drove me to his home, where I crashed on a mattress on the floor in a room where two other men were already sleeping, one of them snoring heavily.

All this reflected the inexperience of the hastily created Asayish, rather than any malevolence on their part. I was nevertheless aware that I was, in a certain sense, placing my life in the hands of these men, in that I would be entering an area the next day that was partially controlled by Assad’s army. They didn’t fill me with confidence. I also had a slight sense of being a prisoner, rather than a guest.

The next morning, the thin young man and I set off for the Asayish office again. I was introduced to a grave, middle-aged woman and an older man. “You will go with this comrade,” the young Asayish man announced. The woman was silent, and spoke neither English nor Arabic.

At this point, my mind began to race. As we got into the old car to set off for Qamishli, I had the idea that I was being taken off somewhere for some kind of investigation, relating to the strange events the previous evening. So, as we were leaving Derik to pull onto the highway, I said to the older man driving that I had no documents, so that if we were questioned at the checkpoint entering the city, I would be in trouble.

This was true. But the main reason I said it was to see if he would agree to let me leave the car, or keep driving nonetheless. If he didn’t turn back, my suspicions were correct and I was in real trouble. If he did, it meant that the situation was fine.

He looked worried, obviously, at the thought that he himself might be seen as

an accomplice if I was caught by the regime and, to my very great relief, he performed a U-turn and began to make for the Asayish base again.

Garzan and the others were bemused to find me back and hanging about the entrance. I explained what had happened.

Garzan snorted contemptuously at what he regarded as the cowardice of the old man. Then he said, “We’ve another guy going down there on a service taxi in a couple of hours. Now let’s go and have breakfast.”

Much more relaxed, I hung around the Asayish base for the next two hours. The officers had, by now, got used to me. All the same, a visiting doctor who was the brother of one of the security men approached me as I was sitting with Garzan and the others having breakfast and said, “Listen, I don’t think you should go to Qamishli. There are a lot of soldiers on the road today.”

I was, at this stage, unable to refuse to go without appearing as a time waster or worse, so I shrugged nonchalantly. Garzan roared with laughter and put his arm round my shoulders, saying something in Kurdish which I couldn’t understand but which I gathered to mean something like “This guy won’t be put off by a few soldiers” or, perhaps, “This idiot doesn’t realize that he’s doomed.”

So we smoked and chatted until about 10.30 in the morning, and then yet another young Kurdish man tapped me on the shoulder and it was time to go. We would be taking a service taxi down the main highway into the city. The service taxis left from what looked like a garage yard near the exit from Derik. The young man with me paid for both of us. Then we set off on the main highway heading for Qamishli. Most of the other passengers in the “servis” were women, many wearing Islamic hijabs. I began to run through the possibilities as we covered the miles toward the city.

There was a problem with all this. The taxi was heading down the main highway toward Qamishli. This meant we were going to have to pass through a regime roadblock at the entrance to the city. If the soldiers asked me for identification, I could wave my visa-less British passport at them, but this would do no good at all. I had no legal right to be in Syria, British or not. And once in an interrogation facility, the other relevant parts of my identity would become rapidly known.

Would my companion be able to do anything for me, with the YPG fighters nowhere in the vicinity? He would call them, perhaps, if I was questioned. Was there maybe a Kurdish checkpoint somewhere close by? I had no idea, and the taxi was speeding down the straight highway, heading for Qamishli.

I looked at the faces of the other passengers. Impassive, pale, hijabed young women who avoided my glance. I would have liked some human contact because I had the slight feeling of potential impending disaster. But I was miles

away, many, many miles away, from anyone who even knew my name.

Finally, the service taxi slowed down. I glanced at my companion and he smiled slightly, obviously knowing what I was thinking. We had arrived at the checkpoint. I looked out of the window. Assad's soldiers were there, at a position by the side of the road, one of them approaching the taxi. I dropped my bag to the floor, thinking that it identified me immediately as a journalist. Then I waited for the door of the taxi to open and for the soldiers to approach.

Then they were there. Very young men, one with a few wisps of a brown moustache. They looked disconcertingly similar to the Free Army fighters that I had seen in Idlib and Aleppo.

The Assad men were wearing regime camouflage uniforms and no headgear, carrying AK-47s. They were all thin in their tight-fitting uniforms. One of them had sneakers on instead of boots. The only thing that differentiated them from the rebels were the regulation Syrian army helmets that I could see lying around. And, of course, the livid-red regime flag and the portrait of Bashar Assad over the position.

They were very bored and very tired, too. Conscripts, stuck on a roadblock. I watched as they opened the doors of the car in front of us. Nothing I could do now. Another minute or so and it would be our turn.

I remembered from my own time on IDF roadblocks on the West Bank that an important element was not to make eye contact with the soldier when he looked into the vehicle. Eye contact would be taken as a challenge, or at any rate an invitation for interaction. It was the only meager advice I could offer myself as the car in front was waved forward and it was our turn. I caught the eye of my companion for a moment again and he made a gesture with his hand which was meant to signal "Keep calm. Don't worry." I was in no danger of losing control of myself. All the same, I had a kind of numb, cold feeling in the pit of my stomach which I recognized from the past and which comes with real fear.

Then the door of the taxi was opening. One of the young soldiers peered in, going from face to face. His eyes rested on me for a few moments. I avoided his glance and tried to look vacant and bored, staring in front of myself.

The young soldier looked from face to face, searching for anything of interest.

Then, after what seemed like a long time but was probably less than a minute, he nodded and exited. We were waved through. No attempt to check our documents. After a few minutes the service taxi stopped and deposited us on the street. Qamishli was dusty and teeming, filled with small shops. My companion laughed and slapped me on the back heartily. We were through.

A few minutes later we were in a PYD safe house, where we waited for the media officer to arrive and sort things out. There was still a long drive ahead,

due west, along the borderline, to Sere Kaniyeh.

She arrived, after a few minutes, a diminutive, bustling PYD woman, who again spoke German and no English. This was Berfin, a well-known journalist on the PKK's Ronahi TV network and an activist of the movement. She seemed to know her business; she told me that the translator and driver would be along presently.

Sure enough, a young husband and wife team arrived a few minutes later, with the woman speaking fluent though heavily accented English. The husband was a taxi driver, a dark, thick set, very Kurdish-looking man. His wife was slim, pale, with black-rimmed glasses and straight black hair in a kind of bob. Zuzan, she said her name was. An English teacher from Qamishli.

The bad news was that we had to drive through central Qamishli, where the regime police and army were deployed, in order to get on the road to Sere Kaniyeh. So more regime roadblocks to come. The thought of this made me irritable and gloomy. How many more roadblocks, I wanted to ask. But I didn't. I didn't want to seem frightened and nervous. Danger was to be treated with humor or ignored. Calm and low temperatures were appreciated and respected. That was how everyone in Syria seemed to behave.

The driver proved a cool customer indeed and Zuzan was friendly. All the same, driving though central Qamishli, which was still at that time festooned with regime flags and pictures of Hafez and Bashar Assad, did not improve my mood. It felt, once again, like I was in the Syria I'd read about, rather than some new putative state that either the rebels (in Idlib) or the PKK (in Derik) were trying to create.

Here was the full paraphernalia of the Ba'athists. A strange life-size white statue of Hafez Assad in the town center, with uniformed police all around it. Regime banners, Ba'ath flags (identical to the Palestinian flag) and pictures of Bashar on the walls. But, also, a disconcerting sense of near normality which contrasted sharply with the obvious, dark, other-world aspect of the rebel-controlled areas. Uniformed police, bustle, shops open, children.

As we waited in traffic, Zuzan said quietly "I think we're being followed. We should get out at the lights. Don't look behind. My husband will drive for a while and see if the car is stopped. Then he'll come back for us."

I resisted the urge to look behind and at the lights we quickly stepped out of the yellow taxi and lost ourselves in the bustling crowd. As we walked, Zuzan began to talk about Qamishli before the uprising. Perhaps she was trying to distract me from the tension of the situation. It worked.

Zuzan had a strong and very tangible sadness to her, which I found to be common among Syrians once they let their guard down. She was 24. She began

to talk about music, telling me that she and her friends listened to Feyrouz in the morning and Um Kulthoum in the evening, just so, for reasons she couldn't explain, but that the Syria she had known was gone. Meanwhile I scanned the traffic for signs of her husband's taxi, trying very hard not to look conspicuous. Finally, he pulled up. "There was no-one following anyway," Zuzan informed me as we climbed in.

We managed to pass through another army roadblock by the border crossing on the way out of the city, and then began the drive to Sere Kaniyeh. After a while the distinctive earthen roadblocks of the YPG, with their reassuring yellow red and green flags began to appear, in place of the regime's red, black, green and white. For the time being, we were back in an area controlled solely by the Kurds.

As we passed through Amuda and approached Sere Kaniyeh, it was already late afternoon. The signs of war began to become apparent. Destroyed houses, blackened walls. Debris. Few people around. Inside Sere Kaniyeh we made our way to a small house where we were greeted by a woman of about 40. She was one of the local activists and, after the inevitable glass of sweet and scaldingly hot tea, she said she'd take us up to the frontline positions where we could meet the fighters.

So we spent the following hours visiting the frontline strongholds of the YPG, with the positions of the rebels and jihadis – and of the strange new organization, ISIS – only a few blocks away.

While I was in Sere Kaniyeh there was no fighting. A ceasefire had been declared a couple of days earlier. Areas of the town had suffered from the clashes between the YPG and the Islamists. But the devastation was not on the scale of that suffered, for example, in Aleppo. Still, the situation was tense. Two rounds of heavy fighting, in November 2012 and late January 2013, had taken place here between the Kurds and the Islamist rebels. Most of the civilian population appeared to have left the town. The streets were deserted, with the remaining civilians dependent on outside aid and rarely leaving their homes.

The Islamists remained in possession of the neighborhoods of Yusuf al-Azma and al-Sumud, around 10 percent of the total area of the town. These were sealed off by a tense frontline in which the fighters faced one another. In the dying afternoon light, we spoke to the area commander and some of his fighters.

The commander, Jamshid Osman, had become a highly respected figure in the YPG as a result of his role in the Sere Kaniyeh fighting. About 30 years old, stocky and wearing an incongruous Russian-style military cap when we met him, Osman spoke to me in a room darkened by a power cut, with a group of his fighters around him.

Sere Kaniyeh had become a kind of watchword for the Kurds at that time. It was where, they believed, the interests of the Sunni rebels and the government of Turkey coincided.

As Osman put it, “The Free Army took money from the Turkish government. Sere Kaniyeh was the first phase. Their intention was to go on all the way to Derik and the oil town of Rumeilan, and take the petrol there.” Moreover, said Osman, “The Kurds are self-governing in Sere Kaniyeh. That’s not good for the Turks, so they wanted to put an end to it.”

He described the battles of November and January, in which the fighters of Jabhat al-Nusra, Ghuraba al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid and other groups deployed tanks against the Kurdish fighters. “When they first came in, the Turks opened the border gate, to bring in supplies and take out wounded. Ambulances carrying weapons also came in from the Turkish side.”

This claim of Turkish involvement in the fighting was commonly heard from the Kurdish side. The Kurds further claimed that injured Islamist fighters were treated at a hospital in the Turkish border town of Ceylanpinar. That the rebel forces were operating from across the Turkish border was borne out by eyewitness reports. Turkey was undoubtedly watching with concern the emergence of a second Kurdish autonomous zone, alongside Kurdish-ruled northern Iraq.

A truce between the YPG and the Free Syrian Army had come into effect February 17, but few expected it to last. The Kurds were well aware that their area of self-government offered a tempting prospect to surrounding forces. As Jamshid Osman said, “Turkey, Assad, Iraq, all want this area, where we’re governing ourselves, because it’s full of oil. But we’ll fight anyone who wants to make us slaves.”

Syria was never an oil-rich state, even at the height of production before 2011. The revenues accruing from the oilfields in the Rumeilan area never came anywhere near those of the Iraqi oilfields or the Gulf. Still, in poverty-stricken, ruined Syria, possession of these areas would represent a considerable prize.

Rumeilan was on our agenda for the following day. But first we had to get back to Qamishli. This, unfortunately, meant heading out of the YPG areas and back into the nebulous zone of the city. I tried not to think about it as we boarded the taxi to begin the journey back.

Zuzan had evidently decided that I was someone who could be talked to and, as we drove through Amuda, she began hesitantly to open up regarding her own view of what was taking place in the Kurdish-controlled areas.

“You shouldn’t believe everything the PYD are telling you,” she said. “It isn’t all so wonderful here.” Her own preference, she made clear, was for Barzani and

the KRG in northern Iraq. I tried to ask what it was exactly that the PYD were doing wrong. “They are raising the most ignorant people to positions of power,” she said, “and they are taking houses of people who fled.”

As we headed toward Qamishli city, I began to relax. The fear I had felt at the roadblock earlier seemed amusing as it receded, and I began in my mind to fashion it into an amusing anecdote that I would tell my friends back in the bars of west Jerusalem.

Even as I was having this thought, I felt the taxi slow down sharply and I looked ahead. A white pole had been placed across the road, bearing the red sign “Police.” Two or three plainclothes officers were standing by the roadblock. My stomach lurched again. A thin, grey-haired man with a moustache approached the driver’s window. They began to converse in Kurdish. The driver was ebulliently friendly and amused. The policeman, nevertheless, appeared grave. I heard him going behind and checking the boot of the taxi, as I stared straight in front of me. Then he opened the back seat door, where I was sitting, and took a good look at me. I kept my eyes on the seat in front, trying to appear nonchalant but not disrespectful. He slammed the door and said something to the driver, who laughed again and started up the engine. And we were out of there.

“My husband says to me that if they try to take you, he will offer them money, and if that fails, he will go himself,” Zuzan told me gravely after a few minutes silence, as we drove along the darkened highway.

We arrived at her parents’ house in Qamishli city, a sanctuary of middle-class respectability, a few minutes later. Within a few minutes Zuzan’s father was questioning me about eighteenth-century British history while her mother brought us a hastily improvised but delicious supper.

It occurred to me that this was the first time I had entered a middle-class, urban Syrian home, at least at a time that the family were still living there. In Binnish, all the homes had been those of the devout, rural Sunni poor. In Aleppo, the places I had stayed in were ruins, inhabited by the rebel fighters.

Here was a normality I recognized. One that included the presence of women in the reception rooms. One that was trying very hard to stay in being, with terror and insanity all around.

There was something poignant, full of pathos about the way that Zuzan’s mother welcomed us, trying hard to pretend that the arrival of foreign strangers was a perfectly normal part of the family’s routine. When the electricity cut out and we had to continue our conversation by flashlight, she reacted with a friendly and slightly embarrassed smile. She did not for a moment lose her composure. Yet the family did not laugh about the situation, the way the people in Azaz and Binnish did. This determined, even heroic attempt at normality

concealed a very human dismay, rather than defiance.

The plan for the next day was to visit the oil town of Rumeilan. Then, if that went OK, back to Derik and then back to the border as soon as possible. It was still three days before my flight from Erbil back to Amman and I was hoping for some rest and recreation in the Iraqi Kurdish capital.

We met early the next morning and began the journey to Rumeilan. The issue that especially interested me was whether the Kurds were now controlling the oil extraction process, or whether this was another example of the curious and ambiguous relationship between the Kurdish enclave and the regime. We managed to bypass the last regime roadblock out of Qamishli by some deft driving along hidden tracks through arable land by our driver. Why wasn't that possible during other parts of the trip? Why had I been sent down the main highway by the Asayish straight into the arms of Assad's army? No good response.

Rumeilan was a dusty, teeming town, surrounded by wells that looked inactive. There was a sale of oil at rock-bottom prices to residents going on in the town center as we drove in. Men took their allocation of two cans full of oil for their families, for heating and cooking purposes.

A tiny Arab child of not more than five was smoking a cigarette in the queue for the oil. When her hijab'ed mother noticed, she knocked the thing from the child's hands. It began bawling. "The Arabs come also to take oil from here. Then they re-sell it back in Aleppo province for ten times the price," Zuzan remarked.

Rumeilan smelled of oil. But the derricks were still, like monuments. An engineer from the oil plant at Rumeilan told me later that production was virtually at a standstill.

From 166,000 barrels of oil a day in early 2011, they were down to about 5,000–6,000. The pipelines to Homs and Tartus were damaged. The foreign companies, the British Gulfsands and the Chinese, had long since left. The oil that was extracted had been going to the Homs refinery only, and was used for domestic consumption.

"This charity that the land gives us, the oil," said the engineer, "never gave our people anything other than foul smells, cancer and other diseases. The benefits were always for the others, who shipped it to Tartus, the Alawi people."

The YPG/PYD had political and security control in Rumeilan, but the oil industry, it rapidly became clear, was still in the hands of the regime, at that time at least. As a local official, Farzanan Munzer, explained to me, "We have no money to give to the people working in the plants, to change the ownership from the Ba'ath to the Kurds. Also, the only refineries are in Tartus and Homs and,

without refining, it's useless."

The officials I spoke with, associated with PYD-linked groups, spoke of their hopes for the area. Munzer, who told me he'd served four years in a regime jail for writing an article against the Assads, had evidently learned patience. "In the future, we'd like to build a pipeline to Iraqi Kurdistan," he told me. "But right now, we don't have the possibility. And if we didn't send the oil, the regime would stand against us, and the Free Syrian Army would stand against us, and war would come to our areas. So there'll come a day when we take control of it, but it's not now."

His responses seemed indicative of the modest dimensions of the Kurdish project in north east Syria. Many on both the regime and rebel sides believed that the Kurds were operating according to some detailed blueprint for separation. The truth, as suggested by the accommodations reached with the rebels in Sere Kaniyeh and the regime in Rumeilan, was that this very poor, historically oppressed population was looking mainly for self-protection and a measure of self-rule – and, if possible, hoped to sit out the terrible civil war raging elsewhere.

From Rumeilan, we made it back to Derik and, once more, the offices of the Asayish.

Garzan greeted me with an ironic effusiveness, tinged with disappointment. Evidently, he had taken a firm dislike to me. I think it was because of my talk about the senior PKK officials that I'd interviewed when I was trying to get him to take me seriously on the first night. He saw me as a jumped-up, mouthy and incomprehensible foreigner.

I was not particularly enthralled about being back in the company of these emergent secret policemen myself. The two days spent with Zuzan and her family had reminded me what normal, non-barracks life felt like. I preferred it to the echoing, dilapidated corridors of the former State Security headquarters in Derik/Malkiyeh. The negligence with which these men had related to my security regarding the trip through Qamishli also did not warm my heart to them.

I understood it, of course. There they were, newly empowered, running the show. Then a creature from another planet arrives and starts braying and whining about how he expects to be allowed to go to Sere Kaniyeh. So their attitude had been, I think, well if you want to go, then fine. We won't be taking any special measures to keep you safe. But if you feel like traveling round north east Syria with no identification other than an unmarked British passport, that's up to you. We can even sort you out some rides.

It wasn't the way that journalists were supposed to get treated by their hosts in war zones. It reflected the chaos of the time, as well as the lack of experience of

the local men that the PKK had raised up to power in their areas of control.

The following day, Garzan and one of his men drove me to a village close to the border called Tel Khanzir, set high in the hills above the Tigris. I was placed with a farming family there, to wait until a river crossing was cleared to take place.

The farmer was a handsome, grizzled Kurd in his early 60s, living in a small house of mud bricks surrounded by his family. A silent old grandmother was in an adjoining structure.

The village appeared almost untouched by the war, living according to its slow rhythms and amid a great silence. Rabbits hopped and ducks waddled between the tiny houses.

But as always in Syria, the harmony was deceptive, and concealed something quite different.

“You can’t go walking around the village,” the farmer’s son told me abruptly after my arrival. “There’s ‘Istikhbarat’ (Intelligence) there, people informing for the regime. We can’t let them know you’re here.”

So I stayed largely confined to the tiny, mud-brick dwelling and the yard.

Tel Khanzir (hill of the pig) is too small to appear on most maps of the area.

All the houses were of the same ubiquitous Kurdish baked-mud bricks – an ancient way of building of which the Kurds were very proud. They contrasted their dwellings favorably with the stone houses of the Arabs, which they seemed to see as emblematic of a greater Kurdish capacity for work and closeness to the land.

It was interesting also to note the more open nature of life there when compared with the Arab towns and villages further west. Few of the younger women wore hijabs. The women sat with the men in the main living area.

A day passed, then another. The Kurdish organizations seemed to have forgotten me. Perhaps this was Garzan’s way of further avenging himself on me for inconveniencing him and then having the effrontery to return in one piece with further demands.

By the third day, I began to seriously consider offering to do some work for the farmer, in return for the food I was getting.

Of course, he wouldn’t have heard of it. He was a friendly and good-natured man. One son off fighting in the YPG, another with the PKK in the Qandil mountains, another working in Erbil and only his remaining son and three daughters and his wife living with him in the tiny house.

One of the daughters was an activist with the PYD. The whole family, it seemed, were deeply engaged with the Kurdish cause. The TV played heartrending Kurdish songs all day. One of them that I particularly liked was

called “Keca Kurd”. Its refrain is a single word “partizanum” (Partisans). It was sung by a woman and a procession of faces of very young women flashed up on the screen as it played. These were martyrs of the YPJ, the women’s section of the YPG militia. It was on Ronahi TV, the pro-PKK Syrian Kurdish channel. Propaganda, of course. But very moving, for all that. It also reflected a very basic and worrying truth – the staggering attrition that the war was imposing on the younger generations of Syrians – Kurd and Arab alike.

I sat and watched and fretted and wondered why the YPG hadn’t been in contact. As the days passed I began to have absurd visions of myself forced to live for months in Tel Khanzir, eking out a meager living as an indentured laborer for the farmer and his family, with the border sealed and my fate unknown.

Finally, the call came, and I left for the border. We made it across the Tigris, in a dinghy crowded with refugees.

I had missed my chance of rest and recreation in Iraqi Kurdistan, though. I caught a taxi from the border to Erbil, presented myself at the airport, took the flight to Amman, then a taxi to Beit Shean and another to Jerusalem, and thus passed from one world to another.

As we traveled up the Jordan Valley, heading for the border crossing, it occurred to me for the first time that I had come close to capture by Assad’s forces – at the checkpoint at the entrance to Qamishli. I felt no sense of drama in this conclusion. The reason is odd and hard to precisely describe. Syria became like another universe as soon as one crossed the border. This made it hard to think of events that took place there as belonging in the same dimension as those of more mundane nature. One either survived or one did not. That was all. Any further investigation seemed superfluous. That human life could appear of reduced value in conflict situations is no great revelation. But what was unexpected was the way in which it could somehow devalue the currency of one’s own life, or reinflate it again, according to the circumstances. I had often wondered at how people could go to death by execution with no great perception of hugeness at their own demise. I had seen films of this and found it utterly baffling. On the occasion in the Lebanon war of 2006 when I had myself nearly been killed, neither I nor my comrades had any sense of the devaluation of our own lives or our fate. On the contrary, we remained a tight knit group of people outraged at the injustice of the possible loss of our own lives. Syria produced something quite different. There had already been so much death. What difference could a little more make? One didn’t entirely feel this, of course. Perhaps only a very little. But it was enough to cause a certain disorientation when one surfaced back on the other side.

A strange thing that happened a day after my return from Syrian Kurdistan was that my voice disappeared. Literally. For three or four days I was unable to speak. I did not seek medical aid for this and have no explanation for it. Somehow, I related it to this transition from the city of the dead to that of the living.

The Kurds had created the quietest and most peaceful area of Syria. And the YPG was clearly one of the most formidable militias active in the conflict. The Syrian Kurds were lucky enough to have clearly defined, pan-Kurdish national movements whom they could look to.

On the other side of the line, a few blocks away in Sere Kaniyeh, or Ras al-Ain as the Arabs called it, for the Sunni Arabs, it was the most extreme religious elements that were taking control. This fragmentation was defining the conflict.

Back in Jerusalem, I thought long and hard about the fragmentation now evident in northern Syria. I wrote a number of pieces arguing that it was clear that the insurgency had become a Sunni Islamist affair, and that, as such, it was no longer possible to advocate for western support for it. This was a train that had passed by.

These articles cost me the goodwill of a number of friends and colleagues who still identified with what they called the “rebels”. But it was impossible for me to deny the evidence of my own senses. I continue to believe that while a democratic Syria was probably an unachievable goal, a stable and broadly western-aligned one could have been achieved if the West, meaning mainly the US, had involved itself from the start in helping to rally and organize the armed opposition.

At a certain point, this became no longer possible. As with medical conditions, if a situation is allowed to progress beyond a certain point, then what might have been a feasible remedy in the past becomes no longer relevant. The Syrian war, by mid-2013, had reached this stage. It was no longer a simple affair of a dictatorship battling an insurgency. What had happened was that the country itself had begun to come apart at the seams – along the seam-lines of the various ethnic and sectarian communities that made it up. That is, rather than experiencing a change of government, Syria was ceasing to exist.

## Notes

1 “South by South-East,” *The Economist*, October 20, 2012. <http://www.economist.com>

2 “Syria’s Population,” *Fanack Chronicle*, September 29, 2009. <https://chronicle.fanack.com/syria/population/>

3 Gil Shefler, “In Iraq’s Kurdish Zone, Israelis and Long-hidden Jews see Hope for Revived Ties,”

*Tablet*, November 8, 2013. <http://www.tabletmag.com>

# 4

## THE SIEGE OF KOBANI

### Interviewing ISIS

I left Syria alone for a while after my visit to the Jazira region. With the war undergoing its metamorphosis, it seemed more important to analyze than to report. But I knew I'd need to go back in at some point. This wasn't only to do with professional or altruistic motivation. The war had got under my skin. Little else in my life could compare with it.

I say this with no particular pride. Westerners treating foreign wars as arenas in which they can test and affirm themselves have always struck me as grotesque. I had nothing that I wanted to prove. I was no longer a young man. I was well aware of both my capacities and my limitations.

So I wasn't on any great quest in wishing to return to the Syrian wars. But I had grown, on some level, to love the country itself and also to love the business of war reporting in this most extreme of contexts. People would ask me to explain this attraction. I could not.

It was in this period that the kidnapping of journalists by Sunni jihadi elements began in earnest. Oddly, it was events related to this that precipitated my return.

In August, Steven Sotloff, was taken. Steven had informed me of his intention to head back into Aleppo via Azaz in the summer of 2013.

It was clearly an unwise decision. I had taken this route into Syria during the summer of 2012. But times had changed. ISIS and Nusra were now all over the northern countryside. And while the non-Salafi rebels were still strong in Aleppo city itself, to get there meant going through areas infested by the jihadis.

Steven's kidnapping returned Syria to the front of my consciousness. It spurred a desire to return and report from there again.

The place I had in mind was the besieged Kurdish enclave of Kobani. This precarious entity was surrounded on three sides by ISIS, and on a fourth by a tight Turkish border regime. Within it, the PYD was maintaining its rule. It seemed an ideal opportunity to take a second look at one of the “sideshows” of the Syrian war which were now becoming its main event. These were the conflicts between successor entities over the ruins of the country, in areas long abandoned by the Assad regime.

I would spend my time as the guest of the Kurds and their formidable YPG militia. But I also had a vague idea about trying to get some interviews afterwards with ISIS members on the Turkish side of the border.

Through PKK contacts in Europe, I made the necessary arrangements and, in May 2014, I flew down to Gaziantep, close to the border.

It was the first time that I had tried to enter one of the Kurdish enclaves in Syria by way of Turkey. This was not an easy exercise. The Syrian Arab Army, which once constituted such a fearsome prospect along the borderline was now only a distant memory. The problem was the Turks. Turkey was deeply concerned at the prospect of de facto PKK territory emerging along its border with Syria. The policy Ankara adopted along this border was starkly in contrast to its laissez faire approach in areas facing the Syrian Arab population. There, money changed hands and all was conducted in fraternal fashion.

The Turks looked at the Syrian rebels and the refugees with a kind of good-natured contempt. Of the type one might have toward a family member less accomplished and refined than oneself, but who nevertheless has endearing and redeeming qualities.

With the Kurds, and especially with the PKK, it was different. Officially, a ceasefire between Ankara and the organization was in place. But it was not clear where this would lead. In the meantime, the dramatic change in Kurdish fortunes was a matter for concern. The Turks were deeply involved with many of the Islamist militias who had fought the Kurdish YPG across northern Syria in the previous months.

Kobani was unconnected to Jazira, the Kurdish enclave further east, which had its border with Kurdish northern Iraq. So there was no way of getting in except via Turkey.

The border policy that the Turks maintained facing Kobani was strict. Anyone caught seeking to cross the border illegally would receive a beating at the hands of the Turkish army or gendarmerie. Those who failed to stop when ordered could expect a bullet.

A number of refugees had died attempting to leave the area for Turkey. On the one hand, I didn't relish making a run across the border. On the other, the

distances one needed to cover were short, so the time of real danger would be limited. Kobani is a city nestled close to the frontier. One simply needed luck in getting through the fence and a little further south.

I reached the town of Sanliurfa, and then on to Suruc. This teeming border town was PKK country. I spent the day waiting in one of the movement's offices. Then we drove to the border line to wait for darkness in the house of a supporter of the movement in a remote border village. The man was a small, bald, middle-aged Kurd, his house decorated with pictures of Abdullah öcalan and various martyrs of the movement.

This area had formed one of the main centers of the "dirty war" conducted by the Turks in the 1980s and early '90s in the south east of the country, with the intention of wiping out the PKK.

We waited for darkness to fall along the vast border. The silence in the house was punctuated by a child, presumably autistic, laughing and crying and beating her head against the wall of the little house as her mother tried to control her.

Waiting for nightfall had become a familiar routine for me. Still, I hated it. There is something in our nature which tells us that when the darkness comes, you're best to stay inside. This applies particularly to the blank, pitch black, brooding darkness that arrives in remote, rural areas with nightfall. Persistently ignoring such a patently sensible inner voice seemed foolhardy. Attempting to cross into Kobani by day, however, would have been suicide.

Finally, the young smuggler who was due to take me across arrived. He was not what I expected. A handsome, very tall and dashing Kurd, with a leather jacket wrapped round his shoulders, and flashing a white-toothed smile. He treated the whole matter with nonchalance and, after brief introductions, we set off down a pathway from the village and into the darkness near the border fence.

At a certain point, he suddenly broke into a fast run and I scrambled after him. We sprinted toward the fence, then along it for a few meters. Then he deftly swung himself up on a tree next to the barbed-wire barrier, then onto the fence itself, then over it and, with a swift movement, down to the other side.

He beckoned to me. The fence was about 15 feet high. Trying not to remind myself that a Turkish patrol could show up at any second, I began to pull myself up the tree, then carefully, slowly maneuvered on to the fence. I managed to get over without too much difficulty, though inevitably I cut my hand a bit and ripped my jeans. Once we were over, after about five minutes of striding, he stopped and turned with a smile and handed me a cigarette. "You are in Syria," he said.

He seemed too clean-cut to be a smuggler. I began to wonder if he was one of the PYD activists of Kobani who had developed this additional skill out of

necessity. But at his family house were a bunch of his relatives, sitting around smoking and drinking tea and cradling ancient AK-47 rifles. Smugglers, all right. Presently, a bespectacled activist turned up to take me on into Kobani city. So far, so good.

The YPG had changed and become more like a regular force in the year since I'd met them in the Jazira region. There were uniforms now; a distinctive non-Syrian-looking green camouflage. The Asayish security service had a uniform of its own, too, of plain green.

Kobani was in a state of siege. ISIS had disconnected the electricity. The power was being maintained by generator. The water supply had been cut off too. The de facto Kurdish authorities were digging for wells to provide drinking water.

The enclave was not large. A few tens of kilometers to Tel Abyad in the east and Jarabulus in the west. Many Arab refugees had made their way there from Aleppo seeking safety. The young activists of the YPG and the PYD, nevertheless, managed to maintain a cheerful atmosphere in the various centers they maintained. Food was scarce and monotonous: lots of potatoes and a few vegetables, with the ever-present black tea still there in abundance.

We began to tour the frontlines the next day, and spent several days traversing the YPG positions. The siege had been under way since March. For ISIS, the destruction of the Kobani enclave was a strategic necessity.

It was the point at which two rival successor projects to the Syrian state met. The Kurds maintained three enclaves stretching from east to west along the Syrian-Turkish border. Kobani was the middle of them.

ISIS, meanwhile, was in the process of carving out a contiguous area from the Syria-Iraq border further south, across Raqqa province and Deir E Zor, and up toward Aleppo province. Kobani jutted into this enclave. Its existence prevented the jihadis from using the highway from their capital in Raqqa city to the town of Jarabulus on the border, west of the Kurdish enclave. No less importantly, it meant they didn't have direct access into Aleppo province, for some future offensive westwards.

So the jihadis had elected to destroy Kobani. The Kurds, meanwhile, were determined it would not fall.

ISIS was already, by this stage, acquiring a reputation that set it apart from other rebel groups. It had not yet declared its enclave to constitute a "caliphate". But the power of its name was based on a floridly sadistic cruelty toward its prisoners and enemies: beheadings, executions, the primitive desecration of corpses had become its trademarks.

The two fronts, east and west, differed. In Tel Abyad, to the east of Kobani

city, the sides camped in abandoned villages. The ruined landscape had a lunar quality. ISIS had forced the villagers to leave when the fighting began.

The fighters of the YPG, ever mindful of the presence of ISIS snipers, moved gingerly around their positions in these eerie, empty villages. In places, the two sides prowled less than 500 meters apart. ISIS favored mortar fire by night and sniping by day; some 80 YPG fighters had died since the fighting erupted in March.

The bodies of ISIS fighters could be seen in the flat fields between the village and the position of the jihadis.

“They don’t bother to come and get them,” one of the YPG fighters told me. “But when one of their ‘emirs’, their big commanders, died here they came with an armored vehicle to pick up his body.”

So the twisted corpses of the jihadis remained, strange dark-colored piles dotted around the field. “They wanted to go to *janna* [heaven],” one of the fighters remarked with a smile, “so we sent them there. But don’t spend too long staring out at the field from the window opening there or you’ll be heading the same way. They have a sniper operating round here.”

There was particular hatred for the Chechens, the fighters from the Northern Caucasus who formed a formidable and brutal element among the jihadis. The education afforded the YPG fighters was that of the PKK, with its Marxist-tinted language of internationalism. So the fighters became embarrassed when I asked them of their views about the Chechens and they smiled shyly at each other and muttered, until one of the bolder among them, a cheerful-looking man with a brown moustache, spoke up and said, quite simply, “They are animals. Monsters.”

The Chechens, it seemed, had brought some of the more savage practices of war in the Caucasus to northern Syria. On the part of the Kurds, their desecration of corpses and use as totems to terrify the enemy was a matter of particular wonderment and disgust.

The Chechen commander in ISIS, “Abu Omar al-Shishani” – real name Tarkhan Batirashvili – was a frequent subject of conversation. “He has vowed to drink tea and to pray in Kobani,” one YPG man said to me. And then, leaning forward, mock conspiratorially, “He won’t, though.”<sup>1</sup>

Batirashvili had also vowed to change the name of Kobani to “Ayn al-Islam”. In official Syrian maps, it still appeared as “Ayn al-Arab”, the name that the Ba’ath regime had given it.

Surkhwi, a female commander in the YPJ, the female military force of the Syrian Kurds, was contemptuous of the enemy, as we talked at an abandoned school near Tel Abyad which had been converted into a base.

“They outnumber us, often. But they lack tactics,” she said, in a variation of a comment I would hear again and again from the fighters of the YPG. “We think many of them take drugs before entering combat, and they attack randomly, haphazardly. They desecrate bodies, cutting off heads, cutting off hands. They don’t respect the laws of war.”

This claim of drug use was also a common one against the fighters of ISIS. It was never clear what exactly the drug was. But the picture that emerged was one of a fanatically committed force given to the employment of fairly simple tactics and to a wasteful approach regarding the lives of its own combatants.

The YPG, it appeared, was more tactically proficient, trained by PKK fighters, and this was reflected in its far lower casualty rates.

I was, naturally, cocooned among activists of the PYD and fighters of the YPG in the course of this visit, and so I cannot claim that my experiences reflected the entirety of the Kurdish experience in Kobani.

Yet it was difficult to spend any time with these young militants without being profoundly impressed.

This was not because of the particular strange ideology of “Apo-ism” promoted by the PKK. In fact, it was in spite of this philosophy, a curious hotch potch of far-left and anarchist thought, that seemed spectacularly unsuited to the realities of the societies of the Levant.<sup>2</sup>

No, it was something else. Here was a people whose experience was perhaps without parallel in wretchedness in the blighted modern history of the Levant. The Kurds had been divided up between four repressive and authoritarian states – Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran. But the Kurds of Syria were perhaps uniquely sealed off, confined to their remote northern corners of the country. Their language, traditions and most basic rights had been trampled by the Assad regime, far from any media interest. But in Kobani and the other enclaves, finally, the very modest project of simply securing protection for the area’s civilian inhabitants and their language and culture, in the face of assaults from some of the most vicious military organizations anywhere, was being achieved.

I was far from idealism or idealization. But it didn’t take any particular ideological outlook to understand that ISIS was one of those periodic manifestations of the utterly monstrous to which humanity appears inclined. Now its forces were knocking at the door of Kobani. The defense against it seemed motivated by generosity, a youthful optimism and a sort of rough, warm decency.

The frontlines were periodically active, even when a major offensive was not under way. Outside the village of Haj Ismail, I was able to watch as the YPG fighters mobilized in response to ISIS fire on their positions.

I was interviewing Nohalat, a senior commander of the YPG in the area, when we heard the pop-popping of small arms fire. The fighters rushed from the tent to take their positions. I followed close behind, fumbling for my camera.

The swift mobilization proved efficient. There was a machine gun post at the front of the outpost, concealed behind sandbags. A few hundred meters beyond, across flat ground, was the position from which ISIS was firing. Two of the YPG men began to sprint toward the machine gun, doubled up as though sheltering from rain. I followed them in a similar position.

This doubling up would be no protection against bullets, of course, but it seems to be an instinctive reaction. We reached the position and the machine gun was swiftly brought into effect as the fighters loosed off a series of bursts toward the ISIS line.

A third fighter joined us and began to fire rounds from his AK-47 toward the jihadis' positions. The firing was still coming from the other side. I tried to keep my head below the sandbags while photographing the YPG men.

Was this the prelude to a ground attack? We waited. After a while, the shooting tailed off. We returned, sweating and laughing, to the commander's tent.

"They are trying to test our reactions," Nohalat, the commander, told me as we continued the interview. "Almost every day they fire off like this. And in the night-time, with mortars. Trying to wear us down. But they haven't advanced here, not a centimeter, since March."

There were some Arab fighters among the YPG at Haj Ismail. And on the other side, among the ranks of ISIS, were Kurds, mainly from the Halabja area in Iraqi Kurdistan, where Islamic and tribal traditions were strong. But, for the most part, this was an ethnic war, Sunni Arabs against Kurds. For the latter, at least, ethnic loyalties seemed to trump religious ones.

And the Kurds appeared to be prevailing. The Islamists hadn't broken in. From Jarabulus in the west to Tel Abyad in the east, the enclave was holding.

But the siege was tight. And getting out proved more of a challenge than getting in had been.

On the night I was due to leave I sat in the media center talking to a very thin, very tall and soft-spoken Kurdish man in his mid-30s, who everyone treated with a sort of quiet deference. This was Nuri Mahmoud, a local man who had lost a leg fighting the Turks with the PKK in the Qandil mountains, between northern Iraq and south east Turkey.

Nuri spoke very quietly, and at length, and was never interrupted. He had come down from Qandil to oversee the building of political institutions in the enclave. He was one of the senior PKK cadres that one came across everywhere

in the Kurdish parts of Syria. He was keen to ask me about Israel, and how Israelis and Jews viewed the Kurds. And as was usual in Kurdish circles, he said some kind words about the Jews, their history, sufferings and aspirations. Among the Kurds, unlike with the Sunni Arab rebels, there was no need to conceal Jewish or Israeli connections. Indeed, if anything, they conferred a certain advantage.

After our interview, an impromptu concert began in the media center. A man with a saz, the Kurdish stringed instrument, began to play and sing. Some of the young activists joined in. I am fond of this instrument, with its wild, jangling tones, so I stayed and listened to the singing. The light was failing. It would soon be time for us to leave for the border area. There was a small lawn outside; some of the activists were digging a vegetable garden. The atmosphere was one of idealism, good humor, quiet devotion.

They played YPG songs in the van as we drove out of the city westwards for the rendezvous with the smugglers, too. One of the anthems I particularly liked. It had a kind of defiant swagger to it. The chorus was “Biji, biji, YPG!” (“Long live the YPG!”). It came out of the radio as the night fell and we drove west in the direction of Jarabulus. I remembered a line from Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, written 80 years earlier, about a moment in the Spanish civil war where he was arrested by the nagging doubt that perhaps war was, indeed, glorious after all.

The exit proved a challenge on a level I had not experienced before. The Turkish security measures were tight. I was placed with some smugglers in a remote and tiny hamlet close to the border fence. On the first night, a Turkish armored vehicle with a camera was patrolling along the fence and the smugglers decided not to risk trying a run.

A man called Adnan, with his two small and well-dressed children, had attempted to make it across earlier. He had been caught by the patrol and beaten. Brown-haired Adnan, who must have been about 40, was stoic and quiet as he described the events. They had shouted at him to stop and he had done so. Then the officer and the soldiers had kicked and punched him and sent him back in the direction of Syria, and he had returned to the smugglers’ village from where he had started out. His children were silent. A girl of about ten and a boy slightly younger, with pale, set, serious faces. They huddled together quietly under the covers of one of the makeshift beds in the hut.

“Tomorrow I’ll try and head back for Damascus, and look for work there. And you – make sure you don’t end up in a Turkish jail,” Adnan told me as we sat on the floor and ate a meager meal of raw vegetables.

The night passed, slowly. In the morning the smugglers informed me that we

would hopefully be trying again the following night, but much depended on the presence of the mysterious camera vehicle. “It’s from Israel,” they said with a sort of fearful wonder regarding the device, “the Turks bought it from them. It can see in the darkness.”

