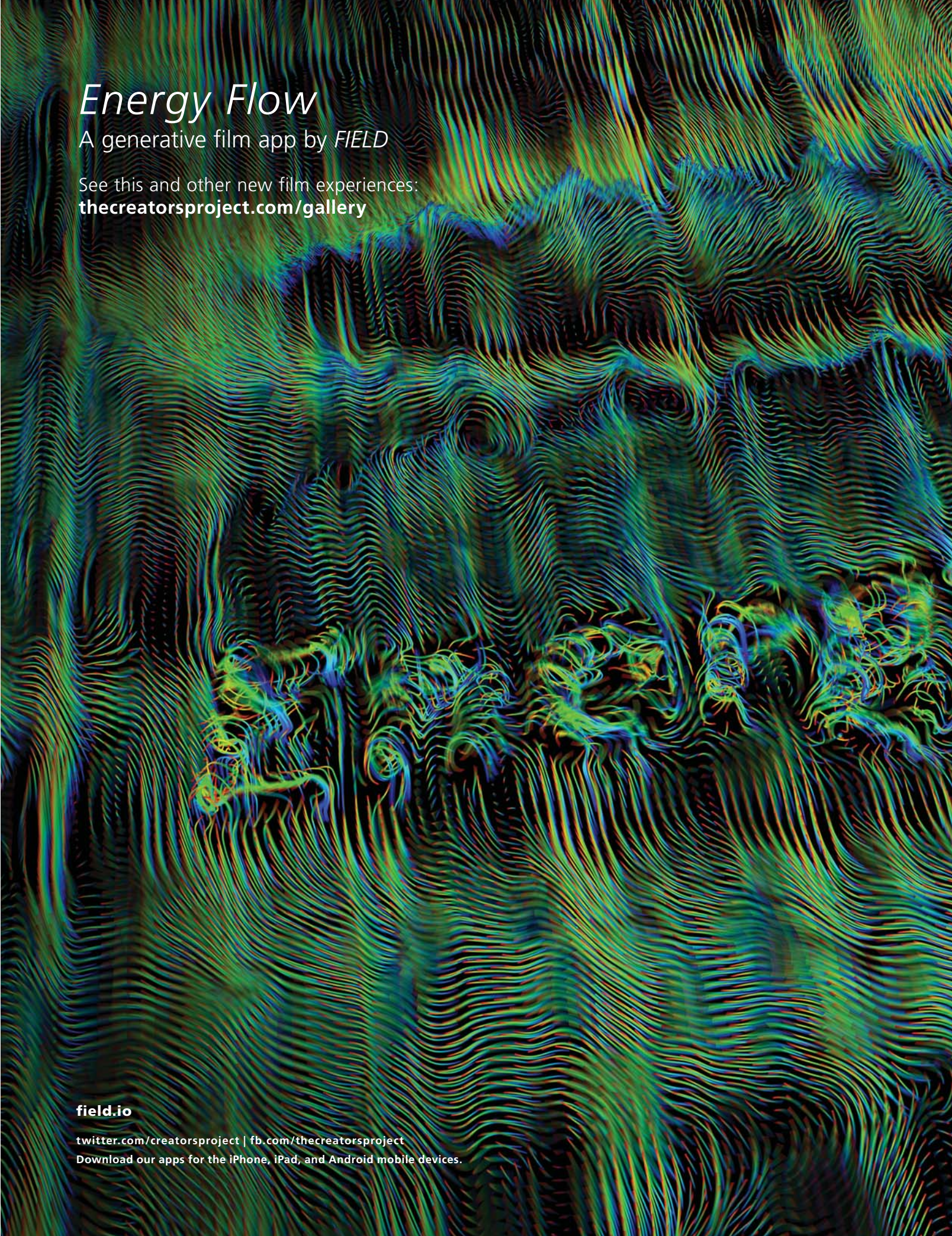


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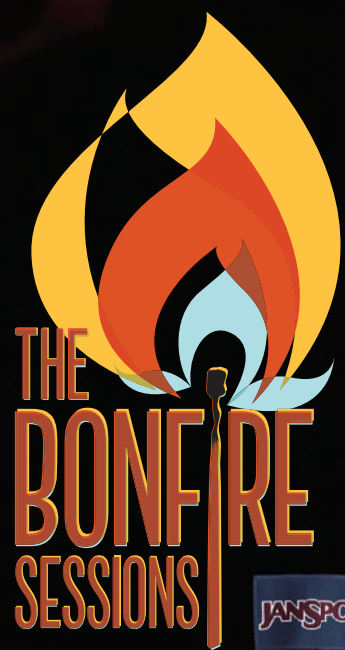
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Jonah Freeman was born in 1975 in Santa Fe, NM and lives and works in New York City. He has exhibited widely since the late 1990s throughout the United States and internationally with photographs, films and installations that explore the phantasmagoria of the constructed world.

Justin Lowe was born in 1976 in Dayton, OH and lives and works in New York City. He has been exhibiting since 2000, creating installation "environments" like gallery-lounges, cluttered house interiors and an intricately stocked bodega and Mister Softee truck. Lowe is also known for his collages produced in collaboration with Jonah Freeman. Their new work continues the themes of previous versions specifically that of alchemy in a modern context and community, ritual and psychosis.



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Syrians gather every Thursday for a weekly DJ pool party hosted at the Dama Rose Hotel in Damascus. The music continued to blare even after an explosion by the Ministry of Justice. The woman by the pool said that she and her boyfriend (seen shooting her with a water gun) are shabiha. “I am shabiha. He is shabiha. We are shabiha. Do you know what that means? We are with the president.” She also claimed that they are on an opposition hit list. She was informed of this by the government, and supposedly it is listed on Facebook pages too. Photo by Kate Brooks

VOLUME 19 NUMBER 11

Cover by Mugur Varzariu

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The body of a Free Syrian Army fighter and a civilian who both died during a battle against Bashar al-Assad's army lie in the back of a pickup truck outside an Aleppo hospital. Photo by Robert King/Polaris

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WeActivist SHELLY ZANDER
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EMPLOYEES OF THE MONTH



ROBERT KING