The smugglers lived in astonishing squalor and poverty. An outside squat toilet overflowing with excrement. Chickens and a goat came and went inside. An aging matriarch with blue tattoos on her face was in charge, with her five sons and their wives together inhabiting the small house and the adjoining hut.

They were friendly enough, though. The youngest, a muscle-bound man of about 25 called Samir, was permanently connected to the internet through his cell-phone. “Are you on Facebook?” he asked me, and began to search for my profile, with a rusty old rifle placed by his side as he scrolled down, looking for me. A scene that in most of its details could have been unchanged for 150 years, armed Kurdish smugglers on a remote border – and then the smart-phone.

We got across that night. Samir and I made the final run toward the fence. He pulled it up and I crawled under. Here we go again, I thought. I was becoming a connoisseur of border fences. This one felt like a real border, not a forgotten one. Searchlights and a gendarmerie base stood close by. The wire was tough and young. Samir used all his strength to pull it up as I crawled under. I had to sprint about 100 meters toward a house where the smugglers’ associates were waiting for me. I made it. The strange vehicle, it seemed, had deployed elsewhere that night.

The second group of smugglers were a number of very young boys, the youngest about 14, the oldest no more than 18, living semi-ferally in a shack close to the border fence. They began to demand additional payment from me a few minutes after I arrived. I refused, knowing that if I paid up, there would be more demands all the way through to Urfa. Instead, I told them I’d give them something the next day once they’d got me off the mountain and down to Urfa. For a moment, I feared that things were about to get strange; the moment passed. The next day, they drove me down from the mountain in an ancient car which we had to push to get it to start. I was in Sanliurfa by morning and back in my hotel in Gaziantep by lunchtime.

I savored moments such as these: entering the hotel, covered in earth and dust and sweat. Everything was worth it for that brief euphoria, and then the peace and silence for a while afterwards. The ice-cold beer, and the hot showers, and the trashy American comedy shows that I loved to watch for hours, with the air conditioning on, and the Syrian war just a few miles and a long, long way away. *Two Broke Girls* and *Veep* and *Family Guy* in all their wondrous inanity coming out of the screen. And privacy. And solitude.

I had three days till I was due to leave Gaziantep. But my job wasn't quite over. The town, and neighboring Kilis were, I knew, a hub for the fighters of ISIS. I wanted, if possible, to make contact with members of the organization, and to interview them on the Turkish side.

This was not as difficult or as dangerous as it sounds. Of course, ISIS were already renowned for their cruelty and violence. But they were seen quite differently among the circles of the Syrian rebels – even those who did not support them.

To them, ISIS were not monsters. The rebellion as a whole was Arab, Sunni and Islamic. So they were not viewed as some strange creatures who had emerged from outside – but rather as a particular manifestation of the rebellion, albeit one with its own problems and peculiarities.

I tried to reactivate some of my old contacts among the Arab opposition to see if they could connect me to the jihadis. First, I called Zaher Said, my fixer from Aleppo. Zaher came to my hotel late in the evening and it was joyful to see him. He hadn't changed, still the same lustrous sheen of black hair and the same tech-savvy, cool demeanor. I asked about Meysoun and was told that he was OK too. But Zaher wasn't sure if he could help me about ISIS. "They don't usually talk to journalists, you know. They have to ask their Amir for permission, anyway."

I thought of the frontlines near Jarabulus and the dead ISIS fighters lying there like strange mounds of earth. And how they sent armored vehicles to collect the fresh corpses of these "Amirs". I remembered them in the distance, blasting away across the flat ground, and the Kurdish fighters racing to their positions. Zaher said he would get in touch with some friends of his from the organization and would let me know if anything else came up.

I tried someone else, another contact with the Arab rebels. This was Mahmoud Mousa, who I had met in Antakya, and who I regarded as among the most impressive of the rebels that I knew.

Mahmoud was from Jisr a Shughur, a former head teacher. An early supporter of the rebellion, he had fled with his family across the border when the fighting reached his hometown in late 2011. Resettled temporarily in the Kilis refugee camp, Mahmoud had set about finding himself a new profession. With fluent, clipped English and an analytical mind, he had started as a fixer for the foreign media and had progressed to working as a kind of unofficial political analyst and educator for the more serious journalists. His insights into the balance of forces in northern Syria and the more general situation were invaluable.

Ginger-bearded Mahmoud was, indeed, a born teacher, with a natural air of quiet authority. And he told me he'd make some enquiries among his friends and family and would give me a call if anything came up.

Part of me – a large part, actually – hoped that he wouldn’t get back in contact. My conscience wouldn’t have let me rest if I hadn’t tried to contact the jihadis. But once the effort was made, I was perfectly happy spending a few relaxed days around Gaziantep.

It wasn’t till I was out of Kobani that I realized how little I’d eaten in the previous week. No meat, just lots of mashed potatoes with hot paprika sprinkled on top (the YPG were fond of that, for some reason) and coarse pita bread with a few raw vegetables.

So I wolfed down helpings of iskander, the Turkish lamb and yogurt dish, at the restaurants by the hotel, and I drank the small, exquisite cups of sweet coffee available in the old cafés and smoked and felt my limbs relaxing from the strains of the running in the dust and falling. And I drank cold efes pilsen beer in the evenings at the hotel, quite alone and happy. Modern cities, even modest ones like Gaziantep, become things of wonder after a few days in a place like besieged Kobani.

Then Mahmoud called to say he had an ISIS fighter who was willing to speak to me in Kilis.

The man, he said, was a distant relative. He was a former or resting fighter, but he had asked his Amir if he could speak with me, and the latter had apparently agreed. I’d need to get to Kilis the next morning. The meeting would take place in a private apartment belonging to an older man close to the circles of the jihadis.

The prospect filled me with some trepidation. I didn’t like the thought of being alone and enclosed in an apartment with the ISIS guys. Also, Mahmoud said that another man would be accompanying his relative – somebody still involved with the jihadis. The organization had already kidnapped journalists so, on the one hand, this arrangement raised alarm bells. On the other, I wasn’t sure that I was quite important enough for an operation like this to be raised in my honor. There had been no previous indications of similar actions on Turkish soil, and I imagined that the organization’s complex relationship with the Turks would be something it would wish to preserve.

Anyway, whatever the advisability of the meeting, I wasn’t going to turn down the chance. The opportunity was too fascinating, and too good for the stories I wanted to write. So I had a quiet and subdued evening in the hotel and in the morning set off in a service taxi for Kilis.

I had passed through Kilis before, but that was in the evening when I was tired, on the way out of Syria. This was the first time I had seen it by daylight. It had become a Syrian town. One heard Arabic everywhere, and Turkish hardly at all. The streets teemed with Syrian refugees. The Kilis refugee camp was clearly

not the main place of residence anymore. Rather, the Syrians had taken up residence in the town, where they sought any available employment.

I waited for Mahmoud at the bus station. He was late. I began to think he wasn't coming. But, finally, he arrived, unshaven, ginger and smiling. I remembered his slow, quiet-spoken style, his modesty and dignity.

We walked to the flat. The owner of the apartment would receive us, Mahmoud explained, but he wasn't connected to ISIS. Rather, he was a member of the Hizb al Tahrir party, and from the general camp of the Sunni Islamists.

The apartment was on a dusty side street about 10 minutes' walk from the bus station. Up some stairs to the second floor. The owner answered it, and ushered us in, sending me a sidelong glance and a smile. The cat was looking forward to playing with the mouse.

We drank coffee and sat on cushions in the small reception room of the apartment. One of the nice things about being back on the Arab side was the chance to drink coffee rather than the tea that the Kurds preferred. As we waited for the two ISIS men to arrive, the older man asked me why the western media were writing lies about ISIS and expressed the hope that I would be honest in my own writing. I assured him that I would.

Finally, the two ISIS men entered the room, swaggering in with youthful energy. They knew I was a westerner and probably assumed I was somewhat nervous. I wasn't, exactly, but seeing their faces fascinated me. It was nothing to do with the specific context of ISIS and the YPG. It was to do with the strangeness of being in the same room as these men just two days after the skirmish at Haj Ismail, when their comrades had been trying to shoot me.

They called themselves Abu Mohammed and Abu Nur. Abu Nur was Mahmoud's relative. Abu Mohammed was a current ISIS member. The former was the one I had been scheduled to see, but, as it turned out, it was the latter who did most of the talking.

Abu Nur, the relative, had a small beard, and was relaxed and smiling and monosyllabic.

Abu Mohammed, by contrast, was engaged, full of words. Clad in a black and white tracksuit, clean-shaven, muscular, with a sort of pointed, marionette-like face and black curly hair, he offered justifications, delivered in rapid Arabic and flecked with a sense of the absurd.

I had not expected ISIS men to be keen to show the ludicrousness of their opponents' positions. It was not how I had imagined them. This says nothing regarding the murderous nature of the organization. It appears that no-one, or hardly anyone, is ever the "bad guy" in his own eyes. Rather, the default stance of almost everyone, apparently even the representatives of murderous jihadi

groups, is that they have been misrepresented, came with goodwill, want only the best and have been baffled by the unreasonableness of others.

“The media have exaggerated this,” Abu Mohammed said in response to a question I asked about ISIS executions and amputations. So what did this mean? Were such punishments carried out, I asked, or weren’t they? “In certain areas they cut hands off, in others not,” he pronounced, his marionette face taking on a look of pained innocence.

I evidently looked unconvinced by this response. He added: “Look, we are trying our best to apply Sharia law. Of course, there have been some mistakes.”

On one level, the protestations of Abu Mohammed were ridiculous. The outfit of which he was a member was engaged in creating something close to hell on earth for the millions forced to live under it. But there was something else going on.

I asked Abu Nur what it was that had made him decide to join ISIS. He had begun his career in the rebellion with the Northern Storm Brigade. I had come across this group before, when crossing the border at Bab al-Salameh in 2012. They were a non-jihadi operation, adhering to something resembling a Muslim Brotherhood-type Islamism.<sup>3</sup> They had also acquired a reputation for corruption and incompetence.

ISIS had fought a fierce battle against Northern Storm in the town of Azaz in October 2013. At that time, Abu Nur had chosen to side with the jihadis. His reason? As he related it to me, it was the visit of Senator John McCain to the Syria–Turkey border area, as the guest of Northern Storm, in the spring of 2013. He was suspicious of what he referred to as the attempts by foreign governments to “use Syrians for their own ends.” ISIS, he felt, was not available for purchase in this way. And so he had joined it. The organization, he told me, “imposes Sharia, acts against criminals and robbers, and has no contact with any foreign government.”

Still, as he described it, it had not been an instant decision. First, he had taken part in demonstrations against Northern Storm because of their corruption and criminality in Azaz. Then the militia had arrested him and his brother as a result of this. He had been released after a couple of weeks, but his brother was not. He had met with senior FSA officials and had even contacted General Salam Idriss, commander of the Free Army, he claimed, in an effort to secure his brother’s release. To no avail. At that time, someone had proposed that he join ISIS. He had refused. Instead, as he described it, he had become a “middleman”, providing supplies and intelligence to the fighters of both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda franchise in Syria.

Then, “we began to notice that after McCain’s visit, weapons started turning

up in the hands of the Northern Storm, Tawhid Brigade and other fighters. Enough weapons to conquer Aleppo in a few days. But they weren't to be used against the regime, but rather against ISIS. We hadn't been fighting with the other groups. But suddenly, everyone was against us."

This had been enough to persuade him to enlist with the jihadis as a fighter. He described how he had taken part in the liberation of ISIS detainees from a makeshift Northern Storm jail in Azaz.

His contempt for other rebel formations was general, but he reserved particular scorn for Jamal Ma'arouf and the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front, whom he regarded as collaborators. Ma'arouf, a former laborer from the Jabal Zawiya region of Idlib province, emerged as an early influential rebel leader in the north west. But he had also acquired a reputation for corruption.<sup>4</sup>

Our interview took place at a time when the first reports of the provision of US TOW anti-tank missiles were emerging. These were widely believed among the rebels to have reached Ma'arouf's forces. "Jamal Ma'arouf went to Turkey and Jordan," Abu Mohammed said. "And the US supplied him with TOW missiles. You know why?" I shook my head. "Because Ma'arouf's forces control the border with Israel, with Palestine in the south. So they want to protect Israel through Jamal Ma'arouf."

"In Jordan, there are many groups who want to fight ISIS. But if ISIS falls, you can forget about Sunni people in Syria."

What might be learned from this? I think what such accounts show is that, for the Syrian rebellion, ISIS was one option among many. It was not some outlandish or foreign implant. This was a different story to the one usually reflected in global media, which tended to place more stress on the phenomenon of foreign fighters with the organization. But, clearly, there were plenty of Syrian men too, who had started with the rebellion, and who had decided to throw their lot in with the group. Indeed, the statistics suggest that, throughout, a steady majority of ISIS fighters in Syria were Syrians.

Even Mahmoud Mousa, who opposed ISIS, nevertheless noted that he, like many others, had regarded it positively when it first emerged on the scene in early 2013, turning against it only when it began to make war against other rebel groups. "In Syria today, there are three groups worth mentioning," he had told me. "ISIS, the regime, and the Kurds. Nothing else."

At our meeting in Gaziantep, Mahmoud had described how corruption had spread into the rebellion. How local commanders concluded deals with besieged regime bases to bring food in and men out at agreed times. ISIS and Nusra did not take part in such schemes, he said. It was a problem of the non-jihadi fighters.

“The Arabs are nothing without Islam,” Mahmoud told me, in his quiet, sincere and sad tone.

The rebellion was a project of Sunni Arabs. ISIS spoke a variation of a language common to all. This was the crucial point.

As for the fighting in Kobani, which the ISIS men referred to as “Ayn al-Arab”, Abu Mohammed was keen to set the record straight. “This is not a sectarian war that is taking place there. There are some Kurds who have joined ISIS, and, on the other side, there are even some Sunnis who are fighting with the Kurds.”<sup>5</sup>

“But the issue is a clear one. There is a Kurdish goal of establishing a Kurdish state in part of Syria. This is completely unacceptable. This is what it is about.”

He then went on to describe the “shock” of many of the rebels in the north at what they regarded as the Kurdish “collaboration” with the regime – which was to say, the failure to fight the regime, and preference for carving out defensible Kurdish autonomous zones.

As for the movement’s goal – Abu Mohammed spoke about it with reverence.

“We want the caliphate, something old and new, from the time of Mohammed. The Europeans came here and created false borders. We want to break these borders.”

ISIS, in other words, was emerging directly from the reality of the Levant in 2014. It was utterly brutal, dysfunctional and sectarian. But it was speaking a language that was able to mobilize the Sunni Arabs of the country in a way that nothing else apparently could.

This language was not something radically new in the local political discourse. It was the familiar cocktail of paranoia, furious self-righteousness and ethno-religious supremacism which had long plagued the Arab world. Now in a slightly new garb. The FSA was working for foreign powers. ISIS was the only force independent of the West. And why were the West and its clients so implacably opposed to ISIS? Here, too, the answer had a familiar ring to it.

“Why? Who benefits from this? The West benefits from Bashar. He protects the borders with Israel.” The same old world-view - with the occult, rarely seen Jew at the pernicious center of it. Though, of course, Abu Mohammed was quick to add that Sharia was not opposed to the Jews, but granted them an allotted place beneath its protection, as had been seen, he maintained, in the caliphate in previous days.

So we talked that way for a couple of hours. Abu Mohammed and I made a certain connection when I began to respond directly to his statements in Arabic, anticipating Mahmoud’s translation. Perhaps my local appearance also helped in this. I think there is something basic and before words in this visual assessing of

people. It has no political significance, of course, and wouldn't have withstood the announcement of my actual identity. Yet it plays a role. Abu Mohammed seemed to think I was all right.

War and strife appear to be natural presences among human beings. What makes it all strange though are the momentary connections of a pre-verbal and pre-intellectual type, which are as liable to happen as much or as little among "opponents" as among allies. This can be learned only by being up close to the enemy, and hence probably by wearing some form of disguise. The disguise doesn't affect this deeper level. The strange parallel story of human chemistry. So, yes, I quite liked Abu Mohammed, on some curious level, while also considering him an enemy.

Sunni Islamists, in my experience, often seem to display a lack of guile. There is something ludicrous and engaging about their genuine bafflement that not everyone rushes to embrace what seems to them to be the self-evidently superior system which they are proposing. This comes, perhaps, from the fact that Sunni Islam among the Arabs is a majority creed, a creed of historic victory and governance. This aspect perhaps also explains the laxity and lack of security awareness which is a notable aspect of many Sunni Islamist outfits. The Shia, a minority sect with the clandestine and watchful traditions appropriate to this, are entirely different.

The older man remained amused and skeptical of me and, gradually, he began to take over the discussion, asking me if I practiced the Christian religion and whether I had ever considered becoming a Muslim. I answered diplomatically that I would study more, already thinking about getting back to Gaziantep.

After a while, we wrapped things up and said our goodbyes. Mahmoud accompanied me to the bus station. I thanked him and took the service taxi out. It was early afternoon.

ISIS already controlled parts of Anbar and Nineweh province in Iraq at this time. But it was still a few months before the push east and north that would take them to the gates of Erbil and Baghdad, and through Mosul. They had carried out, in January, a strategic retreat under rebel pressure from a number of villages in north west Syria. As it turned out, this was part of the preparation for the coming offensive.

Abu Mohammed had answered cagily when I queried him regarding this retreat, stating cryptically that "If there are powers against me, I have to retreat and protect my back. And perhaps in the future I will return again." Contrary to rebel claims at the time, there had been little fighting between ISIS and the other rebels for these areas. The jihadis had left, at least partially, of their own accord.

So, in the spring of 2014, the jihadis were getting ready for their biggest move

of all – namely, the extending of the sectarian war in Syria across the border into Iraq, effectively nullifying the border between the two countries.

I was aware of none of that, of course, as I chatted with the two jihadis in Kilis. The Kurds in Kobani were unaware of it, too. But it would cause an earthquake in their own situation and in the future of their enclave.

In the meantime, the service taxi back to Gaziantep was stopped by plainclothes Turkish police. I had to show them the Israeli passport in my pocket, as that was the way I'd entered Turkey. In a taxi full of Syrian refugees, I wasn't sure how this would go down. But luckily, the gold menorah emblem on the cover of the passport had rubbed off when I'd had to shove the thing down my trousers while worrying about the search in Azaz in 2012. So it appeared only as an anonymous blue document and did not arouse attention from my fellow passengers. The Turkish plainclothes man looked at me with bemusement but didn't say anything. I left Kilis and Kobani behind and flew out that night.

The emergence of ISIS and its battle with the Kurds in Kobani was further evidence of the fragmentation that Syria was undergoing. In entirely different and opposing ways, both the Kurdish and the jihadi projects were successor entities to the fallen Syrian state, fighting over its ruins. The effective eclipse of Syria was the main outcome, it appeared, of the war. "Syria has gone," as one of the smugglers on the border had repeated to me several times in our conversation, "Suriya rach." What would replace it was not yet clear. But the disintegration of Syria was not the end of the story. Rather, this process was about to burst its borders.

During our interview with the ISIS men, Mahmoud had encouraged me to ask them whether ISIS would turn west or east. That is, would the movement continue to push westwards toward Idlib and Aleppo, and perhaps across the desert toward Damascus, too. Or would it, rather, focus its attention eastwards, toward Iraq. Predictably, the men had not given a straight answer. It is probable that they didn't know and, if they did, they weren't telling. But the answer became rapidly clear in the summer months ahead. The Islamic State was gunning for Iraq.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tarkhan Batirashvili (1986–2016) was a half-Georgian, half-ethnic Chechen militant who led a brigade of foreign militants called Jaish al-Muhajireen in the early part of the Syrian civil war. He joined ISIS in 2013 and rose to become a senior commander and an iconic figure in the organization. He was killed by a US airstrike in July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> See Wes Enzinna, "A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard," *New York Times*, November 24,

2015. <https://www.nytimes.com>. Also see Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York: NYU Press, 2007, for a useful though now slightly dated discussion of PKK ideology.

- 3 The Northern Storm Brigade was an early Syrian rebel group formed in 2011 by smugglers from the town of Azaz close to the Syrian-Turkish border. It was driven out of Azaz by ISIS in late 2013, but returned after rebels and Kurdish forces expelled ISIS from the town in early 2014.
- 4 Jamal Ma’arouf was among the first of the armed rebels in Idlib province. From the Jabal Zawiya area, he, for a while, acquired prominence, as well as Saudi support and funding. His Syrian Revolutionaries’ Front was attacked and defeated by Jabhat al-Nusra in late 2014. Ma’arouf then became an exile in Turkey.
- 5 This was the terminology that the ISIS men used, and it is noteworthy – after all, the Kurds are also Sunni Muslims. But none of the jihadis I spoke to made any ethnic qualifier, such as “Arab” Sunnis. There were “Sunnis” and there were “Kurds” in their lexicon.

# 5

## BLACK SUMMER, 2014

In the summer of 2014, the Syria war conclusively burst its borders, moving closer to a regional conflagration. The instrument that smashed through the line separating Syria from Iraq was the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq organization. As it turned out, the retreat from north west Syria had formed part of the preparations for the assault. Mahmoud's shrewd question, which the jihadis we'd met in Kilis had avoided, now received its definitive answer. ISIS wanted a clear and defensible line at the western-most point of its Islamic State. Once this was achieved, the push eastwards could begin.

Iraq had, in any case, witnessed growing unrest, along sectarian lines, since the end of 2013 and it was this dynamic which ISIS sought to exploit. The government in Baghdad was dominated by the Shia Islamist Dawa party.<sup>1</sup> The Sunni Arabs of the center of the country had not reconciled themselves to a future as a 20 percent minority in a Shia-dominated Iraq. Tension and confrontation were inevitable. Protests began in late 2012, in the town of Falluja. In late 2013, a number of towns close to the border with Syria fell out of government control.

ISIS was already in there, working in tandem with former officers of Saddam Hussein's regime to foment a new Sunni insurgency. On the face of it, that appeared an unlikely marriage – the jihadis and the “secular nationalist” officers of the old regime. In practice, in 2014, it made perfect sense. Sectarianism, openly declared, was the new language of political mobilization in the collapsing states of the region. The old distinctions had meant less than many western intellectuals had imagined anyway. Saddam's “secular” Iraq had been dominated by Sunnis at its core, most of them the dictator's kinsmen.

The dynamic of the Arab dictatorships in Syria and Iraq had, throughout, been

sectarian and tribal at their core. But in the era of the collapse of these states, the secular and nationalist pretence had been dispensed with. So now a force would emerge which would combine the utter cruelty and sadism of the jihadis with the skills and knowledge of the officers. The officers themselves, of course, Saddam veterans all, were enthusiastic killers in their own right. ISIS would be less new than some people thought. In fact, it was a manifestation of the pathology of local political culture, rather than a generator of it.

In January, amid a background of Sunni agitation against the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, ISIS took control of the cities of Falluja and Ramadi, bringing much of the restive Sunni province of Falluja under its control.<sup>2</sup> The Iraqi government forces attempted a counter-offensive in the spring, which made little progress. But the main events were still to come.

The Islamic State's drive into Iraq began on June 5, 2014. The Iraqi army melted away before them, most notably in the city of Mosul. The conquest of this city, Iraq's second largest, focused global attention on ISIS for the first time.<sup>3</sup> Jihadis, numbering 1,500, attacked a force of at least 15,000 men, entering the city from the north west on June 6. The capture of Mosul seemed to presage a kind of jihadi blitzkrieg, entirely unexpected, across Iraq.

For the next month, the situation was fluid, as the government army attempted a counter-attack. Shia Islamist militias paraded in Baghdad on June 21, promising resistance to the advancing Sunnis.

Then, in August, a second phase of the ISIS offensive was launched. This brought the jihadis to the gates of Baghdad, and to a few kilometers from the Iraqi Kurdish capital of Erbil. On June 29, ISIS declared the foundation of the Caliphate in the areas of Syria and Iraq that it had conquered. It was a declaration simultaneously absurd in its pretensions, and ominously impressive.<sup>4</sup>

Catastrophe now loomed. The Islamic State, which had seemed like one more brutal Syrian militia, was suddenly operating on an entirely different level. The jihadis had already created a huge refugee problem, as terrified non-Sunni populations sought to flee their advance. Now they were at the gates of the cities of refuge. There seemed a real prospect that both Baghdad and Erbil might fall.

On August 7, in response to this emergency situation, US aircraft began to drop aid to civilians fleeing the fighting in the Sinjar/Shenghal mountain area, close to the border with Syria. Then, on August 8, the US started bombing of Islamic State forward positions.<sup>5</sup>

The American intervention removed the immediate danger from Baghdad and Erbil. The land surrounding the cities was flat and bare. Islamic State was aware that any further attempt to move forward would result in their obliteration from the air. So, after the lightning advances of the summer, the frontlines stalled

outside of the cities.

In Sinjar, however, a desperate fight continued. The jihadis took the city on August 4, after the Kurdish Peshmerga forces unexpectedly pulled out. Random killings and brutal repression followed. Around 200,000 Yezidis, adherents to one of the old pre-monotheistic religions of Mesopotamia, fled the area. Of these, 50,000 made for Mount Sinjar in an attempt to put themselves beyond the reach of the jihadis.<sup>6</sup>

ISIS, who regarded the non-monotheistic Yezidis as something close to sub-humans, were deployed all around the mountain.

I joined some colleagues in Erbil a few days after the US bombing campaign began. The IS advance had been halted outside the city. But the jihadis' progress across the country had, nevertheless, transformed the atmosphere in the Kurdish capital.

In early 2013, on my way into Syrian Kurdistan, I had stopped off in the city for a few days to make preparations. At that time, it had the feel of a boom town – shopping malls springing up across the skyline, brand new SUVs on the road, Exxon Mobil and Total coming to town. The safest part of Iraq, an official of the Kurdish Regional Government had told me proudly over dinner in a garden restaurant.

But, in August 2014, the war had come from neighboring Syria, and Erbil was a city under siege. The closest lines of the Islamic State forces were just 45 kilometers away. At the frontlines, IS was dug in, its vehicles visible, waiting and glowering in the desert heat. The Kurdish Peshmerga forces were a few hundred meters away in positions hastily cut out of the sand to face the advancing jihadi fighters.

The atmosphere in the city was febrile. It was generally believed that, had it not been for the rapid intervention of the US Air Force after August 8, IS would have found its way in.

“There was panic,” my friend, the Iraqi Kurdish journalist Hiwa Osman told me, as we sat in his air-conditioned office. I had asked about those early August days when IS had seemed to be coming for the city like a juggernaut across the desert. “I was in Europe and I spoke to my wife. She described to me how cars were backed up trying to get out of the city. There wasn’t enough fuel. We think about 30 percent of the population left.” The exodus was in the direction of Dohuk and Zakho, further north and close to the Syrian border.

The foreigners from the oil companies and consulates left too. The bars and restaurants that had sprung up to cater to them, with staff from the Indian subcontinent and cold lager on tap, were all sad and empty. Only those too poor to leave or determined to fight it out would be there to meet the Islamists if and

when they collided with the Iraqi Kurdish capital.

In place of the departing foreign contractors, a new population had arrived. Refugees – Christians from the Mosul area, Yezidis from Sinjar. Thousands had already been massacred by the jihadis and buried in shallow graves. The religious minorities and the non-Arab, Kurdish-speaking Yezidis knew what to expect from the invaders. The lucky ones had made it as far as Erbil and sanctuary.

Luck is, of course, a relative concept. The refugees were destitute. Their houses, goods and property in the hands of IS, or those of their Sunni Arab neighbors who chose to cooperate with them. One saw them everywhere in Erbil, a stark testimony to how much things had changed. In the available spaces afforded by half-built apartment blocks, Yezidi refugees from Sinjar had planted their tents and were sheltering from the sweltering heat of August.

In the yard of the Chaldean Church in the Ainkawa district, Christians from the Mosul area lived in rows of tents, receiving food and consignments of ice from well-wishers and local people.

In the evening, when it cooled down somewhat, the city teemed with people. There were other, earlier and less visible refugees. Young men from Syria working in the hotels – some from government-controlled areas, some from the rebel zones. All had crossed into Iraqi Kurdistan believing that here, at least, was a haven, a bastion from the sectarian war raging from the Iraq–Iran border to the Mediterranean Sea.

The bastion had held, just about. The Peshmerga were still mustered in their positions past the city's outer suburbs. A wall of iron stood between the jihadis and the Iraqi Kurdish capital. But the Kurdish Regional Government had proved to be far more vulnerable than anyone had suspected.

My destination, however, was not Erbil. I wanted to head north to Dohuk, then across the border into Syrian Kurdistan and southward as close to Sinjar Mountain as I could get. So I set off on the highway for Dohuk. It was reputed to be safe, but traversing it required driving close to the new Islamic State stronghold of Mosul.

The frontline between the Kurds and the IS was a huge and fluctuating affair, stretching all the way from Jalawla on the Iraq–Iran border to Jarabulus on the line between Syria and Turkey. But the Peshmerga were deployed in force along the highway as we made our way up, and all was well.

News was coming in that the Kurds and Iraqis had recaptured the Mosul Dam, a vital facility which provides water and electricity for Baghdad. (It had fallen to the jihadis on August 7 and was recaptured by the 19.) American air support and probably the presence of US special forces on the ground were the decisive

factor, once again, in the turning of the tide.

Arrived safely in Dohuk, I traveled to the border crossing at Fishkhabur, or Semalka, as it was known to the Syrian Kurds. This was a crossing jointly and efficiently maintained by the KDP Peshmerga, on one side, and the fighters of the YPG, on the other. Neither group were recognized by the world, of course, as having any right to police borders at all. They formed a visible testimony to the de facto birth of Kurdistan, on the ruins of Iraq and Syria.

The waiting room on the Iraqi side was full of Syrian Kurds trying to leave the KRG area for “Rojava”, the Syrian Kurdish autonomous zone. They had made their way to Iraqi Kurdistan a year earlier to escape the war in their home country and were now petitioning to make the return journey.

Between the jihadis and the forces of Bashar Assad, they were homeless twice over. They had made their calculation. IS had so far been kept firmly out of Syrian Kurdistan, defended by the lightly armed but formidable YPG militia. The Iraqi Peshmerga forces, though, had broken in mysterious circumstances at Sinjar and the Islamic State was now just a few kilometers away. So these civilians wanted to go back to Syria.

“We tell them that if they go, they can’t come back again,” a KRG official at the border crossing sighed. “But they want to go anyway.”

The borderline was the Tigris River, clear and cool in the summer sun, an old and rusty red metal barge making its way slowly back and forth. The single bridge was closed. I remembered crossing the Tigris by night a year earlier with the YPG. The river lit by moonlight, and us moving slow to avoid the Peshmerga patrols. Things had changed, and were still changing.

The contrast between the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga and the Syrian Kurdish YPG on the other side, though, remained. The former – big and heavy set men in their 30s and 40s, moustachio’d and friendly. The latter younger, thinner, quieter and graver in manner. Men and women fighters together, in their plain green guerrilla uniforms without insignia.

Mohammed Ibrahim from Derik was waiting for me on the other side of the river. We would be working together again. My idea was to try to get as close as I could to the frontlines around Sinjar. The YPG were engaged at the time in an attempt to open a corridor from the Kurdish-controlled Jazira area to the mountain, to bring the refugees out. The Syrian Kurdish authorities had constructed a new refugee camp outside of Derik. I wanted to take a look at all this.

Derik was much as I remembered it from early 2013. But something had subtly altered. In early 2013, it had only been a few months since the regime had departed and there had been still a kind of euphoria about the place. A sense of

sudden freedom. The old State Security building, that Kurdish parents had warned their children not to look at for fear that the agents outside it would see their glance as a challenge, had been transferred to the hands of the Kurds themselves. The atmosphere had been one of good-natured and improvised chaos.

That was now gone. Instead, there was fatigue hanging over the town. Everything ordered and sedate. The Asayish, in their green uniforms, were still ensconced in the former State Security headquarters. But there was no longer a crush of local people crowding around the entrance, smoking and talking. The town was dry and dusty and quiet in the afternoon.

At the Asayish headquarters, I met again the ginger-haired officer who had accused me of being a spy a year earlier. Now he had a brand new green police uniform of his own. We laughed and shook hands. He had evidently settled into his new role. No more fierce, childish glee in exercising an authority that now hung about him as if by right.

Mohammed had changed too. On the face of it, he was still the efficient young press officer for the PYD, friendly and enthusiastic. But there was a sadness behind his laughter now, a way that his smiles ended very quickly.

It had all, in short, been very evidently going on for far too long, and despite the achievements, people were exhausted.

The Jazira area was quiet and relatively well governed. There was none of the insanity that had now descended on the areas “liberated” by the Sunni Arab rebels. The regime largely left the Kurdish areas alone, so the terror of air raids that pervaded the Sunni Arab domains further west was also absent.

But it was a meager life. Food was scarce, the future prospects entirely uncertain. Graffiti etched on a wall close to the Asayish headquarters in Derik proclaimed ominously that “the Asayish forgives but it does not forget.” Forgetfulness was in short supply, it seemed. And sorely needed.

There was a single hotel in Derik, but it was full. Instead, Mohammed deposited me in a YPG facility, in the company of a number of fighters wounded in a battle with IS in the town of Jeza'a further south a few days earlier.

I learned that the YPG had already succeeded in its mission of establishing the precarious corridor to Sinjar Mountain. Tens of thousands of Yezidi refugees stranded on the mountain had been brought down over the last few days. But the corridor was a provisional and precarious affair, snaking through IS-controlled areas.

The refugees were brought from the mountain to Jeza'a, Rumeilan and then the newly established Newroz refugee camp. IS was engaged in trying to cut the road at Jeza'a, and a fierce fight was being waged there. They had launched a

frontal assault a couple of days earlier. A 17-hour battle, fought mostly with light weapons and at close range, had ensued.

At its conclusion, the corridor was still open.

The men and women at the facility in Derik had all participated in the fight and had suffered light wounds. They were recuperating for a few days before returning to active duty. Recuperating involved a lot of drinking black tea, a lot of cigarettes and much time for talking.

The wounded fighters in Derik were clearly dog-tired. Still, they were happy to find a distraction in the form of a foreign journalist suddenly placed among them. So I spent many hours chatting with them in the small courtyard outside of the house. Kurdish stories. Students from south east Turkey who had fled to Europe as political refugees, then returned to join the YPG. One man from Kordestan province in Iran, in pajamas and walking on crutches, who wanted to know if I was a liberal or a socialist.

One of the commanders was a slim young woman, called Jihan. She asked me if I was Jewish and nodded wide-eyed when I said I was. She wanted to know why, in my opinion, the world powers were not coming to assist the Kurds in Syria.

I thought about the strange time after I returned from Aleppo, the refugees among the verdant groves by the borderline north of Azaz, bereft and alone. I told her that, in my opinion, there was no such thing as the international community, nor was there a global conscience. Things didn't work that way.

Therefore, I told her, the Kurds of Syria were doing the right thing in relying on absolutely no-one but their own selves and the strength of their own hands. The world would come and acknowledge them if they could organize and sustain this. And if not, it would move on with a shrug. I think I disappointed her because she was working up to deliver a powerful appeal to the conscience of the world, via the medium of this western reporter. But she was rather young, and the way I put things had made such an exhortation problematic. So, after a while, she became silent and then left the room.

There was something sympathetic about Jihan. She was a good commander, forever active and on the move, slim and springy in her well-fitting YPG uniform. As with many of the YPG and PKK types, it was difficult to get her to say anything much about her own self and her life. They were educated to speak in slogans. This was the cult-like element of the movement that ruled Syrian Kurdistan. But one saw something else in Jihan in the way she worked till late in the night in the small office at the house. In the way she ran around organizing meals and making sure the place was kept clean, conferring with her fellow commanders, manning the phone, her brown hair falling in her face. A sort of

generosity.

This is a thing one sees among many young fighters and commanders. I suppose it is one of the reasons why I have returned again and again to reporting on conflict. It is the opposite of selfishness, of corruption, a certain purity of intention. Jihan exemplified this, as have others I have met. I liked her and looked forward to seeing her when I did. She did not particularly reciprocate this warm feeling and, after our initial conversation, hardly spoke to me again.

I was stuck for a few days in the YPG facility, while Mohammed tried to sort out if we'd be able to get down to Sinjar Mountain or not. The problem was the ongoing situation at Jeza'a, where the fighting was continuing close to the highway.

There was no other way of getting down there, I was told. The YPG was more reluctant than other organizations active in Syria to allow journalists close to the active frontlines. Whether this was to do with a concern for the journalists' safety or a particular attitude toward field security was never quite apparent to me. One came across it in working with them on many occasions. So we waited.

One morning, as we sat in the courtyard eating our usual breakfast of scrambled eggs and black tea, white goat's cheese and pita bread, one of the fighters told me some unexpected news. "There is a British fighter here," he said. "He arrived here yesterday. He will be down here soon. You can talk to him."

I was surprised, and intrigued. Foreign fighters on the Syrian battlefield were a phenomenon at that time more usually associated with the Islamist forces than with the Kurds. Later, of course, a considerable foreign contingent fighting with the Kurds would build up. But that was still in the future. I had heard of only one foreign volunteer with the YPG. This figure had cropped up in a number of conversations with the fighters.

He was, they told me, a former American soldier – a veteran of many wars. He wore various items of US military paraphernalia and was well-liked and valued by the Kurds.

This mythical-sounding American volunteer was, in fact, Jordan Matson from Wisconsin, the first non-Kurd to fight with the YPG. He would go on to organize the foreign unit fighting with the Kurds that would eventually number several hundred.

The "British fighter" who turned up a few minutes later, however, was very obviously ethnically Kurdish. In his early 30s, stockily built, with his arm in a sling, and speaking in a broad South Wales accent.

Soran had immigrated to the UK with his family as a child and had grown up in Cardiff, where he now owned a restaurant with his brothers. It was passingly

strange to hear his rich, south Welsh cadences there, in that place. His accent, with its musical tones, turning everything he said into a sort of sorrowful incantation.

So what had led him from running a Kurdish restaurant in the Welsh capital to the YPG and the fight against the jihadis?

“Well, I heard from my family what was happening,” he related to me. “My family’s from Diyarbakir, see. So I thought I had to do something. So I left my wife and kid, and came here to volunteer. My brothers are running the restaurant now. I trained for a couple of weeks, then straight into it.”

Now, with a badly dislocated shoulder, he was contemplating his next step and remembering, with the same deep and calm sadness in his voice, the details of the Jeza’ā fight.

“There must have been about 500 of them, about 90 of us,” and he looked straight at me as if to detect whether or not I was grasping the strangeness of the scene he was recalling. “They had no tactics, just kept coming forward. You should have seen when the trucks came to take away the bodies. Stacked up, they were.”

“I killed three of them,” he continued, the same fearful wonder in his voice. “One was only a kid of about 16. They just keep coming forward, you see, and either you shoot them or they shoot you. That’s all.”

He had been injured, not by a bullet but by a fall when he’d had to leap over a wall after an IS fighter threw a grenade. The wound wasn’t that serious but was enough to take him out of the fighting line in Jeza’ā, and up north to Derik. He was due to see his family, who had come to Diyarbakir from Wales and were waiting for him there. He would need to make an illegal crossing of the border in a few days to get there. After that, he would decide on his next steps. Either back to the fighting lines, or home to Cardiff and the family restaurant.

Soran and I spent the morning talking about Kurdistan and Britain, Wales and London. He was a great football fan and laughed when I pointed out that as a Kurdish-Welshman, I’d have imagined that rugby was his game of choice. “We’re Kurds, we love football,” he said.

Later that evening, Mohammed turned up with a slightly harassed look on his face, to tell me that the powers that be had decreed that Sinjar was not an option. “Too dangerous to get past Jeza’ā,” he said. “Fighting still going on down there.”

There seemed little point in disputing the issue. Mohammed told me, by way of consolation, that he had obtained permission to get us to another frontline area, further north. This was Yarubiya, a border crossing between Syria and Iraq which had been captured by ISIS and then partially retaken by the YPG. There was a stand-off between the two, although the Kurds now controlled both sides

of the crossing. Mohammed and I decided that we would first visit the Newroz refugee camp, where the Yezidi refugees from Mount Sinjar had been taken.

That night, I hardly slept because a very young Kurdish fighter newly arrived from Jeza'a decided to watch television all night in the room where we were both deposited. He was entirely within his rights to do so, having just returned from the frontlines. At the time, though, the sound of Kurmanji drama shows and music blaring out of the tinny TV set inclined me to wish all sorts of misfortune down upon him. He was a big-built, quiet youth, and he resolutely ignored all my attempts to hint at my displeasure as the hours of the night wore on.

So, feeling a little groggy, I set off with Mohammed Ibrahim the next day for the Newroz refugee camp. Temporary home to around 20,000 Yezidi refugees brought by the YPG from Sinjar Mountain. The Yezidis were followers of a syncretic, obscure religion which combined local animist traditions with elements of Zoroastrianism. The figure of "Melek Taus", the "peacock angel", was chief among their objects of worship. For the Islamic State, this set them outside of the realm of human beings worthy of any kind of protection by rightful law. They considered the Yezidis "devil worshippers". The fate decreed for them by the Islamists was conversion, death or slavery. The jihadis were now trying to visit that fate on this ancient community, as they powered eastwards through the Yezidi homelands in northern Iraq.

As we arrived, the August heat was just settling in. Conditions at the camp were primitive in the extreme – rows of brownish tents on an open plain with little protection against the sun. The Yezidi refugee families we interviewed there were very clearly glad just to be alive.

The stark contours of what was happening were rapidly presented to us.

The spreading rumors that the jihadis were approaching. The growing fear. Then, usually in the small hours of the morning, their arrival; the rapid departure of the Peshmerga forces (a matter of particular bitterness for many of the refugees); and the attempt by the men of the village to mount a desperate defense of the area at least long enough to allow the women and children to escape.

"Before the crisis, we had told the Peshmerga that ISIS was near," related one Yezidi man, crouched in his tent with his family around him. "We knew they hated us because we aren't Muslims, and we knew we were in real danger in Shenghal."

"At 3 am we heard that ISIS was coming to attack the village. The Peshmerga shot in the air for ten minutes. The men in the village took out their own weapons also."

The man, in his mid-30s, with several days' growth of beard, paused at this point, as if considering something. Then he continued, "After one hour the

Peshmerga left for Zakho, and we were left to fight ISIS alone.”