Born and raised in Tennessee, Robert “Haji Memphis” King is a photographer and videographer who has documented almost every major conflict since the Bosnian War in the early 90s. Robert has no formal training in journalism, and obviously he doesn’t need it because apparently the man is a bulletproof ghost. He’s covered fighting in places like Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq, Mexico, and Haiti, his photographs have been published in just about every publication you can name, and his footage has been broadcast around the globe. In October, he risked his life by diving into the war-torn city of Aleppo to bring VICE the startling words and images that constitute the backbone of this very special issue dedicated to Syria.

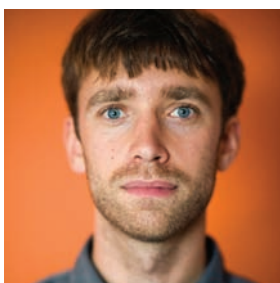
See THE MAN WHO WAS THERE, page 110



ANNA THERESE DAY

An independent journalist and social-media researcher, Anna Therese Day specializes in “global civil-society organizing,” and whatever that is, we think the world needs more of it. In 2012, she was named a UN Press Fellow, and the year before made Google Zeitgeist’s top 30 Great Young Minds of Our Time. She’s been on the ground in Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, the Palestinian territories, Syria, and Turkey, and her work has been featured in media outlets like CNN International, the BBC, and Al Jazeera English. For this issue, she embedded with the Free Syrian Army to report on how they have been acquiring their weapons. As with most things in the country at the moment, things didn’t turn out as planned.

See GUNRUNNING WITH THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY, page 86



DAVID DEGNER

David Degner is an American photojournalist based in Egypt who lives a stone’s throw from Tahrir Square. Over the past year and a half, upheavals in the Middle East have taken him to Libya, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Syria, but he tends to focus on stories about Egypt’s now-unchained and quickly evolving culture. He studied photojournalism and philosophy at Western Kentucky University, interned at a few newspapers, worked in China until he was booted into Kazakhstan, shot commercial photography in Florida, and ended up in Egypt, which isn’t so different from his native southern US, as it turns out. His account of interacting with pro-Assad citizens in Syria and corresponding photos are a highlight of this issue.