“Then we tried to get all the women and kids out of the village. People who were able to get to the mountains were safe. People who stayed, all of them were killed.”

“That’s to say, they killed the men. The women, they took. We arrived to the mountain for a week. After six days, the PKK came and opened a corridor for us to cross to Rojava.”

His wife took up the story, “Before the PKK came to the mountain, some of ISIS came up there and said, ‘You must convert to Islam or we will take the women and slaughter the men.’”

Her aged parents had been unable to move and had been left behind in the village as the jihadis bore down on it.

These accounts were, in essential details, repeated to us in tent after tent of the Yezidi refugees, as Mohammed and I spent the day talking to them. Tales of horror.

“Many children died on the mountain because of lack of water. This was the most difficult part,” one young man told me, “and many of the things dropped by the Americans were broken on the rocks.”

Five hundred women, with names, taken to Mosul, to be sold. “They make the women say Allahu Akbar so they become permitted to them.”

“There is a man here who lost his wife and three children. All of them taken by ISIS. He is alone now.”

“They think they will go to paradise if they convert a Yezidi woman.”

“ISIS took hostages. They took all the women. Any man that could hold a weapon was slaughtered. They are selling Yezidi women now in the slave market at Mosul, for five dollars a head.”

“Three hundred people died on the mountain because of lack of food and water.”

“I saw a child of about three, blinded because of the sun, with its parents, dying of thirst.”

“The smallest children died first.”

“We took our vehicles, then left them at the base of the mountain and continued on foot.”

“We knew that a massacre was coming.”

Many voices, many cramped tents under the blazing sun. Family units, some of them dressed in little more than rags. But at the Newroz camp, and alive.

So what would they do now?

“It was coming for a while. After Maliki came to power, the Yezidis started to feel that their Sunni neighbors would support radicals, so many young Yezidis

joined the Iraqi army. That enabled us to live like human beings for a while.”

“Many of us have family members, maybe we’ll go to them in Zakho, then cross to Turkey. We don’t like Turkey. ISIS was made in Turkey. But if we can get to Turkey, then we can seek asylum in Europe. We’ll never go back to Iraq. Our neighbors in Iraq became our enemies, and killed us. Sectarian war in Iraq – brother against brother. But the Yezidis have never harmed anybody.”

And what about looking for refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan?

“Even in Erbil, a shopkeeper told me that smoking is haram. It’s the same mentality as ISIS.”

So we did our best, Mohammed Ibrahim and I, to piece it all together. The harrowing, terrifying story of the previous days. The many, many voices. The small children whose sad faces made it very close to impossible to maintain one’s composure. Though we did.

Once again, a people abandoned by humanity – but, as it turned out, not by their own people. Not entirely, anyway. Soran and Jihan had been there, after all, risking their blood and their young lives to open the corridor to the mountain. They, in all their generosity, offering their young lives to protect these innocents.

One need have no illusions regarding the PKK in order to understand the truth of this, and its importance.

Still, honoring this (and it’s worth honoring, if anything is) does not mean forgetting the complexity of the situation.

The Yezidis had been among the smallest and most vulnerable of communities. Their relationship with the Kurds was not simple. The Kurds referred to them as “Yezidi Kurds”, and some even spoke of them as the most Kurdish of all because of their animist, local, pre-Islamic religion.

The Yezidis themselves, however, seemed to see themselves as a community set apart, alone, with their own unique obligations and traditions. It was not possible to predict the implications of any of this. What was clear was that whatever fabric had bound Iraqi and Syrian society together was coming apart. As the dictators were destroyed or relaxed their grip, so nothing seemed to remain to prevent the fragmenting of the countries.

Mohammed and I hardly spoke on the drive back from the Newroz camp. The testimony of the refugees was too much to be absorbed in one setting. It had within it much, very much, of value. Not only for understanding the history in which we were currently engaged, but also previous history, and perhaps something even of what it meant to be human.

Their delicate, gentle faith and the peacock angel had not been there to protect them from the jihadis. The lessons it provided, for our own time, for past times and for the nature of human possibility were all of the most stark and bleak

variety. I recalled my conversation with Jihan at the YPG base. Perhaps she had to go on believing in the global conscience to continue her work. In which case, by all means. The conscience of humanity and the peacock angel would be, it seems, of a similar level of usefulness.

The next day, we headed for the frontlines at Yarubiya. In June, the YPG had captured the border crossing. This meant, oddly, that the Syrian franchise of the PKK was now in control of a tiny section of Iraq. Control, however, was a relative concept in this context. The IS forces were all around.

The border crossing, and what was once the no man's land between two countries, two immensely centralized, tightly governed countries, had all become a fiction. In a YPG vehicle, accompanied by four young fighters, Mohammed and I drove the distance between the two ruined states. A sign in bad English marked the exit point from Syria. "Syria thanks your visit," it proclaimed, grandly and un-grammatically. It made me think of *Ozymandias*. All that remained of the mighty edifices once erected by two brutal Arab nationalist police states were these ruins. Once, their clumsiness contained in it something terrifying, a tyrant daring you to laugh at his grotesquerie. Now it was merely comic. And the "lone and the level sands stretching far away."

IS, however, were not far away. They controlled two neighborhoods adjoining the border crossing. The civilian population were long departed. A sniper's war was going on. The YPG fired mortars across when the Islamic State sniper made his appearance.

We arrived to the first YPG point and were treated to the usual glasses of scalding, industrial-strength black tea.

The commander there was a woman in her 30s, Zilan. She had a sort of preternatural cool about her, relaxed and slouching against the wall, her legs tucked under her, a walkie talkie grasped loosely in one hand. "Why don't you have a flak jacket like the other reporters that came here?" she asked, nodding with her chin toward my T-shirt-covered chest. It was a good question. I knew the flak jackets and helmets worn by other journalists could save lives. I'd been a soldier long enough and a journalist long enough to have seen examples. Fragments that would otherwise kill or paralyze or cause brain damage would be effectively deflected by this equipment. A direct shot from a bullet would get through, of course. But anything not coming at full strength and direct and from short range stood a good chance of being rendered harmless. So why did I travel without them?

There were other considerations. I had experienced now, on numerous occasions in Iraq and Syria, the way that my local appearance was an asset. It had probably saved my life on the way into Qamishli in 2013. Everywhere the

ability to blend in, to be unseen, afforded me the possibility of slipping into and out of situations in a way that a more visible, obviously western reporter could not.

To have donned a flak vest and a helmet would have been to have given up this very considerable advantage, at one stroke, in its entirety. It would have immediately made me as visible as any Danish or German or British reporter.

The downside was in places like Yarubiya, or earlier on in Haj Ismail or Aleppo. It meant that when there was debris and bullets flying I was no more protected than any other Syrian or Iraqi. Or any YPG fighter, for that matter.

The Kurdish fighters also moved light and unencumbered. So that was how I answered Zilan. “You don’t have these things, right? So why should I have them?” the Kurdish commander smiled slightly at this reply, without changing her languid pose, as though she were talking to a small child.

“The sniper can’t shoot so well, anyway, so don’t worry,” she continued. “You can go on in a minute to our forward positions and meet the fighters there. Wait, they’ll tell us when through the communications.”

After a few minutes, the word came though. Mohammed said that he wouldn’t be coming with me to the forward positions, but would see me when we got back. Instead, one of Zilan’s young female fighters, a tiny girl wearing a maroon Iraqi special forces beret was deputed to go with me. “So you were in the special forces in Iraq?” I asked before we set out, momentarily confused by her headgear. This led to general amusement.

“No,” Zilan said, smiling at the girl. “She found it on the floor when we took the border crossing from ISIS. I suppose one of the Iraqi soldiers here left it when ISIS threw them out. Special forces, uh. So, why not?”

The girl with the red beret and I had to sprint across a section of open ground to get to the next position. The IS sniper enfiladed, we were told, from the minaret of the neighborhood mosque adjoining Yarubiya. But he wasn’t there as we ran across the dusty ground and we made it to the YPG position, a few hundred meters back into Iraq.

A slim, English-speaking male commander was there; he motioned us in quickly. Open points in the position were covered with blankets to obscure the sniper’s view. “They control the neighborhoods to left and right, and they fire in, and we fire back. Sometimes they try and push in and that’s when things get interesting. But, for the most part, it’s just the snipers and the mortars. You should know that we have snipers too, some good ones. So we’re winning right now.”

Morale among the fighters was high and they were keen to remind us of their record in recent days – the corridor to Sinjar, the capture of Yarubiya (“Tel

Kocer” the Kurds called it); the inability of Islamic State to break into the isolated Kobani enclave, despite the weapons they had captured from the garrison in Mosul.

But as our conversations progressed, I could once more glimpse the exhaustion of the fighters, behind their smiles.

Events of great magnitude were on the move all around us. No-one knew quite where things were heading. And, all the same, death in battle is a private thing, experienced not in community, but rather alone. So things were very small, too. I had been a soldier in wartime and I knew that there is an enormous difference between the soldier’s experience of war and that of the journalist.

The correspondent can go home when he’s had enough, or at least when his assignment is over. His encounter with the frontline and the promise of death has all the thrills of a brief fling. The soldier, by contrast, must experience it all in the cold grey light of wartime day. He is married to the war. He must stay through all the tedium, disillusionment, irritation, fatigue and boredom. His reward, such as it is, is greater knowledge, and also greater consequence. But this is a reward that becomes apparent, if at all, only in retrospect. And on the condition that one survives.

Many of the YPG fighters in the forward positions at Yarubiya were very young indeed. Contrary to what is sometimes said, very young people do not always feel immortal. Particularly not those who have seen plenty of death. They were bored so they enjoyed seeing me. But I was happy to make the run back to Mohammed and Zilan, over the open ground, with the girl in the special forces beret up ahead of me.

A day after Yarubiya, we attended a joint funeral of five YPG fighters from the town of Derik who had been killed in the Jeza’ā fighting.

The funeral took place on the parched plain outside the town, beneath the blazing August sun. A long line of cars set out, accompanying the white vans holding the coffins. A crowd had gathered at the gravesite.

There were speeches from officials of the PYD and the YPG and singing. Finally, as the sun sank, the YPG fighters took the shovels themselves and filled in the graves of the five very young men. Their mothers and sisters were weeping, set a little back, as the dust arose and the young fighters worked with shovels to fill in the graves.

“We have these funerals now nearly every week,” one YPG fighter confided to me as we returned to the town.

The Syrian war was into its fourth year. Since it started all lives had been on hold. Even those, like the people of Derik, lucky enough to live in an area that had avoided the worst of the war’s ravages had been unable to move forward –

to study, marry, buy a house – the war made everything frozen.

That evening, my last in the YPG facility in Derik, I sat and talked with Leyla, a 23-year-old girl who was there visiting her brother. She spoke fluent English and had a delicacy about her that seemed out of place in the rough military surroundings.

Leyla told me that Syria “used to be beautiful.” Then she reflected a little and added “even though we weren’t allowed to speak Kurdish or even give our children Kurdish names. Anyway, it was better than ISIS.”

The sentiment seemed entirely understandable. For all the iron brutality of the Assad regime, it at least maintained a structure within which normal life could take place. And as long as that normal life kept to within the Arab nationalist forms preferred by the Assads, they were prepared to leave it largely unmolested. This was not a good way to live. It was not anything remotely approaching a social contract. But it wasn’t hard to see how people could miss that, in comparison with the seemingly endless meat grinder of the war.

“We used to be Syrian first and Kurdish second,” Leyla reflected. “That’s all changed now. Syria has gone. And we don’t yet know what’s coming to replace it.”

Syria gone. I first heard it from Ali, the smuggler from Kobani, living with his blue-tattooed mother and his brothers and their wives and their animals in a wild hamlet close to the border. Now, here was this refined student of architecture from Damascus, as different as could be imagined in every way, and of the same opinion.

I left Derik and Rojava the next day. The same way I’d come, back across the peaceful Tigris River. I thumbed a lift from a friendly Iraqi Kurd and was back in Erbil, in Ainkawa, by the afternoon.

I wanted now to take a look at the Iraqi Kurdish war against the Islamic State. The Peshmerga were vastly superior to the YPG in equipment. They possessed an armored and artillery capacity, Humvees, body armor, a totally different operation. What was in question at that time, however, was not their equipment, but, astonishingly, their fighting spirit. This seemed absurd. Were not the Peshmerga fighters of legend, the mountain warriors who had fought uprising after uprising against the attempts of the Arab nationalists to subjugate them?

They were. But it had become apparent, in the course of the summer of 2014, that the Peshmerga of our time were not quite the same force that had existed in the 1980s. The Kurds of northern Iraq had been living in a situation of de facto autonomy since 1992. In the meantime, a whole new generation had grown up for whom education in Kurdish and a relatively secure existence had become the norm.

Corruption existed in the Kurdish Democratic Party. There were rumors that closeness to the political leadership as much as professional merit were the key to success and advancement for officials and officers. Further down the ladder, the Peshmerga, that is, the armed forces of the Kurdish Regional Government, had come to be seen less as a calling and more as a way for men from poor families to earn a living. This was all fine for peacetime, of course. But it wasn't peacetime.

The Peshmerga was also not a single, unified force. The KDP and its rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, each maintained their own separate armed forces. The hurricane descent of the Islamic State on Iraqi Kurdistan in the summer of 2014 served as a brutal wake-up call for the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga. I wanted to see the reaction up close.

Back in Erbil, though, my first meeting was with Nilufer Koc, a Kurdish politician close to the PKK but resident in the city. Nilufer was closely involved in efforts to buy back a number of the Yezidi women who had been captured and enslaved by IS. But our meeting proved memorable because of her broader thoughts on the nature of the Islamic State phenomenon and, in particular, its place in the context of regional politics.

“Salafism is a continuation of the ideology of pan-Arabism,” Nilufer declared, in her rapid, German-accented English, as we sat and smoked and talked in her office opposite one of Erbil’s busy shopping malls. “And so ISIS is led by former members of the Ba’ath party, helped along by people like Tareq al-Hashimi (the former Iraqi Vice President of Iraq who had fled to Iraqi Kurdistan in 2011 after being accused by the government of murder).

“People in Mosul, Anbar and Falluja became impoverished, there was high unemployment. This was why they opened their doors to ISIS. Maliki and the government of Iraq are responsible for this.”

And, behind Maliki, as she saw it, stood Iran. “Iran is trying to fan the flames of conflict elsewhere so the war won’t come to Iran itself. This is a policy of prevention.”

As for the Kurdish interest in all this – she was quite clear. “We need to first clear the referendum (on independence). And then, if the coming new government continues to reject giving us our rights, then the Kurds need to take what belongs to them.” In spite of Iran, and in spite of Turkey.

As for the Yezidi hostages, it was a sensitive business. Some of the women had managed to call their families from their places of confinement, after hiding mobile phones. The conditions in which they were being kept were appalling. Many had been raped. Some had already attempted suicide. The go-betweens were Sunni Arab members of the parliament who had some means to contact the

jihadis. Nilufer was hoping for the best.

I was interested, though, in her remarks regarding Salafism as a continuation of pan-Arabism. On the face of it, this sounded absurd. Wasn't pan-Arabism, in its Ba'athist and Nasserist varieties, a secular political creed? Hadn't its proponents ruthlessly persecuted the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists when in power?

The answer was yes, but the situation was more complex than it sounded. In Iraq, the rule of the Ba'ath had been the vehicle through which the Sunni Arab minority exercised its domination over the Shia majority and the Kurdish minority. This dispensation had ended with the American invasion of 2003. Since then, the Sunni Arabs had been transformed into a beleaguered minority, but one that still retained all the perceptions and expectations of a rightful ruling caste.

In the new and emerging reality of Iraq and Syria, one's sectarian identity became, in effect, a surrogate or replacement nationhood. In this context, the jihadis of IS and the deposed Ba'athi former elite had a certain commonality of interests. Both wanted to raise up the position of Iraq's Sunni Arabs from the nadir that it had reached. The precise balance of power between the former Ba'athis and the Islamists was hard to gauge with any accuracy. But the presence of such prominent former regime figures as Izzat al-Duri was a reality.<sup>7</sup> Islamic State had not developed its skills at clandestine organization and agitation merely from the experience of former al-Qaeda members. They were learning from masters of this trade.

And they were still waiting outside of Erbil. About 45 kilometers from the city, their vehicles gleaming in the hard August sun. That was where we wanted to go next.

A Peshmerga general, Maghdid Haraki, had agreed to meet with me and be interviewed at one of the frontline positions of his army. So, the next day, we set out from the city and, after about half an hour, we arrived at one of the rear echelon bases of the Peshmerga. Again, the contrast with the young and under-nourished commanders of the YPG was marked. All the Peshmerga officers seemed to be huge men, broadly built and often of considerable girth. Also, if the sudden arrival of IS to close proximity had in any way phased them, they weren't showing it. There was an infectious bonhomie about them. Food always seemed to be arriving on plastic plates from somewhere, and there was always enough to go around. Many of the commanders had insignia and berets indicating membership of this or that branch of the force. No-one seemed to be especially in a hurry.

There was tea, of course, and chairs strewn around, and almost everyone was

smoking and talking. The facility seemed, among other things, to be a sort of clearing house for foreign media crews trying to reach the frontlines and, in the hour or so that we were there, I saw a British TV crew come in and leave, a group of Germans and also an Iranian crew doing their best to look inconspicuous. “The Iranians are all around here,” my fixer, Younes, told me.

Then, finally, we had our quick interview with a Peshmerga officer, who told us that we had received permission to travel to a position on a quiet section of the frontline and that General Haraki would be joining us later.

Outside, a few of the young Peshmerga were hanging around. They seemed, in a way that was hard to define, more normal than the YPG. Some of them were wearing sunglasses. Some were speaking into mobile phones. Every man had boots (most of the YPG seemed to make do with sneakers). They were mostly young, all male, of course, cheerful, fit-looking.

Younes told me as we went to board the van that was take us to the frontline position, “The guy inside there said that we weren’t to speak to any of the soldiers at the base. You can take pictures of them, but you can’t speak to them. Its about security, he said.”

I thought it was more because this commander didn’t trust his own fighters to stay on message. It hadn’t been a very good few weeks for the Peshmerga.

In a way, though, this improved my impression of them. One of the disconcerting things about the YPG was that every one of its fighters seemed well trained in speaking in impenetrable, PKK-type slogans. The result was that they would have no need to not let journalists speak to the rank and file. The latter could be relied on to stay on message. The effect of this was slightly disturbing. That it didn’t apply to the Peshmerga spoke to their very different nature. This was something that resembled a regular army, not an ideological militia.

This impression was confirmed on our arrival at the position. As it turned out, it wasn’t on the most forward line facing the Islamic State. Rather, it was the second line. Still a few kilometers before one would hit the jihadis. The atmosphere seemed somewhat sleepy. Some of the soldiers were half-dressed, laughing, talking. To the side was an old tank, a T-55, surrounded by sandbags.

This was testimony to the accuracy of one of the Peshmerga’s main complaints. Namely, that the West refused to arm them directly. Western countries preferred, in the interests of preserving the unity of the country, to supply all weaponry to Baghdad, in the expectation that it would then be appropriately shared out also with the Kurdish forces in the north. This, of course, did not happen.

The good stuff stayed with the Iraqi security forces. The Peshmerga,

meanwhile, had to make do with antiques of the kind on display at the position I visited.

This was an arrangement that might have made sense in peacetime, if a genuine attempt at building an inclusive Iraq had been under way. But the reality was that the ruling Dawa party in Baghdad was a Shia Islamist outfit, pro-Iranian in orientation and increasingly sectarian in practice. The West had been busily arming a pro-Iranian military in Baghdad, which had itself been starving the very pro-western Kurds from obtaining adequate armaments.

To make matters worse, the Iraqi army had proved incompetent. In Mosul, it had abandoned a large complement of shiny new weapons which had then been absorbed by IS. So, on the plain outside Erbil, the jihadis of the Islamic State could muster American Abrams tanks and howitzers, against a Kurdish force possessing only the kind of antique armor of the type to be seen at the position I witnessed. This fact alone went some way toward explaining the surprisingly poor showing of the Kurds in the first weeks of the Islamic State's offensive eastwards into Iraq.

The forces were at stalemate, facing each other across the plain, with the US Air Force close by. Soon, the Kurds expected the counter-attack to begin in earnest.

We ate our lunch in the company of the soldiers that we weren't allowed to talk to. They laughed and glanced at each other. I did my best to get through the gristly meat and rice that was presented to me on a plastic plate. How wonderful a thing are regular armies. Even in Iraq, where the food at least always seemed to be good, one could trust a regular military to turn out something tasteless.

After the meal, and with a sudden flourish, Haraki and his entourage swept into the room. Maghdid Haraki was an impressive-looking figure, with iron-grey hair in a US-style crewcut. He was very clearly influenced by US military style, the bonhomie, the formalities observed somehow in a simultaneously amused yet dead serious way. Of average height, broad-shouldered and lean, Haraki had a brisk, officers' manner, and he got right to business.

I raised with him, first, the issue of the failure of the Peshmerga in the Sinjar area. I thought that the question might have irritated him, but he kept his smile. "The problem was that, at the time, that zone was new for the Peshmerga, and unfamiliar. Because the Iraqi security forces had held it in the past."

"But the real danger," he continued, "is far from the Kurdish zone. ISIS is successful there because local Arab Sunnis helped and are helping them. This is the main reason for their advances."

So what was needed to stop their advances? "We don't want direct US intervention. But we want direct support. Not from Baghdad and the Iraqi army.

The world still looks at the KRG as part of Iraq. But, since 2007, Baghdad has sent the Peshmerga nothing. That's why we want direct aid."

As Haraki put it, there was no separating the military problem from the political issue. And the chief political issue went back to the forced and unnatural unity of Iraq, which prevented a rational prosecution of the war.

"Eighty years ago, they joined three nations together. This is a mistake that must not be repeated. We have a different land, different language, different mentality. I don't know why the world doesn't see this. They just see 'Iraq.'" God made the differences. And people are trying to join the differences. So the solution – is breaking up."

It was as clear an exposition of the core Kurdish perspective as any I heard in Iraq or in Syria. The basic logic of separation, which underlay everything.

In the meantime, however, there was the war. A huge and fluid frontline of 1,500 kilometers – all the way from the Iraq–Iran border to the line between Syria and Turkey.

"ISIS has collected negative human beings from all over the world, from the UK, from other countries. So we are defending the West too, in being here. Because, when they finish here, they will come for you in your home too."

The Peshmerga, in cooperation with the US Air Force and the Iraqi special forces, were now on the offensive, Haraki said. Determined, it seemed, to wipe out the shame of what happened on Sinjar Mountain. Important gains had been made. Still, Islamic State was still deployed close to Erbil at three separate points.

All this, spoken at a silent frontline. The Islamic State waiting a kilometer or so from the first Kurdish positions.

I left Erbil for Amman in the early hours of the following morning. The streets were deserted, the refugees' tents still visible at the side of the road.

The city had barely avoided a dreadful and destructive storm which had consumed many lives just a little further west. The storm was man-made, political in nature. It was not yet spent. The energies of millions were now engaged in turning it back. But this itself was only a part of a much larger picture. Iraq and Syria, it appeared, had become geographical expressions only. Political Islam, in its various versions, was fighting over what remained. The Kurds stood for a radically different politics along a long line to the north.

The government in Baghdad itself was a product of the alliance between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the ruling Dawa party. Iran may have avoided placing videos of executions on YouTube, and all the other florid insanity to which the Islamic State was prone. But this did not alter its anti-western nature, nor the viciously repressive form of its internal arrangements. Meanwhile, other

than the Peshmerga, it was not the official Iraqi armed forces who were playing the key role in fighting the Sunni jihadis as they swept into Iraq.

Rather, the heavy-lifting south of the KRG zone was being performed by Shia militias, Islamist in outlook, and often directly aided by the Iranians and their various regional proxies. Iraq and Syria, in addition to collapsing inwards, had also become fronts in a larger struggle for power between Iran and its Sunni opponents across the region. What had begun as a civilian uprising, and morphed into a militia battle over ruins, was now also taking on the dimensions of a region-wide struggle for power between rival states, each utilizing its own paramilitary instruments.

## Notes

- 1 The Islamic Dawa party is a Shia Islamist party founded in Iraq in 1957. It headed the Iraqi governing coalition at the time that ISIS invaded Iraq in 2014.
- 2 Martin Chulov, "Iraq Army Capitulates to ISIS Militants in Four Cities," *Guardian*, June 12, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com>
- 3 Martin Chulov, "ISIS Insurgents seize control of Iraqi City of Mosul," *Guardian*, June 10, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com>
- 4 Declaration Announcing the Foundation of the Caliphate. [https://ia902505.us.archive.org/28/items/poa\\_25984/EN.pdf](https://ia902505.us.archive.org/28/items/poa_25984/EN.pdf)
- 5 "Second Strike: US Warplanes Drop More Bombs on ISIS Forces," *NBC News*, August 8, 2014. <http://www.nbcnews.com>
- 6 Mohamed Salih and Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, "Iraqi Yazidis: If We Move, They Will Kill Us," *al-Jazeera*, August 5, 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com>
- 7 Izzat al-Duri, the most high profile official of the Saddam Hussein regime to escape capture, went on to form the Naqshabandi Army, which cooperated with ISIS during the events of summer 2014.

# 6

## A YPG VOLUNTEER

In October 2014, with its advance on Erbil and Baghdad halted, the Islamic State turned back westwards. The target was the Kurdish enclave of Kobani, where I had visited earlier in the year. Kobani was a bone in the throat for IS. It was the direct point at which the projects of IS and the Kurds encamped in the ruins of Syria clashed. These two entities could not coexist. The Caliphate was meant to represent the first organization of a structure that would eventually encompass the entire world. The more modest and sane Kurdish project was to provide a chance for autonomous organization for one of the region's most oppressed peoples. Geographically speaking, the Kobani enclave poked into the Islamic State's Syrian holdings, necessitating a circuitous route for the jihadis if they wanted to get from their capital in Raqqa city to the areas they coveted in Aleppo province further west. This made it a natural target for the jihadis' intentions once the frontlines to the east in Iraq had stabilized.

The assault began in September. The eastern and western edges of the enclave fell rapidly against the hammer blows of the Islamic State forces, using equipment they had captured during the recent taking of Mosul.<sup>1</sup>

By October, the Kurdish predicament looked desperate. The jihadis were closing in on Kobani city. The Kurds did not allow foreign journalists into the enclave at this point. The expectation was that the jihadis would take the city and a massacre would follow.

The PYD representatives in London at that time asked me for a meeting. I joined them at an evening vigil that they had organized outside the House of Commons to demand action by the British government to save Kobani. We went to a pub for a meal afterwards. As we sat eating fish and chips, one of them looked at me and quietly spelled out the situation that the Kurds in what was left of the Kobani enclave were facing.

“We have already sent out all the civilians. There are only fighters in Kobani now. Da’esh are coming in on both sides. We expect that, if they can link up north of the city, then our fighters will be massacred.”

A London pub in dark wood. Noise and beer and a crowd all around. And “our situation is absolutely desperate. If there’s anyone you know, any way that someone can help us, it would be appreciated.” The situation must really be desperate, I was thinking, if now you’re turning to journalists to help you find weaponry. Nothing much I could do but write articles. I didn’t know anyone who could run guns into northern Syria.

But, as it turned out, Kobani was not doomed. In October, western air intervention to save the enclave began. The combination of US air power and the YPG, supported by a small force of Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga on the ground, was sufficient to turn the tide. The jihadis, once again, would not get to drink their tea in “Ayn al-Islam.”

Instead, the new alliance would set about driving the jihadis back in an eastward direction, liberating Tel Abyad and pushing the jihadis in the direction of their capital.

It was one of the utterly surreal and very consequential partnerships that the Syrian war generated. The YPG, after all, was from start to finish a production of the PKK. Five minutes in the autonomous area of Rojava was sufficient to establish this. The armed forces, the political and social organizations, the system of governance, all were the creation of PKK cadres down from Qandil, in cooperation with the local Kurds. And the PKK remained listed as a terrorist organization by both the US and the European Union. Yet here were the US and a branch of the PKK uniting in a successful military partnership against the common enemy of Islamic State.

Kobani, as a result of this new partnership, rapidly turned into a slaughtering ground for the jihadi fighters. They did not simply accept defeat and, throughout November and December, they continued to push men into the mincing machine that the ruined city had become. Finally, in January, the siege was lifted and they withdrew.

I had been trying fruitlessly throughout the fighting to gain entrance to the enclave. The Kurdish concern for journalists’ lives and field security kept reporters out of the city for the worst of it, though crews began to arrive toward the end of the year. In the latter part of February 2015, I finally got the go ahead that I could enter the enclave, where reconstruction was just beginning. So I made my way on the now familiar road to Istanbul, then Gaziantep, on to the border town of Suruc.

Suruc, from where I’d crossed into Kobani in mid-2014, was grey and

depressed in the February cold. A torrential rain was pouring down as I made my way to the “Amara” community center from where I was told we’d be setting out for the border.

Inside the center there was the cheerful chaos that I associated with the Kurds. Young activists coming and going. An urn filled with black tea and a large bowl of sugar next to it. Children’s drawings of Kurdish flags and martyrs on the wall.

But something had changed. When I had first started to write about the Syrian Kurds, prior to the war, many people had responded that they had had no idea that there was a Kurdish community in Syria at all. This all began to shift in the course of 2014 and, in particular, after the IS offensive into Iraq in the summer of that year.

The Syrian Kurds offered an example of an avowedly secular and leftist cause, engaging directly against the jihadis – and succeeding.

The Amara community center was, as a result, filled up on that February day not only with local Kurdish activists and volunteers. There was also a curious complement of Europeans, of anarchist or Marxist persuasions, young people from Italy, Spain and France, who had come to help the Kurdish cause.

We were all housed together by night in a single room. The border crossing was delayed. An unexpectedly large presence of Turkish forces, it seemed, made slipping across for the moment impossible. So we spent the days watching the rain pour down outside the window of the community center, smoking and talking.

The leftist activists were a curious bunch. On closer inspection, they turned out not to be all Europeans. A shy, very thin and long-haired Canadian young man called Cody was among them. Cody had an encyclopedic knowledge of the fronts in the civil war. His solemnity and attention to detail seemed slightly out of place in this crowd, where flamboyant and youthful gesture politics was more the style. One would hear long, impassioned conversations about the global revolution and lessons that could be shared with the Kurds from what the activists themselves had learned in their struggles in Italy and France.

Much of this had a certain comical element to it. I had not come expecting absurdity, but here it was. There were perhaps 400,000 refugees from Kobani in Suruc and the surrounding areas. The city was devastated. Only the late application of US air power had prevented the absolute certainty of a fearful massacre. But here were these young Europeans, talking about renewable energy and their hope that the Kurds would be amenable to their ideas about rebuilding the city along ecologically sound and environmentally friendly lines.

Their idealism was met by incomprehension from the Kurds, who were dealing with war, revolution and a potentially imminent human rights

catastrophe. What they wanted to offer the young foreigners was military training, to enable them to take their place among the ranks of the YPG. Regarding this, the foreigners were less sure.

A PKK-connected lady, Fawzia, had been appointed to look after us. She soon learned to avoid me whenever she walked in the room because of my habit of immediately trying to corner her and ask whether we would be able to cross the border that night. Trying to pin her or her colleagues down to any solid commitment was impossible. With the foreigners, Fawzia had other problems. They did not reject taking up arms on principle, of course. But they wanted, first, to journey into Kobani to take a look at the situation and decide if a genuine revolution was, in fact, taking place in Rojava, as they had been told. Only after this inspection, they made clear, would they be in a position to decide whether to fight the jihadis or not.

This stance was met by their hosts with some bewilderment, albeit with the friendly smiles and general statements of goodwill that seemed to be the Kurdish response to most expressions of foreign oddness. “Well, couldn’t you,” I heard Fawzia say to one of the Europeans who was expressing himself on this matter, “perhaps do the military training first and then we could talk about your ideas for the reconstruction.” This proposal, however, was met with much dissent from the Europeans, who began a lengthy discussion of their own in regard to it in the spirit of a socialist summer camp. The long-haired anarchists, nevertheless, clearly regarded themselves as men to be reckoned with. One of them, Nicola, a handsome, bearded Italian, would lead the others in impromptu martial arts training to pass the time.

The leftist contingent was an entertaining diversion. But I was wasting time. The days were passing. Each evening as it grew dark we would gather in the main room of the center, hoping to be told we were crossing to Kobani, only to receive news that it had been postponed once again. Too much army on the border, Fawzia would say, and then smile sweetly as though she forgave us for this fact.

So I spent my time wandering around Suruc, up to the improvised refugee camp run by the PKK just outside the town. The refugees from Kobani were living in grey tents, with minimal facilities and in a camp lashed by rain and winds by night. But safe from Islamic State and among their own people. The Turkish government had also created a large refugee camp, but many Kurds were reluctant to entrust themselves to it.

One day, drinking tea at the center, I noticed that a new young man had arrived and was talking to the activists. He looked similar to them, in his 30s, with long brown hair and wearing a pair of military-type green trousers. But I

caught a difference in him as I sat and listened to their conversation.

“So, are you an activist?” Cody the Canadian quizzed the newcomer.

“Well, I’ve just come to help out, y’know. Come to help. I’m a Christian,” all this in a quiet American accent.

“Yeah,” he went on, “I tried to cross the border by myself yesterday, got as far as the fence but then the Turkish army came and said it’d be better if I went back so” – he smiled a little – “I guess I’m here till I can get across. Till they need me.”

Anyone who had made an attempt to cross the border into Kobani by himself was not someone who had come just to persuade the people of Kobani to rebuild their city along ecologically friendly lines. I stood up and introduced myself. “Yeah, he’s a journalist,” Cody said, glancing at me. “His work is published all over the world.”

“Hi, I’m Keith,” the young American said, and we shook hands. But we got off to a poor start. Maybe because of the nature of the introduction or for some other reason, Keith wasn’t immediately forthcoming when I tried to speak to him. My attempts at asking questions received polite but monosyllabic answers and, after a while, Keith got up to help himself to the black tea bubbling away in an urn.

I concluded that there was some issue in the ineffable world of human chemistry that he had decided to listen to rather than overcome, or else that he was simply wary of journalists. I regretted this, mainly because I was bored and wanted someone I could talk to without having to worry about revealing my non-radical leftist views on the region, but partly also because I was fascinated by the foreigners who were beginning to come to fight with the Kurds. I hadn’t met one of them yet in the flesh and was keen to get a sense of what he was about.

I needn’t have worried. Keith – Keith Broomfield, as he introduced himself properly when we talked a few hours later – had just been checking me out with the polite reserve that was a natural accompaniment to his New England courtesy.

In the hours and days that followed, we formed a kind of loose alliance, mainly deriving from the fact that we were foreigners stuck in Suruc who weren’t connected to the radical left and anarchist crowd.

It was Keith’s Christian convictions that had led him to leave Massachusetts to join the fight against the Islamic State. These were obviously deeply sincere. They went with the slightly old-fashioned politeness with which he treated everyone. But there was something else there too, which came out as we got to know each other better. He had a love for risk and adventure for its own sake,

and also for fighting. And his checkered, interesting past emerged as we sat in Amara whiling the hours away in conversation.

Keith came from quite a well-established family who owned a manufacturing company in rural Bolton, 25 miles north west of Boston. He was the youngest of the boys, the wayward and wild man of the family.

“I went to join the Marine Corps after I got out of jail. They asked me if I liked fighting and I told ‘em I did. But in the end it didn’t work out because of my record,” he told me.

And “in jail, you join a gang just to survive. You don’t necessarily like the guys you’re in the gang with, but you watch their back and they watch yours. Once I had a cell mate that I liked a lot, but he was in a different gang to me. We knew that if a fight broke out on the landing, we’d end up fighting each other. We didn’t much want that but we couldn’t go against the gang. So we made an agreement that if it broke out and we had to join in, when we left the cell I’d go right and he’d go left. That way we’d maybe end up not running into each other.”

The leftist girls liked Keith and he liked them too. There was a young Hungarian woman whom he spent a great deal of time with. The European anarchists soon got the measure of the young American, and understood that he wasn’t quite like them, but was also not altogether different.

The Kurdish cause in Syria brought together a particularly disparate cast of characters at that time. This was because the YPG was simultaneously fighting with courage and effectiveness against the Islamic State, but also pioneering a secular and leftist social experiment. People like Keith Broomfield were brought by the first aspect. The European leftists were interested in the second. It caused less friction than one might have imagined. Perhaps because of the close proximity of the common enemy.

Something of the freemasonry of the young must have operated here too, though Keith, at 36, was in the process of departing that particular fraternity. All the same, he rapidly became a fixture of the odd little community that emerged in the Amara community center in Suruc. Shadowboxing out in the courtyard by morning, as the Italian anarchists went past to buy bread for everyone.

Keith loved animals and motorbikes and was happy to talk about both. Also of his evidently simple and sincere Christian faith. He laughed at my impatience with the slowness and disorganization of the Kurds. “Well, I guess they’ll call for me when they need me,” he’d say whenever it came up.

There was another young woman staying at the hostel whom Keith also liked. She was a Kurdish girl, Mizgin, who had come down from a more prosperous part of Turkey to volunteer. A teacher by profession, she was slim and dark-

haired, full of passion.

For her attentions however, Keith had a rival, namely, myself. It wasn't a serious rivalry. Keith's long hair and smile and status as a volunteer for the fighting put him in another league from an aging and ambiguous hack. All the same, I wasn't quite ready to concede in advance. The result was that the three of us began to form a strange little community within a community of our own, of a type familiar in high schools the world over.

That was how it formed up and how the days passed in Suruc. Mizgin was volunteering with the Kurdish refugees, and so through her we were able to meet some of them.

The conditions in which the refugees outside the camps lived were utterly desperate. Kurds fleeing Kobani had sought shelter in every available space in Suruc. We met the Shaikho family, who had escaped the fighting and found refuge in an empty warehouse, along with four other families. With the wind and the rain outside, and just a blue tarpaulin laid across the doorway and flapping and buffeting. The middle son, Fadel, had lost his legs on the way out of the enclave, as they passed over a minefield.

I remembered my own rushed exit from Kobani some months earlier. I had run 100 meters across open ground, in the pitch black, toward a light that had been pointed out to me by the smuggler who took me as far as the border fence. But the smuggler and his family were from a border village, and knew exactly which ground might contain mines and which did not. I had the money and the connections, as a western visitor, to find such people.

The Shaikho family were local and poor. And they had been running for their lives from the sudden eruption of people seeking to slaughter them when they took the decision to cross the border. With no time for making connections and precious little money. And here they were, bereft. In a deserted warehouse with blue tarpaulin for a door, and a son who had lost both his legs from a Turkish mine in one of the fields past the border fence, and who never smiled.

"I used to run some girls up in Providence, Rhode Island," Keith told me with a grin as we sat talking one afternoon. "The problem is that a lot of the guys'd fall in love with 'em. Then you'd have to go and sort them out. One time a guy locked one of the girls in his bathroom. Said that he was in love with her and couldn't let her go. She had a little kid at home that she had to look after. So I went down there to try and persuade him to let her go. He's in love with her, he tells me. So I tell him yeah, that's very nice, but I ain't leaving here without her so you'd better think about that. In the end I had to knock his teeth down his throat. That's OK, though. Hey, do you have a cigarette?"

Was he coming to Kurdistan to purify himself? Was that the thing? Having

discovered God, did he intend now to endanger himself helping the defenseless, and so atone for whatever sins he had committed? It would be easy to think so. But it was something else, I think.

Keith had a sort of natural and instinctive generosity. The same thing I had seen in Jihan, the Kurdish commander in Derik. This was something inherent to his personality, I think. It wasn't implanted by his Christianity; he had been around the Hells Angels for a while, had sought to join the Marine Corps. It was about brotherhood and unity. Christianity wedded this to a larger morality. But there was a kind of core goodwill, a fellowship that was deeper than any particular religious conviction. It went together, clearly, with a capacity for murderous aggression against whoever the enemy was. A thing that was, in itself, perhaps impervious to a particular code, potentially mobilized for a good cause or for a bad or indifferent one. This was what brought us together in those days in Suruc.

The community, once formed, included Mizgin, too. And myself. And the others, the European radicals and the Kurdish activists; the desire for community preceded them.

One evening Keith, Mizgin and I went down to the refugee tent encampment. We spent the evening in the company of a family of refugees. Two of their sons were still across the border, fighting with the YPG. I was almost out of time. The border crossing still showed no signs of happening.

The wind was buffeting the sides of the tent and there was a kind of electric bar fire keeping us warm. A little girl sang a sweet song about Kobani. Keith played with one of the older kids, a boy of about ten, teaching him some boxing moves. The old man heard that Keith had come to join the fight and treated him with great respect. Mizgin was in her element, too, commanding everybody in her good-natured, pedagogical way.

I decided to leave the next day. I had been stuck at the center for five days and was out of time. Even if we had been able to cross, by that stage I wouldn't have had time to get any work done and I had a flight back home leaving from Gaziantep in a couple of days.

The little scene that had emerged was also breaking up. The European leftists had heard that a large protest was due to take place in the city of Diyarbakir, so they were heading off to take part in that. Rebuilding Kobani along ecologically sound lines was going to have to wait. Only Keith and a couple of others would be left, waiting to enter whenever the army presence on the border permitted it. Mizgin was still around and so I would be conceding in that not-very-serious competition too.

It was sunny and cold on the day I left. Keith and I shook hands. "It's a pity

you're going," he smiled. I had a feeling of lightness and freedom as I left the place. Looking forward to privacy and a hot shower in Gaziantep.

It wasn't until I got back to Jerusalem that we discovered what the reason for the hold-up had been: Turkish troops had been scouting the border in unusual numbers in preparation for an operation they were about to mount into Syria. The objective was to bring back the remains of Suleiman Shah, the father of Osman, the founder of the Ottoman dynasty.<sup>2</sup> The government of Recep Tayipp Erdogan was apparently worried at the possible fate of the bones and the shrine, given the chaotic situation in northern Syria. Keith sent me some pictures of Turkish tanks on transporters heading through Suruc, past the center.

Keith, Mizgin and I exchanged a few emails in the weeks that followed. Then he disappeared across the border to begin training in Kobani, and Mizgin returned to her job further north, back in Turkey.

I thought about him sometimes in the subsequent months. About what he was doing. And what I was not doing. Should I, perhaps, also have offered my services to the YPG? The thought had crossed my mind on a few occasions. But I was older and a veteran of other wars. And I knew what armies and war were and didn't want to find myself under orders and discipline ever again, if I could help it. All the same I was envious.

Some members of the Broomfield family from Massachusetts got in touch with me. Keith's brother Andy was a solid sort of character, a bespectacled, buttoned-down New Englander. His sister Jennifer was a blonde and beautiful young woman, an athlete. They had seen I was a friend of Keith's on Facebook. Keith had just a very small number of Facebook friends, so I suppose they must have assumed that I had met him in Turkey. They contacted me to say that they hadn't heard from him and to ask if they ought to be worried about this.

I replied that this was not a cause for concern, but rather for its opposite. The YPG was a well-organized, serious force, with an established bureaucracy. If there was anything to report, they would surely be informed. Keith was no doubt busy, and without internet access. I reassured them. I did so with good conscience. I wasn't placating them.

Spring turned into summer. The war rolled on. I supposed Keith would already be engaged against the jihadis. I knew that he would excel as a fighter.

In July I was in Baghdad, on an assignment about the Shia militias. It was an intense and demanding trip, conducted in sweltering heat. Back one evening, drinking beer with a group of British contractors at the hotel, I glanced at Facebook on my phone. I saw that Jennifer Broomfield had put an update, saying she loved her brother and had never expected to lose him. I knew immediately what it meant. I Googled Keith's name and, sure enough, on a

number of Kurdish sites they were reporting that the American volunteer, Keith Broomfield, “Gelhat Raman” to his Kurdish comrades, had been killed in action outside Kobani.

I was preparing to spend a couple of days with the Ktaeb Hizballah militia in Anbar province. It was an assignment with an element of risk, which required my concentration. There wasn’t much time to think and internalize. So I put it to the back of my mind and I told myself I’d think about it when I got back to Jerusalem. Keith and the memory of him were all around in the days that followed.

The YPG brought his body back to Massachusetts and Gelhat Raman was buried there. A combination of white picket-fence New England, green and manicured lawns and neat little church houses, and chanting Kurds holding his picture in YPG green camouflage uniform as the black car containing his body drove by.

Much later, in the dying days of 2015, I finally managed to revisit Kobani and I asked around regarding Keith. Mustafa Alali, a friend of mine close to the PYD, who spent most of the siege inside the city, remembered him. “Gelhat? Sure, he was a sniper. He was doing well. The guys liked him a lot.”

“So how did he die?” I asked.

Mustafa pulled a face. “It was a sniper that killed him. An IS sniper. You know, a lot of the guys, once they’ve been doing this stuff for a while, they start to get complacent, you know? They start to move about when they should keep still, they think they know the game. Too brave. We lost a lot of people like that.”

There were pictures of YPG martyrs all over north east Syria. Yellow posters. Grave faces of the dead looking down. Red stars of the YPG emblazoned across. Coming out of Amuda I saw a portrait of Keith among them. So that’s where he is now, it occurred to me. All the way from Massachusetts.

There is no need to make cardboard heroes of the men and women who came to volunteer against the Islamic State at that time. They were complex individuals, each with their own stories and motivations. And regrets. Keith had wrestled with all manner of stuff in his time. Nevertheless, when one thinks of the terrible suffering of the people who lived under IS, and of the forces that stemmed their advance, much of the complexity fades away.

I am left with the image of Keith the last time I saw him, at the entrance to the Amara community center in Suruc, with the kind of grin that men give each other when they are departing into the darkness, danger and adventure. An acknowledgement of something shared. Something neither light nor superficial. I miss the small community that we created in the Amara cultural center in those

days. I'd go back to it if I could, and I'd stay longer. The center itself was the target of an IS suicide bombing in July in which 33 people died. Our scene was long since forgotten by then. I left it for my home in Jerusalem. Keith Broomfield left it for the border, for Kobani in late February, and was killed in early June. He was a most exceptional and brave man.

## Notes

- 1 Ayla Jean Yackley, ISIS assault on Kobani: “‘Intensify Air Strikes on Militants’, Urge Kurds Trapped in Border Town,” *Independent*, October 11, 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk>
- 2 “Turkey Enters Syria to Remove Precious Suleyman Shah Tomb,” BBC Online, February 22, 2015. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>

# 7

## UNCOVERING ISIS'S USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

The first rumors of chemical weapons (CW) use by the Islamic State organization began in the late summer of 2014. CW were, of course, already part of the Syrian war. The Assad regime had used them on at least three occasions. Indeed, the regime's employment of sarin gas in August 2013 brought the US close to intervention for the first time in the war.

According to subsequent UN investigations, the regime used sarin gas against rebel-controlled areas in Khan Al-Asal (March 19, 2013) and Saraqib (April 29, 2013) in Syria's north. The largest attack, however, took place in, eastern Ghouta on August 21, 2013, in the eastern suburbs of Damascus. In this attack, up to 1,000kg of sarin was dropped, resulting in the deaths of around 1,400 people, mainly women and children.<sup>1</sup>

Assad's actions were clearly in defiance of the previous red line issued by US President Obama.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent expectation was that the US would take direct action, probably involving air power, to "punish" the regime and seek to restore the ban on use of chemical and biological weapons as an instrument of war.

In the event, a "compromise" was reached according to which Syria would agree to sign the chemical weapons convention and accept the removal of its chemical weapons stockpiles by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).<sup>3</sup>

But instances of use of chemical weapons did not end with the declaration by the OPCW that their mission had been achieved. In the course of 2014, rumors began to spread among the inhabitants of the Kurdish enclaves in the north that the jihadis of ISIS were employing chemical weapons of some kind in their war

against the Kurdish YPG. I was interested in these stories which I first heard during my visit to Kobani. But it was difficult to get anything concrete on them. The YPG were well organized and secretive. Any information regarding chemical weapons was likely to be closely guarded.

Nevertheless, an email received one day out of the blue from a friend in Kobani offered a chance of a breakthrough. Sirwan (not his real name) was one of the YPG-connected activists in the city. He divided his time between northern Syria and Istanbul. What he did was not clear. He was a handsome, slightly vulpine young man. The military organizations that emerged in Syria at the time of the civil war produced a number of recognizable types. One of these was the well-connected son of an influential local man, tangentially connected to one or another of the armed groups. These types, “princes” I called them, always seemed to be engaged in work across the borders, mixing business with war work, cultivating an air of mystery.

Sirwan wanted to inform me that he had photographic evidence of use by the Islamic State of chemical weapons in a recent fight against the YPG. He would send me the pictures if I was interested. His purpose, however, was not that they should be published. Or not straight away, at least. Sirwan knew that I was in Israel and for various reasons assumed that I had connections there to the authorities. What he wanted was that the veracity of the pictures be established by an official body. He had evidently cleared all this with the higher authorities in Rojava. I wrote back immediately to say that he should send the pictures.

The next day they arrived. About 20 of them. Pictures of something terrible. Dead bodies of Kurdish fighters. Some girls. Some of them very young. Some with terrible wounds. Not bullet wounds. Yellow blisters. Skin peeling off like plastic wrapping.

I knew various individuals close to the Israeli authorities. In particular, one man, a former senior official of the Mossad, seemed relevant here. I called E. the next day and explained the situation to him. He asked me to send the pictures along to him and he would make some “inquiries”. I informed Sirwan of this, and put the issue to the back of my mind.

After a few days, E. called me and told me that the authorities were very interested in the pictures in question, and would be taking the matter further. That’s great, I told him. It was, he said, nevertheless impossible to draw any firm conclusions regarding what had taken place from the pictures alone. For this, it would be necessary to interview people, bring soil samples and so on.

I told him I’d be happy to help in this process, if needed. On this, however, he appeared equivocal. Thinking about the conversation afterwards, it occurred to me that what was going to happen was that the authorities might well now

conduct an investigation of some kind of their own, but that this would not necessarily involve letting me or anyone else in on the details.

I hadn't bargained for this, but, once I thought about it, it made sense. We were into a realm of great sensitivity. I had no power to force the Israeli authorities to do anything, of course, and it was entirely in their power to thank me for the pictures and exclude me from knowledge of any further action they might take.

There was nothing much I could do but wait. But, in the meantime, I was trying to explore the issue of where the chemical weaponry might have come from, through contacts in the Raqqa province area and elsewhere. One interesting possibility was that it had been taken from old CW supplies at the Muthanna base close to Baghdad, which was captured by IS during its push toward the Iraqi capital in the summer of 2014. Opinion was divided as to whether the materials at this site were still usable. But Muthanna was only a theory and there were others. It was equally possible that IS had former Iraqi government scientists on side who had produced it.

I didn't hear again from the authorities in Israel. A couple of publications I contacted regarding the pictures responded with skepticism. So I waited. It was an odd sort of feeling. This collection of photos which I had no reason to believe were not genuine waiting on my computer. The dead, and their terrible wounds.

Finally, after about three weeks, I got a call from E. "I showed the pictures to a doctor with a background in this stuff. He says it looks like its mustard gas, but he can't say with certainty without further tests."

I decided to run the pictures together with an article examining the issue of possible IS use of chemical weapons on the website of the Rubin Center, the small think tank with which I was associated. We put the pictures up. Twenty-four hours later the website collapsed after about 2 million hits.<sup>4</sup>

A number of papers and news channels covered the issue. The *New York Times* had an editorial on the matter.<sup>5</sup> A certain amount of noise was created. Other experts in the field agreed with the mustard gas diagnosis.<sup>6</sup> A year later ISIS's use of mustard gas was confirmed by an investigation by US intelligence.<sup>7</sup>

Nothing much changed. It was another story about Syria that rapidly ascended the news cycle and failed to produce concrete results. Another detail of the horror taking place in the country.

The faces of the dead fighters continued to trouble me in the weeks after we ran the story. They were all very young. There seemed a certain indignity in the treatment we had given their photographs. This derived from the fact that, in my concern to get the story out, I had hardly thought of the human beings that these corpses had once been. They had been people before they became evidence that

the jihadis were using mustard gas.

I saw the dead on a number of occasions in the Syria and Iraq wars. Once, traveling south of al-Hawl in Hasakeh province, we came across a group of IS fighters vaporized in a US air raid and then lightly covered by the YPG as they pushed south. We shared jokes and photographed the bodies. Even then, though, even in the presence of these unmourned enemy dead, amusement seemed wrong.

The dead female fighters of the YPJ, of course, deserved an entirely different moral calculus. The issue was that to even think for a moment in instrumental terms about them was somehow a desecration. To focus on anything but the outrageous fact of the loss of them and their precious young lives a sort of sacrilege, like joining with the indifference of the world to the dead from the Syrian war.

I remembered an old book of poems by a now nearly forgotten English war poet called John Pudney that an aunt of mine used to have at her house, and that she gave me when I was a boy. Pudney wrote mainly about the trials and travails of the men of the Royal Air Force. My father joined the RAF in the last days of World War II and, consequently, there was a slight cult of the Air Force around our childhood.

Pudney is not a great poet, but there are moments where he gets through. Here is a line from his poem “For Johnny” about an airman lost in the war: “Fetch out no shroud, for Johnny in the cloud – and keep your tears for him in after years.”<sup>8</sup> This line came to me as I was dealing with these pictures of the dead girls and their terrible yellowy blistered skin. That was how I greeted them each time I saw them. “In after years.” This made it possible.

Our story about the use of chemical weapons by ISIS traveled far and wide, but, apart perhaps from the investigation which confirmed its veracity, it didn’t produce very much. It may be that this is the fate of those who trade in information outside of very narrow and specific areas. Or it may be that indifference is welded into to the very nature of our lives, and one can only very briefly break through it, and even then in a limited context, and with great effort.

## Notes

1 “Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 10, 2013. <https://www.hrw.org>

2 Hisham Melhem, “How Obama’s Syrian Chemical Weapons Deal Fell Apart,” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com>

3 Ibid.

4 Jonathan Spyer, "Did ISIS Use Chemical Weapons Against the Kurds in Kobani?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs Special Report*, October 12, 2014. <http://www.meforum.org>

5 "A Deadly Legacy in Iraq," *New York Times*, October 15, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com>. See also Joe Cirincione and Paul Walker, "Is ISIS Using Chemical Weapons?" *Defense One*, October 14, 2014. <http://www.defenseone.com>

6 Damien McElroy and Philip Sherwell, "ISIL Jihadists May Have Access to Chemicals for Dirty Bombs," *Daily Telegraph*, October 15, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk>

7 "US Reportedly Sees Possible Pattern in ISIS Chemical Weapons Attacks," *Fox News*, August 15, 2015. <http://www.foxnews.com>

8 John Pudney, "For Johnny," in *Dispersal Point*, London: Unwin, 1942: 24.

# 8

## WITH THE SHIA MILITIAS IN IRAQ

By 2015, I had reported extensively on both the Sunni Arab rebel and the Kurdish sides of the war in Syria and Iraq. A significant gap remained, however, in that I had not been able to contact elements on the Iranian/Shia/Assad side. This meant that any picture I sought to paint of the conflict would, inevitably, be partial. I decided, therefore, to seek a context where I could find my way to one or other of the representatives of this side.

When ISIS had been heading eastwards into Iraq in the summer of 2014, a mobilization of the country's Shia militias had taken place. The Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) or Hash'd al-Sha'abi now formed a key element in the war against the Sunni jihadis. Some of the groups in question had emerged during the period of American occupation in Iraq, and were veterans of insurgency against the US. Others, such as the Badr Organization, had a longer pedigree as Iranian proxies.

The Popular Mobilization was evidence of how weak central government had become in Iraq. It was also an example of Iran's peerless abilities in the field of the assembling and mobilizing of proxy political military organizations.

The Iraqi Ministry of the Interior announced the formation of the Popular Mobilization Committee, to be headed by one Falih al-Fayyadh, who (notably) was also National Security Advisor to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, on June 15, 2014.<sup>1</sup>

But this Committee from the outset played a liaison role between the various militias, rather than one of direction and leadership. The militias had their own existing leadership structures. They were not taking orders from Prime Minister Abadi.

Unofficially, as everyone knew, the main organizations involved were proxies of the Iranians and were controlled via the Quds Force of the Revolutionary

Guards.

This was the aspect that particularly interested me about the militias – the process whereby the Iranians were able to turn military power into political, and vice versa, and in so doing to magnify both. Iraq, like Syria, was coming apart at the seams. The militias were feasting over the ruins. And the Assad regime and the Shia militias were on the same side, part of the Iran-led alliance that formed one of the sides in the conflict in Syria and Iraq and, indeed, across the region. So I decided to make contact with the representatives of the militias and see if I could spend some time reporting with them in the frontline areas where they were engaged.

I wasn't overjoyed about going to Iraq again. I disliked the prevailing landscape – the dusty, sandy heat and half-built or crumbling buildings. Syria had a kind of Levantine elegance that seemed always to be trying to get out, even under the most desperate of circumstances. Iraq had none of that. There felt, to me at least, always to be a brutality, even a crudeness. This was true of the Kurdish region, or at least of Erbil (Sulaymaniyah was quite different) as much as further south.

Baghdad was my destination. My intention was to set up shop there, meet with the militia representatives and then, if possible, head out of town with them. There were two main areas of combat involving the Shia militias taking place in the summer of 2015. IS was already on the retreat, though it had yet to lose any of its really important holdings at that stage. The main fronts were outside Baiji, to the north of Tikrit, and in the Sunni heartland of Anbar province. I wanted to reach both.

I flew to Baghdad via London and Amman. The airport at Baghdad was a sign of what was to come. I wasn't ready for the extent to which Baghdad had become a Shia city, nor for its very evident dysfunctionality. The airport atmosphere and the rickety old buses going to the car park were like a time capsule back to the mid-1980s. Noise and chaos everywhere. Imposing but dilapidated sandy-colored buildings.

I tried to imagine what it would have been like there during Saddam's rule. The Iraqis I knew spoke about the old regime's time as one of terror but also of a kind of rigid order that resulted from it. The latter element had clearly disappeared.

At a booth occupied by the army at the main entrance, I glimpsed a large banner on the wall. "Labayek, ya Hussein!" it read. "At your service, o Hussein!" The Hussein in question was the son of Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam, cousin and son in law of Mohammed. He is the chief icon and martyr in the pantheon of the Shia. The poster was a straightforwardly sectarian declaration of

Shia loyalty, placed in a clearly visible position at an army position in front of the country's main airport, where no traveler could miss it.

I was staying in a small "business center" next to the French embassy. Its main selling point was that it benefitted from the security detail the French had placed at both ends of the street. The security provisions consisted of an armored car and iron gates, along with two armed men in uniform on permanent duty.

"If someone sees that you're a foreigner, or hears you speaking English, they can just pull out a gun at you and tell you 'come with us'. And what can you do? So foreigners tend to take these precautions," Omar, my fixer and a native of the city, told me. This I could understand, but an armored car?

"That's the only thing that can stop a suicide bomber in a car. Nothing else can. So, yes, that's crucial too. They even have them outside the best hotels. The bombers like to drive up the stairs and into the foyer and blow themselves up there. An armed man can't do anything about that. But the armored car just drives into the bomber and absorbs the explosion."

Omar was a Sufi Muslim by inclination, and of Sunni background. Small, plump and moustachio'd, he was a gentle fellow with an air of melancholy about him. He had never married and lived at home, where he was nursing his aged father and engaging in a series of complex disputes with other family members. He was also an experienced and skilled fixer, with contacts across the political spectrum and the sectarian divide.

The Hash'd al-Sha'abi consisted of about 70 militias. But some of these were very small and provisional affairs. When the mobilization was announced, anyone credibly claiming to be leading an armed force could receive assistance for it from the Interior Ministry. This, inevitably, had led to a mushrooming of militias with resounding names, some of which were little more than gangs. However, there was a core of authentic organizations around which the Hash'd was gathered. The main militias of these were the Badr Organization, Ktaeb Hizballah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Sarayat al Salam militia of Moqtada al-Sadr. The first three of these were openly pro-Iranian, armed, trained and supplied by Iran. Sadr, meanwhile, maintained a more independent and ambiguous stance.

The real command structure of the PMU was not complex. Two veteran pro-Iranian figures were in control. They answered to Qassem Suleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Suleimani, in turn, reported directly to Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran. The two leaders in question were Hadi al-Ameri of the Badr Organization and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis of Ktaeb Hizballah. Both were pro-Iranian Shia Islamists, with rich histories of judiciously applied political violence behind

them.

Al-Muhandis, whose real name was Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim, was a half-Iranian native of Basra, in southern Iraq. A long-time militant of the Shia Islamist Dawa party, which now ruled Iraq, he had fought on the Iranian side in the Iran-Iraq War. He was wanted by the US for a bombing of the US embassy in Kuwait in 1983. He had fled Iraq during the anti-US insurgency, in which he was deeply involved. He was rumored to have been among the chief smugglers of the explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) which killed and crippled many American and western troops during the Shia insurgency. He was among those who armed and trained the Shia militias at their birth, with the Americans in pursuit. In 2007, a Kuwaiti court sentenced him to death in absentia for the 1983 bombing.

After the US departure, al-Muhandis reappeared in Iraq. The Americans in the Green Zone bit their lips and watched as he became a noted political figure. They had tried to arrest him during the insurgency, but he had always got away. Then, when IS came on the scene, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis completed the circle, returning to military activity. Not against the Americans this time, but against the Sunni jihadis – and this time, for the first time, with the government of Iraq behind him. Al-Muhandis's official position was deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Units. He was perhaps more accurately described as their field commander.

Hadi al-Ameri, the official leader of the PMU, was head of the Badr Organization, largest and most veteran of the pro-Iranian Shia militias in Iraq. Al-Ameri, who had served as Transport Minister in a previous government of Iraq, was also a veteran pro-Iranian operative, famed for his brutal methods of torture. He was the subject of a US federal indictment for his role in a 1996 attack in Saudi Arabia in which 19 US military personnel were killed.

The PMU were keen to promote themselves as a counter-terror force, acting as a barrier to the advance of ISIS. The lines separating the militias from the regular Iraqi military were already not clear. In Diyala province, it was said, the influence of the militias over the state forces ran deep. Al-Ameri there was the effective controller of the police and the army.

Within Baghdad, the militias could not openly carry weaponry or wear uniforms. But their power was not of the type which required such displays. They doubled, after all, as political parties, and were represented in the government. Badr, in its guise as a political party, controlled the Interior Ministry. A less well-known member of its leadership, Mohammed Ghaban, served officially as the minister. Al-Ameri was the real, universally acknowledged power there. The Interior Ministry, in turn, controlled the Iraqi Federal Police. What this meant, in practice, was that the police were controlled

by Hadi al-Ameri, via Mohammed Ghaban.

Al-Ameri and al-Muhandis could be seen beaming or scowling from billboards at intersections across the city. But their power was not only representational. The city was full of Sunni refugees fleeing IS. Was there a force that could protect these people from the unfriendly attentions of the Shia militias, when the militias themselves controlled the Interior Ministry and the Federal Police? Effectively, nothing stood between the Shia militias and the population. As for the methods preferred by the militias, Hadi al-Ameri, according to a leaked US State Department cable, had ordered attacks on around 2,000 Sunnis during the period of the US occupation and favored “using a power drill to pierce the skulls of his adversaries.”<sup>2</sup> These were the leaders of the PMU.

Before heading out to the frontlines, I wanted to spend a day photographing the Shia militia posters and billboards that were ubiquitous in the city. This, however, required receiving press credentials from the Interior Ministry. Omar assured me that this would not be a problem. In practice, things proved less simple. We spent a morning at the ministry, and my application for press credentials was turned down. There was no explanation. In such circumstances, the drill was that you just went and photographed anyway, while trying not to attract the attention of any representatives of the authorities (or the militias).

So Omar, myself and our driver, A., an older Sunni refugee from Anbar province, spent a rather farcical afternoon traversing the city in search of Shia militia billboards and posters. When we found one, A. would begin to sail round the intersection and I would try to snap the picture from the car window while Omar watched for the presence of police. It was less easy than it sounds and the results were not inspired. The important point, though, was the sheer ubiquity of the posters. There were sectarian flags, everywhere, again often bearing the supposed visage of Hussein ibn Ali, the martyr of Shia Islam. These flags gave Baghdad an exotic look, for anyone more familiar with the Sunni Arab world and its strict forbidding of representations of the human face.

Our intention, however, wasn’t to stay in the city. And, after a few days, we received an invitation from Badr to join them in the Baiji area. Once one left the Baghdad city limits there were no restrictions on photographing and reporting.

Omar and I set off for the Badr offices in Baghdad the next day. Badr’s headquarters were situated in a well-guarded, dusty compound amid the half-built structures that were everywhere in Baghdad. There was a poster with a picture of Supreme Leader Khamenei on the iron gate. A young armed militiaman escorted us inside.

Formed in 1982, Badr was one of the oldest and most established of the pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militias. It constituted the military wing of the Supreme

Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and fought on the Iranian side in the Iran–Iraq War. For 20 years, it was based in Iran. Then, after the American invasion in 2003, Badr returned to Iraq. With the American-led coalition's attempt to ban militias, Badr officially split from SCIRI and formed a political party in its own right. In practice, it continued as a clandestine armed force, even maintaining its own secret prison. Badr cooperated with the Americans against the insurgency by Sunni Ba'athist diehards and the emergent Sunni Islamists in the post-2003 period of US occupation. But its agenda remained pro-Iranian. As a political party as well as a militia, it proved adept at maneuvering in the shadowy area between legitimate and illegal activity.

In October 2014, a report by Amnesty International entitled *Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq* fingered Badr for involvement in sectarian killings and torture.<sup>3</sup> Once IS came in, Badr committed itself to the fight against the Sunni jihadis, its natural enemies, and won a number of significant victories at some cost. The movement claimed a membership of 50,000, though some observers thought this figure exaggerated.

A group of Badr officers were sitting around chatting in a dingy office as we came in. We joined them. One of them, a thickly built man with a sheen of dyed black hair and a matching moustache, was cradling a captured ISIS flag, smiling as he spoke. The officer was telling a story about how a Badr militiaman had cocked his weapon at a BBC journalist because he had heard the latter referring to “the Islamic State” with reference to ISIS. The militiaman had said that he would shoot the reporter if he used that expression again.

The story caused hilarity among the Badr men present. They took little notice of us. The conversation continued. After a while, it turned more serious and the men began to discuss the PMU and its future role. The officer holding the ISIS flag warmed to his subject. “In Iran, they have the Artesh (army) and the Revolutionary Guards. So that's exactly how it should be here too. We'll have the Iraqi army, and then also the Hash'd as permanent formations.”

We pulled out of the city a half an hour or so later. Omar, though Sunni, was relaxed and fluent with the militiamen. He had the ability to appear harmless and affable, a useful quality for a Baghdad Sunni in a jeep bristling with Badr members. The fighters themselves were mostly in their early 20s, fit-looking, some of them very dark-skinned, almost Indian-looking men from the Shia south of the country. On the roadblocks outside Baghdad, PMU militiamen, soldiers and federal policemen in their blue uniforms mingled easily together.

We headed toward Baiji. This was the northern-most point that the fighting had reached at that time. The Iraqi army and the militias were pushing ISIS back toward Mosul. Tikrit and Hit had already been liberated. Baiji was next. The

news had reported days earlier that the city was already in the hands of the anti-ISIS forces. This, as it turned out, was not so. There was still fighting going on in Baiji and we couldn't enter far into the city.

Unable to enter the city, we cruised around for a while with the local commander, a former artillery officer in Saddam's army. Then, as we were driving south of the city, outside of a town called Marja'a, we stumbled upon a briefing being given at a small facility belonging to the army. There were soldiers and militiamen milling about in a dusty courtyard.

Omar and I managed to make our way through the crowd and peer into the room where the briefing was taking place. There, in a large room and in front of about 40 officers, some of them with senior rank, was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, one of the two top officials of the Hash'd noted earlier.

There was a large map projected on the wall and al-Muhandis was talking about the campaign. A room full of uniforms. Some with the insignia and emblems of the Iraqi army, some in the blue of the Federal Police, some the drab camouflage and mix-and-match of the militias. No-one seemed to mind us being there. Al-Muhandis was wearing the beige military-style fatigues without any badges of identification which were his trademark. He had a relaxed bearing to him and smiled frequently.

There was a strange edge to him though, immediately apparent, which would have caused an observer to feel the need for caution, even if he hadn't known who he was in proximity to. It was in the slow confidence with which al-Muhandis moved and the wolfish quality of his ready smile.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was very clearly the senior figure in the room. Among the senior officers present was Major-General Juma'a Enad, operations commander of the Iraqi security forces (army and Federal Police) in embattled Salah al-Din province. So not only were army officers mixing freely with militia commanders, but – in this case, at least – it also appeared to be the latter who had the senior status. I was determined to speak to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis if it was possible.

He showed no sign of impatience and responded with an indulgent shrug to our requests for an interview. He was candid in his responses.

On the issue of who was leading the fight against Islamic State: "The Hash'd [Popular Mobilization] is playing the main role currently... and it is now planning and leading large operations – in full cooperation with the army. The army has weapons and capabilities we don't have. The Federal Police are also playing a role. But we have planning and management, and we have the enthusiastic fighters."

He dismissed with a smile the efforts of the Americans and their allies. "They

couldn't liberate Mosul or Baiji. Instead, Ramadi has fallen." Regarding the sources of support of the militias, al-Muhandis was also entirely candid. They relied, he said, on "capacity and capabilities provided by the Islamic Republic of Iran."

The conversation with the PMU leader continued for about 15 minutes.

We managed to speak also to Major-General Juma'a Enad afterwards. The scene was chaotic in the usual Iraqi way as soldiers and militiamen milled about, eating an Iraqi military lunch (rice and beans in tomato sauce) from plastic plates. The Mid-Eastern practice of removing shoes before entering a room was being partially observed here, too, which meant that a pile of shoes was strewn around the entrance to the meeting room. Enad was as candid as al-Muhandis, regarding the relative strengths and limitations of his own Iraqi army and of the Shia militias: he acknowledged that "the majority of forces that are clearing the land [of IS] are Hash'd."

Accounting for the Hash'd's performance, he pointed to two areas – the superior training and equipment of the Shia fighters and their greater motivation.

Regarding the former, Enad said that "American support now is insufficient. The US has vast forces. But they are carrying out four or five raids per day. The Iranians, by contrast, give the Hash'd unlimited support, weapons, ammunition, advisors. So we are now seeing the results."

It wasn't only a question of external support, however. "The Hash'd has a strong point – the spiritual side, the jihad Fatwa. Like ISIS," he said. "In the army, by contrast, there was mis-planning after the fall of the regime in 2003, and corruption. There was a failure to make use of the Americans when they were here to train the forces, so they couldn't build up fighters with sufficient will."

It was a line I would hear repeated again and again in Iraq – both from army officers and from the militiamen themselves. The militias as a coherent force with ideology, commitment and rival backers, and the army, by contrast, as a lost, corrupted and rotten body.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and the others moved outside to the courtyard. An excited throng of militiamen and soldiers gathered around the Ktaeb Hizballah leader. A prevailing sense with the militiamen was of a kind of happiness. They were enjoying all this. Smiles and laughter all around. And al-Muhandis engaging in the kind of good-humored displays of command and affection that characterize military units when they are working the way they're supposed to.

We had visited an Iraqi army artillery unit outside Baiji earlier in the day, and I had been struck by the extent to which this army still looked the way I remembered from film footage of Saddam Hussein's military. A certain

incongruous rigid discipline, and within that a general atmosphere of laxity, slowness and flyblown indifference. The soldiers had gathered in front of one of their howitzers and begun a chant about their own prowess, waving their rifles in the air. It had the opposite of the intended effect. The growing sense was that the militias were the ones who mattered.

Back in Baghdad, I wanted to get a different look at the PMU – namely, from the point of view of its enemies. That the militias were relatively effective military units on the frontlines against ISIS was not in dispute. They played two other roles – one was as political parties. The other, most murky and interesting role was the area in which the two combined.

The militias did not maintain a hermetic seal between their political and military role. Rather, the possession of a coercive capacity was also a part of their political modus operandi. A., our driver, was a Sunni from Anbar province. He told a story of a relative of his who had fled the advance of ISIS and reached Baghdad with his wife and children. He had settled in a Shia area with his family. After a while, they had received a knock on the door from a young man who announced himself as a member of the Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia. Ahl al-Haq were notorious as one of the most criminalized of the militias. The young man had welcomed the family to the neighborhood, and had informed the head of the household that the price for their being permitted to live safely in it was \$20,000, which they should arrange to pay within a week.

And so on. Asaib Ahl al-Haq had ignored all our attempts to contact them, though they were a legal movement, even with a couple of seats in parliament. But the militias' use of strong arm tactics in the cities wasn't limited to extorting refugees from ISIS. Rather, it extended to intimidating and neutralizing their political opponents. Remember, the police force reported to a ministry controlled by the Badr Organization. People associated in various ways with the "old regime" – whether that meant the Saddam government or the US occupation authorities that destroyed and replaced it, were finding this out.

In another of the luxury hotels protected by armored vehicles that characterized the upper reaches of the city, Omar and I met with Hikmat Guwood, leader of the Albu Nimr Beduin tribe of Anbar province. Guwood was pleasant and urbane, nothing like the stereotyped image of a Beduin chief. Speaking fluent English, he detailed an ongoing campaign of harassment he and his family had suffered at the hands of Ktaeb Hizballah. A campaign against which he had no legal redress. Members of the militia, he said, had come to his home and personally physically assaulted him twice. On the second occasion, which took place a few days before our meeting, their accompanying message had been plain. It was that the third visit would result in Guwood's death, and

that he should leave Baghdad.

The reason – his erstwhile involvement and that of his tribe in the “Anbar Awakening” – the pro-US mobilization against Sunni insurgency in the province in the 2006–7 period.

Guwood was still close to the Americans, and he wanted to use them as a counterweight to what he perceived as the growing ascendancy of Iran and its Shia partners in Iraq.

“You’re lucky you got to see me today, because I’m leaving,” he told me. “My family are already in Erbil. I’m joining them there in a few days. It’s not possible to stay here anymore.”

The accounts of Guwood and A. are not unique, or unusual. I heard many, many more like them and human rights organizations have also sought to document the militias’ actions against Iraqi Sunnis. An Amnesty International report published in October 2014 listed a detailed litany of abuses committed by the militias against Sunni civilians in Baghdad, Kirkuk and Samara.<sup>4</sup> The modus operandi of the militias is not really open to serious question.

Guwood located the core of the issue as beyond the militias themselves. “The government doesn’t trust Sunnis. They only trust the militias, who are armed by Iran.” That is, the problem was that the militias were hooked into the system, and the system itself facilitated their sectarian instincts and their violent activities. The solution, as far as Hikmat Guwood was concerned, was for the Sunnis to develop their own counter-balancing centers of power. The goal would be the emergence of a federalized Iraq, with a strong, autonomous region for the country’s Sunni Arabs. In the immediate future, however, what he wanted was the provision of greater help by the Americans to Sunni tribal forces in Anbar, and the exclusion of the Shia militias from the campaign against ISIS. And to get his family and himself a safe distance from Ktaeb Hizballah.

The Shia militia ascendancy in Baghdad was a remarkable historical turnaround. The Sunni Arabs had dominated Baghdad throughout its history, as far back as the Abbasid dynasty which centered on it. Sunni domination had long defied demographic logic through the determined use of force. Once that coercive capability was removed, in 2003, by western military power, the upending of the situation was near inevitable.

The Shia were now dominant. And, predictably, the Iranians, with their sponsored militias, were moving in.

But something else was going on too. The Ba’ath party had succeeded in imposing its will to a point where it could not be seriously challenged from within. And once Arab nationalism and socialism lost their sheen, it embraced an openly Sunni sectarianism in its last years in a more or less undisguised way.

The Shia/Iranian ascendancy, however, while no less brutal in its way, was weaker. Guwood had been attacked and beaten. But the Albu Nimr and the other Anbar tribes were not defeated. And he was moving to Erbil, to where the writ of Ktaeb Hizballah did not extend.

It was not only tribal chiefs like Guwood who felt and resented the growing power of the militias. Figures close to the old regime and army, and even to the new army created by the Americans after the 2003 invasion, were equally nervous about the ominous rise in the militias' and Iran's military and political power.

We met with Hamed al-Mutlaq, a former general in Saddam's army, in his home in the city. It had the usual aspects associated with Iraqis of means and closeness to power: iron gates, armed young men in civilian clothes deployed around the entrance. But there was also a lawn, kept watered against the searing heat of a Baghdad summer and incongruous amid the dust and noise of Baghdad.

Al-Mutlaq had served as a brigadier-general in the old Iraqi army. He was now an MP with the Iraqiyya list, a non-sectarian movement. The picture he painted of the growth in militia power was stark. As were the reasons he gave for it. "The Iranians don't want Iraq to have an army," he told us. "Instead, they want to make the army weak, and to strengthen the Hash'd, which is connected to Iran." This was a point made in a slightly different way by the Badr officer who we met earlier. Of course, he had been welcoming it, while for Mutlaq it was a disaster.

It was the time of the height of the war against IS. But for Mutlaq, as for many other Iraqi Sunnis famous and obscure, the Sunni jihadis did not represent the greatest danger. Rather, the Shia militias were the principal threat. As Hamed put it: "The militias are no different from the Islamic State. The Iranian intervention is no different from the Islamic State. The wealth of the country is being looted by the Islamic State, and the militias, and Iran."

Later, in another context, he would speak about the militias in yet harsher terms, saying that "They have committed crimes like killing, stealing, displacing people from their homes... Meanwhile, the government has not been able to have any sort of pressure on the militias, to stop them from committing more crimes.... I don't think the government is satisfied with them, or supports them, but they have grown stronger over time, they have followers, money and are empowered and supported by third parties."<sup>5</sup>

There were two aspects to all this, of course. The first was the rise of the militias as both political and military forces, which was undeniable and obvious, and the support of Iran for this. The second, more obscure issue was the extent to which the government of Iraq supported this process and saw the hollowing out

of the army as a positive development.

The Sunni opponents of the ruling Dawa party had an obvious interest in obscuring the dividing line between the militias and the government, in order to delegitimize the latter. The strongest evidence of the rot in the army, nevertheless, was its precipitate collapse in the summer of 2014 in the face of the advance of Islamic State. This derived from a culture of corruption and absenteeism, and from the sectarian makeup of the army, with Shia soldiers uninterested in defending areas of majority Sunni population.

Omar informed me that a serving general of the Iraqi security forces was willing to meet with us. I hoped this meeting might cast more light on the latter issue. The man would not allow me to use his name, but I could quote him. We were to meet at a restaurant of his choice. I agreed to the conditions and we made our way to the appointed place (a rather upscale fish restaurant in a quiet part of town). The general and his driver arrived in a sleek black armor-plated vehicle, which waited outside as we ate. The general was slim, bald-headed and dark-skinned, with a black moustache. He looked fit and had an easy, relaxed calm in his movements. He ordered a choice piece of fish and a cold lemon juice and we began to talk.

In the course of the next two hours he regaled us with a series of allegations against the government he served, which boiled down to the claim that the Dawa party government was engaged, at the direction of Iran, into turning Iraq into a vassal state. The weakening and hollowing out of the army and the parallel strengthening of the Shia militias was a central part of this strategy.

On the much reported phenomenon of “ghost soldiers”, whereby many of the personnel listed as serving in army units didn’t exist, the general was succinct in his disgust as he explained: “Let’s say you’re running an infantry company and, of course, you’re underpaid and short of money, and you see that above you everything is corrupt. So you have a cousin or an uncle who’s working as a taxi driver. So you go to him and tell him ‘let me sign you on as a soldier with my company. You don’t have to do anything, we’ll get a salary for you, and we can split the salary between us.’” This was a system from which everyone gained. Until a real enemy appeared on the horizon, of course. By which time it was too late to do much about it. As had happened in summer 2014.

But the general, speaking in an even and matter of fact way, claimed that the rot extended much further. Senior command positions in the army, he said, were available for purchase and went to enrich the army’s political commanders. He maintained, for example, that 200,000 dollars would buy you the command of a battalion. Former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was a particular bogeyman, and the general dismissed the notion that Maliki’s departure from the prime

ministership had ended his political influence. Maliki and others, he said, had an interest in this situation because it ensured that the army would provide them with money for other purposes, while remaining a weakened instrument.

All of this was hard to verify, of course. But it went together with similar statements by Mutlaq and by the Badr officers we had spoken to.

In the evenings, after our meetings and interviews, I would sit in a semi-comatose state back at the French business center. It was a congenial sort of place. The owner was a former French military officer. He had engaged a tremendous chef, a local man, who turned out delicious meals each evening. There were a team of British and German contractors staying at the center. They were responsible for a project replacing old drinks machines and putting in new ones across the city. They were a pleasant and not overly taxing bunch and, in the evenings, we'd watch movies, drink chilled Tuborg beer and smoke in the communal room.

It was on one such evening that I learned of the death of Keith Broomfield. Amid the Tuborg bottles and the ashtrays and the banter of the contractors. The stark, blank fact of his killing. I left the communal area on receiving the news. I spent the evening sitting in my tiny room, with the air conditioning turned full blast producing an arctic cold, composing imaginary eulogies for him and remembering the days we had spent together.

Baghdad in the burning heat of July seemed a long way from freezing, muddy Suruc on the Syrian–Turkish border. Each adjoined a separate edge of the Islamic State's domain. The starkly different nature of the forces facing the jihadis on either side – the secular Kurds of the YPG to the west and the Shia Islamists who I was currently covering to the east, was vital to understanding. Nothing was simple. Keith, however, had seen injustice and had come to help end it. His was a story of a different kind.

I had most of what I needed by this time for the stories I wanted to write. The picture was clear. There was a growing Shia ascendancy which pervaded Iraqi politics. This was impacting on the Iraqi armed forces. The Shia militias were the central instrument in this, and they had been massively strengthened by the arrival of IS and the failure of the army to deal with them in the summer of 2014. The militias, supported by Iran, offered an object lesson in the building and wielding of power in the collapsed spaces of the Middle East. I had met and traveled with militiamen themselves, interviewed their most influential leader and spoken both to their Sunni rivals and to their supposed counterparts in the army.

I had not managed to connect to militias other than Badr, and had also not really witnessed the militias in frontline action. But I was running out of time in

Baghdad anyway, and my flight back to London was due in a couple of days, so I wasn't overly concerned. Also, the Agence France-Presse (AFP) were organizing a party for the journalists living in the French compound and I thought this would be good way to wind down before heading back to London.

Omar, however, had been in touch with Ktaeb Hizballah. The latter had a rudimentary organization dealing with the foreign media. At that time, they didn't have a great deal of takers. Many of the journalists stationed in Baghdad were wary of the militias, aware of their capacity for violence and intimidation and the recent involvement of many of them in the Shia insurgency against the US and its allies. Jaafar al-Husseini, their capable and articulate spokesman, did not have the easiest of tasks, and we'd thought he'd be happy for any attention shown him by a visiting foreign journalist.

But it hadn't been straightforward. Omar had contacted a variety of militias before I had arrived. Badr and Ktaeb Hizballah had returned the calls. Meeting Badr had been pretty straightforward. Ktaeb had failed to get back to us a second time.

Then, a couple of days before I was due to leave, we got a call from Husseini, telling us that we were cleared to accompany the Ktaeb to the Ramadi front, where we could visit frontline positions and interview commanders. Ramadi city at that time was in the hands of IS and the Shia militias had not yet begun to be sidelined from central involvement in western coalition supported missions.

Ktaeb Hizballah were a little different from Badr. Less establishment, younger. I wasn't enthralled at the notion of spending time under their protection hundreds of kilometers into the desert of western Anbar province. But there was no question of refusing their offer.

So I didn't attend the journalists' party that night, but instead lay in my bed and listened to it for a while. We had to meet our Ktaeb Hizballah contacts by the highway early the next morning. It was another roasting Baghdad day. We stood by the road with no chance for shade as we waited for them to come. Omar entertained me with stories of the complex and labyrinthine family disputes in which he was involved, of the Sufi Islam which was a central part of his life and of his attempts to lose weight.