See THE DELUSIONS OF ASSAD, page 92



MAX WEISS

Max Weiss is an assistant professor of history and Near Eastern studies at Princeton University. He is the author of *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi`ism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon*, and the translator of Samar Yazbek’s *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, as well as Nihad Sirees’s *The Silence and the Roar*, and, most recently, Hassouna Mosbahi’s *A Tunisian Tale*. His current writing projects include an interpretive history of Syria through the 20th century, which will soon be published by Princeton University Press, and a translation of Fawwaz Haddad’s *Solo Piano Music*, a previously unpublished selection of which we are honored to present in this issue.

See PRELUDE TO ‘SOLO PIANO MUSIC’ and SOLO PIANO MUSIC, page 76 and 78



SUNNY SHOKRAE

There’s this crew of LA transplants living in New York who haven’t stopped celebrating since they arrived five years ago. Sunny Shokrae is their wildest daughter, not to mention their hardest worker, baddest headbanger, staunchest lifer artist, and chilliest *chola* (even though she was born in Iran). A “spooky kid” photo snapper from the age of six, her well-aged fetish for silent family feelings, unguarded nuance, and morning light gives her a thoughtful, loving gaze that you want on you now and you want it bad. For this issue, Sunny shot a family of Syrian Jews who live in Brooklyn... which seems mundane until you realize that there are potentially fewer than 20 Jews living in Syria today.

See ALL IN THE FAMILY, page 58

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NOTHING STOPS SYRIAN BASKETBALL

Coaching a youth sports team is a tough task as it is, but it gets much, much harder when the families of the players are dying in a civil war. Tane Spasev, coordinator of the Syrian Basketball Federation's Youth Basketball Program, learned as much last year. The Macedonian came to Syria just as the protests erupted in March 2011. Tane carried on coaching through the fighting and brought a team of teenage boys to a tournament in Amman, Jordan, in September. I contacted him (he's back in Macedonia) to ask about what his guys went through.



BY HARRY CHEADLE

Photo courtesy of
Tane Spasev

VICE: Did you worry about the political situation before violence spread throughout the country?
Tane Spasev: When I arrived in June of 2011, the situation in Damascus was no less safe and normal than any other big city in the world. The restaurants were full, shops were working, people were enjoying their everyday lives. The "situation" in Homs, Hama, Daraa, and places like that was distant from us and only on TV. All that changed in December and January when two suicide bombs went off in Damascus. Things were never the same after that.

What was it like coaching the boys' team in the tournament in Jordan? Not easy, I imagine.

Seven of the 12 kids on the team were from Aleppo, and I cannot describe the emotional roller coaster we experienced in our preparation period as the situation there deteriorated. One of the kids from Aleppo lost his father due to a heart attack, and his family didn't want the kid to go back because the roads weren't safe.

The coaching staff and I had to tell the poor kid the news about his father, and that was one of the most difficult things I've had to do in my life. The rest of the kids were shocked as well, so we did not have normal practices for the next four days. After that, another kid heard

his girlfriend had died. We tried to shield the kids from the outside situation as much as we could but that was impossible. I was amazed by how much they love basketball and how determined they were to go to that championship and just play the game they love. The situation made them grow up in five months. I am so proud I had a chance to coach them and bring joy to their lives.

Do you think we'll see a Syrian player in the NBA soon?

In normal circumstances, I think Syria would've produced an NBA player in the next four years. We have a young man who was born in 1990 and is over seven feet tall, and he did great at the last FIBA Asia Championship in China; we have another seven-footer who was born in 1993 and runs like Kevin Garnett. As I said, the talent is there. I am sure someday there will be an NBA player from Syria, and I hope that day comes soon and brings joy to the basketball community in Syria and the wonderful Syrian people.



The Magic Kingdom of Syria



WORDS AND
ILLUSTRATION BY
KARA CRABB



Here's a fun idea for Syria: Disneyland. Just because your government has oppressed you for generations and your country is in the midst of a full-scale civil war and your house is on fire right now doesn't mean you don't want to have dumb photos taken with Mickey and Goofy before you get soaked on Splash Mountain, right?