The minutes passed. They were late, of course. The highway and the merciless sun in the morning. I began to think they weren't coming. Omar tried to call his contact, who didn't reply. The usual weirdness. Then, there they were. Pulling up in an old white van. Brown-haired Hussein in the driving seat, smiling and relaxed, and a much younger fighter of the Ktaeb next to him. With the usual instant judgments that were part of the war, I decided that they were all right and we scrambled in. The younger man was blasting songs of the Shia militias via

his phone as we made our way out of the city. Baghdad, huge and rundown, behind us as we headed west toward Anbar province.

The Ktaeb Hizballah men stopped the van a few miles past the city limits and changed into their uniforms. Both produced Kalashnikovs. We were heading toward a town called Huseybah al-Sharqiya, about 10 kilometers east of Ramadi city. This was the area of the frontline that the Ktaeb were holding against IS at that time.

Ktaeb Hizballah had been formed in direct response to the American invasion, and played a prominent role in the Shia insurgency against the US-led coalition. It was designated as a terrorist organization by the US State Department in July 2009. In those years, the group became known for its IED, mortar and sniper operations against US forces. It was known to cooperate closely with the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. Much of the Ktaeb's structure remained mysterious. It saw itself as a kind of "special operations" group for the Shia militias.

Ktaeb Hizballah, for obvious reasons, was regarded with particular suspicion by the Americans. Yet it was an integral part of the government-supported PMU and, in the context of the fighting against IS, it had benefitted at times from close air support from the US Air Force. The wars in Syria and Iraq produced many surreal developments and unlikely partnerships. This was one of the strangest of all.

We arrived in Huseybah in the early afternoon. The population of the town had nearly all departed and everything was quiet. The Ktaeb Hizballah fighters greeted us with the enthusiasm common to all bored frontline fighters everywhere at the arrival of newcomers. "From Iran?" they asked me, with familiar smiles. "No, England," I replied, which led to a slight cooling of the welcome.

"We'll make a patrol around the alleyways and you can photograph us," one of them suggested, "but only from the back. Don't film our faces." Pictures of Shia militiamens' backs would be of limited commercial value, but I figured this might be a good way to break the ice and establish that I was a harmless, well-intentioned figure.

So, rather absurdly, for about half an hour I followed the young Shia militiamen around as they conducted a mock-patrol of streets under their control, and I took pictures of their backs. It seemed to have the desired effect. By the time we returned to the house that they were using for a headquarters we were all firm friends.

They were an impressive-looking bunch. More so than Badr. All the fighters looked under 30, the commanders in good shape. All in matching uniforms and

webbing. At the house, a young man with a badly burned face introduced himself to me and told me that he had been wounded by an IED at the entrance to a building as the force cleared an area a month ago. After two weeks in hospital he had insisted on returning, he said.

“ISIS is a terrorist organization. It has no religion,” he told me. Here was a statement reminiscent of the Badr officer’s recounting of the militiamen who had cocked his weapon at a BBC journalist for referring to the “Islamic State”. The young Ktaeb Hizballah man continued, “It is supported by the US, Saudi Arabia, Israel and others. We are trying to fight them, but the Americans come and bomb us and that allows ISIS to run away.”

What proof was there for this claim, I asked. A chorus of fighters began to offer what they maintained were their own experiences. “I’ve seen it with my own eyes,” said the burned man, “they parachute aid, weapons and clothing and they drop it to ISIS.”

Later, this view of events was confirmed to me in a conversation with the regional commander of Ktaeb Hizballah, who came by the position and with whom we had lunch. He declined to give me his name. A man in his mid- to late 30s, fit and serious-looking. Yes, he said, the Americans were offering active aid to IS: “America is not fighting ISIS. America is helping ISIS. In Tikrit, we had ISIS surrounded. But the US air intervention prevented us from advancing. The US put pressure on the Iraqi government to slow the advance. They put a spoke in the wheels.”

And, by contrast, “if it weren’t for Iran’s intervention, ISIS would have made it to the east and the south. Iran is the only one that was faithful.” The commander had joined Ktaeb Hizballah when the US had been in Iraq. His intention had been to “fight the American occupation,” and he had done so. As for relations with the broader pro-Iranian network of organizations in the region, he was unambiguous and felt no need to duck the question. Just as al-Muhandis at Mizra’a had been equally clear: “All the Islamic resistance movements come from one womb. So yes, without entering into details, we have a relationship with all these movements.”

Our conversation was conducted as we ate lamb and rice from plastic plates, and with the crackle of electronic communications all around us. “Listen,” the commander said, “that’s the ISIS communications you can hear. We monitor their frequencies so we can tell when they’re moving about or planning something.” What were the main problems here? “The usual – snipers during the daytime, mortars at night, sometimes exchanges of fire.” Huseybah was a built-up area and the result was that the two sides were holed up very close to each other, in adjoining structures. Sometimes only 50 or 60 yards from one another.

“You can go take a look at them if you want,” said the commander and he called one of the fighters to take me down to the furthest point forward.

We began to make our way into the warren of houses and alleyways that constituted the frontline. It was rare to be given such access. The Ktaeb allowed it because they had little experience of dealing with media.

We passed through a series of houses, where young militiamen were on duty. They were surprised, suspicious, then amused to see us. The houses were dark inside, with mattresses, webbing and equipment strewn around – the appearance of all frontline positions everywhere and probably at all times.

Finally, we reached the side wall of a house, facing across a flat, dusty area, with a half-built wall about 60 meters away. This, it seemed, was the furthest point forward. ISIS was behind the wall. There was a small hole cut in it for observation purposes. “If you want to take a picture of them,” the young fighter told me, “put the camera up by that hole and click it. But don’t stand behind the camera, put it away from your head. If they see a lens there they’ll shoot at it.”

So I placed the camera up against the hole and clicked a couple of times. After a moment, the young fighter nodded with his chin toward the hole and said “If you look now, you can see them.” I wasn’t sure if he was serious and couldn’t resist placing my eye up against the hole. And yes, there they were! Tiny figures, all clad in a greyish black, moving rapidly across an area where the wall had been destroyed. I watched them for a bit, transfixed. Then the young militiaman touched my shoulder, “We should be getting back. Not sensible to stay here for too long.” So we made our way back through the various positions and to the headquarters.

It seemed, however, that the Shia militiamen had now taken a liking to me and decided that I should have a further treat. As we were drinking tea in the HQ, a sudden sound of automatic gunfire was heard. We rushed outside and sprinted toward one of the forward positions. There, two militiamen were firing bursts of automatic fire at the IS lines from behind a defensive position made of rubble. One of the militiamen was under a sun umbrella proclaiming the appeal of Pepsi Cola. The other was crouched next to a red rug. Answering fire was coming from the positions a few tens of yards away. But it was clear to me after a few moments that no attack was imminent. The Ktaeb had decided to liven things up by firing a few bursts in the direction of their Sunni enemies. IS were obliging to show that they weren’t asleep. And that was it. After a while the shooting stopped and the fighters returned in high spirits to their positions. No-one on either side had been hurt and a fair amount of ammunition wasted.

We were preparing to head out when one of the commanders, a lean, bearded man who everyone called “Mullah”, suggested that we head up to the roof of one

of the houses at the frontline to take a look around. “You can see better from up there,” he said, “but there is a danger of snipers.” Omar looked unenthusiastic. I thought about it, and looked at the faces of the men. If I get killed here, it occurred to me, my true identity and connections will become apparent, and they’ll bury me somewhere in the dirt in western Anbar. It didn’t seem like a reasonable risk. I shrugged and declined the offer. Mullah was expressionless but I thought he was a bit disappointed. It occurred to me that I was vulnerable to the personal assessment of a Ktaeb Hizballah man whose nickname related apparently to the strictness of his Shia Islamist commitment and observance. I told myself to grow up.

A red-eyed, bearded fighter summed things up for me as we prepared to leave: “We don’t rely on America, we rely on God and the family of Muhammad. And Ktaib Hizballah. We rely on ourselves. And if anyone tries to break in here we’ll cut off his hands.”

On the way back to Baghdad, Hussein began to ask me a series of questions which made me, for the first time, a little nervous. “Where are you staying?” he began. “We’ll take you back to your hotel.” Omar tried to demur, “You can just drop us where you picked us up, it’s no problem.” But our friendly Ktaeb host was insistent. And then “So when is your flight tomorrow? Are you flying back to London via Istanbul?” “No, via Amman,” I replied.

I was aware that I had become slightly tense, and I was aware also that the Ktaeb men had sensed this too. This odd, unstated fact hung in the air for a while, waiting for something else to be attached to it. Nothing suggested itself, however. Instead, a silence came down on the car and we sat, occasionally glancing at one another. I wasn’t sure if this was a deliberate move on their part or just a dynamic that had crept in. I knew from experience that if you want to convincingly convey a false impression you have to first of all convince yourself. This was true for me, at least. And generally I was quite good at that, and hence had got away with a fair amount in this regard. But for some reason on the way back from Anbar with Ktaeb Hizballah my nerve failed me slightly.

Nothing surfaced. They dropped us at the entrance to the French business center, in subdued spirits. I was thinking that they now had two pieces of information – where I was staying and when I would be leaving for the airport the next day. I paid Omar and A. and they departed, arranging to meet me the following morning to take me to the airport. I settled in for an evening of mild worry, running possibilities through my head. If the Ktaeb Hizballah men had discovered my Israeli connections, they might be planning something for me. One way to carry this out might be to follow the car to the airport, perhaps running us off the road at a certain point. There was nothing to do but wait. So I

waited.

In the morning, A. was by the iron entrance to the compound as we had agreed. Omar hadn't come. I fretted in the back seat of the car as we headed out to the airport.

But all was well. My visions of Ktaeb Hizballah kidnappers an illusion. Hussein and his friend had probably been bemused as to why I had gone from friendly and gregarious to sullen and non-communicative in an instant. We reached the teeming airport safely. There were three separate, clumsy security checks to get through. IS interest in air travel out of Baghdad was presumably at a premium. And then there was a Royal Jordanian flight to Amman, and a short wait in recovered normality, and then a second flight to Heathrow. I was drinking in a pub in north London by the late afternoon, thinking about the forward position facing IS in Huseybah al-Sharqiyyeh and the Sunni jihadis in their grey-black uniforms scurrying like ants past the exposed point.

As for the militias, they were an example of a virulent strain spreading across the region. They translated political power into military strength and reversed the process back again, operating deftly in the shadows, in the murky area between legal authority and murderous criminality. This was a game which the Iranians and their clients in both Iraq and Syria played in a far more subtle and feline and effective way than their clumsy Sunni opponents. And they were winning.

## Notes

- 1 Zana K. Gulmohamad, "A Short Profile of Iraq's Shia Militias," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 13, Issue 8, 2015. <https://jamestown.org>
- 2 "Election Law Crisis Fosters Sunni-Shia Cooperation," US Embassy to Iraq document published by Wikileaks, originally published December 12, 2009. <https://wikileaks.org>
- 3 *Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq*, Amnesty International, October 14, 2014. <https://www.amnesty.org>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 F. Brinley Bruton, "Anti-ISIS Fighters Terrorize, Drive Out Iraqi Civilians: Witnesses," *NBC News*, March 22, 2015. <http://www.nbcnews.com>

# 9

## THE GHOSTS OF SHORJA MARKET

[W]hat's past is prologue.

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 2, Scene 1

In Jerusalem, I had mentioned my plans to travel to Baghdad to a number of friends. The ethnic and sectarian fragmentation that took place in the Levant and Mesopotamia in the second decade of the twenty-first century was not, of course, the first instance of inter-communal warfare in that region. The Lebanese Civil War of 1975–90 resembled it in miniature. Another earlier episode, similar in many ways to what would come later, was the fight between Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine in the 1947–8 period, which then turned into a war between the nascent Jewish state of Israel and the surrounding Arab states. This war resulted in large-scale displacement of Arab population from the area of Israel, and of Jewish populations from the Arab states which had sought to crush Jewish sovereignty.

Iraq was one of these. Life for Jews slowly became impossible in Iraq and Syria under the nationalist movements that emerged in the 1920s and 30s and which then took power in the 50s and 60s. The long story of Iraqi Jewry, one of the most ancient and illustrious Jewish communities in the world, came to an end in 1951–2. Anti-Jewish laws were enacted in the 1930s. Violence grew and exploded in the “Farhud” massacres in 1941. Almost the entire community was airlifted or smuggled out of the country from 1949–51; Operation Ezra and Nehemiah brought around 130,000 Iraqi Jews to Israel from May 1951 and early 1952.<sup>1</sup>

The result was that the historic Jewish communities of Baghdad, along with those of Aleppo, Damascus, Qamishli and other areas, ceased to exist.

This meant that there was a curious absence – a kind of silent, ghostly partner – in the raging ethno-sectarian warfare of the early twenty-first century. One of the historic communities of the area in question was not there. Only the shell of its past could be found. And even that buried under several layers of dust.

For Israelis descended from the Jewish refugees of Iraq and Syria, the cities of their parents' and grandparents' birth have a kind of talismanic quality, a semi-mythic status. They are unreachable, closed for anyone possessing only an Israeli passport. And, of course, the people who themselves left after 1948 have never been able to return for a visit.

So in Jerusalem I informed my friends of my plans, and asked if there were any neighborhoods where I should visit. One of my friends' fathers, who had left Baghdad as a young man in 1951, suggested I might go and take a look at the Taht al-Takiya section of the city, where he had grown up and which had once formed the vibrant center of Jewish life there.

So I planned to do this if there was some quiet time in the course of the visit. Taht al-Takiya was located inside the Shorja Market area of the city. Shorja was one of the oldest parts of Baghdad. A market had existed in the area since the Abbasid period in the eighth century. For a time, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Jews had dominated trade there. All of that was long gone, of course. Along with the Jews themselves, who had once constituted around a third of Baghdad's population. There were 90,000 Jews in the city in 1949, on the eve of the community's eclipse. In 2013, the Jewish population of the city was estimated to consist of eight people.<sup>2</sup>

The opportunity came one stifling afternoon. Omar and I had been at the Interior Ministry trying to secure me a permit to photograph in the city. After failing to achieve this, we had returned to take shelter from the summer heat at the French business center. As we sat drinking tea and smoking in the darkened front room of the center, it occurred to me this might be an opportune time to raise the subject of the Shorja Market. I had noted the issue as a possibility earlier. Omar had been non-committal. Now I suggested it again.

“If we've nothing else to do this afternoon, why don't we try to head down to Taht al-Takiya?”

Omar informed me that the market would already have closed for the day and that therefore there would be nothing to see. I persisted, suggesting that for my purposes empty streets might do just as well. I was interested in buildings and the look of the area. Omar spoke to the driver, A., in rapid Baghdad Arabic that I did not understand. Then he turned back to me and pronounced his verdict. “Old Baghdad isn't really safe anymore. We won't be able to walk around. After the Jews were kicked out in the 1950s, a load of poor Shia moved in and they have

been running it ever since. So probably better to leave it.”

I might have been inclined to accept this. But then I remembered that I was paying these men for a full day’s work. I didn’t feel sufficiently magnanimous to have them while away the afternoon at my expense. So I insisted. We bargained.

I tried to ascertain what exactly the danger was. But, like much else in Baghdad, it wasn’t clear – just a general sense of foreboding, and maybe justified paranoia, of a kind that was pervasive in the city. Baghdad was tense and febrile. Roadblocks everywhere. Muscular, armed men and light armored vehicles outside the hotels. Logos and pictures of armed Shia irregulars on every street corner. ISIS was just 60 kilometers away in the summer of 2015, its black-clad fighters waiting behind their positions, amid the summer heat and the collapsed buildings.

So I understood Omar’s reluctance. A., who was a recent refugee from Anbar, was no longer young and was tired, too, and clearly had no special desire to head out into the 40 degree heat of the afternoon – still less if the destination was a poverty-stricken Shia section of the city. Yet I found myself unwilling to concede the point and, finally, Omar, with a gesture of resignation, agreed. “Taht el Takia? Well, all right. we’ll go there and see what’s there. But if I say it isn’t safe, we don’t even leave the car. And anyway, you can get out to take your pictures and we’ll stay inside, OK?”

We set off back into the heat of the afternoon and began the drive to old Baghdad. After a while, we reached al-Rasheed Street, one of the venerable streets of the city, and began the search for the neighborhood. The market and area surrounding it were ramshackle and neglected, looking like they’d last been renovated sometime in the 1970s.

Unfortunately, however, we couldn’t find the neighborhood. Omar began to ask passers-by about Taht el Takia. Everyone seemed to have heard of it, but no-one quite knew where it was. “The problem is,” Omar said, “that most of the people here belong to families that came in from the countryside when Baghdad expanded in the 1960s so they don’t really know all the names of these old neighborhoods.”

Finally, from al-Rasheed Street, we reached a warren of small alleyways and Omar declared that this, as far as he could ascertain, was Taht al-Takiya. The market had closed for the day; it was late afternoon and I made to enter the alley. I had heard that the imprint left by the mezuzas on some houses in Taht al-Takiya could still be discerned and I wanted to see if this was so.

The alleyways were full of garbage from the day’s trading at the market. There was no-one about. I began to make my way further in. Omar, with a suffering look on his face but evidently not prepared to leave the idiot westerner

by himself, followed me.

For a while we wandered around the warren of ramshackle houses. I tried in my mind to invoke something of the memory of the places I'd read about that were once there. The Jewish Institute for the Blind, the shops of Yehezkel Abu al-Anba and Fattal, the Laura Kadoorie Alliance Girls' School. But no foothold of memory of any of that was discernible. Even the legend of the faint imprint left by the mezuzas turned out to have little merit. Not on any of the houses I saw, as Omar and I burrowed around the darkened alleys. And after all, it occurred to me, 60 years would surely be enough time for the wood beneath the mezuzas to turn dark again, exposed to the sun. The old synagogues, where they had existed, were demolished, or perhaps boarded up and unrecognizable. Not even a single word or phrase to commemorate that community, which had lived in Baghdad since antiquity, since the Babylonian exile.

This, it occurred to me, was what really happens when a people is blotted out and removed. Quite different to the consolatory phraseology of history books and tourism ministries. Nothing remains – in the houses, in the air, in the doorways – to suggest that they were ever there at all.

After a while, a young man appeared at the end of one of the alleyways and stared at us, saying nothing. I recalled Omar's advice that in Baghdad anyone could simply point a gun at you and tell you to come with him, and then what? This had evidently occurred to him too and he said quickly, "OK, is this enough?" I supposed that it was. There was nothing to see here other than a very poor Shia neighborhood of old Baghdad. Anything else that might have been was no more.

So we made our way out of the area, back toward our car. We ran into a representative of authority on the way. A plump Iraqi security man of some type, wearing tatty army fatigues and a maroon beret, approached us and loudly demanded an explanation as to our presence.

It was not clear to me precisely what force he belonged to. Maroon berets in armed forces usually denote a certain elite status for the wearer. In Iraq, however, this did not apply. That was because more or less everybody seemed to be wearing them. I assumed that since their status-content was generally known, when the new Iraqi security forces were created, everyone wanted to have red berets. This, in turn, had removed any elite indicators the headgear might once have possessed. This was no elite commando.

Omar addressed the man, nevertheless, as if he was a legitimate representative of authority. I decided to follow suit. "No pictures," the security man said, pointing at my camera. "No pictures." We assured him that we had not, in fact, been taking pictures. This seemed to satisfy him. He was looking for a ritual

gesture of deference and, having achieved this, became friendly and talkative.

I told him I had come to look at the area for the father of a friend of mine who had left in 1951 and hadn't seen it since. "Oh, a Jew, yes?" he said. I decided to answer in the affirmative, feeling vaguely that to have denied this would have been a sort of betrayal. "From Israel?" he persisted. This was going too far, and I replied that I had arrived from England.

The man was amused by this and, with a show of magnanimity, he said we could now be permitted to photograph the adjacent mosque and the outside areas, but that he didn't recommend going too far into the warren of alleyways, since it was getting dark.

"Anyone could see that you're a foreigner and just produce a weapon and say 'Come with us,'" he began. This was evidently a generally accepted representation of danger in Baghdad. Yes, I agreed, glancing at Omar. I was acutely aware of this risk. He grinned broadly. "I don't even go in there myself after dark." Then he produced some bottled water, which he gave us by way of a consolation prize.

Under the maroon-bereted man's supervision, we then photographed the Shia mosque that is now situated at the entrance to the Shorja Market, and the inevitable black flag bearing the visage of Hussein ibn Ali that was placed next to the guard post.

After a cursory few minutes, Omar eyed me again and I knew he wanted to go before it got dark. Our new friend watched us as we parted, an indulgent smile on his face. "By the way," he said as we got in the car, "ask your friend's dad if he can get me asylum in Israel."

Later, back in Jerusalem, I sent my friend's Iraqi father the pictures we'd taken of al-Rasheed Street, the Shorja Market and Taht al-Takiya. For some obscure reason, I felt vaguely ashamed at how dirty and ramshackle it was. "It's not how I remember it," he remarked.

The death of Taht al-Takiya and the expulsion of Baghdad's Jews was a portent of what was to come. The Jews were the first minority to be ripped from the fabric of Iraqi society. For a long, subsequent period, stagnation followed and dictatorships of unfathomable brutality imposed their will on the country. These ensured the dominance of the Sunni Arab minority while other communities lived an uneasy, truncated existence, visited by intermittent catastrophe. But the dictatorships imposed a lurid, false picture of unity over the country, without changing its fundamental dynamics.

That period ended in 2003 with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Now, in Iraq, similar forces of tribalism and sectarian hatred to those that ended Baghdad Jewry's long and illustrious history were tearing the whole country to pieces.

This time, of course, the Sunni Arabs were among the principal victims, rather than the perpetrators.

The Baghdad Jews had escaped a worse fate because of the presence of Israel and its structures of rescue and defense. A little, perhaps, like the Yezidis on Sinjar Mountain in the cursed summer of 2014, with the young Kurdish fighters straining their hearts' blood on the way to them. Herein lay the message. All this was long before, and long ago, and all gone. But the fundamental, unsettled dynamic appeared unchanged, unresolved.

## Notes

- 1 "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah: The Airlift of Iraqi Jews," Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org>
- 2 David Rosenberg, "Living in Fear: Iraq's Last Jews," *Arutz Sheva*, March 13, 2016. <http://www.israelnationalnews.com>

# 10

## WASTELAND

Northern Syria, Winter 2015

I made and make no disguise of the fact that the Syrian Kurds were the people with whom I most enjoyed spending time and reporting on in Syria. This was not because I was convinced by the “democratic confederalist” ideology which ruled Rojava. I was not. But it was a fact that this sorely oppressed people had succeeded in creating what was, without doubt, the most peaceful and least oppressive area of poor, blighted Syria. They had done this without international sponsorship, and in the teeth of opposition from the Assad regime, the Sunni rebels and, of course, the Islamic State.

Rojava was not without fault. Legitimate issues had been raised by other Kurdish parties regarding the heavy hand of the authorities and the Asayish security police. I had had my own small but not especially pleasant experience of being accused of spying by the representatives of the Kurdish security forces in Derik in 2013. But, in comparison to what was taking place in both the regime- and rebel-controlled parts of the country, Rojava was an island of sanity. It shared this with the equally imperfect KRG area of northern Iraq.

There was a problem. The KRG and Rojava were at loggerheads with one another. There was a single Kurdish-controlled contiguous land mass now – between the Iraq–Iran border in the east and the western edge of Kobani in north central Syria. But relations between the two Kurdish authorities ruling each part of this area had broken down. The rivalry was familiar and of long standing. One could, of course, seek to locate its origins in the differing social philosophies of the KDP and the PKK and so on. Ultimately, however, the issue was one of power. Each movement, each authority considered itself the rightful vehicle of Kurdish nationalism and hence was bound to want to contain and reduce the

power of the other.

The PKK, meanwhile, was moving forward, improbably, into a de facto alliance with the United States. At a press conference in the Syrian Kurdish city of Hasakah, on October 15, 2015, a statement announcing the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was issued. It read, “Due to accelerated conditions in both the political and the military development and the sensitive phases our country has gone through, there must be an establishment of a unified national military force [for] all Syrians consisting of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and all others living in the geographical locations of Syria. The Syrian Democratic Force is to launch a self-governing Syria.”<sup>1</sup>

Thirteen organizations were signatories to the announcement. Among these, the most significant in terms of numerical strength were the Kurdish YPG and YPJ; the Sanadid militia of the Arab Al-Shammar tribe; the (Christian) Syriac Military Council; and the Burkat al-Furan, Thuwar Raqqa and Shams al-Shamal groups. The latter three were remnants of the non-jihadist Arab Sunni rebellion in northern Syria, and the remainder of the 13 organizations listed in the announcement were similar, smaller examples of groups of this type.

The launch of the SDF was significant for a number of reasons. Firstly and most importantly, it cemented the cooperation between the US-led coalition and the Kurdish YPG. The YPG was a derivative of the PKK, which remained very firmly on the US’s list of designated terrorist organizations. This latter fact related less to the PKK’s actual activities and more to the sensitivities of Turkey, a NATO member state. The cooperation, in obvious contradiction of this reality, derived from the US need for an effective, non-jihadi partner in the war against the Islamic State.

Kobani, in late 2014, was the birthplace of the partnership. But, throughout 2015, the YPG had continued to demonstrate its ability to effectively challenge the jihadis. The Sunni Arab rebels, meanwhile, showed no such capacity and were themselves largely located somewhere along the spectrum of Sunni political Islam.

The foundation of the SDF was clearly intended to build a multi-ethnic force around the core of the YPG, which could operate against IS on a broader front, outside of majority Kurdish areas. This was imperative because, in order to effectively cut off and destroy IS, areas of majority Arab population needed to be conquered. And, of course, Raqqa, the capital and the jewel in the crown of the Islamic State in Syria, was a Sunni Arab city.

But there was a political implication to the SDF’s emergence too. The Kurds were keen to give some kind of formalized shape to the project they had been building in northern Syria since the summer of 2012. The PYD, the dominant

party in Rojava, was formally opposed to any division of Syria, but the intention clearly was to try and solidify the de facto division which had taken place. From this point of view, the foundation of a non-sectarian military force to defend Rojava made a great deal of sense. The Americans weren't interested in this side of things, but having a military force with a track record of partnering successfully with the West would be a major asset for those promoting such a project.

There was much discussion in the media as to the extent that this force did or did not constitute merely a cover, put in place to prettify what was, in fact, a cooperation between the US and an organization which it had long considered terrorist. The formation of the SDF gave me a reason to return to the Kurdish-controlled part of northern Syria and, toward the end of 2015, I made plans to do so.

The Kurdish divide had, by late 2015, begun to affect the accessibility of Rojava to outside visitors. The KRG had good relations with Turkey and needed to keep the Turks on side. They were probably also not over-enamored with the positive publicity that Rojava had been gleaning in the western media because of its unusually progressive attitudes toward gender and its leftist inclinations.

The result was a blockade. The KRG had begun to severely restrict access to the Syrian part of Kurdistan. Journalists were now limited to a single visit only. I had already been in three times. The Syrian Kurds were also no longer taking in journalists with their fighters.

What remained were personal connections. I had heard that senior connections at the KRG could get you in, and a friend of mine was connected to a member of the politburo of the Kurdish Democratic Party. So I arrived in Erbil in grey, rainy early December and we made our way to this man's headquarters outside of the city.

He was a military commander and a political leader. Form dictated that I first interview him as a journalist before proceeding to the stage of requests. This turned out to be very far from a waste of time. The man, a veteran of the KDP's struggles against Saddam Hussein in the 1970s and 80s, was short, stocky, in his 50s and with a weary amusement about him. Drinking his black tea, he opined at length at the need for greater urgency in the Kurdish push toward statehood. He then bemoaned the fact that the current war was leading to the arrival of large numbers of Arab refugees to the cities of the KRG. This, he considered, was the opposite of what ought to be happening. It would be likely to bring the insanity of Arab politics into the relatively peaceful Kurdish areas.

At the end of the interview, he asked me if there was anything else I wanted to know about. "Well, there is one more thing," I mused, before bringing up the

issue of the border crossing and my desire to report in Rojava. He listened with an indulgent smile, then picked up his phone and made a call. There were a few sentences in Kurdish. Then he hung up, looked at me and said, “Go to Fishkhabur tomorrow at 2 o’clock. There won’t be a problem getting across. But don’t be late.”

That night, waiting for the morning at the Fareeq Hotel in Erbil, I heard about the death of General Maghdid Haraki of the Peshmerga. He had been killed in a firefight with IS in the Nawaran area.

I remembered the sudden burst of energy as he and his men had rolled in, their military style immediately recognizable as American, mirror shades and the general’s steel-grey crewcut and boundless energy and optimism. Whether Maghdid had learned his soldiering with the Americans or just liked and therefore imitated them, I never found out.

He had exuded the sense that defeat was not only impossible, but that the very thought of it was absurd to the point of hilarity. This was no small thing in the summer of 2014. At the time, ISIS had seemed, to many, unstoppable. Not to General Maghdid Haraki.

Haraki had spoken bluntly and with passion about the broader political meaning of what was going on. His main concern, even then, even with the jihadis bearing down on the Kurdish capital, was not specifically the threat of ISIS, but rather the push of the Kurds for self-government. “We have a different land, different language, different mentality. I don’t know why the world won’t see this,” he had said, as we sat and talked in a tent just behind the frontlines. With IS glowering behind their vehicles and trenches just a few kilometers from the city. Another man whose country would need him when the time for rebuilding and new beginnings came. And who would not be there.

We made it across the border the next day. Myself and Ipek Tasli, who was coming along as my translator. Ipek, from Turkish Kurdistan but living in Sulaymaniyah with her Syrian Kurdish husband, was a good friend. Her sympathies and connections were in the direction of the PKK, which I thought would stand us in good stead in Rojava. She also possessed a notable sense of the absurd. This was useful in Syria.

We got through the border crossings and across the Tigris River on the now familiar old red barge without any problems, and headed for Qamishli.

The Kurdish autonomy in Syria had, by now, acquired a feeling of normality and likely permanence. The regime presence had contracted and was hardly visible. The familiar earthen roadblocks of the YPG were there every few kilometers all the way on the road toward Qamishli. But the big, livid regime checkpoint at the entrance to the city, through which I had passed back in 2013,

was long gone. The Kurds had destroyed it earlier in the year. There was no longer any danger of being checked and perhaps apprehended by regime soldiers on the way in. Assad's forces now remained only in a large, dilapidated-looking "security" area in the center and north of the city.

I wasn't quite beyond a slight feeling of queasiness, all the same, as we pulled around the intersection next to the regime army base. Assad's soldiers hadn't changed a great deal. They still looked scrawny, underfed and exhausted. Standing by the blank unwashed walls of the base as we drove past, with a tatty and dirty regime flag proclaiming their loyalty.

There was a Mukhabarat-type there, as well. A man in his mid-30s, a lot better fed than the soldiers, somewhat overweight even, shaven-headed and with a brand new, Stasi-type leather jacket on. I caught his eye, involuntarily and unwisely, as we drove past and, for a moment, we stared at each other. But the moment passed and he made no attempt to stop us.

We stayed at a hotel close to the regime facility. It was a place long under the protection of the PKK. This, according to our hosts, meant there would be no problems, though the close proximity to the regime base was uncomfortable. By night, the area around the security facility was eerie and near deserted. Everything in Qamishli was ramshackle and dilapidated. This, however, wasn't a product of the war but rather preceded it. Dusty northern Syria had been blighted and neglected by the Assad regime for decades prior to 2011. Its mainly Kurdish population had been of no interest to the regime. All attempts at protest in these remote and dusty areas had met with savage repression and international indifference. Now everything had changed.

We set off the next day to the frontlines south of al-Hawl. This eastern Syrian town had been captured by the SDF on November 13, during its first offensive. An area of 1,362 square kilometers and 196 villages had been taken in the offensive, which had concluded on November 16 with the taking of the al-Hawl oilfield. The loss of al-Hawl meant that IS also lost control of the Syrian section of Highway 47 from Raqqa city across the Iraqi border to Mosul, Iraq's second city and the other jewel in the Islamic State crown.<sup>2</sup>

Al-Hawl was a mess and was still full of evidence of the recent IS administration. The western media had a tendency to portray the organization as a mighty, unstoppable force. But, seen from close up, the Islamic State was a ramshackle, squalid, if psychotically violent affair. This was reflected in the nature of its administrative buildings – small blocks made identifiable by the black and white painting on the outside walls proclaiming them to be the "Islamic court of the Islamic State" and so on.

It was a cold December day as we came through al-Hawl, and the YPG

fighters were huddled round fires. Their morale was high at that time and they were full of laughter and jokes. They were on the move, going forward, taking ground each day, with US air power behind them. But they remained lightly armed; what they mainly wanted to tell us was that they needed better weapons from the West. In particular, “TOW missiles and anti-tank systems.”

“If we had effective weapons, we could take Raqqa in a month,” that was Kemal Amuda, a short and stocky YPG commander speaking through a swirling desert wind as we stood at a frontline position south of al-Hawl. “But the area is very large. And the airstrikes are of limited use.” What would help? “Anti-tank weapons, tanks,” he shouted above the wind, “armored vehicles.”

And Lawand, a YPG spokesman in Hasakah city, sitting in a school that had been converted into a base for the SDF: “Better weapons systems – especially to defend against car bombs. We need anti-tank weapons, and armored vehicles, to be effective.”

The need for these weapons did not derive from some newly discovered IS tank force. Rather, the creative use being made by the jihadis of vehicles filled with explosives and driven by suicide bombers was the issue. I had first heard of this phenomenon in Anbar. Our driver there had described how the vehicles would advance, weighed down by armor, clumsy, slow and unstoppable. They would appear on the horizon and lumber forward. If you didn’t have the right weaponry, your choice at that point was to flee or wait for death. You might wait five minutes or so as the vehicle slowly approached.

The landscape in this part of Syria was lunar and harsh in quality – empty, bald, sandy hills as we headed back toward Qamishli from south of al-Hawl. It felt as though some great apocalyptic force had passed over and visited itself upon everything. Leaving ruins and chaos and everything broken in its wake.

As we drove down the highway we saw a cluster of dead IS fighters by the side of the road. These men had evidently been killed by an airstrike and then lightly covered with dirt by the Kurdish fighters as they advanced southwards.

They had been eviscerated by the explosives and were strewn in various parts across the flat, sandy ground. Legs here, a torso there.

And one livid remaining face, staring at the sky, the face contorted in an expression of agony. A young man, probably not much over 25. The skin had turned a greyish-green color. But one could make out the wisps of jet-black beard still clinging on along the jawline, matching the black curly hair on the head. There was about half of the body remaining, down to the bottom of the trunk. The rest had been vaporised or was to be found among the black, roasted clumps spread around.

This jihadi had died hard but quickly, blown apart by the shocking and

astonishing destructive power of a charge fired from a fighter aircraft. He wouldn't have seen it coming. A sudden eruption of terrible violence from the sky and the men would have known that they were doomed. There would have been time for a few moments of horror and panic, and then the transformation into this other state.

We joked a little about the dead jihadi. "Laughing boy," I called him. But the jokes were nervous and not convincing. What we really felt was a sense of dread, even of wonder. That this, before a short time, had been a living creature like us and was now mute and turned into something else. This man was of the force that had killed Keith Broomfield and Maghdid Haraki and slaughtered poor Steven Sotloff – that had tried to kill me, too, at Huseybah al-Sharqiya and at Haj Ibrahim. This man, had he lived, would have taken pleasure in my death and the deaths of my friends, would have fought hard to put the Yezidi girls at the Newroz refugee camp back into slavery, would have been among the ones who broke into peaceful Kobani full with the joy of slaughter.

And still. Who was he? A Middle Easterner, by the look of him. Perhaps he had come from Tunisia or Egypt to preserve and expand the Islamic State. Perhaps he was a local man, a Syrian, like Abu Nur and Abu Mohammed, who I had sat and drank tea with in Kilis. Those men whose ambitions were simpler, who were looking, as they saw it, to defend their Sunni communities – and who found the instrument for it in the savagery of the Islamic State.

The dead IS man wasn't telling, of course. So we left him there to stare without seeing at the grey winter skies south of al-Hawl, and we headed back northwards toward Qamishli. Away from the desolation. Back to the city to warm our living bones.

We tried again the next day to reach the frontline positions close to Shaddadah. The YPG were not cooperative. "Too dangerous," they told us.

The overly protective and restrictive nature of the Kurdish forces toward journalists was a phenomenon I was used to. In a way I admired it – it reflected both the greater discipline and the more conscientious nature of these forces. But it could also be unnecessarily smothering.

Often, we would find ourselves trying to explain to them that the danger was our problem and part of our job. Of course, their concerns were for field security and not simply for our safety. Again legitimate, and tiresome. Very different to the rebels and also to the Iraqi Shia militias. These were perhaps less professional about field security and were certainly less concerned for journalists' safety. The result was that one could do far better work in their areas, if you knew what you were doing.

So we did our best to leave our YPG escorts and to drive alone toward the

forward lines. This was not sensible. We were close to an active frontline in which the positions were spread widely along the flat expanse. It was quite possible that IS fighters could be present in the area, on reconnaissance, or that we would simply fail to see when we needed to stop going forward. But we relied on our driver's knowledge of the local roads and decided to risk it.

As we headed southwards we passed through a large, deserted regime military base and stopped to take a look around. Briefing rooms with fading pictures of Hafez and Bashar and Basil Assad, a storehouse brimming with regime army helmets and webbing, a rain-sodden parade ground. And a large regime flag, which once must have flown at the center of the drill square, crumpled, wet and filthy, lying forgotten on the tarmac. The black dye had spilled out of the flag, which was now red, white and blue.

The regime had largely disappeared from eastern Syria at that time. The war here was between the SDF and the Islamic State. But regardless of the precise loyalties of any particular item of debris, I was overwhelmed by the destruction everywhere. By the depth of the loss. The grinding, seeming endlessness of it. Uncollected corpses strewn across the countryside. Rotting, empty buildings. Destroyed structures. And this absurd, faded flag the sovereign symbol of it all.

I picked it up and folded it, thinking it would make a nice souvenir for my apartment back in Jerusalem. Ipek looked on in bewilderment and disgust. What did I want that thing for, she asked? Her husband was a Kurdish nationalist from Amuda, deep in the Kurdish autonomous zone. For them, the livid-red flag of the Ba'athist regime meant prisons and torture and premature death. I entirely concurred, but wrapped the thing up and stashed it away, anyway. Then we carried on south, back into the lunar desert, trying to reach the forward-most points of the SDF.

We took a different route this time, heading eastwards to an area close to the Basil Dam, named after the eldest son of Hafez Assad. Once again the vast, bleak emptiness of the landscape. Through the ruins of abandoned villages, along deserted roads. "We aren't really supposed to be out this far," Ipek commented, "but let's see where we get to."

Finally, we ran into a unit of the YPG. They were friendly but bemused to see us. "Journalists aren't meant to be here," the commander, a young, ginger-haired man commented. But, of course, once we were there, we stayed for a while. Tea and cigarettes and a fire to huddle round. Nothing much in terms of insight. These young fighters weren't used to the presence of civilians. We had reached some point beyond the usual YPG approved circuit of official spokesmen and guided tours.

After a while, an older officer arrived, a man in his early 40s. He was lean,

fluent and fit, friendly and restrained. This was evidently the commander of the sector, and he was very evidently interested in seeing who we were and deciding what should be done.

Ipek spoke to him in Kurdish. I couldn't understand what was being said but I figured that her status as a PKK-supporter well connected in the movement would see us right. And so it was. After a while, the commander began to smile, everything became more relaxed. And he said to me through Ipek's translation that he'd be happy to give us a briefing about the situation in the sector, that we couldn't record it and that after that we should leave. Given the circumstances, that was just fine. So we sat, in silence and increasingly transfixed, as he calmly and fluently took us through the essentials of an assault by Islamic State forces.

First to appear, heralding the beginning of the attack, were the suicide vehicles. Armor-plated cars laid down with explosives and driven by men seeking to die. These were the most formidable weapon in the IS arsenal. They played the role of an armored assault force in a conventional army, or heavy cavalry in earlier wars. Their shock value and speed designed to cause panic and disorientation in the enemy.

The next wave to arrive would be the "Inghimassiyin" or infiltrators – another IS contribution to the Syrian and Iraqi battlefield. These were a kind of elite infantry force, who wore suicide belts for use if tactically necessary but were also shock troops. It wasn't hard to imagine the chaos and fear that such a force could generate. Nor were IS the first to "weaponise" suicide bombers in this way – Hizballah and then the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers had this dubious honor.<sup>3</sup> But the Islamic State had introduced such tactics into the Syrian and Iraqi battlefield.

After the Inghimassiyin came the main wave of attacking infantry. Thus the Islamic State mode of attack. The Kurdish commander, nevertheless, was not especially impressed and wanted us to know that IS were very clearly now in decline.

These methods had been effective, he noted, but also very costly in terms of manpower. Now, the jihadis were evidently seeking to preserve the lives of their force. Their tactics had changed accordingly. They moved in smaller groups, preferring to leave only token forces to defend areas subjected to determined attack.

The change, suggested the commander, derived from a dwindling flow of eager recruits, when compared to the high days of summer 2014. "They were attractive as conquerors. Their power derived from intimidation and imposing terror," he concluded. "This has now gone."

The turn to international terrorism by IS at that time was probably also explained by its loss of momentum in Iraq and Syria. IS needed "achievements"

to maintain its “brand”. Its slogan, famously was “Baqiya wa tatamaddad” (“Remaining and expanding”). But expansion of its actual territorial holdings was no longer taking place. The downing of the Russian Metrojet Flight 9268 on October 31, the coordinated attacks in Paris on November 13 and the series of attacks in Turkey suggested that the jihadis had decided action on the global stage could form a kind of substitute for gains on the battlefield closer to home.

But, in the meantime, there we were – 30 kilometers from Shaddadah, the next target, and the Islamic State was moving backward.

This was as far forward as we made it. This was the war in winter. Bitter cold and fires with fighters huddled round them. Uncollected corpses on the wasteground.

But we hadn’t answered the basic question as to what exactly the SDF was, and where it might be heading. The main partners very obviously were the YPG and the Americans. But what of its other components? It claimed to have several thousand Arab fighters. To what extent were these forces simply a fig leaf?

Jaysh al-Sanadid (Army of the Brave) was the militia of the Al-Shammar Beduin tribe in the SDF.<sup>4</sup> In numerical terms, this was the main Arab component of the SDF. The Al-Shammar are one of the largest and most prominent Beduin tribes in the Middle East. They are located throughout the region, with their largest branch in Iraq. The relatively small Syrian branch of the tribe lived in the Yarubiya and Jeza'a areas, which were under the control of the Kurds.

The Al-Shammar were long-time opponents of the Saudi monarchy and of the Wahhabi trend in Sunni Islam to which the monarchy adheres. The Syrian branch of the tribe had a long tradition of cooperation with the Kurds. The Sanadid claimed 9,000 fighters, though most observers considered they numbered no more than 5,000.

The leader of the Shammar in Syria, and the overall commander of the Sanadid, was a man called Sheikh Humaydi Daham al-Hadi. His son Bandar was the military chief. I managed to arrange via the SDF’s press officers to interview Sheikh Humaydi.

Before this, however, we were required to attend another of the endless military funerals which were a constant feature of the human landscape in Syria. Three Sanadid fighters had been killed in fighting with IS the week before. The funeral was attended by male members of the tribe only. The coffins of the three fighters were wrapped in the red and yellow banner of the Al-Shammar and an honor guard of Sanadid and YPG fighters was assembled. Muslim prayers were conducted. YPG and Sanadid commanders gave speeches. Neither Sheikh Humaydi nor his son were in attendance. There must have been about 1,000 people there.

It all took place with a light rain coming and going. The YPG commander exhorted the blood brotherhood of the Kurds and the Sanadid, in the effort to build a new Syria. The raucous crowd of Shammar Beduin applauded.

The Sanadid fighters had a certain dash about them which the Kurds lacked. They struck dramatic poses by the coffins, wielding their strap-less Kalashnikovs like movie props. “The marchers of the red death,” they called themselves. The YPG, with their no-frills militia style, were privately critical and also amused by the antics of the Sanadid, who they regarded as lacking in discipline and seriousness. “They are completely chaotic,” Ipek confided to me.

Afterwards, as the funeral crowd dissipated, we began to make our way to the house of Sheikh Humaydi, near the village of Tel Alo. “You will have to eat food that he gives you with his hands,” said Ipek. “So don’t be shocked. His house is a palace, also.” I took this to mean that the Sheikh lived in a somewhat more well-appointed building than the tiny shacks that lined the streets of the Beduin villages we passed through on the way to the meeting.

I was wrong. At the end of one of the roads, there suddenly loomed an enormous structure, surrounded by sandy-colored concrete walls and guarded by African men in camouflage uniforms. This was the palace of the Sheikh. The guards were Al-Shammar from Saudi Arabia. We were ushered down the long entrance and into an ornate reception room. The sheikh himself appeared a few moments later. He was a short, plump, avuncular figure with a dyed black moustache. His servants seated us around the room carefully in order of seniority.

“I think you’re hungry. First we’ll eat and then you can ask all the questions you’d like,” said Sheikh Humaydi. The meal progressed in the way I had been warned. An enormous platter of rice with bits of mutton placed in it was brought in. Seated around it in a circle, everyone began to tear at the food with their fingers. One of the Kurdish girls asked for and received a fork.

I was most concerned about the sheep’s head that I had immediately noticed, nestling amid the rice. Sure enough, a few minutes into the meal, the Sheikh began to rip succulent morsels of meat from the head, and pressed them upon me, his fingers dripping with fat. Having no choice, I began to swallow the pieces. They weren’t as bad as I had expected. After the plate was finally removed, and with Ipek trying hard to suppress her laughter, we began the interview.

The Sheikh pointed out that, in addition to his role of head of the Sanadid, he was also co-president of the Jazira autonomous zone established by the Kurds. He then began a long disquisition concerning the Al-Shammar and the historic role they had played in the region.

His focus was not on IS, still less on the Assad regime, and not even on Syria. Rather, Sheikh Humaydi wanted to talk about Saudi Arabia, and about the Wahhabi trend in Sunni Islam to which the Kingdom adheres. This was not what I had expected and we listened as the sheikh depicted the Saudis as “the first ISIS, the first Da’esh.” The Al-Shammar had once themselves been contenders for power in the Gulf and had maintained an emirate in the Jabal Shammar area until it was destroyed in 1921 by Ibn Saud, founder of the modern Saudi state. The sheikh wanted this entity to be re-established.

All this was quite interesting and even exotic to listen to in the wintry Levant in late 2015. But the extent to which it was relevant to the needs of the hour was questionable. The Shammar’s alliance with the Kurds went back to the nineteenth century. But the military usefulness of this not very disciplined tribal militia was unclear. Even its political worth, beyond providing a possibility to say that the SDF was not solely Kurdish, was open to question.

The dinner proceeded to its stately conclusion. The sheikh’s son Bandar, the military commander of the Sanadid, entered and I spoke to him too. The son, it turned out, was a resident of Qatar, here just for the war. We posed for a few pictures with Sheikh Humaydi and a rather adorable six-year-old grand-daughter of his who appeared on the scene. Finally, the sheikh observed that I was very much free to stay if I wished, but that if I had pressing engagements I could, of course, also leave. Taking this as a signal that we should clear out, Ipek and I began to say our goodbyes.

The towns which the SDF would be capturing as it moved further south against IS could not, of course, be entrusted to a Beduin militia. So the key issue was whether the alliance could attract support from urban Arab military and political groups, most crucially those non-Islamist groups who had formed the nucleus of the old “Free Syrian Army” brand. In this regard, the increasing dominance of the rebellion further west by hardline Islamist and jihadi factions had worked in the SDF’s favor. There was no doubt that the YPG vastly outweighed the other factions in size and influence. But some of these smaller rebel factions were, indeed, drawing closer to the alliance.

Among the factions in question were Thuwar Raqqa (Revolutionaries of Raqqa), Jaysh al-Thuwar (Army of Revolutionaries), Shams al-Shamal (Sun of the North) and various others. All of these were remnants of the old FSA, and all had only a few hundred members. The Kurds were particularly mistrustful of Thuwar Raqqa, which later pulled out of the SDF.

There was also an organization representing the Syriac Christian communities of the area, called the Syriac Military Union (Mawtbo Fulhoyo Suroyo, MFS). Founded in early 2013 and led by Gewargis Hanna, the Syriac Military Council

was the military wing of the Syriac Union Party. The movement regarded Syriacs as a separate ethnic identity from Arabs and Kurds.

So the SDF – in addition to the Sanadid and MFS factions – was a meeting point for some elements of the once thriving non-jihadist rebel movements of northern Syria that had not ceased activity or become absorbed by the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham.

All our conversations, however, suggested that the liaison and coordination with the Americans was conducted by the YPG alone. The YPG was also responsible for the overall management of the force. The characterization of the other groups as a kind of window dressing for what was effectively a YPG-US alliance seemed to me to be basically accurate.

I also had no problem with this. For the Kurds to be in the driving seat of a military force engaged in and around areas of Kurdish majority population made sense and was probably inevitable.

But the need felt by the US backers of the SDF to conceal or blur this reality pointed to a broader issue – namely, the large gap between the considerable military prowess of the YPG and the much less impressive political successes of its civilian partners.

The US and the broader West remained entirely committed to the maintenance of Syria as a unitary state – even as that definition came to constitute more and more a denial of observable reality.

Rojava consequently faced near complete diplomatic isolation. The Kurds were, at that time, preparing to declare their Syrian holdings as the “Federation of Northern Syria.” The declaration finally came in mid-2016.<sup>5</sup> But the Syrian Kurds, ruled by a PKK franchise organization, had prepared very little diplomatic hinterland.

The friends they had made wanted their help in fighting IS. But the West, the regime, the rebels and the Turks were all indifferent or hostile to the Kurds’ broader ambitions.

The Kurds had held an event in the town of Derik, which they had dubbed the “Democratic Syria” conference. It had resulted in the election of a 42-member “Syrian Democratic Assembly”. We interviewed Hediya Yusif, a former PKK guerrilla and senior official of the federation, at her office in Derik. She was far more interested in talking about the new assembly than about the war. But the conference had been almost entirely ignored by the international media.

It seemed the Syrian Kurds had little ability and, perhaps, little real interest in remedying this situation. I thought that they should pay more attention to it. The PKK/PYD were affective administrators and good soldiers. But a yawning gap between the KRG in northern Iraq and the rulers of Rojava in the diplomatic

field was apparent.

The KRG had spent two decades investing in international connections. It had a prospering network of global contacts that now extended even to Ankara. The West was committed to Iraqi unity as well as Syrian. But, on the one hand, the return to a centralized system operating from Baghdad was no longer imaginable in Iraq. The KRG had too many friends for this to happen, was too securely grounded in economic and political relations. In Syria, on the other hand, the eclipse of the Kurds in the event of a regime or rebel victory was not so inconceivable.

What was the reason for this absence? The PYD had little of an international network to build from. The PKK, its parent organization, surely did but it consisted largely of figures and organizations from the European radical left. These were the people who had stuck with and supported the movement in its long insurgency against Turkey. They could offer little of substance in the current circumstances. The Syrian war had catapulted the movement to a plane of activity with which it was unfamiliar. It had yet to find its footing. Its main asset was the military alliance with the Americans. The SDF was the institutionalization of this relationship. Much would depend on the Kurds' fighting and organizational ability. But, in the end, their ability to turn all this to political advantage would also be crucial.

I wanted to go to Kobani. I figured that surely there one would find a greater international presence on the ground. It was there that the alliance between the US and the Syrian Kurds had first been formed, in fire and steel in the last days of 2014. It was there that the Islamic State had suffered its first defeats and that its forward trajectory had first been reversed.

I had reported from Kobani a few months before the IS push toward the enclave had begun, and was also looking forward, with a little trepidation, to seeing some of the people I had met during that time. And to observing the city itself and the efforts at reconstruction.

So we set off from Qamishli early in the morning, myself and a likeable rogue of a driver called Fahad, a Kurd from the city. Ipek had met up with her husband in Qamishli and they headed back in the opposite direction – toward the border and the KRG.

As we approached Kobani city, a landscape of astonishing destruction stretched itself out before us. I remembered Kobani as poor and vibrant under siege in 2014. The residents drilling wells and cranking generators for electricity. Now the apocalypse had visited. Street after street of torn structures, broken walls raised in strange entreaty to the heavens, electrical wires hanging out of them like tendons from severed limbs. The desperate and terrible fight for

survival against IS in late 2014 and early 2015 had torn the heart out of the city.

As we entered Kobani, Fahad stopped the car and gestured. “Let’s get out,” he said. I glanced toward where he was pointing. There was a sound of drumming accompanied by the wind instrument that the Kurds called the qernete. It was recorded, blasting from a sound system. In an open area surrounded by the ruined structures, a large group of Kurds were dancing one of the mixed circle dances that their region is known for. The music was hypnotic. We stood and watched the scene for a while. “It’s beautiful, no?” Fahad said after a while. It was, but also macabre. Huge, claw like structures all around, the dust and the dancing.

The clichés that might come to mind are obvious. Here were the Kurds, men and women together, in the midst of wasteland and ruination, dancing in joy – and defiance. And so it was. It was the stuff of which wartime propaganda is made. All laid out before us, and not for our benefit. But I remembered how much I had liked Kobani before, the sanity and good humor I had found there. So strange in the midst of the war. And now it was all ruined and blown apart. Everything seemed broken. The music and the dancing were still continuing as we made our way further into the city.

My reunion with the friends I had made in mid-2014 was not all I had hoped for. Things had changed. The Kobani media activists with whom I had worked had been among the last to leave the city, shortly before its expected encirclement by the Islamic State forces in October of that year. In the course of those months, they had passed through a series of experiences which had deeply traumatised them – and created a sort of barrier between them and everyone else, which was immediately apparent. They avoided eye contact, laughed at jokes only they could understand.

The old media center had been destroyed during the siege. I found my friend Mustafa Alali at the single small hotel that remained in the town. I remembered Mustafa as someone who had projected a kind of cozy normality. In besieged Kobani, he had invited me to stay a few days at his parents’ house after my reporting ended. “Now you can relax, get cleaned up, have something to eat,” he had suggested. I had declined, wanting to get back across the border, with the quiet intention of seeking out ISIS members via my rebel contacts. But I remembered how tempting the invitation had been. Mustafa had invited a feeling of compassion because one felt just how much he wanted things to be as in other places.

But Mustafa Alali no longer sought to project the sense that all was normal. Rather, he was exhausted, much older and very clearly haunted; he spoke in short and staccato sentences. He and his friends were watching a video showing

the people of Kobani mourning a massacre that had taken place in the summer of 2015, after the main fighting had ended.

“Da’esh came in in the early hours of the morning,” he told me when I asked about the video. “When the fighters are tired. They were wearing YPG uniform. Some of them spoke Kurdish and that’s how they managed to get through the YPG checkpoints. Then once they were inside, they began to knock on people’s doors. People thought they were the YPG, so of course they opened up. It was about four in the morning. Sometimes it was kids who answered. Then, once they were inside, they began to shoot everybody. It took a while before the fighters could corner them all and kill them. About 100 people were murdered.”

Mustafa delivered all this in a quiet and calm tone. In the background, with the sound turned down, I could see the film which showed families identifying the bodies of those killed in the massacre. Mute and terrible mourning, and Mustafa’s voice very calm and tired.

The other thing about the Kobani boys was that they had become media stars. I remembered them as country people, with a kind of wonder at meeting foreigners and the outside world, having been tightly sealed in Assad’s stifling Syria for so long. But the wonder had passed and now they were largely indifferent to the foreign journalists who trooped in and out, and mainly happy to make a few cash dollars from them. So, remembering why I’d come, I asked Mustafa if he could connect me with any of the Arab rebel groups fighting as part of the SDF.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” he said. “Tomorrow we’ll go and meet Shams al-Shamal and Abu Layla. They’re down by the Euphrates. That’s where the front line is.” I had hoped to reconnect with others of the activists, but many had left and Mustafa was busy, so Fahad and I found some beer from somewhere and sat in our small hotel room drinking it. And the next day we set off to look for the positions of the Shams al-Shamal militia down by the Euphrates.

The initial sighting was not encouraging, at least in military terms. The HQ of the militia was set about 200 meters off the highway. We arrived at about 9.30 in the morning. It was already broad daylight. There was no guard. We were just a few kilometers from the first IS positions. In lieu of a sentry, the rebels had dressed a dummy in a military uniform and sat it by the entrance, arming it with a toy rifle. This, presumably, was supposed to look like a real sentry, in the dark, from the road, thus deterring any possible attacker.

Inside, as we carefully pushed open the door, the men of Shams al-Shamal were all asleep. Mustafa clicked his tongue in disapproval. Slowly, they began to stir, with sheepish smiles. Heavy set, unshaven, friendly and smiling. It was an inauspicious beginning. We explained who we were and what we wanted.

“Adnan will be along in a minute,” one of the men yawned, lighting a cigarette and beginning to boil some water for tea. Adnan – Adnan Abu Amjad, the second in command of the militia, arrived a few minutes later. Slim, prematurely grey, Adnan had a friendly and calmly competent manner which belied the unimpressive nature of the force he helped to command.

Yes, there was certainly an offensive coming. Shaddadah had to be taken, of course. But there was work to be done much closer to Kobani. “The Tishreen Bridge is just near here,” Adnan said. “And we have to take that before we can begin any attack in Raqqa. It’s the last bridge Da’esh control across the Euphrates. Once that’s taken, they’ll need to bring forces all the way down below the Assad Lake in order to move west to east. So it’s important.”

As for the rest – yes, the SDF was a combined, multi-ethnic force, but the YPG was the senior force. Shams al-Shamal, like the Sanadid, was not involved in the coordination with the Americans. The force itself was multi-ethnic, consisting of fighters from the town of Manbij, where both Arabs and Kurds had lived prior to the war.

As Adnan was speaking, another man entered the room, walking with a slight limp, and with a beaming, delighted smile lighting up his jet-black-bearded face. This was Faysal Abu Layla, the commander of Shams al-Shamal. Adnan quickly deferred to his commander, who arranged himself on the floor opposite us, relaxed, over a glass of tea. “I have wounds in the leg and in the head also,” said Abu Layla, smiling as though it was the most obvious thing imaginable.

“I’m from Manbij,” he began, in response to our questions. “I was a mechanic before the war. I joined the rebels back in 2012 and we fought against the Assad regime. In Aleppo city we fought them, and further west. Then, later on, we fought ISIS around Manbij.”

Abu Layla was famous among the Kurds, among other things, for an incident that occurred during the fight for Kobani. He had, it was reported, helped to save the life of a wounded Islamic State fighter who had been trapped under rubble. I asked him why he had done this. The question produced his delighted smile again, “After the war we are going to have to live together again. And there was a little bit of time for this, so there was no reason why not. Many of the Da’esh members are just brainwashed. It was good to show him that another way apart from the one he was taught was possible.” Mustafa, who was doing the translating and who hardly ever smiled, was affected by this, and began to look at Abu Layla with a sort of puzzled, half-amused expression, as though astonished that such a person could exist.

“We’re trying to show this in our battalion, and in the SDF, also. We have Arabs and Kurds together. And I hope we’ll be back in our homes in Manbij

soon, just as soon as Da'esh can be kicked out of there." Shams al-Shamal, the name of the rebel battalion that Abu Layla and his comrades from Manbij had formed, means "sun of the north." "Why don't you come down to Ja'ada with us now, and take a look at our frontline positions?"

It is common to speak of leaders possessing "charisma" and presence. I have met few people in whom I have detected this basic quality of magnetism. Abu Layla possessed it. But the strength of his presence contained nothing of military swagger or strut. Rather, it derived from a warmth that was almost tangible.

The Euphrates River was blue and beautiful in the morning. Abu Layla's men were holding positions there, with Islamic State on the other side of the river. It was hardly an interview now – more simply of a conversation. Some sort of glow had emerged between us and no-one wanted to extinguish it. As it turned out, the attack on Tishrin Dam that Adnan had hinted at was imminent and would begin a couple of days after our visit. Abu Layla didn't speak about operational details, though. The main point he wanted to convey was that the original ideals that had inspired him to take up arms against the regime in 2012 were now here among the SDF fighters challenging Da'esh.

This, the beautiful blue water of the Euphrates, and the fresh December morning air combined and produced a feeling akin to surfacing for air after a long submersion. I began to play back in my head the sights and sounds of the recent days, the prevailing sense of being surrounded by a presence of destruction as a sort of embodied force. Here, it seemed, was a powerful counter-force. Powerful in moral terms, at least. Militarily, they were as amateur and unimpressive as could be imagined.

We left the Northern Sun fighters after a couple of hours and drove back to Qamishli, all aglow. And I crossed back into Iraqi Kurdistan the next day, completing the process of surfacing.

This ends in the predictable way. Abu Layla never got to see Manbij again. The SDF took the Tishrin Dam a few days after I left, just as Adnan had hinted. The fight to expel the jihadis from Manbij commenced some months later, in the summer. It proved ferocious. Abu Layla and the Northern Sun battalion were operating in the village of Abu Qelqel, located in the countryside south of the town. He was shot in the head by an IS sniper. He didn't die straight away and a US helicopter flew him to Sulaymaniyah. But it was impossible to save him and Abu Layla, real name Saadoun al-Faisal, died on June 5, 2016. With Manbij still not liberated but the forces moving forward.

After his death, Abu Layla's brother Yusuf also joined the fight against IS in the Manbij area and was himself captured just a few days later.<sup>6</sup> He was never seen again. The SDF named the Manbij battle "Operation Martyr Abu Layla." It

was concluded successfully a few weeks later. Adnan Abu Amjad, deputy commander of Shams al-Shamal, was himself killed in the battle for Raqqa in August 2017.

Abu Layla had four children. One of them was “Layla” from whom he took his name. In the Middle East, fathers usually take their son’s names in this way, as a kind of honorific. Abu Layla chose to take the name of his daughter. It was, I think, characteristic of the man – the wish to convey a message through action rather than talk, even if it was only a gesture. I can picture him now, sitting relaxed and graceful behind his tea glass in the hut that belonged to his battalion, with his glowing smile, taking us through this or that harrowing fact of his war.

Syria and Iraq by late 2015 had become something of a vortex, consuming all before it, laying things to waste. Even a sympathetic magic as strong as that possessed by Saadoun al-Faisal was evidently not strong enough to stand effectively against it. The SDF, or at least the Kurdish component among them, were a formidable gathering and were set to emerge as the dominant military formation in north east Syria. The war itself, though, seemed to have become a kind of force unto itself, churning up, destroying, consuming and continuing on its way.

## Notes

- 1 “Syrian Democratic Forces Announce the Campaign to Liberate the City of al-Hasakah with Coordination with US-led Coalition,” Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 31, 2015. <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=36484>
- 2 Ali Khalidi, “Kurdish-led Forces Liberate al-Hawl from ISIS,” Kurdistan 24, November 13, 2015. <http://www.kurdistan24.net>
- 3 “Tamil Tigers: Suicide Bombing Innovators,” National Public Radio, May 21, 2009. <http://www.npr.org>
- 4 “Al-Sanadid Forces: We Go Wherever the YPG Goes,” Hawar News Agency, July 15, 2015. <http://en.hawarnews.com>
- 5 “Syria Civil War: Kurds Declare Federal Region in North,” Al-Jazeera, March 17, 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com>, See also Ferzand Sherko, “Northern Syria’s New Democratic Federal System,” Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org>
- 6 Zhelwan Z. Wali, “Brother of Abu Layla captured by ISIS,” Rudaw, July 5, 2016. <http://www.rudaw.net>

# 11

## THE REBELLION AT TWILIGHT

The town of Gaziantep. Southern Turkey. Summer 2016. Everything shimmering in the heat. The constant noise of traffic, the periodic prayer calls of the muezzin across the town producing a hypnotic effect. Gaziantep, 30 kilometers from the border with Syria, was a buzzing center of activity for the Syrian rebellion, even as it faced the slow contraction of its ambitions and the emergent possibility of defeat.

I returned to Gaziantep to try and connect with the rebels, and to get a sense of where things were heading. It was a long way from 2012, and I had shed my own illusions about the rebellion some time before. From the outset, there had been a contradiction at its heart. The contrast manifest in the great gap between the statements and ambitions of its external spokesmen and many of its civilian supporters – for a more democratic and pluralist Syria – and the very obvious domination of its fighting ranks by forces affiliated with one or another form of Sunni political Islam. By 2016, this contradiction had resolved itself – and not in a good way. The erstwhile civil society activists and others were now riding shotgun on a Sunni Islamist insurgency.

This reflected something more general. Among the Arabs of the Levant and Iraq, in the early twenty-first century, popular politics took on Islamic form. Kings and dictators could mobilize forces from above, and often successfully defend their domains. But when the question was grassroots political and especially military organization, the Islamists were the only game in town. The Syrian opposition, of course, were dependent on the willingness of large numbers of young men to go up against the butchery of the Assad regime. Islamism produced young men willing to fight. Arab liberalism did not. The result: any notion of the rebellion representing the doorway to some better or more representative future for Syria or the region had long since departed.

Much had changed in the border area. I remembered the high days of 2012, when the rebels had been the momentary darlings of the western liberal conscience. Then, the frontier had been open. Victory had seemed in sight. Fighters, refugees and reporters had crossed over freely. The coming of the jihadis onto the Syrian battlefield in force ended all that. It was one thing to risk evisceration by regime bombs to bring out the story. Quite another to entertain the possibility that ones' rebel "hosts" regarded one mainly as a piece of meat on a stick to be marketed to the most generous group of jihadi kidnappers.

There was a sadness to all this. Perhaps it had been hopeless from the start. But still, in the milieu of the rebels, one came across individuals who genuinely represented something of the hope of those first days. They constituted a frustrating reminder. Not exactly of what "might have been". I wasn't convinced that things realistically could have turned out all that differently. Not for as long as political Islam remained the only organizing principle in the neighborhood able to muster large crowds and arm and direct them. Rather – from what "should have been". This sounds pathetic, but it's worth remembering that a great many decent people had given everything to the Syrian revolution, and now found themselves stranded.

Working with me in the border area that summer was Fathme Othman, from Qamishli via Damascus, who lived with her sister Cihan and their parents. Fathme's father was a veteran oppositionist close to the circles of Michel Kilo, a prominent figure among the Syrian secular and liberal opposition.<sup>1</sup> The Othmans were Kurds by ethnic origin, but opposed to the separatist project of the PYD in the north. They had stood for a united and democratic Syria. This had turned out to be an elusive phantom.

Sometimes, a close examination of the dynamics this produced turned up grotesque results. Among the mass of exiles and oppositionists who constituted the crowd I was moving with was Mahmoud al-Basha, a veteran of the early days in Aleppo. Al-Basha was a close companion of my old, dead friend Abdullah al-Yasin. Al-Basha, who was a good friend of Fathme Othman's and a likeable and impressive fellow, had developed a sideline working with western media crews. In this capacity, he had saved the life of the British journalist Anthony Loyd, when the latter was kidnapped along with his photographer Jack Hill, by a rebel turned people trader called Hakim Abu Jamal. The latter had been planning to turn the men over to IS. Only a desperate and heroic effort by al-Basha had prevented this.<sup>2</sup>

Hakim, according to Mahmoud, was now, shamelessly, back with the rebellion, running his own militia once again. There had even been media reports suggesting that his group was among the ones benefitting from the CIA-backed

aid program operating in southern Turkey.<sup>3</sup> There was nothing that the crowd of oppositionists close to the western media could do about it. They had no guns to enforce any objections they might have. Thus the realities of power. The nice pro-western types did the explaining and the connecting. The jihadis and criminals did the fighting, and the kidnapping, and the trading in human flesh, and got away with it.

The emergence of the Islamic State in Syria had led to a fading of western interest in the destruction of the Assad regime. It had also brought about a recalibrating of the Turkish position. From Erdogan's point of view, IS hadn't always appeared necessarily a bad thing. The jihadis were keen to challenge the Kurdish nationalists of the PKK and its Syrian franchise. These were the forces that Ankara was really worried about. But with the commencement of IS's war against the West, a policy of benign indifference toward the jihadis was no longer possible. So Turkey had begun to act against the IS presence in the country. IS hit back – by shelling the town of Kilis and by activating its cells within Turkey itself, and carrying out a bombing at Ataturk airport in Istanbul.<sup>4</sup>

As a consequence, the border fence had been revamped and replaced with a wall along some sections of the frontier. And the army no longer took bribes. Anyone seeking to make a run to or from Syria faced a good chance of being shot dead (back in 2012, the soldiers used to just fire in the air, except in the Kurdish areas).

Something else had become plain. By mid-2016, it was obvious that victory in the sense that the rebels had originally understood it was no longer a possibility. There would be no triumphant march on Damascus, no raising of rebel and Islamic banners over Mount Qassioun. The Russians entered the battle actively on the regime side after September 2015. This put paid to any such hopes.

This left the rebels stranded, beached. They still had plenty of men, they still had control of some areas of land. At that time, they still had the backing of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and, most importantly, Turkey. They were not destroyed. But victory was no longer a possibility.

And yet the rebellion also did not appear to be close to complete defeat. The regime had troubles of its own. It had powerful friends but lacked loyal and organized manpower on the ground.

For the rebels and their supporters in the border towns, what all this meant, mainly, was waiting.

A whole community of exiled Syrians connected tangentially or directly to the uprising had settled in Gaziantep. To wait. They would gather in the summer evenings in a number of establishments to drink coffee and smoke nargileh, and to talk about places they had lost and remembered. Something of a look of

permanence was beginning to emerge in this. Many had found jobs and rented apartments. They swapped exasperated, amused stories about their Turkish hosts and so on.

Meanwhile, the rebel organizations maintained their quiet presence. In apartments in echoing buildings off the main streets, with paint peeling off the walls and stone floors.

The Islamic State, in its invisible form, was there too. Every so often, its presence became manifest. In late December 2015, IS murdered Naji Jerf, a prominent journalist and critic of the movement, in downtown Gaziantep.<sup>5</sup> Two more people were killed in an IS suicide bombing in May 2016. “You should be careful here. It’s less normal than it feels,” the receptionist at the Ibis Hotel told me, with a smile.

“Of course, if we’d thought logically, we’d never have begun the revolution. We went out bare-chested in front of the regime,” that was Yasser of the Nour al-Din al-Zinki brigades, one of the Islamist rebel militias. “We lost a lot – but we’re continuing.” Yasser was from Aleppo province, and helped us in locating the representatives of the various militias. I spent a lot of time around the Zinki members.

This militia was officially Islamist, but many of its members did not seem particularly devout. It also had a reputation for criminality. Later, its name would become briefly notorious after members filmed themselves beheading a 12-year-old Palestinian Syrian boy on July 19, 2015. The Zinki fighters in the video claimed that the boy was a “spy” for the Assad regime.<sup>6</sup>

There was a bewildering profusion of rebel militias by this stage of the war. Many of the original formations had ceased to exist or split into component parts. In the northern Aleppo countryside, the Americans were supporting some of the small, non-Islamist groupings for their war against Islamic State. The US had established a coordination center staffed by CIA personnel in southern Turkey, commonly referred to as the Musterek Operasyon Merkezi (Joint Operations Center, or MOM). In addition, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar had their own networks providing support to their favored rebel units. The rival (and more successful) program of support for the Kurdish-led SDF was run out of the Defense Department.

There was also a profusion of battlefronts, each containing a different mix of rebel fighting groups. The first of these was north of the strips of territory held by the government and the SDF in the Nubl and Zahraa area of northern Aleppo province and reaching to the Turkish border. In this small area stretching from Azaz to Marea, militants supported by the US were fighting against the Islamic State, which controlled the area immediately to the east. The rebels here had also

fought against the Kurdish forces in the Afrin canton, which bordered this enclave to its west. This area functioned as a kind of reservation for the small non-Islamist groups associated with the old Free Syrian Army brand.

A second conflict arena was besieged Aleppo city itself. Here the insurgents were fighting the Assad government and its allies. The last exit from insurgent-controlled eastern Aleppo, the Castello Road, had effectively been sealed by Assad's forces in July 2016 after coming under intense government artillery fire since April 2016. This had grave implications.

With the Azaz–Marea pocket to the north effectively sealed off, the insurgents could no longer bring goods and personnel from across the Turkish border via the Bab al-Salameh border crossing into the part of the city which they controlled. Supplies had thus been brought in by a much longer and more circuitous route – from the border town of Reyhanli, through the rebel-controlled countryside of Idlib and Aleppo provinces, and into the city by the narrow corridor of Castello Road. The closure of the road left eastern Aleppo effectively cut off from resupply. The stage was set for its later reconquest in its entirety by the forces of the regime, Iran and Russia.

The third zone of conflict consisted of the southern countryside of Aleppo and of Idlib and part of Latakia and northern Hama provinces. This was a far larger area and neither the SDF nor the Islamic State had forces operating here. Instead, it was an arena of conflict between the Assad government and the rebel militants only.

In this larger, southern conflict arena the dominant rebel grouping was the Islamist Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) alliance. This alliance consisted of three main component militias – Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, Jabhat al-Nusra and Faylaq al-Sham (Syria Legion), in addition to a number of less significant groups. As of July 2016, the Jaish al-Fatah force was by far the most significant insurgent alliance in northern Syria.

The Salafi-jihadi Ahrar al-Sham was the most powerful insurgent group in north west Syria. It had between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters. Its members were also influential in other frameworks. Formed in mid-2011, the group brought together a number of Islamist and Salafist militias under a single banner.

Jabhat al-Nusra constituted the official franchise in Syria of the core al-Qaeda network, with about 15,000 fighters organized under its banner.

The third significant militia in Jaish al-Fatah, Faylaq al-Sham, was not a Salafist-jihadist group like its two partners. Rather, it emerged from the many opposition groups associated with Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamism in northern and north west Syria. It was formed on March 10, 2014 through the unification of 19 insurgent brigades active in the Homs, Hama and Idlib areas.

Faylaq al-Sham had around 4,000 members.

So the rebellion had evolved into this astonishing and confused alphabet-profusion of organizations and fronts, with no real strategy for victory. But, in spite of their organizational diffusion, the rebels had a number of points in common. In all our meetings, two of these immediately became clear.

The first was that none of them would contemplate any compromise over the key issue – the fate of Bashar Assad. Assad had to step down, and that was that. The rebel fighters looked pained at the very question. “Do you know how much we have suffered in all this?” they would ask, “How many have died?” I did know, I would say, and would add that this wasn’t what I had asked. I didn’t question the rightness of the dictator’s removal. The question, however, was how this was to be achieved. On this, given the balance of forces, no-one had an answer.

Something about this emergent situation reminded me of the Palestinians. In exile, entirely refusing to accept the evident reality of their situation, and preferring to speak in terms of grand matters of principle rather than practical politics. It wasn’t an encouraging comparison.

Meanwhile, the gap between declarations and reality was widening. And time was passing.

Behind all this was the second point of commonality: a very evident bone weariness. The rebels had been fighting for five years. They were very, very tired. Things had not turned out as expected. The weariness made itself felt from behind the old dutifully recited slogans. Bassam Haji Mustafa, an ethnic Kurd and a senior member of Nour al-Din al-Zinki in Aleppo, tried out the old language on me. We were speaking via Skype. We in the Ibis Hotel in Gaziantep, Haji Mustafa in besieged, rebel-controlled eastern Aleppo. “The Free Army isn’t the whole rebellion,” he told me. “Only the military part... there are activists, youth, political parties, artists. The Syrian people are united in seeking freedom. The revolution is continuing.”

And so on. Hopes and slogans repeated because it felt like surrender to abandon them. So I asked him if there was really any revolution anymore? What made the Sunni Arab military organizations of which the rebellion consisted any different to other sectarian gunmen in Syria? At which Haji Mustafa calmly conceded the obvious. Namely, that four “projects”, as he called them, were currently in existence in Syria. These were “the Assad regime and its allies; the [Kurdish-led, US-supported] Syrian Democratic Forces; Islamic State; and the rebellion.” The problem for the rebels was that they were no longer even among the strongest of these. Rather, they were just holding on.

Assad, of course, was weakened too. As Haji Mustafa noted, “The regime is

no longer an organized force. It is a mixture of many components – Iranians, Lebanese, Iraqis.” Throughout the war, the main problem for the regime had been the issue of manpower. This was a structural flaw, which Assad’s side could never resolve. Its war effort on the ground at that time was made possible because of the contributions of its many allies. This flaw enabled the rebellion to avoid complete defeat.

But the rebels had a parallel structural fault – their chronic disunity. This had now reached an acute stage with the proliferation of these tiny militia groups across the north. But the jihadis of Jaish al-Fatah were the main act, Sunni political Islam was now the hegemonic presence among the armed rebel groups. The problem with the domination of this style of politics, aside from its innate qualities, was that it made western support for the rebels more difficult, and risked leaving the rebellion alone to the mercies of Russian air power. No western power would take any risks in favor of al-Qaeda-related forces, no matter how brutal their enemies.

In any case, the simple and very apparent fact was that the rebellion had failed to break any of the patterns of regional politics – sectarianism, militarism and paranoia were all deep in its DNA.

One afternoon, we went to interview some commanders of the Fawj al-Awwal (First Regiment), a small rebel grouping which was one of the fragments of the old and once powerful Tawhid Brigade of Aleppo. I remembered my time with the men of Tawhid in Aleppo city in the summer of 2012 and I was keen to revive the acquaintance. It was Ramadan and it was a summer afternoon. A young ginger-haired man in the apartment maintained by the organization in Gaziantep recognized me immediately – “Saif al-Dawli, right?” he said, mentioning the name of the Aleppo neighborhood where we had run into fighters of the organization in 2012. I remembered him too. He was the son of Haji al-Bab, the distinctively ginger-bearded Tawhid commander who we had interviewed, a few hours after the bombing at the Dar al Shifa hospital. I remembered the fierce confidence and certainty of the Tawhid men at that time. The prospect of victory near.

Stocky, black-bearded Ahmed al-Imam was deputy military commander of his organization and a veteran of much combat. He did not attempt to disguise the nature of the situation faced by the rebellion. His account was stark: “There is a ‘joint front’ between the [Assad] regime and [Islamic State]. PKK terrorists are also fighting us, supported by Russia and America, as a knife in our back... they have all the energy – we have nothing... but for us it is [a matter of survival]. We have no choice but to continue.”

So what was the plan to change this? “We have no clear strategic plan. The

regime is supported by powerful countries, and the allies of the Free Army are weak.”

Was the rebellion finished, then? Ahmed al-Imam shrugged; “To be or not to be. No choice but to continue.”

This was refreshing after a week of rebel commanders proclaiming the justice and pathos of their cause, calling down hatred for their enemies and avoiding discussion of specifics. Al-Imam, at least, spoke in plain and clear terms and seemed to have a grasp of the essential realities.

Then he began to offer his deeper explanation for this state of affairs. The problem, he suggested, was that the US and the Shia in Iran were in alliance against the Sunnis. This was producing the current isolation of the Free Army and its allies. What, I asked, was the explanation for the alliance between the US and Iran? Who or what might be responsible for producing this state of affairs?

The factor responsible, according to Ahmed al-Imam, was the old and nefarious enemy – Israel and the Jews. Israel’s alliance with the Shia, he suggested, was behind the US stance. The Israeli–Shia alliance, in turn, was apparently of long standing, and was evidenced by the fact that a large number of synagogues were able to function in Iran, while Sunni mosques were banned.

He spoke with a sort of calm venom, in the dry apartment, with the summer sun outside and not even a drink of water available (due to Ramadan). Then he offered me the chance of accompanying his fighters into Syria. I declined.

The First Regiment crowd in that apartment exemplified the alliance that remained of the rebellion. There were some secular and liberal young Syrian types still around them, all Sunnis in terms of sectarian origin, of course. These ones were genuine in their modernity and connectedness to the West. They did irony and self-righteousness on Twitter and Facebook in the manner of their generation. But the hardcore, the fighters, weren’t those kind of people. Ahmed al-Imam was impressive in his way. He was also quite typical of the pathologies that kept the Arabic-speaking world poor and torn by wars. We left shortly afterwards.

Here was the rebellion approaching twilight. A few months later, rebel-controlled eastern Aleppo would go down in fire and smoke. It was easy to understand Ahmed al-Imam’s anger at the West. Assad had allied with forces that stuck by him and saved him. The rebellion was aligned with weaker and far more feckless backers. But given the political style that dominated the rebellion, it was also not hard to empathise with those westerners who wanted nothing to do with it and, indeed, who saw it as a manifestation of precisely the political orientation – Sunni Arab political Islam – which constituted the main antagonist to the West, in terms of an immediate threat to life and limb.

In any case, there was little to be done by this stage. The rebellion appeared to be set to hold on in some form or other in the rural badlands of Syria. But it had long since ceased to represent anything even vaguely resembling a more hopeful alternative to the Assad regime. Rather, the two sides had, by mid-2016, come to quite closely mirror one another. Both were disparate collections of sectarian gunmen, loosely organized in the case of the regime, and unorganized in the case of the rebellion. Destined to fight one another to the end.

It was the memory of the refugees crowded along the border in 2012, of the martyrs' mothers in rural Idlib and of people like Mahmoud and Fathme who truly wanted some better, more open society for their country which cast all this in the tragic dimension. By mid-2016, it was clear that there would be no reversing it.

## Notes

- 1 Kilo, a Syrian journalist of Christian background, emerged as a prominent figure in the Syrian opposition during the “Damascus Spring”, the short-lived period of hope for reform after the accession to power of Bashar Assad in 2000. Kilo was jailed for three years in 2005 after signing the Damascus Declaration, which called for widespread reform in Syria. <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48921?lang=en>
- 2 Anthony Loyd, “Kidnapped in Syria: Anthony Loyd’s Harrowing Story,” *Men’s Journal*, October 2014. <http://www.mensjournal.com>
- 3 Anthony Loyd, “The Man Who Shot Me Now Works for the CIA,” *The Times*, September 3, 2016. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk>
- 4 “ISIS Leadership Involved in Istanbul Attack Planning, Turkish Source Says,” CNN, July 1, 2016. <http://edition.cnn.com>
- 5 Rengin Arslan, “The Death of Naji Jerf and the Battle Facing Syria’s Citizen Journalists,” BBC Online, January 13, 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk>
- 6 “Child Beheading in Syria Triggers Backlash Against Rebels,” Associated Press, July 20, 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com>

# 12

## BEFORE MOSUL

Black smoke was rising from the Qayara oilfields as the refugees huddled in the shade. They had arrived that morning – from ISIS-controlled territory a little further west. From Jahala village. These were Iraqi Sunni Arabs, who had elected earlier that day to risk an escape from Islamic State territory across the desert – a route ending in certain death if caught by the jihadis. “ISIS have set fire to the oilfields,” one of them told us. “The smoke makes it impossible to breathe; 12 or so people every day need the hospital. It’s impossible to stay.”

So they had set out in the early dawn, just after first light. A convoy of men, women and children. “The best time is before the sun rises, when ISIS are sleeping. We used that time to come over,” said a young man from among the group.

Now they were exhausted, grimy, but safe. The Peshmerga fighters of General Mala Mahdi were quizzing the men, looking for any indications that they might be IS members sent to infiltrate the lines. It appeared that all was well.

After a while trucks arrived and the families began to load their belongings. Their destination was one of the large refugee camps established by the government of Iraq. There would be little by way of comfort there. But there would be shelter, food, water – and a chance to breathe air not polluted by the black smoke of burning oil.

We were a few kilometers from Mosul city. Early autumn 2016. And as the war between Assad and the rebels ground on further west, the fight against the entity ISIS had created was beginning to move toward decision. The offensive to take Iraq’s second city from Islamic State was at an advanced stage of preparation. Each day, the Erbil–Mosul highway was jammed with trucks and military vehicles taking equipment and ammunition to the frontline positions.

The act of firing the Qayara oilfields in an area under their own control

exemplified the florid insanity with which the name of Islamic State was associated. It was intended to obscure visibility for attacking aircraft. With a stroke it also rendered the lives of the civilians in the area unlivable. The result was that Sunni Arabs, like the refugees from Jahala, were forced to seek sanctuary with the Kurdish Peshmerga. The Sunni Arabs, of course, were the very people in whose name IS waged its jihad.