Like me, Syrian businessman Tarif al-Akhras thought erecting Cinderella's Castle in his country was a no-brainer, which is why in July 2010 his company signed an agreement with the French firm LOFTUS to build Disney Syria inside TransMall, a massive shopping center in the city of Homs. They might have been onto something, but we'll never know, since eight months later anti-Assad protests kicked off in Daraa, and the site that was planned to house the Happiest Place on Earth is now a major battleground in the brutal war.

Very few details about the project can be found online, but I did discover that the estimated cost of establishing Disney Syria was only \$22 million, which is teeny-tiny compared with the \$400 million it took to construct Disney World's Magic Kingdom in Orlando back in 1971. To me, this means that everything about Disney Syria would theoretically be very hilarious. It would probably look like a living, breathing issue of *Adbusters*—especially with all of the heavy street fighting going on around and possibly within it!

Since May 2011, rebel forces in Homs have been at war with the Syrian Army, with more than 6,700 casualties reported thus far. In a short time, the city has transformed from a bustling, sunny tourist destination into a smoky desert of rubble. But I don't see any reason for Disney Syria's backers to not move forward with their plans. If anything, the country could really use all the positive

symbolism and reinforcement it can get—"Dreams really do come true!" etc.

I was so excited about the potential of riding It's a Small World in the middle of a war zone that I called Disney's corporate office to ask when we can expect to see some Pixie Dust—and not just Murder Dust—sprinkled over Homs. The American lady I spoke with told me that she wasn't sure about the time line for the project plans, and suggested that if I was interested in getting a job at the nonexistent Disney Syria I could visit their careers webpage and apply. OK! (Whoops, it doesn't exist.)

Maybe after all of the fighting is over, Disney should completely demolish their theme parks around the world and leave us with *only* Disney Syria as a testament to the thousands of children who have already been murdered in the most atrocious ways possible in this complex conflict.

QUENTIN TARANTINO
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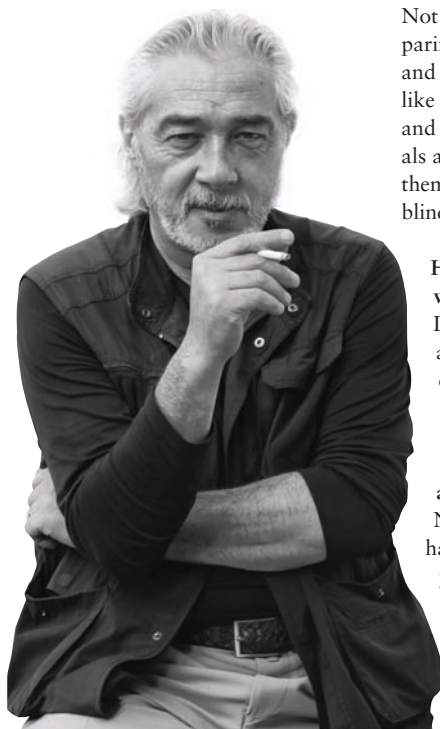
Last year, in a show of support for the opposition to Bashar al-Assad, TV networks in Qatar and other Gulf countries began refusing to broadcast Syrian-made films and TV series linked to the regime, leading to a huge drop in the number of scripts being produced by studios.

The censorship was a blow to Najdat Anzour, a leading Syrian director who's best known for Al-Hour al-Eyn (Beautiful Virgins), a 2005 film that vilified suicide bombers and terrorists. He also made the news in 2007, when it was announced that he was slated to direct a film based on a screenplay by Muammar Gaddafi, which was later revealed to be funded by \$50 million of the dictator's personal fortune (that project has since been scrapped, duh).



BY JAMIE CLIFTON

Photo courtesy of Najdat Anzour



I dialed up Najdat and found out he's keen for more creative freedom, but also opposes the FSA rebels who are fighting against a regime that he believes has had a spotty record on free speech, to say the least. It was all very confusing, just like the conflict at hand.