The reduction of the area of IS control was, by that time, an advanced process. The jihadis had lost 50 percent of their holdings in Iraq and around 25 percent in Syria. The city of Mosul was the next, looming target. It promised to be a fiercely contested fight. But the eventual result was not in doubt. The jihadis were outnumbered and outgunned. They were going to lose the city.

Unambiguity ended, however, when one came to consider the state of affairs among the various forces seeking to carry out the task of defeating IS. Here, there were clashing agendas, different and rival traditions, and the almost certain prospect that the defeat of IS would constitute only an episode in the wider story of conflict in the Levant and Mesopotamia.

I had come back to Iraq to get a sense of the mood of these various elements in the coalition arrayed against the Islamic State.

The forces arrayed against IS included brutal and sectarian groups. Nevertheless, anyone who remembered the shock and panic of the summer of 2014, the terrible stories of the Yezidi and Christian refugees and the fate of those who were unable to escape the rampage of the jihadis could not remain unaffected by this fight. I recalled the eyes of the children at the Newroz refugee camp, just down from Sinjar Mountain, in that black August. I wanted the Islamic State to be destroyed.

Mosul had the same symbolic significance for the fight against IS in Iraq as Raqqa city did in Syria. The latter was the “capital” of the Caliphate. But Mosul, Iraq’s second city, was the largest urban prize that the organization had acquired during its lightning advance across the country in 2014. There was a sense all around of something very big coming down the road. But, for now, the frontlines were inert as preparations for the offensive continued.

We made our way from the refugees at Makhmur to the operational headquarters of the Iraqi security forces. The Iraqi regular army was a new experience for me. It was a profoundly different creature from the irregular units I was used to working around. None of the poverty and devotion of the YPG or the fanatical commitment of the Shia militias or the Syrian Sunni Islamist rebels to be found here. A seedy atmosphere of boredom and potential violence pervaded the army bases. The conscript soldiers weren’t much interested in conversation. They would stare at you without words for a long time, as though

longing for an order to set aside the annoying niceties and give the foreigner a well-deserved beating.

“I don’t believe in Shia and Sunna, Kurd and Turkmen. We are all citizens,” Major-General Najem Jbeiri had said, as we sat in his office at the main ISF base south of Mosul. Jbeiri was the commander of Nineveh operations for the Iraqi army and the officer commanding the Mosul operation. He was a big, well-built and very tired-looking man.

Jbeiri’s story wasn’t that of a run of the mill Iraqi army officer. Graduating the officer’s school of the old army in 1979, he had served as a brigadier-general in Saddam’s air defense units in the war of 2003. Later, he had begun to work with the Americans, as mayor of Tel Afar, west of Mosul, in the period 2005–8. Then he had made his new home in the US.

Now he was back, commanding the army in Mosul and still declaring his loyalty to the idea of a united Iraq. “Politicians use sectarianism to keep their positions. I don’t believe in it,” he told us. “If we stay locked to the past, we’ll go to hell. If we forget what happened, we’ll have a chance for the future.”

The army, he asserted, had moved on since the disastrous performance of the summer of 2014, when IS took Mosul and was stopped at the gates of Baghdad and Erbil. Better training, better weapons, increased motivation would produce different results.

Jbeiri, when he was not commanding troops for the Mosul offensive, was a research fellow at the Near East and South Asia department of the National Defense University in Washington DC. He had come a long way from Saddam Hussein’s anti-aircraft units. His paeans to forgetting the past, embracing shared citizenship and rejecting sectarianism were certainly of the stuff that his DC employers would be happy to hear.

They did not, however, reflect the sentiments of other, no less important players in the area of the Mosul battlefield. They also did not resemble the frankly sectarian nature of the Shia-dominated government, which relied, in good part, on the efforts of the Shia Islamist militias. Jbeiri’s staff included earnest, fresh-faced US army officers who spoke in similar, bland terms. There was a stark disconnect between this PR phraseology and the underlying realities.

In addition to the Iraqi security forces (ISF), the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Shia militias of the PMU (Popular Mobilization Units) or Hash’d al-Sha’abi and the Sunni militiamen of the Hash’d al-Watani (National Mobilization) were all set to take a prominent part in the battle for Mosul.

The Kurdish Peshmerga, controlling the entrances to Mosul from the north, east and west, held a starkly different view to the representatives of the Baghdad government of the nature and meaning of the battle in which they were engaged.

For them, the sweet words of the Major-General about shared citizenship concealed a bitter history, and a state structure in which they now had no desire to remain.

Senior Peshmerga commander General Bahram Yassin, speaking at his HQ in Bashiqa overlooking Mosul city, put it in stark and clear terms: “The process of capturing Mosul will be a stage in the achievement of Kurdish independence. President Barzani has already started the process by announcing a referendum. Our main goal is getting to independence.”

I reminded him of a recent statement by Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi urging the Kurds to move no further toward Mosul on their own. Abadi had warned of the possibility of resistance to the Peshmerga from the Sunni Arab inhabitants of the city.

“The Peshmerga have been responsible for security around Mosul since 2003,” Bahram Yassin responded, “and, regardless of what Abadi says, we are going to move forward... And we will have clear conditions for taking part in the Mosul operation. There is a need for clarity on who will control the city after the operation is concluded, including taking into account the interests of minority communities. We will not take part in a process where we lose many men, and are then asked to leave the areas we conquer.”

The Bashiqa base was on a ridge offering a clear view down to the city. Mosul was spread all before us, with open fields and a few small villages separating the Peshmerga from their expected objectives. The city looked like a dark shadow on the landscape. Everything was quiet and serene, though.

General Bahram Yassin was a young, fit-looking and telegenic commander, with a reputation for treating foreign journalists well. He had gathered a small and colorful entourage around him. One of these was a Scottish former soldier of the Queens’ Own Highlanders, Alan Duncan.

Alan Duncan was an example of the westerners who came to volunteer with the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan. They were a different crowd from the YPG people in Syria. The Peshmerga volunteers were nearly all former soldiers, experienced men often of conservative political outlook. They were not interested in the radical social agenda of the YPG/PYD/PKK. They had come to fight the jihadis, and to defend the Kurds. Usually in that order. Many of them were adherents of the anti-Islamist politics growing in Europe at that time in response to the jihadi threat.

General Bahram Yassin, however, was concerned not only about IS, but also, in particular, about the presence of the Shia militias in the Mosul area, and of their agenda. “The Hash’d al-Sha’abi are a big challenge to the future both of Kurdistan and of Iraq. Many of them are trained by the Iranians. They receive

support from the government. They are seeking to secure an area in the west of Mosul, which will be a channel to Sinjar, and from there to Syria. They want to complete the ‘Shia circle’ from Iraq, to Syria and to Lebanon.”

According to a rumor commonly heard in Erbil, Shia militiamen were to be found among the Iraqi army forces, wearing the uniforms of Iraqi troops. That is, of the troops of Major-General Jbeiri, who disliked sectarianism and wanted to forget the past.

As if things were not complicated enough, Yassin and other Peshmerga officers accused the rival Kurdish PKK of collaboration with the Iran-aligned Shia in this task. They were deeply suspicious of the presence of a few hundred PKK fighters in the Sinjar area, to Mosul’s west.<sup>1</sup> The PKK, meanwhile, dismissed these charges and issued a counter-accusation regarding the KRG’s closeness to Turkey at a time when it was repressing its Kurdish population. It was all business as usual – internecine wranglings, arcane divisions.

It was also very clear that the KRG had recovered much of its composure since the summer of 2014. The Peshmerga had reconquered all territory lost in that year. This underlay the clear determination to avoid ceding any ground taken. As General Mahdi in the Makhmur area had put it, “We clean the area, we make the border, we opened the way. Where we gave our blood, only with blood will we leave.”

There were other, stranger forces deployed alongside the Peshmerga before Mosul. Under the protection of the Kurdish Peshmerga, but separate to it, the Sunni Arab Hash’d al-Watani was training and preparing, but little noticed by the outside world. This was the Sunni Arab force set to join the fight against IS.

Their training base in the Bashiqa area was an entry into a world generally held to have vanished. The officers of the Hash’d al-Watani were all veteran commanders of Saddam’s army. There, on the plains of Nineveh province, in miniature, they had created a version of the military culture they knew. To enter their base was to encounter, in all its faded glory, the once menacing military style of the Iraqi Ba’ath party. Strutting parade ground sergeants wearing World War II-style British gaiters and whitened belts and webbing. Much saluting and standing to attention. An odd sense of having traveled back in time. This came complete with the other Iraqi army stuff – the suspicion and paranoia toward outsiders, the faint but clearly apparent desire to convey menace and intimidate, and the ability to step effortlessly into the language of ringing propaganda.

All rather offset, or rather transferred to the surreal plane, by the fact that these former overlords of Iraq were able to assemble their little force of 2,000–3,000 men only with the permission and under the tutelage of the Kurdish Peshmerga. That is to say, they were under the protection of the very men who,

as young officers, they had chased and harried and hunted through the mountains of northern Iraq, when they were the representatives of a mighty and brutal regime and the Peshmerga only a ragged guerrilla force. But irony was not the strong point of these hulking officers of Saddam's army, so I did not raise this matter with them.

The Hash'd al-Watani was established in cooperation with Barzani's Kurdish government. But its training was provided by none other than the Turkish army. So, on the Nineveh plains, a small Sunni Arab militia was being trained by the Turks, officered by former members of Saddam's army, under the tutelage of a Kurdish government open in its desire for statehood and independence.

And who was this strange arrangement being mobilized against? Islamic State, of course! But then everyone was against the Islamic State. Their victims were the bloody shirt that every party in Iraq and Syria waved to establish their own righteousness. More meaningfully, the enemy of the Hash'd al-Watani, once again, was the Shia-dominated, increasingly Iran-aligned government in Baghdad.

Indeed, the best way to understand this strange but significant initiative was that it represented a notable if tentative entry by Turkey into the arena that Iran had largely made its own in Iraq – namely, the sponsoring of sectarian political/military organizations in neighboring countries intended to advance the cause of the sponsoring state.

Turkish infantry officers, a lot younger and fitter-looking than the superannuated Saddam-era veterans, were overseeing the training of the Hash'd al-Watani volunteers at the base at Bashiqa.

The Hash'd al-Watani was the brainchild of Atheel Nujaifi, a former governor of Ninawah province who was strongly linked to Turkey.

Nujaifi, who I met in Erbil, saw the force as an element in the construction of a federalized, decentralized northern Iraq, divided into Sunni, Shia and Kurdish areas.

Nujaifi had been criticized in the past for statements apparently taking a lenient view of the nature of IS rule in Mosul. He dismissed these criticisms, but it was clear that his main focus was not the iniquities of IS, but rather what he saw as the intention of the government in Baghdad to create a sectarian Shia government, and what this would mean for the country's Sunni Arab minority.

Like Bahram Yassin, Nujaifi saw the future of Mosul as part of a larger struggle to resist Iranian encroachment in the region. The Iranians, according to Nujaifi, wished to make use of Iraq's Shia militias to achieve this goal. "Iran wants to use Mosul to build a corridor to Syria," he told me, "and to dominate the region." The Iranian intention, he suggested, was to "build a revolutionary

army,” through the Shia militias. Shades of the Badr men in Baghdad once again.

As for Iraq’s future, if the attempts at federalism failed and “if the Kurds split and become independent, then Iraq itself will split. The Sunnis cannot go back to the situation before 2014. But we hope this can be avoided. We see the future as a federation for Ninawah involving all the minorities, all of which currently have their own force. Hash’d al-Watani can’t be this force alone – only in cooperation with other minorities.”

So both the commanders of the Peshmerga and their junior partners in Hash’d al-Watani, saw the Iraqi government and, in particular, the Shia militias aligned with it as no less a danger to their respective community’s aspirations as the retreating Sunni jihadis of the Islamic State.

Where was all this heading? The offensive was approaching. Leaflets had been dropped by coalition aircraft over the city, informing its inhabitants that the liberation was imminent and urging them to leave so as not to be used by IS as human shields during the battle. The refugees were continuing to stream in from the IS-controlled areas.

From the frontline positions of General Bahram Yassin’s Peshmerga in Bashiqa, only about 12 kilometers separated the Kurdish forces from Mosul city center, their final objective in any assault. On most days, the frontlines were quiet, just the occasional mortar fire or the crump of heavier ordnance from further off. The fighters spent their days cleaning their weapons, keeping fit and waiting for the order to move forward.

Much fighting and dying remained to be done in and around Mosul city. But the various forces in the “coalition” assembled to destroy IS were already looking beyond the city. Each in a different direction. The Kurdish Peshmerga on the ridges above the city were thinking about independence; the Sunni militiamen under their tutelage also saw little future for themselves in a united Iraq; the Shia militiamen were serving the cause of the larger, Iran-led regional alliance of which they were a part. The PKK were seeking to advance their own, rival Kurdish nationalist project (which they claimed was not nationalist at all). The western-led coalition, meanwhile, seemed to be promoting a somewhat hapless notion of shared Iraqi citizenship which failed to conform to the obvious realties beneath the surface.

IS was the immediate business at hand. It had placed itself beyond the pale of “acceptable” sectarian politics. It had committed the usual Sunni jihadi mistake of picking fights with forces several sizes too large for it. The payback was now approaching. What it all meant was that while there was a strong, underlying sense of justice in the retribution that was visibly building at that time against IS on the plains around Mosul city, the battle itself would not resolve any of the

deeper processes that had produced the Islamic State and that defined the dynamic in both Iraq and Syria.

## **Note**

- 1 The presence of the PKK in the Sinjar area would later become a major point of contention. Turkish fighter aircraft attacked PKK positions in the area on April 25, 2017. <http://uk.reuters.com>

## 13

# IN THE RUINED CITY

“So I’m a sniper, right, and I see four IS guys approaching. I’m on a roof. I take down two of them. Then the rifle jams. And they’re coming forward. So I make it down the stairs, and I throw a grenade as they’re in the courtyard of the house. One of them’s killed outright. The other’s badly wounded. So he’s lying there, in a bad way, can hardly move, so I disarm him, he has a rifle and also a pistol. He’s calling to his friend, it seems. In Russian. He was a Russian. But the friend isn’t answering because he’s dead. So he looks over at me and he can see I’m making the pistol ready. I don’t speak Russian and I guess he realized the friend wasn’t answering. So he looks at me and he says to me in Arabic ‘Don’t you fear God?’ So I tell him ‘no’ and put two bullets in his brain.”

Z. a wounded fighter of the Hash’d al-Watani militia, badly hurt in the fight against IS in the Hay al-Arabi section of eastern Mosul city, finished his story with a delighted laugh.

Then he showed me a picture of the man he killed on his phone. There was a bushy black beard beneath the shattered skull. Then a picture of a damaged Russian passport found on the body. “He was probably Chechen,” I said. “Most of the Russian citizens you’ll find with IS aren’t Russians. They’re from the Caucasus.” “He’s Russian,” Z. replied. “He was speaking Russian.” I began to say something else, and then decided not to bother.

Mosul city, February 2017. We were on the way to the Hay al-Arabi neighborhood, captured from the Islamic State a few days before. Z. was on crutches and with one of his arms bandaged. He had been wounded in the ferocious fight for the area that took place a few days previously. The neighborhood adjoins the Tigris River, which at that time was the line dividing the various forces engaged on behalf of the Iraqi government from the jihadis of IS.

The offensive had proceeded slowly since its commencement, with accompanying fanfare, on October 17, 2016. The Iraqi forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga had reached the outskirts of the city by November 1. But then the going had got tougher. The 8,000 ISIS men in Mosul, facing an attacking force of about ten times that size, proved a ruthless and imaginative enemy. The vehicle convoys of the attacking forces found themselves harried relentlessly by suicide car bombs, careering out of the side streets, halting convoys which would then be strafed with small arms fire, mortars and grenades.

Islamic State used drones in large number for the first time in Mosul. Quadcopters, commercially available toys – but fitted to carry grenades, or cameras for reconnaissance.<sup>1</sup> The jihadis succeeded in creating a terrifying urban battlespace. The death toll was high, in particular among the black-clad special forces of the Counter Terror Service, who bore the brunt of the fighting.

On December 13, the Iraqis paused to consider their strategy. The attack resumed on December 29, beefed up by 4,000 troops from the Federal Police.<sup>2</sup> The tactics had changed. No longer in convoy, the special forces now comprised sections of seven men – on foot, and preceded by heavy air activity and artillery fire. The Americans knocked out the five bridges separating east and west Mosul. The jihadis began to run short on supplies east of the river. The car bombs grew more primitive. Just regular cars filled with explosives now, no longer the armor-plated behemoths of the first days. Harder to spot, but a lot easier to destroy when you did.

And so the government forces started to roll up the neighborhoods of east Mosul. And the jihadis fell back to plan their last stand in the narrow alleys and warrens of the western city. That was where it was up to when I came to Mosul. There was still gunfire from Rashidiyah, the last neighborhood to fall, where the jihadis were holed up. But Mosul east of the Tigris was free from the Islamic State, at least in its visible form.

Hay al-Arabi, adjoining Rashidiyah, was a mess. Huge craters left by the aerial bombing, filled with rainwater. Reminding us of our tiny dimensions, as evidence of aerial bombing always seems to do. Our tiny bones and our flesh. Little doomed creatures running this way and that. The sheer huge destructive power available, and the sense and the fact of the impossibility of escape if your number is written on the bomb.

The fight in Hay al-Arabi had been conducted street by street, and house by house. There were still skeletons of suicide car bombs littering the roads. The people had a way of staring at you, directly, unflinching for a long time. Neither hostile nor friendly. As though they wanted to ask you a question but could not quite find the words.

In one street a very young man, of about 20, approached us. He was bearded, with a scarf wrapped around his neck and with the usual glazed Mosul look. “Come and see that suicide car over there,” he began in Arabic. “There’s something interesting there.” He was leaning very close to me. I had a sudden fear that this might be one of the “sleepers” that IS had left in the neighborhood, zeroing in on me as a foreigner with a camera. But the others didn’t react, and so I didn’t either. I followed him over to the remains of the car and looked at where he was pointing, with a nervous smile on his face. “Rijal, rijal [leg]” he said.

And yes, there it was, plainly visible. A black, toasted-looking human foot. It had presumably belonged to the suicide bomber who had died while detonating this car. No-one had got round to clearing it up yet. “Do you have Facebook?” the young man demanded, as we walked away. “I do,” he continued. “Look me up. My name there is ‘loveyoursmile.’”

We left loveyoursmile to his cars and remains and kept moving. Hay al-Arabi was full of similar macabre items of human destruction. Bombed out houses, and rocks strewn across the streets. Black soot from explosions.

In the soot-covered courtyard of one house, more remains from a suicide bombing. Here, the bomber’s body had not been completely destroyed and one could make out a sort of shape in the lump of red flesh, wrapped in what had once been a black uniform. There was the remains of a crushed skull, but the face had disappeared into a gaping hole.

There was huge damage to a number of civilian houses too. IS had used the primitive tactic of burning tires and oil again to create a cloud of black smoke above the skies of the areas they controlled. The intention – to blur visibility for coalition aircraft, making effective targeting more difficult. And, as in Qayara before the offensive began, the result was greater damage to civilian life and property. Of course, the jihadis could turn such losses into propaganda, so from their point of view, such methods were without a negative side. Their own targeting was on the primitive side, too. There had been damage to civilian houses in eastern Mosul from IS mortar shells falling short.

We passed a row of gutted houses. “That one at the end was used by Da’esh to store weapons,” a middle-aged man standing on the street told us. “So the Americans bombed it. But they hit the next house along too. That was my house.” And he nodded toward the gutted structure, which workers were already engaged in clearing up. “I was on the ground floor when the bomb came and so I survived it. There was no-one else at home. But my son’s an artist and all his paintings were on the first floor so they were all destroyed.”

Eastern Mosul was divided into areas of control of three forces – the Iraqi army, the Special Operations Forces (ISOF or CTS) and the Federal Police. The

black-clad troops of ISOF had taken on the heavy lifting, and suffered heavy losses.

The three forces were a study in contrasts. ISOF were the most impressive, the Iraqi army by far the least. We visited the Najaf Battalion of the special forces in the Beker neighborhood of the city, which they had captured from IS a week earlier. Captain Ra'ad Qarim Kassem took us through the mechanics of the battle from his unit's point of view. Kassem was a well-built young man from Kirkuk, sporting a bristling black moustache. The other officers of the battalion seemed cast from the same mold. A few things were immediately noticeable – none of them were overweight, hardly any of them smoked and they were friendly and welcoming to us. All this made them immediately different to the Iraqi army people I was familiar with.

Kassem stressed the crucial role played by coalition air power in destroying the five bridges between west and east Mosul, preventing IS from supplying their fighters east of the river. The jihadis had tried to move across the river by boat in the hours of night. But the destruction of the bridges had led to the gradual depletion of their resources.

“At the beginning of the operation, we came in mainly with vehicles, and we met with suicide cars and IEDs in the street, so we had to change our tactics,” Captain Kassem said. “So we moved, at that point, to fighting on foot. We'd enter the IS-controlled neighborhoods by night. We'd come in divided into seven-man sections. IS tried to use the suicide cars against them. But on foot we were able to use subterfuge, conceal ourselves, enter houses and so on.” Kassem was a professional soldier. Many of his fighters were very young.

The men of the Najaf Battalion were set to move from Beker south to the village of Bartella over the coming days. There they were to prepare for the next phase of the operation – the conquest of western Mosul. The Iraqi government didn't release casualty figures, but some reports suggested as high as 50 percent killed and wounded in some special forces units in the course of the recapture of eastern Mosul.<sup>3</sup>

We sat and ate lunch with Kassem and a few of his comrades in the battalion's headquarters, in a large private house in the Beker neighborhood; Kassem painted a picture of a chaotic, terrifying combat zone, one in which IS resistance was slowly and remorselessly being ground down.

“Sometimes as many as five suicide cars would attack us at a given time. But as the battle progressed, the number was reduced. Suicide bombers on motorcycles too.”

“We try to shoot down the drones using sniper rifles... but sometimes they're too high, so we just have to hide ourselves.”

Kassem took us afterwards to the Nebi Yunus shrine. Supposedly the grave of the biblical prophet Jonah, it was on one of the two mounds where the ancient Assyrian city of Ninawah was located. Islamic State, who regarded reverence for shrines as evidence of idol worship, had desecrated the mosque there and reduced much of it to rubble. On the day we visited it, the government forces had raised a huge banner of Hussein ibn Ali, icon and martyr of the Shia, over it. This would be visible from western Mosul, and left no doubt as to the sectarian dynamic at work.

With the irony that history favors, however, IS's destruction of the mosque and their attempt to dig tunnels into the hill had ended up revealing an archaeological treasure that outshone the shrine itself. The tunnels led down to an Assyrian palace built for King Sennacherib, who destroyed Babylon. The palace dated back to the sixth century BC.<sup>4</sup> It was a reminder that marauding empires had fought across these plains for millennia. Islamic State and their opponents were only the latest tide of destruction, and presumably not the last. And also, no less importantly, that there were cultures here that preceded that of Islam and the Arabs.

As for the other forces deployed in western Mosul, a visit to the 16th Infantry Division of the Iraqi army, in the northern part of the city, northern Mosul, produced the familiar impression. Here were the strutting, overweight commanders and amused, bored and indifferent soldiers that characterized the Iraqi army. The positions poorly guarded, armored vehicles left outside with no guards placed on them and civilians standing around nearby.

The Federal Police in the Intissar neighborhood in the south of the city were more impressive, their vehicles well maintained, their position properly secured. They possessed an elite force, called the Emergency Response Division, which took part in offensive operations against IS in eastern Mosul and would play a prominent role when the assault on the western side began.

Alongside the three branches of the Iraqi ground forces already mentioned, the Hash'd al-Sha'abi (PMU) were in the city. Most media reports noted that the PMU had been kept out of Mosul for the offensive, partly because of concerns at possible sectarian retribution against the Sunni inhabitants of the city, and at the request of the US-led coalition. The big Shia militias were, indeed, located to the west of the city. There, they formed a kind of blocking force, preventing IS fighters in Mosul from retreating in the direction of Syria.<sup>5</sup>

However, elements of the PMU were in the city itself. The first group we witnessed were members of the Shebek minority, a mainly Shia ethnic group native to Ninawah province, in which Mosul is situated. They belonged to the Quwat Sahl Ninawa (Ninawah Plains Forces) and were mustered 13 kilometers

east of Mosul, in the Bartella area. Their base, flying the PMU flag, was located just a few hundred meters from a facility used by the US special forces.

The second group from the PMU witnessed inside Mosul was the “Hash’d Ashari” (Tribal Mobilization). This was a gathering of members of Sunni tribes opposed to IS, and willing for their own pragmatic reasons to work with the Baghdad government against them.

Their presence was a reminder to avoid simplistic over-use of the Sunni vs Shia paradigm when considering Iraq. The Beduin were interested in resources, power and security arrangements, and saw no reason necessarily to work alongside disruptive and anarchic Sunni formations such as IS. The US had exploited the same pragmatic and power-oriented approach when they turned the tribes of Anbar against the Sunni insurgency during the “surge”.

The government of Iraq, its Shia militias and the Iranians behind them were now engaged in the same business. The loyalty of these tribes cost money and resources, and continued for just as long as such support was provided. Or, as one Israeli former official familiar with these dynamics put it, “The Beduin tribes are not for sale. Not at all. They are, however, available for hire.”

From the PMU’s point of view, it was a smart move to put their Sunni clients into Mosul. It avoided raising the fears of the people of the city, and probably also the attentions of the US-led coalition. It was, nevertheless, a demonstration of power and relevance.

There were unconfirmed reports of Badr Brigade checkpoints very close to the city. But whether or not these were accurate, the PMU were a major part of the fight to clear the Islamic State from Ninawah province, of which the Mosul operation was a part.

This had clear and grave implications on the political level for Iraq. The PMU, in the Iranian style, were gradually building up that mixture of political and independent military power which characterized the Iranian approach. It had so far brought Teheran to effective dominance of Lebanon and a good part of Syria. This strategy was now under way in Iraq, forged by capable cadres such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Badr’s Hader al-Ameri, with Qassem Suleimani of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) above them. This was taking place under the noses of the US and its allies, who had broken and remade Iraq in 2003, but who had yet to understand these dynamics.

On the way out of the city one evening, we came across a convoy of US armored vehicles and artillery pieces trying to find its way to the road to Erbil. The convoy was organized by one of the US Army’s most storied and historic units, the name of which is not relevant here. We went to try to speak to the officers at the head of the halted convoy, expecting to be told to make ourselves

scarce. Instead, to our astonishment, the officers greeted us effusively, asking “Do you know Arabic? Great. Can you help us?”

It turned out that these officers had planned a route down to Erbil and then on to Qayara on their map, without checking with the local Kurdish commanders in the areas through which they wanted to travel. And as it turned out, one of the bridges they wanted to cross couldn’t carry 88mm cannons. But they had also set out without a translator and were hence, when we met them, helplessly trying to explain the situation to drivers who knew not a word of English, while trying to work out how to plot another route, even as the darkness was coming down.

We helped them and set them on their way. Watching these young men, members of the mightiest military on the planet, trying helplessly to make themselves understood and to make sense of their map, it was difficult not to be reminded of the larger confusion of western regional policy.

This confusion was happening in close proximity to the smart, slow assembling of military and political strength by the Iranians, often quiet and unseen, just next door to the western-created forces. The real winners of what was to come were the independent structures of power that the Iranians were building inside Iraq, most visibly manifest in the Popular Mobilization Units. “Iran has its hands all over Iraq,” one Mosul refugee at the Khazer camp outside Mosul told us.

In eastern Mosul, an oddly beautiful if grandiose shell of a mosque that Saddam began building in the 1980s to bear his name was still there. Islamic State used it as a factory to make IEDs and car bombs.

The war of succession to the old order was taking place, amid the ruins of the old structures. In the meantime, at the root level, war in all its suffering and grandiosity and strangeness was the ruler of Mosul, and of Iraq in the first months of 2017 – its subjects the civilians with the glazed eyes, wandering the ruins of their neighborhoods, and the fighters taking their rest and preparing for the fires still ahead.

One thing was clear. However long it took, and despite the suicide cars and the buzzing, murderous UAVs and the suicide bombers bursting into the courtyards, the Islamic State was on the retreat and as a territorial entity was going to cease to exist. That would not, of course, resolve any of the underlying issues which had produced this malignant growth in the first place. But this was the direction of events.

For many of us, the eclipse of the Islamic State meant the closing of a circle. I remembered the Yezidi refugees in the summer of 2014, the desperate children, the refugee tents in the blazing sun. ISIS had perpetrated an enormous evil and it was unambiguously good to witness its defeat. But, ultimately, it was only a

malignant symptom of larger processes – namely, the collapse and fragmentation of Arab states, the war of succession over them and the rise and triumph of political Islam. All these would survive the eclipse of the pseudo-caliphate.

## Notes

- 1 “ISIS Drones Disrupt US-Backed Iraqis’ Fight for Mosul,” *CBS News*, February 25, 2017. <http://www.cbsnews.com>
- 2 “Iraq Re-Starts Mosul Initiative After Month-Long Pause,” *Haaretz*, December 29, 2016. <http://www.haaretz.com>
- 3 Mark Perry, “How Iraq’s Army Could Defeat ISIS in Mosul, But Lose Control of the Country,” *Politico*, December 15, 2016. <http://www.politico.com>
- 4 Josie Ensor, “Previously Untouched 600 BC Palace Discovered Under Shrine Demolished by ISIL near Mosul,” *Daily Telegraph*, February 28, 2017. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk>
- 5 Michael Knights and Matthew Schweitzer, “Shiite Militias are Crashing the Mosul Offensive,” *Foreign Policy*, November 18, 2016. <http://foreignpolicy.com>

## 14

# UNDERCOVER IN DAMASCUS

By early 2017, as the Islamic State headed for eclipse in Iraq, the Syrian war appeared also to be moving toward a strategic stalemate. The Russian entry into the war in September 2015 meant that the prospect for a complete defeat of the Assad regime no longer existed. But the Russians also did not appear interested in helping the regime reconquer the entirety of the country. The result was that while the bloodletting continued, the fragmentation of Syria that the war had ushered in looked set to remain, despite the wishes of the Assad regime and its supporters, and of the Iranians.

The Islamic State in the east of Syria was heading for defeat at the hands of the Kurdish-led SDF, assisted by the Americans. The Turks had inserted themselves into an enclave between the towns of Azaz and Jarabulus. This enclave existed ostensibly to challenge IS, but, in reality, to end the possibility of the Kurds uniting the Kobani and Afrin cantons and thus coming to control the entirety of the border.

The Americans were building landing facilities outside Rumeilan and in Kobani.<sup>1</sup> The Russians, meanwhile, had established a military presence in Afrin. The Americans, British and Jordanians were operating on the still rebel-controlled Jordan–Syria border, concerned both at the presence of an IS franchise in the area and at the deployment of Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah fighters there. This latter issue was, of course, a major concern for Israel also. The Iranians were set on building a contiguous corridor from Iraq via Syria to the border with Israel, using the various clients they had masterfully assembled. The rebellion, lastly, also still controlled a large enclave in the north west.

So Syria was full of conflicting rival interests. The regime had failed to develop a coherent and achievable strategy for regaining control of the country.

And, whatever the details, this situation looked like becoming permanent.

In my own reporting on the wars in Syria and Iraq, there remained a certain absence. I had covered the conflict from a variety of angles – I had spent time with the Syrian rebels, the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish forces, the regular Iraqi army and the Shia militias. The latter experience meant I had made contact with people from all the combatant sides in the intertwined war taking place in Iraq and Syria. I had interviewed Islamic State members. I had not, however, entered government-controlled Syria, nor spent any time with fighters and supporters of the Assad regime. This was a significant missing piece and I wanted to remedy it. The picture would not be complete without this aspect.

Achieving this was easier said than done, however. The regime was wary about granting visas, particularly to people who had previously reported from other sides of the war. And its information structures kept a close eye on all reporting of the conflict. I made a number of attempts to contact Syrian embassies and start the visa process. I got nowhere. I came close to concluding that the regime-controlled areas of the country would remain inaccessible to me.

This was not necessarily a tragedy. Damascus airport was closed, so getting into regime-controlled Syria would almost certainly involve going through Beirut. The airport there was under the security control of Hizballah. A colleague of mine from the *Jerusalem Post* a few years earlier had been caught coming though there. She was not an Israeli citizen and nothing terrible had happened. The airport security had questioned her for a couple of hours and then they had put her on a plane back to Jordan. The security man had warned her not to try to enter Lebanon again. “I never forget a face,” he had said.

I was unlikely to receive such lenient treatment. I was an Israeli citizen and had also taken part in the 2006 war against Hizballah, as could easily be discovered via a Google search of my name. So I did not experience the fact that the Syrian government evidently preferred not to grant me access to the part of the country it controlled as a profound tragedy. It did, nevertheless, limit the portrait of the war that I wanted to make.

Then things changed. A friend, a young American man engaged in work for the Iraqi Kurds, sent me an email with a link to a site inviting applicants for a delegation of “independent journalists and activists” to Syria. The site promised meetings with senior Syrian officials and travel throughout the regime-controlled part of the country.

The organizers of the trip were Jordanian Palestinians, sympathetic to the Arab nationalist ideas ostensibly represented by the Assad regime. I was intrigued at the prospect of spending a couple of weeks in the company of people of this type, and their western analogues. I had known such people only from a

distance.

A curious by-product of the Syrian war was the modest but notable success that the regime enjoyed in promoting itself among an element of the western left. This might seem counter-intuitive. The regime was a murderous dictatorship. The left ostensibly committed to human rights, social justice and so on.

And, indeed, it was only a small minority of the western left which found its way to the information operations of the Assad regime. But they existed, and I suspected that they would be the takers on any such delegation. The self-justification of these western leftist supporters of the dictator derived from a view of the world that saw US and western interests as representing the main threat to global order. In this telling, the Assad regime was a legitimate government, targeted by a puppet uprising initiated by the US, probably with some Israeli involvement. This was a less attractive element of the western left to the free-wheeling anarchists and libertarians who had aligned with the Kurds. The pro-Assad types had adopted certain of the ideas of the old far right, specifically the romantic admiration for political violence and for militarized, authoritarian leadership. Also the perception of conspiracies, probably leading back to Jewish interests. But, grotesque or no, I was looking forward to studying them close up.

Inevitably, participating in a trip of this kind would involve an element of subterfuge. My connections to other parts of the Syrian conflict and, more importantly, my Israeli citizenship and residence meant that openness would have been suicidal. I would need to create a persona for myself that would be convincing both to the Syrian authorities and to my companions on the delegation.

I had some experience in this area. I didn't and don't take pride in such things. The ability to prevaricate convincingly is a grubby and ambiguous talent. But I am generally quite good at this kind of work, and it has its applications. It is a little like being on the high wire. One must keep one's concentration and focus at all costs, ready to navigate any dangers and obstacles ahead, without hesitation and with confidence. One must remain alert to the slightest shifts in personal interactions, and must have an ability to intuitively read situations in real time. And, once you're launched onto the wire, you must see it through. There's no going back, and no safety net.

So I imagined for myself the character I was going to represent. He would be a man of high moral gravity for whom life had not gone entirely according to plan. He was of mixed British and Indian origins, a British father and a mother from the Punjab, both of leftist political persuasion. An early mixed marriage. He had begun a PhD but then abandoned it, and had spent the decades of his

adulthood traveling the world and teaching English. At present, he was engaged as a full-time carer for his ailing mother. As a result of this commitment, he had no time for political activity, but he followed events closely.

As a young man, he had been involved with militant anti-fascist organizations in London. He was suspicious of surveillance by the authorities, and easily angered by memories of historical injustice (hence the lack of an online footprint). His support for the Assad regime derived from radical leftist views. Specifically, he believed that the war in the Middle East was about control of resources and that, from this point of view, Assad's efforts reflected an attempt to prevent western domination of the region and keep local resources in the hands of local governments. However, he was not starry eyed or un-critical of the regime.

I thought that this would be an easy and convincing part to play, precisely because in various core ways it represented who I actually was, or could conceivably have become, just with the vision slightly shifted. I hoped there wouldn't be British people among the other participants, as this would complicate things. Even then, though, I was confident of my ability to carry it off.

I made contact with the organizers of the delegation, using a false name. A dance of courtship began. Throughout it, of course, I had no idea if they had divined my true identity and were hence toying with me, with the intention of getting me to Syria and then handing me over to the authorities. This would have been a notable coup for the regime, to have outwitted and caught a "Zionist" journalist seeking to infiltrate the country. It would have meant that my life would have been over. I would have become a face on the list of those who had disappeared into the underworld of the Syrian regime's places of incarceration.

But had they worked it out? In such matters, one cannot know. You send your messages through, hoping that they are eliciting the response you want. The other side is a blank edifice. Impossible to know what it is thinking. Impossible to verify. Answers arrive. You must interpret them as best you can. And, at a certain point, you must simply take a leap in the dark, board a plane knowing that once it has taken off you can no longer turn back. Or you must decide not to roll the dice. And then you'll never know.

So we got to know each other online. Then, abruptly, the organizers stopped replying to my letters and I assumed they had discovered my true identity and discreetly exited. I sent a reminder, thinking that it would be the last move. A few weeks later, they suddenly reinitiated communication. Things began to come together. A date for the trip was set. There was talk of destinations – Aleppo, Damascus, Palmyra, Latakia. We were to fly to Beirut. We would meet at Rafik

al-Hariri airport and, from there, begin the journey to Syria. It was on.

I flew over to London from Tel Aviv to take the flight to Lebanon. I stayed the night with my friend Dave McAvoy. Dave, from east Belfast, had lived in Damascus for a year and knew the Syrian situation intimately. We spent a quiet and slightly strained evening together. I deposited everything that could remotely connect me to Israel at his apartment and set off for the airport again in the morning.

It was in the few hours of solitude between leaving Dave's house and taking the Beirut flight that I had my first real misgivings regarding the whole business. It occurred to me that I might be flying straight into the welcoming arms of Hizballah or of the Syrian intelligence services. I had no way of knowing if behind the impenetrable wall of the other side's responses now lurked an extensive plan for my temptation and capture. Throughout the day, I stilled my nerves by reminding myself that I did not have to take the flight and therefore, logically speaking, was at present in no danger whatsoever. This was a kind of trick that one can play on one's own system. But I knew that, once the time came, there would be no hesitation.

I took the tube from the West End in the direction of the airport. At a certain point, the Piccadilly line forks. One direction leads to Heathrow Airport. The other goes to Uxbridge, where my family were living at the time. It was early April evening and sunny. As the train neared the intersection, it occurred to me that I could still get off and take the right fork. That way lay normality, sanity. A dear family friend had passed away a few days earlier. Heading for there would enable me to attend his funeral. The other way led to Damascus, Aleppo, the Syrian war and the regime. But there was no real dilemma. I knew I'd stay on the train to Heathrow. And I did.

I had expected that the hardest point would come in the five hours of uncertainty between boarding the plane and landing in Beirut. That would be a period when I could no longer turn back, but did not yet know if I had been discovered or not. As it turned out, though, this was not the case. The hardest part was the hour or so prior to boarding the plane, when choice still existed. By this time, the spring evening had faded and it was getting dark and cold. I fretted and watched the minutes tick by.

Once on the plane, though, for some reason I became calm and contented and slept most of the way to Beirut. The sense of normality extended to the customs at Rafik al-Hariri airport in Beirut at 4.30 in the morning. I watched absent-mindedly as the tired officer of the Surete Generale<sup>2</sup> stamped my passport. This had been the moment I had most been dreading. I had visualized it in my mind. The sudden look of consternation on the part of the officer, and then his order for

me to wait. And the appearance of another man, in plain clothes, speaking English. This would be the Hizballah intelligence officer. Hizballah were widely considered to control the airport. They had boasted in the media in the past of having a list of Israel-linked undesirables.

But all was well. Nothing untoward. The Surete Generale men found nothing strange about the visitor from London. I strolled into the airport arrivals area, bought coffee and cigarettes and settled in for the wait. I was supposed to meet with the other members of the delegation at a certain spot at the airport later in the morning.

For a few minutes, I felt enormously exposed in the arrivals terminal. I imagined that Hizballah must have plainclothes personnel everywhere, and that they would approach me once they saw me hanging round for a while. This did not happen. I later heard from a Lebanese friend that the main security in the airport itself was not, in fact, connected to Hizballah. The movement handled the perimeter of the airport and the area surrounding it. I am not sure if this is accurate.

The delegation, once met a few hours later, was a study in contrasts. There was, indeed, a British couple of the pro-Assad leftist orientation. Both in their 40s, he big and fair-haired and smiling, she more restrained and cautious. But there were also a couple of young Americans along because Syria represented a kind of “extreme traveling” destination.

Then there was a Russian professional boxer of nationalist views who regarded Syria as a front in Russia’s contest with the West, a Lebanese Jordanian woman wearing a Hizballah armband and a bespectacled Belgian of radical left views who supported Iran and the Assads. In addition, there were the two Palestinian Jordanian brothers who had organized the whole thing, a Ukrainian lady who was the friend of one of the brothers and a Polish journalist. The latter, as it turned out, was not a supporter of the regime at all. He was of pro-western opinions and had come in order to look into the situation of Christian communities in Syria. The Pole joined us later because he had been arrested for photographing in a sensitive area of Beirut.

No-one seemed especially interested in me and I realized that this would make things a lot easier. I was due to be in close proximity to these people for the next ten days, but that didn’t mean they’d be watching my every move. They were mainly, and entirely naturally, interested in watching their own moves.

The drill for the coming days was Aleppo, then Homs, then meetings and briefings in Damascus. We got across the border without incident and headed for Aleppo. The tour was sponsored by the Syrian Ministry of Information. Its people would be accompanying us throughout the country, and we would be

accredited at the ministry itself in Damascus. A young, rather harassed-looking man called Wada'a appeared at a certain point and joined us. He was the ministry's representative.

I had last been in Aleppo in the summer of 2012. That had been just a few months after the rebellion broke into the city. It had been a time of great hope for the rebels, before the conclusive Islamization of the revolt, and when victory had seemed near.

How things had changed. The regime's "liberation" of the city (i.e. the expulsion of the rebels) had been completed in late December 2016. It had been achieved mainly through the Russian tactic of area bombing.

We entered the city via the east. It was already dark, but one could see the astonishing destruction silently stretched out all around. Endless shells of houses and bombed out buildings. We came in through the Sheikh Najjar district. I remembered the name. I had entered along the same highway with Zaher Said and Meysoun, in August of 2012. There had been positions of the rebels, and of Ahrar al-Sham, all around the same intersection. Now it was quiet, bereft of people. This was what defeat looked like.

And yes, of course, the rebellion had been most likely all along to have ended up in the hands of the jihadis. And there was perhaps little in truth to mourn for. But, all the same, I remembered the rooms in which Abdullah al-Yasin and his friends had made their positions, Abu Saumar and the long defunct Afhad al-Rasul Brigade. Sweat, and fatigue, and desperate courage. And the regime planes overhead in the summer skies. The barrel bombings and the attack on Dar al Shifa hospital. What had happened since clearly dwarfed any of that. Indeed, the scale of the evident destruction across the eastern part of the city was hard to comprehend. War against civilian populations, intended quite unambiguously to render life impossible in the area beneath which the bombers were operating. A simple, brutal tactic. And it had worked.

The western part of the city, which the rebellion had never reached, was a stark contrast. Restaurants and hotels were operating. The street lights were on. People were out enjoying the spring evening. The contrast was, I felt, like that between a dead body and a living being.

My companions were excited at the sight of the "liberation", of course, and I rapidly learned a new terminology to use about the war. There was no "civil war", still less a "revolution" (the term the opposition and the rebels preferred). Rather, what was going on in Syria was a "crisis". The crisis pitched the "Syrian Arab Army" (not "SAA", the regime supporters didn't seem to like to use the acronym, for some reason) against the "terrorists". And what appeared mainly to be happening now, to their evident happiness and relief, was that the terrorists

were being driven back and the forces of legitimate government pushing forward.

This view of the conflict was, of course, embedded in a broader perception of the region, which appeared to be shared between the Syrians on the regime side and their foreign supporters. According to this view, a general plan was under way to destroy the government of Syria, for nefarious purposes. There were a variety of versions of this account. One telling placed the blame on the Qataris. The war had been fomented, it was said, because of Syria's refusal to allow the construction of a gas pipeline across its territory from Qatar to the Mediterranean.

But the general view, unsurprisingly, held a different factor to be at the center of the conspiracy.

"Syria refused to make peace with Israel," L., from Jordan, one of the participants in the delegation, told me, "so they decided to start the war and bring down the Syrian government. They will only allow puppet Arab governments who do what they say – like Jordan and Saudi Arabia."

"There was the Iraq war, of course. And then there was the war of 2006, which was supposed to defeat the resistance. Then, when this failed, they decided to try the 'Arab Spring' instead." "They" being Israel, and perhaps the Jews, whose plans and schemes were evidently to be found behind everything.

And "There are six countries in the world whose banking systems are not controlled by the Rothschilds – Syria, Iran, Iraq, Russia and China, and Gaddhafi's Libya – so these are the countries that we are attacking." That was M., the male half of the British couple.

I had heard a precise mirror image of this theory from Ahmed al-Imam of the Syrian rebels on the Turkish–Syrian border a few months earlier. In his telling, the conspiracy had involved a nefarious alliance between the Iranians, the Assad regime and Israel.

In the case of Ahmed al-Imam and his colleagues, such claims came in Sunni Islamic wrapping, giving them a more contemporary tone. With the regime supporters, however, there was something especially archaic. Their justifications came in the tones of the old secular leftist Arab nationalism of the 1960s and 70s. With a slight remembered atmosphere of the Soviet Union, third world solidarity, heroic revolutionary slogans.

This, after the late 1960s, was no longer a real political force anywhere. It had enjoyed a second half-life, however, as the rhetorical decoration used in the information campaigns of a number of very brutal Arab police states. Most of these states – Saddam's Iraq, Gadhafi's Libya – were themselves gone. Assad, thanks to his choice of allies, remained. So this language and style remained too

to accompany him.

But it was all paper thin. Because behind the Arab nationalist rhetoric of Syria being the last defiant fortress of pan-Arab resistance, it was plainly obvious that the regime was entirely dependent for its survival on non-Arab forces – namely the Russians and the Iranians.

The Russians were very much in evidence in Aleppo. One would see burly Russian paratroopers, with their distinctive hooped blue and white t-shirts, strolling around the western part of the city. They were friendly enough, but would refuse requests for photographs. The Russian nationalist in our group said that they were contractors, volunteers. He also noted that the Russians generally had contempt and slight regard for the Syrian regime forces, who they regarded as lacking skills and motivation. They had a higher view of Hizballah, however.

We didn't see the Iranians and Shia militia fighters. But they were around too. So the Assad regime and its supporters, for all their antique pan-Arabist rhetoric, were located only on a part of Syria, and were entirely dependent on the support of non-Arab powers for any further advances they would make. This did not have any effect on the righteous fury of their rhetoric.

This rhetoric rapidly became tiresome. Not, chiefly, because it was hostile to forces or countries to which I had allegiance or regard. Rather because of the willed helplessness that lay at its heart. The internal logic of the conspiracy theory, after all, was that nothing “we” could do would make any difference because hidden forces of tremendous power were operating in opposition to us. So there was no need to look seriously at any faults in our own system. On the one hand, any problems were the result of the conspiracy, and hence unsolvable except through resistance to it.

But, on the other hand, because of the invisible, immense power of the conspiracy, there was nothing particularly dishonourable about failure or stagnation, as long as one did not betray or abandon the fight. So failure too contained within it no need for examination of beliefs or practices.

The whole thing produced a rhetoric and, at a deeper level, a mentality of passivity and acceptance, disguised with immense self-righteousness and a superficial impression of confidence. And all, in any case, a thin and flimsy covering over one of the most brutal and repressive police state regimes on earth.

There were a variety of additional coverings. It rapidly became apparent that a major message the Syrian Ministry of Information wanted we foreign sympathisers to take away was the regime's tolerance toward non-Muslim minorities and, in particular, Christians. We were in the country over the Easter weekend and, to this end, we were shepherded to various Christian churches in west Aleppo and then in Homs. There, I watched the western members of the

delegation enjoy their interactions with various Syrian Christian civilians. At the Syrian Maronite Church in Aleppo, a little girl approached us and, in good English, recited to us that she was very happy that the international solidarity movement was supporting the government of President Bashar Assad.

Later, the Englishman M. and I struck up a conversation with a young woman and two of her friends outside the church. “We love Bashar and we hate the Free Army,” the young woman said. “All of us love Bashar.” “Yes,” M. replied, “everyone that I’ve met in Syria has told us that they love the president. Yet in the West we are told that the people of Syria hate him. That he is a dictator who kills his own people.” That was how this man talked. A slow and clear enunciation of words of a type that British holidaymakers often use to make themselves understood to non-English speakers.

The young woman looked incredulous. “What?” she said. “But how can they say this?” “Yes,” our British friend responded. “And, as we know, he was elected in free elections in 2014.” This reference to Bashar’s landslide victory in the rigged “presidential election” of 2014 was evidently too much for this young woman, who replied diplomatically, “Well, he was elected in our hearts.”

“I’ve just been struck by the spirit of defiance,” M. commented after the young woman had gone back to her friends. “The Syrian people simply will not be beaten.”

There was a deeper logic at work here, beyond the stale rhetoric. One way of seeing displays of this kind by the citizenry of western Aleppo would be to imagine that people were mouthing words of support for the dictator because of fear of his retribution, while secretly “hating him like poison.” It’s likely that some people felt that way. But, for at least as many, it seemed to me, there were other factors.

Love for the dictator and commitment to Arab nationalism and fighting the conspiracy might have been empty rhetorical devices. But it was still not hard to see why Arabic-speaking minority communities in Syria – the Alawis, of course, but also the Christians, Druze and Shia – preferred to locate themselves on the regime side. All the evidence suggested that their fate under the rule of the Sunni Islamist rebels would be far worse. If the price of a degree of security was mouthing slogans and even indulging idiotic foreigners – well, this was a price probably worth paying. That was the real logic behind the gaudy and grotesque curtain of the regime’s rhetoric and the parroting of it by Assad’s subjects.

It was difficult to put up with this stuff and remain silent, but I had, of course, a fairly good incentive to do so. Even a slight slip could have rapidly precipitated disaster. One afternoon, as I sat drinking coffee with M., the Englishman, we got into a discussion about the various feuds between different

tour operators in Syria. Predictably, there were a number of pro-regime setups bringing foreigners over on “solidarity” tours and, equally predictably, the organizers all hated each other. But a sentence M. casually inserted into the conversation caused me to start. “It’s not only the other tour operators trying to send spies into our group,” he remarked, “they think that Zionist infiltrators have tried to get in too.”

I gave what I thought was a remark of mild consternation, and continued to listen politely. But my mind was now racing. Back in my hotel room, I began to consider the possibilities. As I knew from practice, it was not that difficult to connect the false name I had used with my true identity, if a person knew what they were doing online. Then there was the abruptly broken and then renewed contacts with the trip’s organizers. Could that have been the result of growing suspicion, and then the developing of a response with the help of the authorities? I went over the behavior of the organizers, identifying a number of aspects which might indicate suspicion.

So, if they had begun to suspect me, what should be my response? For a mad moment, I thought about making for the Kurdish enclave in Aleppo, in the neighborhood of Sheikh Maksoud, and asking for the help of the YPG there.<sup>3</sup> If they were to contact the Kurdish leadership in Qandil, I might have been deemed worthy of protection, given my long association with the Syrian Kurds.

Then I told myself to stop panicking and to calm down. The Englishman’s remark had in no way been directed at me. There was no reason to leap from the notion that the organizers had suspected Zionist infiltrators in the abstract to the conclusion that they had identified me specifically as belonging to this class. On the contrary, as was evident from the remarks of recent days, they tended to identify hidden and nefarious Zionists behind everything. This didn’t necessarily lead to vigilance and effectiveness in policing actual breaches of security. Indeed, quite possibly, it had the opposite effect. Thus I managed to convince myself, in any case. What was obvious was that calm and confidence were of the essence. I had to persuade myself of the manageable nature of the situation to maintain these. I was deep in regime-controlled western Aleppo. There was nothing I could realistically do if suspicion had fallen on me other than to act as if nothing was amiss, and then deny everything if they confronted me. Which wouldn’t do any good, but there it was.

The ruined eastern part of Aleppo had been recaptured by the regime in its entirety. But the fighting still wasn’t that far away. The rebels were located just north west of the city in Kafr Hamrah and Harithan. The strained normality of the street scene in the west of the city would be punctuated every so often by deep, ominous booms of artillery fire from somewhere not very far off. There

were military checkpoints everywhere. The soldiers were jumpy and forbade any photography. They would demand identification if you looked like you didn't belong. I nearly got arrested trying to photograph the Ba'ath party headquarters. We were just a few kilometers from Rashidin, where a large terror attack would take place two days after our departure.

The neighborhoods formerly held by the rebels remained, for the most part, uninhabited. Bustan al-Qasr, for example, which had formed one of the most bloody faultlines between regime and rebels, was now a ghost town. Just a few shops had reopened. A horse and cart driven by a one-armed man was the only traffic passing down the road as we milled about, photographing the ruins. Yusuf was the driver's name. He had lost his arm fighting in the regime's army, he told us. He showed us also the scars of a bad head wound. He had relatives in besieged Kefraya. The rebels had killed his brother. He was proud to have fought for Assad. Now he was taking some vegetables across to sell at the market. The war would soon be over, he said. The terrorists were finished. Wada'a, the Ministry of Information representative, was delighted and plied the man with questions. He responded in humorous and defiant fashion, waving the stump that was all that remained of his left arm.

I was horrified, walking around these shells of neighborhoods in the grey daylight. More than I imagined I would be. For all its manifold faults, it could be said that all those Arab Syrians who wanted a better, saner future for their country were gathered on the side of the rebellion. People like Mahmoud al-Basha, Fathme Othman, Zaher Said and the others. They did not dominate it. Indeed, they were hapless and lost, and had long ago ceded its leadership to people who wanted to go back to the governing codes of the first days of Islam. And yet there were no equivalents even of these hopeless and defeated reformers on the regime side. Here, it was straightforwardly a gathering of the servants and enthusiasts of dictatorship. And here in the city of Aleppo, at a terrible cost, they had been victorious.

Of course, the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurds in the east represented something positive on a different level. But they weren't in the running here in western Syria and were visible only in a couple of isolated enclaves – the Afrin canton on the Turkish border and the Sheikh Maksoud district of Aleppo, to which I had, for a moment, considered fleeing. Here, the war was between Assad and his Shia Islamist and Russian allies and patrons, and the Sunni Islamist rebels only. The Kurds, in any case, belonged to the entirely different national sphere of Kurdish politics. Western Syria was a civil war between Arabic speakers.

The Ministry of Information disapproved of us wandering off on our own and

would demand to know where we had been whenever we did. We were supposed to see only what they wanted us to see. The notion, fairly obviously, was that Syrians permitted to speak to us in the absence of representatives of the Ministry of Information might express less than fulsome veneration for President Assad.

Their determination to prevent this, however, was combined with fairly poor organization skills. Indeed, after a few days the initially somewhat daunting appearance of the regime and its authorities became leavened with an unmistakable added ingredient of evident laziness and incompetence. The Syrian Ba'athist regime was certainly evil, guilty of mass slaughter, indiscriminate targeting of civilians, reducing of an entire population to a state of effective slavery. But, as well as being brutal, its servants appeared somewhat inept and not especially intelligent. I found this reassuring, while having to exhort myself not to underestimate them. The possibility remained, of course, that I was myself being directed and observed. But, on balance, as the days passed, that came to seem less likely.

Nevertheless, I had to continue to navigate with care. On one occasion, at the Jibreen refugee camp, I thought the game was up. Wada'a, the Information Ministry man, received a call on his cell-phone. He approached me with one of the organizers, saying, "Mr. Spyer. Someone wants to talk to you. Can you answer their questions?" Once again, this was how I had imagined my discovery would happen. The ministry people would call to talk to me. I would be separated from the group, invited for a meeting and confronted with the evidence. I managed to maintain what I thought was an appearance of mild curiosity, nevertheless.

But all was fine. Wada'a was involved in some complicated dispute with the local Aleppo representative of his ministry. He wanted, as part of this, to demonstrate that some members of our delegation possessed a level of Arabic knowledge. So I was supposed to speak to her on the phone in Arabic.

A more serious challenge emerged a couple of days later. Syrian State TV were interested in our delegation and in making what propaganda gains they could from it. In Aleppo, a TV crew turned up and wanted to interview a couple of us. As a native English speaker, I was asked to speak.

I was in two minds about this. On the one hand, the idea of appearing on Syrian State TV in the guise of a pro-Assad activist mouthing regime slogans quite appealed to me. On the other hand, I had to think about two things: first, such a recording could be used later to try to discredit me. Not that such an attempt would make sense as it would be obvious that the interview had been conducted in an undercover capacity. But still, this was a consideration. The other, more important issue was that if an interview went out in front of millions

of viewers of Syrian TV, it would only take one person who followed the writings of western analysts on Syria to recognize me and contact the authorities, and all would be sunk. The likelihood of this was perhaps low. But it existed and was enough to make me decide against any such appearances.

The problem then arose of how to sell this to the delegation's organizers, without appearing suspicious. I thought about this for a bit. My first idea was just to wander off when the TV crew arrived and pretend to have got lost. I tried it but was spotted by a member of the delegation wandering around the streets close to our hotel. This was L., the Lebanese Jordanian pan-Arabist. She was of a matronly and commanding temperament and immediately began to helpfully marshal me back to the group. The TV crew had already arrived and were setting up outside the hotel.

Then I had another idea. Approaching one of the group's organizers, I asked if I could speak to him in private. "Listen," I told him. "On the way here, I was called in by the security at Heathrow Airport. I was questioned for about half an hour and they reminded me that there was a warning against British citizens going to Syria. They repeated the warning to me. So I told them that on consideration, I'd probably only go as far as Beirut. But I'm worried that the Foreign Office or someone probably monitors Syrian TV videos, and I don't want to get into trouble on the way back."

The arguments against this being likely were, of course, easy to muster. But I was hoping that the organizers would conclude that while I was reacting somewhat irrationally, this could be explained by my relative inexperience. (I had told them that this was my first time in Syria.) I hoped they would conclude that the best approach would be to allow me to be involved only in ways I was comfortable with. This approach seemed to work. I was excused from participation in the broadcast. A couple of other members of the delegation began to energetically sound off regarding the virtues of the Assad regime and I made myself scarce as soon as the cameras started rolling.

There was an odd, nightly accompaniment to all these maneuverings. Usually, I do not remember my dreams, but, in Syria, I had a series of wonderful and comforting dreams that stayed in my mind in the morning. These were mainly centered on the places of my early youth, places that I associate above all else with safety and well-being. A wooded area close to my parents' home in Hatch End. Camden Town market and the canal on a Sunday afternoon in summer. And people too, friends from my teens and early 20s, men and women. Often I would not be in communication with them. I would simply see them. As they had been, when we were young. Disheveled. And gorgeous. I would awaken with an enormous feeling of well-being.

I had experienced dreams of this kind in Syria once before. In Qamishli, in 2013, the night before we were due to go to the oil town of Rumeilan, and through two government checkpoints. I presume that such things are a kind of compensation that the psyche offers itself because of stress during the waking hours. I wish I could find a way to trigger such dreams without the involvement of the close proximity of the Assad regime.

From Aleppo, we made our way down to Homs. The map of forces showed just how precarious the regime's position was, in spite of the Iranian and Russian interventions. A single highway snaked its way south of Aleppo through regime-controlled territory, with the rebels to the west and Islamic State to the east.

At its narrowest point, near the town of al-Sa'an, the regime-controlled area was just a few kilometers wide. The Ministry of Information, of course, was keen to convey an image of calm and legitimate governance, with just a remaining problem of a few "terrorists" and their nefarious backers. But this was transparently inaccurate. We heard small arms and machine gun fire from the open ground as we stopped by the side of the road.

The devastation in Homs was, as in Aleppo, comprehensive and terrible. Whole neighborhoods turned into wasteland, rendered uninhabitable. Homs had been one of the nerve-centers, the heartlands of the revolt against Assad. Destroying the rebellion there meant destroying much of the city itself. This the Russians had undertaken and had largely achieved. Now, there was a sullen silence about the ruins. There seemed no hurry to repopulate it, or to rebuild.

Our guide in Homs was an ebullient Alawi Syrian lady called Hayat Awad. Hayat wore a pendant around her neck, showing the face of one of her sons who had died fighting the rebellion while serving in Assad's army.

She trudged with us through the dead streets where the rebellion had lived and been destroyed, dispensing the official regime version of the conflict as she did so. "They destroyed everything at the behest of the Jews," she declared, "because the Zionists want to claim that they have the oldest culture, but they were not able to do this because Syria has a history 7,000 years old." We were in a Christian church damaged in fighting between the rebels and regime in the Homs old city at the time.

It seems unfair to single out the words of a bereaved Alawi Syrian mother and local state employee. Casual anti-Semitism of this kind is common and entirely mainstream in the Arab world. No logic is required for it. Consider the claim: Sunni jihadi fighters in Homs had deliberately set about destroying the Christian heritage in the area because they are in alliance with a broader Jewish and Zionist plan to destroy non-Jewish cultural heritage in the Middle East, this in

order to further a plan of the Jews to pretend that theirs is the oldest culture in the area, or the world. Such an idea is obviously insane. It is also to be found among the mainstream of discussion in Syria.

Hayat Awad declared this in front of a small audience consisting of a number of people most of whom would declare themselves progressives, leftists and liberals in their own western homes. Not a word of protest from any one of them. Thus the western supporters of Assad's Syria.

Later, in the bus, she and Wada'a led us in chants of "Allah, Suriya, Bashar ubas" ("Allah, Syria, Bashar and that's all"). This was a popular chant among Assad supporters. We were encouraged to wave little Syrian flags too, and the scene was recorded. I declined to take a flag. I also noticed Hayat and Wada'a looking at each other with amusement as the western supporters of Assad sang and chanted.

All this, the clapping and the flags and the slogans and then the corralling and control were a kind of light and not so serious version of something much more sinister that is a pervasive presence in the police states of the Arab world, or at least those that bother with the elaborate ideological justifications that the Assads have always stuck with.

There is an odd style of intimidation and menace which I associate, in particular, with the Ba'athist regimes of the Arab world, and which I have experienced on a number of occasions in both Syria and Iraq. I think this style derives from the Ba'ath's origins in European totalitarian movements. There is nothing resembling it among Islamist movements. It is instantly recognizable when experienced. If you have watched the scenes where Saddam Hussein is greeted by soldiers who dance and proclaim their love for him and kiss his hand, you will know what I'm talking about.

It consists of an interaction where one person who has power behind him watches with amusement as another performs in ridiculous and humiliating ways, abasing and infantilising himself and going through gestures of submission, in order to avoid harm. There is an implied potential of physical violence about this dynamic. Essential to it also is the shared knowledge among both parties that the one performing is doing so against his will.

I never lived under a Ba'athist regime, of course, but I assume that a person learns this pattern of behavior first through regular subjection to it and then, for some, through the chance of inflicting it on others. It reminds me of the way that a cat will play for a long time with a wounded mouse before dispatching it. Watch the North Korean generals hysterically applauding Kim Jong Un. This is an example of the same phenomenon.

I should add that the individuals with whom I experienced this curious, nasty

cat and mouse dance were not all servants of the Ba'ath and its regimes at the time that I met them. There were the former officers of Saddam's regime at the camp at Bashiqa, who had created a little version of the military culture they knew, under Turkish control. Also the newly branded security services of the Syrian Kurds in Hasakah in 2013. Local working-class men suddenly awarded power over life and liberty. I never experienced it among the Syrian rebels, but I assume this was chance rather than design, since they had grown up in the same school.

Of course, our little scene on the tour bus didn't contain any inherent violence in it. Just a kind of undercurrent of ridicule. Hayat and Wada'a knew, I think, that they were peddling lies. Not that they secretly believed that their own side was wrong, but they were aware they were selling an absurd, sugar-coated version of the situation that contradicted easily verifiable reality. We were the silly children who believed the story. How absurd we must have seemed to them.

From Homs we traveled to Damascus. There, we were due to meet with the Minister of Information and various other functionaries of Assad's regime.

I had worked for many years on Syria, and had never been to Damascus. But it was no great revelation. The city was much as I had imagined it. Sandy-colored brown buildings. A general, not unpleasant feeling of having stepped back into the 1980s. Pictures of Hafez and Bashar and Basil and Maher Assad everywhere. Red regime flags. But, behind the tinny triumphalism, the atmosphere was strained and tense. The fighting was never far away, and was often audible.

The story the regime and its allies were telling the world at that time was that the rebellion was finished and the war in its closing stages. But the rebels had recently launched a counter-attack which had brought them to the Jobar district, just two kilometers north east of the old city. They had pushed in from eastern Ghouta also. The regime with Russian help had halted the advance, but the fighting was still continuing. As in Aleppo, every so often, one would hear rifle and machine gun fire, or deep booms that sounded like artillery rounds.

I remembered how terrifying the very thought of SAA checkpoints had once been to me, in the north, among the rebels and the YPG. Now, of course, I had a regime stamp in my passport, testifying to my legal presence in the country, and there was nothing in particular to worry about. The checkpoints were, for the most part, manned not by regular Syrian troops but by local members of the National Defense Forces (NDF). This was the paramilitary auxiliary force which the Iranians had created for Bashar back in 2012/3 when the acute shortage of available loyal manpower became apparent. Older men, for the most part, and a few women too.

In Damascus, we were under the care of a local man connected to the structures of the NDF. We were shepherded from the hotel to the bus and to our meetings with various officials. It was impressed upon us that we were not to leave the hotel alone, even during periods of downtime. There would be flurries of uncertainty and exchanges if anyone went missing. This was all irritating, but also, by now, in itself informative. The desire to project certainty at all costs was an obvious indication of the precise opposite.

The issue that chiefly concerned me was whether, behind the rhetoric, the regime had any real strategy for the reconquest of the country and whether, indeed, it could still really be seen as an independent player at all. There was a stark contrast in the words of the people we met between the rhetorical certainties and the absence of any practical plan. It was plain to see that Assad would have fallen in 2012/13 had it not been for the assistance afforded by Iran and its proxies, and even with that help available the regime would have been destroyed in late 2015 had Russian air power not appeared in his service over the skies of Syria. The point at which rhetoric and reality either met or did not meet was that of practical strategy. I wanted to try to tease out this contradiction.

My first opportunity to do this was in our meeting with Information Minister Mohammed Tourjman, at his ministry in Damascus. Before the question could be posed, however, we had to listen to Tourjman's briefing on the situation in Syria, which was a more polished and structured version of the sentiments we had been hearing all week.

"There is a plan to divide Syria into cantons, and to keep us weak, to benefit the Zionist entity," the minister suggested. "Everything happening in Syria benefits only one force – the Zionist entity."

The nefarious entity, again. Tourjman noted that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had revealed the existence of this plan when she had spoken of a "New Middle East" to be established in the region.

The Syrian people, however, would not be defeated by this plan: "We have faith that Syria will emerge victorious, and remain united. Whatever they do to spread sectarian hatred and division, the Syrians will remain united!"

The Information Ministry had a somewhat dilapidated feel about it. Old furniture, ornate but threadbare curtains, clerks sitting around smoking in various offices. And, of course, the ubiquitous pictures of Bashar Assad on all the walls. The checkpoints and intersections featured the dictator in military uniform. But the one at the Information Ministry was Assad in a business suit, with a sort of slightly amused but also skeptical expression on his face. An expression saying something like "I am slightly surprised by what I see going on here, but rest assured that I am in control and will proceed accordingly." It was a good sort of

pose for a Big Brother is watching you type of message. I caught myself staring at the picture and being slightly un-nerved by it a few times during the course of Tourjman's talk. The minister himself was a likeable looking man with a modest demeanor, slightly overweight and neatly turned out, suited and tied. He delivered his messages in an affable and friendly tone. Combined with the content of his words, this created a slightly strange sensation.

"America is seeking to export terrorism to Russia and Syria. This is the inhuman, colonial mentality that seeks to control the world. This is what is happening."

And "They talk about barrel bombs and so on. They are fabricating this and making it a big issue. The SAA don't usually use them. They are usually used in training camps."

I remembered the people in the basement at Dar al Shifa, Zaher Said's impassioned description of the noise the barrel bombs made on their way down. The street outside after the bomb had landed. The dead and the wounded. Meysoun's car with the windshield broken and covered in fragments. And the little driver from Azaz superbly indifferent and amused by it all.

But Tourjman was heading for yet more curious pastures as he turned his attention to the matter of Syrian internal politics: "We are the only country in the area which has democratic institutions including a parliament. Syria is an emerging democracy."

I looked around to see how my fellow participants were responding to this. No-one seemed unduly perturbed. On the contrary, they were in agreement. "Above all, religious identities is the umbrella of Syrian and Arab identity," the Belgian observed. "Syria has always been on the frontline of defending Arab identity. And we learn from history that the right will always prevail."

This ritual of unctuous rhetoric and recital appears to be a built-in feature of secular totalitarian regimes like that of the Assads. After the speech ended, I managed to ask my question concerning regime strategy for the reunification of the country. "We have absolute faith that the division of the country is a temporary situation," the minister responded. "The main reason for this faith is that the Syrian people start to understand the extent of the conspiracy and its agenda."

I wasn't asking about absolute faith, I tried to say. I was asking about how you actually intend to do it. But there wasn't time for a second question and soon we were back to the conspiracy across the region to prevent Arab unity.

I tried again with the second minister we met. This was Ali Haidar, leader of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), who held the position of Minister for National Reconciliation Affairs. This sounds like an empty position, but, in

reality, was of some substance.

The regime and the Russians had developed a strategy of surrounding rebel areas adjoining regime-controlled territory, subjecting the fighters and civilians in the area to siege conditions and aerial bombing, and then offering those who wished to continue the fight against Assad the option of leaving for the large rebel- and jihadi-controlled enclave in Idlib province. This was the approach patented in Homs and then applied also in eastern Aleppo. It was utterly ruthless, of course, and consisted, in essence, of terrorising and starving out a particular population and then giving them the option of flight.

It was also enjoying some success. The net effect appeared to be to consolidate government-controlled areas rather than bring about a profound change in the map of the war. But, perhaps by slow and incremental, grinding progress of this kind, the regime hoped eventually to reduce the rebellion to tiny remaining cantons which could then be crushed. Haidar's ministry managed this process.

I was interested in Haidar for another reason. He was the leader of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. Founded in 1932, this curious grouping had looked to be receding into the past, but had received an unexpected lease of life from the Syrian war and the sectarian conflict it had birthed.

The SSNP historically, as its name suggested, was unambiguously modeled on European fascist parties. The party's symbol was a kind of local improvisation on the swastika – a red four-pointed symbol on a white circle against a black background. The SSNP had the paramilitary aspect appropriate to its origins. It stood for an ideology of pan-Syrian, rather than pan-Arab nationalism, which had caused it to see the Ba'ath party which ruled Syria as a historic rival. The version of Syria that the SSNP aspired toward did not consist only of the current dimensions of the country. Rather it also included all of current-day Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip and also, improbably, Kuwait and Cyprus.

From 2005 on, the party had been legalized in Syria and had become a partner in Assad's governing coalition. Haidar was one of two ministers affiliated with the SSNP. In the course of the Syrian war, it had increased its base of support, in particular in the western coastal area, and in particular among younger people on the pro-regime side. It maintained the florid ideological preferences of its earlier years. Its literature referred to the rebels as "internal Jews".

In the 2006 Lebanon war, my own unit in the IDF had come up against fighters of the SSNP in the town of Marjayoun, and had wiped out an RPG-29 crew from among them. The party had erected a memorial to these men in the town, which I had visited in 2007.

Haidar himself was an articulate, dry, bespectacled man, a party intellectual type and more impressive than Tourjman. He was an Ismaili Shia by origin (the SSNP, for obvious reasons, had always done well among minorities, as had the Ba’ath). His son had been killed by the rebels in May 2012, when their car was ambushed on the road between Homs and Masyaf. An ophthalmologist by training, he had graduated together with Bashar Assad from Damascus University.

He noted that 100 towns and villages had “achieved reconciliation.” This included 3 million Syrians affected by the war. The reconciliation efforts, he said, could form the basis for a comprehensive political resolution of the war. UN envoy Stefan De Mistura had, indeed, based his own reconciliation proposals on those of “His Excellency.” (This was how Haidar’s translator, who sat beside him and translated to English, described the minister.)

One must differentiate, he added, between the political resolution to the war and the fight against terrorism. The regime evidently hoped to receive the incremental surrender of the non-jihadi rebels, leaving the groups not backed by any foreign state and affiliated with al-Qaeda to be destroyed. How to reunite Syria, I asked him? “First, we need to get foreign powers to stop supporting the organizations,” he replied, before outlining a rumor prevalent at the time of a possible western intervention to support the rebels in the south and prevent “reconciliation” (i.e. regime reconquest) in this area.

So, again, it was clear that no real strategy for victory existed. The regime was advancing where it could, well understanding its dependence on its backers, and hoping for the best. The importance of militia structures outside of the formal structures of the army and the de facto decentralization of power away from regime bodies completed this picture.

We participants in the Ministry of Information’s tour were being shown the equivalent of Potemkin’s villages. Just as Grigory Potemkin built fake dwellings along the banks of the Dnieper, so that Empress Katherine II would gain a false impression of the lives her subjects were leading, so we were marshaled from our hotel to various offices and told that Assad’s Syria remained a strong, united fortress of Arab sovereignty. And all around was a truncated, divided kingdom ruled over, in real terms, by two non-Arab states – Russia and Iran.

Later, at the Arab Writers’ Union in Damascus, the antique pan-Arabism shaded off into farce, as a mid-morning assembly of apparently not very busy writers competed to make more and more ambitious claims regarding the omniscience of Syria in all fields of human development. The assembled novelists and poets appeared to loathe one another, though they covered this in a treacly politeness. Some things at least were apparently universal. They

struggled to better one another in detailing the extravagance of Syria's achievement. Syria invented musical notation, claimed one. Not only that, said another. Syria also invented the wheel.

And, of course, "The Syrian crisis is a conspiracy meant to protect Israel and the interests of the imperialist countries. Israel aims to create conflict between the Syrians in order to divide us."

Even the death of half a million of their own citizens evidently did not cause the members of the Arab Writers' Union and the more serious figures to engage in a moment of self-examination or self-criticism. The Zionist folk devil could always be invoked instead. Amid the dilapidated buildings and the ruins. I hadn't known quite what to expect behind the curtain of regime-controlled Syria. Something of the grandeur that evil can sometimes cloak itself with, I thought, perhaps. In any case, there was nothing like that. Only viciousness, acres of destroyed buildings, tawdry excuses and squalor, all covered with a layer of fading Ottoman elegance.

On our final evening in Damascus, one of the delegation's participants was threatened at gunpoint by an inebriated Russian journalist. The journalist, accompanied by a Russian soldier in uniform, burst into a bar opposite our hotel, where a few of the younger participants were finishing their evening. He later drew the gun on L., the female Jordanian participant, too, and began to ransack the hotel where we were staying. Then he placed his pistol at the forehead of one of the hotel's employees.

When the participants tried to alert the authorities, they asked if the man was Russian. When informed that he was, they said there was nothing they could do.

This incident, more than any other, summed up for me the true state of affairs in regime-controlled Syria. Behind its gaudy and relentless rhetoric, the Assad regime did not even enjoy sovereignty in its own capital. Sovereignty – that is, the monopoly over the means of violence. In Damascus, Russian citizens could behave like members of an army of occupation. No Russia, no regime, after all.

The question remained: why? Why this tired, reality-denying rhetoric, and the dismissal of all other concerns, and the conspiracies, and the paranoia, and all just a flimsy cover for helplessness and dependence?

The Assads represented a style of Arab politics that was long spent in terms of any ideas it might once have had. What remained was a regime gathered around certain economic interests and, beyond that, sectarian concerns and fear of Sunni political Islam, all protected by the greater power of foreign states, with very different outlooks. This could not be said or admitted. So, instead, the old, tired rhetoric was wheeled out.

This might have mattered less had the forces arrayed on the other side stood

for something better, some chance for more rational development and for channeling the energies and talents of the country's people. But, sadly, in the main, they represented Sunni political Islam. Also a politics of fantasy, of a different type. Between them, they had reduced Syria to a ruin. Bashar Assad was wearing a hollow crown, presiding over rubble.

We left the next day, back to Beirut, after which I continued to London. Ten days undercover was less of a challenge than I had anticipated. I felt like I could have continued almost indefinitely. The trick, it seemed, was to align one's "cover" identity with one's real personality, as much as possible. Once this was done, emotional interactions were entirely genuine, opinions and positions just props, and there was no seam, no contradiction.

It was ten in the evening when the plane touched down at Heathrow. I had expected to feel a great catharsis at the lifting of danger, but it wasn't really like that. I was just very tired and in dire need of a drink. When I left the airport in London it was already dark and I thanked whoever needed to be thanked for the luck that had apparently stayed with me once again. The regime-controlled areas would be sealed to me, as soon as my published articles revealed my true identity. The jihadis on the rebel side too had long ago made the opposition areas too dangerous to access. Even the Kurdish zones were harder to reach because of intra-Kurdish squabbles and the Iraqi KRG's consequent sealing of the border. Still, one way or another, there would be other opportunities. And if the door, for a while, would close, I had done my meager best to bear witness. Insufficient, of course. Incomplete. Only ever the roughest of drafts. But better than its absence.

## Notes

- 1 "US Builds Two Airbases in Kurdish-Controlled North Syria: Kurdish Report," Reuters, March 6, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com>
- 2 The Surete Generale (General Security Directorate) is the Lebanese intelligence agency charged, among other things, with security at the Rafik al-Hariri international airport in Beirut.
- 3 The Sheikh Maksoud neighborhood was an isolated Kurdish-controlled enclave within Aleppo city.

# AFTERWORD

The civil war in Syria expanded in its dimensions at a number of identifiable points. Starting off as a civilian uprising, it morphed into a civil war. From the outset, both the government and the rebel sides had a built-in structural drawback. For the government, it was a shortage of loyal manpower. The regime was built on a narrow base. It could be assured of the active loyalty only of members of the Alawi sect to which the Assads themselves belonged, along with members of other minority sects and certain elements of the Sunni Arab population loyal to the regime. This was insufficient to ensure its survival against an insurgency rooted in the 60–65 percent Sunni Arab majority of Syria.

The rebels, meanwhile, were stymied from the outset by an inability to unite their forces. No single leader or leadership structure ever emerged in the Syrian rebellion. The external opposition structures never succeeded in imposing authority over the fighting groups in the country or, indeed, vice versa. And, inside the country, a bewildering mass of squabbling militias emerged, some limited to local areas, some operating across the country.

The war then magnified into a regional contest, and drew in global powers. The alliance of the regime with Iran and with Russia enabled it to continue its war despite its manpower shortages. From the outset, the Iranians were willing to provide expertise in developing new military structures to plug the gap, and to mobilize Teheran’s own proxies such as Lebanese Hizballah and Iraqi Shia militias to enter the Syrian battlefield and engage on behalf of the regime. Iranian financial contributions proved vital in preserving the regime.

Russia’s role was also invaluable at every stage – initially in continuing to provide arms and preventing any possibility of concerted international action on Syria via the UN and, after September 2015, in the direct military role played by Russian airpower and special forces. The regime was fortunate in its choice of allies. The rebels far less so. In 2013, and again in 2015, the regime faced the real prospect of imminent defeat. On both occasions, it was an increase in the

volume of support from allies that prevented this.

The rebels, by contrast, suffered from hesitancy, disunity and incompetence on the part of their allies. The Obama Administration rapidly lost interest in the rebellion once the euphoria of the “Arab Spring” had passed and it became clear that the Assad regime would not rapidly crumble in the manner of western-supported Arab authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. Any aspirations for Syria were soon abandoned in order not to disturb the larger goal of rapprochement with Iran.

The Sunni states that supported the insurgency generally failed to effectively coordinate their efforts. For a period, a kind of free market emerged in southern Turkey where commanders of sundry rebel armed groups would seek to market themselves and their organizations to representatives of regional states. The rapid emergence and rise to dominance of Islamist and jihadi groups among the rebels, particularly in the vital northern front, further complicated the issue of state support for the insurgency. On a number of occasions, weapons systems given to rebel groups were taken by powerful jihadi militias. This further reduced the motivation for western states to assist the rebels.

Two additional, entirely different and opposed forces emerged on the Syrian battlefield in the period 2012–13. These were the Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) organization. The Kurdish autonomous cantons were established after the withdrawal of the regime from a swathe of northern Syria in mid-2012. ISIS, meanwhile, emerged from the rebellion, but by 2013 had carved out an area of exclusive control in eastern Syria. In the summer of 2014, dramatically, it extended its holdings into Iraq.

The emergence of independent Kurdish power and the inability of the rebels or the regime to defeat one another ensured the *de facto* fragmentation of Syria. The ISIS invasion of Iraq in the summer of 2014 carried this process into Syria’s eastern neighbor. The result has been the emergence of a single large conflict system stretching all the way from the Iraq–Iran border to the Mediterranean Sea.

Once Russia entered the war in Syria in September 2015, the Assad regime’s defeat became an impossibility. At the same time, at the time of writing, it appears that the Russians are not committed alongside the regime and the Iranians to a war for the reconquest of the entirety of Syria for Assad. For as long as this situation holds, *de facto* fragmentation and partition look likely to continue.

Nearly half a million have died in the Syrian war. Conflict in the Levant and Mesopotamia is, of course, far from over. The strength of political Islam remains the language of popular politics among the Arabs of this area. More broadly, the

dominance of a political culture at odds with modernity, and ruled by conspiracy theories, grudges, magical thinking and the furious desire to revenge past humiliations is likely to ensure energies for continued warfare.

The war proved the impotence of notions of an “international community”. Assad’s powerful allies raised the cost beyond what western powers verbally committed to such a notion were willing to pay. As a result, the dictator enjoyed relative immunity to continue his activities, including the use of chemical weapons against civilians and mass executions in his jails. A limited international intervention nevertheless did succeed in helping to stop the advance of the Islamic State. Even here, however, the key role on the ground was played by local forces.

The rival interests of outside powers, regional – Sunni states vs Shia Iran, global – the US and Russia and, increasingly, global vs regional – the US against Iran, have served to ensure continued strife.

I witnessed the high hopes and passions of the early years, the murderous tactics of the regime as it sought to drown the opposition to it in its own blood, the coming of the Islamists to take control of the rebellion, the rise of Kurdish power as a separatist force, the murderous onslaught of ISIS, the consequent eruption of the war into Iraq and how that onslaught was broken and turned back, the rise of the Shia militias, and the Assad regime itself, surviving, nestling in the arms of stronger powers. Still bawling out its tired, grotesque old slogans of defiance and revenge. The war had magnified itself many times. The country in which it had begun no longer existed.

The Assads unleashed a terrible festival of death in their war for survival. Many died. So many faces. So many young lives. Abdullah, Steven, Maghdid, Keith, Feisal and all the others. And the Yezidi children at the Newroz camp, saved from slaughter. The desperate refugees at Bab al-Salameh, the terrified civilians in Dar al Shifa hospital, under attack from their own state’s air force. The bodies of the Kurdish girls after the jihadis’ mustard gas had done with them. And the eviscerated ISIS dead like debris in the desert near al-Hawl and in Mosul. Nothing resolved, the war is not concluded.

The latter can only come with the birth of new entities more representative of the mosaic of populations resident in this area. No less importantly, a new political culture that embraces modernity, rationality, evidence-based thinking and transactional logic would need to take hold in the area for the successful development of its human resources, which has so long been elusive, to take place. Sadly, there is as yet little sign of this.

Unfortunately, the ideas, structures, energies and interests that produced the Syrian war appear to still possess vitality and wide support. As such, the

continuation of severe repression and bloodletting appear to be a near certainty for the immediate period ahead. This has been a chronicle of an attempt to both witness and analyze the war as it progressed along its main axes. I make no pretence, however, of depicting anything by way of an ending. Tragically for the peoples of the area, the conclusion remains to be written.

Jerusalem, 2017

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