VICE: Najdat, how has your life changed since the beginning of the civil war?

Najdat Anzour: First off, it's not a civil war—it's an international war, organized by other authorities against Syria. It's a war between terrorist gangs and the Syrian people, and it's still spreading chaos. It seems like that's what was intended when this war was started: to turn Syria into a chaotic, unstable country; affect peoples' work and ambitions; and put us all in a climate of fear.

You truly believe that is what's happening at the moment? Not that they are actually revolutionaries fighting for freedom?

Yes, and there's no room for a gray zone anymore. People need to know about the conspiracy against our country and who it is that's trying to stab it in the heart. A huge number of Syrians want change, a move toward more freedom of expression and democracy, and whoever creates a boundary against Syria's development and modernization needs to be disposed of.

Do you have plans to make any series or films about this supposed misunderstanding?

Not directly about that, no, but I'm currently preparing a dramatic series about the events in Syria and their direct effects on Syrian youth. Productions like mine contribute to eventually creating dialogue and discussion that will help immunize individuals against extremist Salafi ideas. Or at least make them think about what they're doing instead of just blindly doing it.

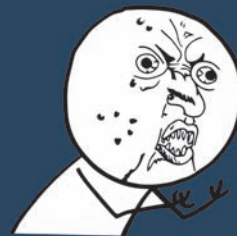
How would you like to see the situation in Syria work itself out?

I'm personally hoping for more creative freedom and less fear, lies, favoritism, and tyranny. All we can do is challenge what's in front of us.

Has the boycott on Syrian TV and films in the Gulf made you and other directors hesitant about continuing to work?

No, there are still a lot of Syrian artists who have stayed on and given up a great deal of their personal income in an effort to keep working on local drama. We criticize the corruption, encourage development, and call for national unity. That's how Syrian drama always is: pioneering and courageous.

BASHAR AL-ASSAD



Y U NO LEAVE?

Serious Syrian Memes



BY GARRETT HOUGHTON

Illustration by Kayla Colaizzi

Like the rest of the internet, the Syrian memeverse is messy, argumentative, and prone to stupidity and hyperbole. But it's a place where Syrians can openly riff on sensitive political topics. Abo Samer, an admin for one of the more militant Syrian-meme Facebook groups, says his intention is to publish “intellectual, social, urban, and cultural content in the spirit of an old Syrian proverb: ‘The first ones didn't leave anything unsaid.’”

Memes are so popular among Syrians that the “Syrian Memes” Facebook page has over 160,000 likes—about three times as many as the (politically neutral) community page for Syria the country. The memes featured on that page (most of them are in Arabic) bash everything from Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime to the dietary domination of falafel in the country. In one, the traditional puffy-faced Y U NO guy asks McDonald's, “Y U NO OPEN IN SYRIA?” In another, a shady cab driver in the Middle East ripping off a tourist is depicted as having a Reddit-issue trollface. Other memes are more provocative—crudely drawn “rage” comics that feature photos of massacred children and cartoons of gun-toting members of the secret police.

Abo says he started his page because he wanted to spread old Syrian proverbs his grandmother used to recite to him; however, his focus changed once political conflict broke out in the country. Now the Damascus native says he “publicizes his page as anti-state,” making original, politically charged memes in the wake of the “massive crimes on the people of Homs and other parts of Syria.”

Abo isn't the only guy taking meme-jabs at the regime. One of the most popular memes floating around on Syrian blogs features Assad measuring a short distance with his hands and the text: “We make reforms/ this much at a time.”

Not every meme-maker is antigovernment, though: One image floating around shows Assad waving to a crowd of admirers and is captioned, “TRUTH: Bashar al-Assad is loved by the Syrian people. Once you realize that you will shit bricks.”

Additional reporting by Amira Asad

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MANDAEAN REFUGEES ARE STUCK BETWEEN IRAQ AND A HARD PLACE

More than 1 million Iraqis fled to Syria during the sectarian bloodbath that followed the US-led invasion of 2003. Among them were thousands of Mandaeans, an ethnic and religious minority who have lived on the shores of the Tigris, Euphrates, and Shatt al-Arab Rivers since antiquity. Mandaeans, who specialize in ancient trades like boatbuilding and silversmithing, were persecuted during Saddam Hussein's reign. In his absence radical Islamists have continued his legacy of assaults, abductions, and rapes of members of the Gnostic sect.

Today, fewer than 5,000 Mandaeans remain in Iraq, down from 50,000 before the fall of Saddam. Those who fled to neighboring Syria, one of the last secular havens for religious minorities in the Middle East, are now finding that they left one hellish location for another.



BY MILÈNE LARSSON

Photo by Nasir Shathur

A Mandaean refugee family in their apartment in Syria gathered around a photo of their murdered son.



"It was a good life at first, at least better than the one in Iraq, but it's getting worse every day," said "Aida" (she didn't want to reveal her real name), a Mandaean who in 2009 fled to Jaramana, a poor suburb of Damascus.

"Food prices and rent are going through the roof, there are daily power cuts, and we hear explosions and gunshots on the streets so we only leave the house for emergencies. But that's normal to me, I'm used to it from Iraq."

Even before the revolution, the UN warned of worsening conditions among Iraqi refugees—most are only granted guest status at best, and the majority of the chosen aren't allowed to work, which forces them to subsist on meager savings and foreign aid, resulting in the coercion of many women and children into the sex trade.

Hikmat Salim Abdul, a Mandaean who now lives in Sweden, said it saddens him that a whole generation of Mandaeans will not be given the opportunity to go to school.

"I couldn't find work and had to survive on donations from Mandaeans abroad, and so did many Mandaean families," Hikmat said of his time in Syria, where he delivered funds to families in need. "Sometimes it was impossible to deliver money to families living in other areas because of shelling and fighting."

As the Syrian civil war spirals into sectarian violence, Mandaean refugees will most likely relive the perils of religious persecution, just as they did in Iraq. Aida said that she was less afraid of the regime than of the rebels: "For the time being, the regime is protecting us, while the Free Syrian Army is trying to send Iraqis back to Iraq."

I Left My Family for the Free Syrian Army



BY LOUBNA MRIE AS TOLD TO AMIRA ASAD

Illustration by Daniel David Freeman

Loubna Mrie grew up in a high-profile Alawite family, but unlike most of the adherents to the Twelver school of Shia Islam, Loubna does not support the Assad regime. When civil war broke out last March and Assad's troops began shooting civilian protesters, she was persuaded by friends to support the rebels of the nascent Free Syrian Army in Damascus, where in February she was assigned to a six-month ordnance-smuggling stint.

When the revolt began I was opposed to armed revolution. Then the cruelty of the Syrian Army forced me to change my opinions about the possibility of a peaceful resistance movement.

You should know that the FSA are not a strange army that just came to Syria. They are friends whom we were protesting and working with before any sort of rebel force was actualized. I knew they needed help, so I asked what I could do. One of them said they needed bullets, so I called my friend who took me to another area (it would be irresponsible for me to say exactly where) to buy them. I later smuggled them back. It's not complicated, but it's very dangerous.

At checkpoints, the Alawites, Christians, and Druze (followers of a branch of Shia Islam who also incorporate other beliefs into their religion) are always free to pass—the government and the *shabiha* (armed men in plain clothes who support the regime) think all the activists are Sunni. They don't thoroughly search believers of these other faiths, so they can smuggle anything easily—even guns.

One day I was smuggling bullets with my friend, and the police pulled us over, asking to see the registration for the car. The papers we needed were underneath the box of bullets between the seats. My friend and I pulled the papers out slowly; if we shook the box it would have definitely made a noise. They don't expect people to transport something so dangerous close to their bodies, so we were able to get away.

When I was in Salma, Latakia, the most dangerous area in the mountains, I was interviewed by a guy from the FSA on camera. I was covering my face, but people recognized me once they put the video on YouTube. I received many messages on Facebook like, "Shame on you, you are betraying us and now you are collaborating with the terrorists." Now many people from my hometown and my father's family are sending threatening messages, saying that they will kill me if they see me.

Before the YouTube video was released, I was planning to leave Damascus anyway. But now I fear that I cannot return. Most of my friends got arrested, many of them died, and Damascus was under siege and full of checkpoints where I knew Assad's soldiers had my name. The YouTube video wasn't the main reason for my departure, but it did result in my mother being kidnapped. I haven't heard from her since August, and I don't know if she's still alive.

I knew that I couldn't make it past a border checkpoint, so for that reason I was smuggled into Turkey in August by the FSA. We went through the mountains and walked for three hours, eventually arriving at Istanbul. Still, I am not afraid for the future of Syria.



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UBISOFT



HEY, UNITED NATIONS!

What the Hell Are You Doing About Syria?

BY VICE STAFF

It's arguable but fair to say that the international community's response to the conflict in Syria has been underwhelming. The greatest attempt at a resolution thus far came from former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, who in late February was appointed as UN-Arab League joint special representative for Syria and attempted to implement a six-point peace plan to increase stability in the nation.

One of Kofi's first steps was to call for a ceasefire between regime troops and Free Syrian Army forces, which was enacted by Assad's government in early April. But the ceasefire was never actually respected, and peace talks collapsed following the massacre of at least 108

residents—including 49 children and 34 women—of opposition-controlled villages in the Houla region north of Homs. The FSA immediately announced that they would be resuming “defensive operations,” and Kofi continued trying his best to broker a compromise that would suit both sides until he determined the situation to be hopeless and resigned on August 2.

In an attempt to find out how the world's premier bastion of peace, international cooperation, and social progress has internally reacted to the conflict since its withdrawal, VICE bureaus from around the world reached out to their respective UN branches to ask what they had to say about the upheaval and what, if anything, they are doing to quell it—specifically the targeting of innocent children and women. Many did not offer comment, but we have published the responses of those who did below. These responses, which our global editors compiled over the course of October, have been lightly edited for grammar but otherwise remain untouched.

Illustration by iStockphoto/graphixel

UK



While we do not have monitors on the ground, eyewitness reports, NGOs, and media reports show that atrocities and human rights violations are being perpetrated by both sides.

UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, the joint special representative for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, [and] the high commissioner for human rights, Navanethem Pillay, have all criticized the human rights abuses and appealed to the combatants to put an end to the violence in all its forms. The JSR is hoping to develop an initiative that will encourage the parties to end the violence and begin a political process.

—Ahmad Fawzi, spokesperson, Joint Special Envoy on Syria of the United Nations and the League of Arab States

SPAIN



The position of Spain in the UN regarding Syria is on the side of that of the European Union.

—María José Gámez, press officer, Permanent Mission of Spain to the United Nations

AUSTRIA



I hope you understand we cannot comment on events on the ground we [do] not have specific knowledge of.

The UN condemns any type of violence on all sides. The latest statement by the UN Security Council on Aleppo can be found on: www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43223&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.UH1Pg2dxqyA. All UN efforts [in] Syria build on the peace plan developed by former envoy Kofi Annan: http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/six_point_proposal.pdf.

—Regina Rohrbach, associate information officer, United Nations Information Service

FRANCE



There's a problem. I can't speak about that. The ambassador can. I cannot express myself freely. It would be careless. I do not try to discard myself, but there are authorities that are more legitimate than I am to speak about this matter. We're just a small embassy in a big international organization. I cannot speak about a matter of that utmost importance, especially since the president of the French Republic, François Hollande, has taken such a strong position on the subject. France speaks with only one voice, loud and united. But you may try and call Philippe Lalliot. He's the spokesperson of the Quai d'Orsay. He aims at communicating to the youth like you. He would certainly have the freedom to answer you.

—Brieuc Pont, press counselor, spokesperson, and chief of staff, Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations

CANADA



Here are our responses to your inquiry:

Canada continues to call for a complete and immediate ceasefire that will lead to a Syrian-led political transition. Given the Assad regime's consistent failure to honor its commitments, we all need to be fully cognizant of one indisputable fact—Assad will not voluntarily cease the brutal campaign of slaughter that he has launched against his own people. He has a clear interest in desperately clinging to power. All countries must bring pressure to bear on Syria for Assad to go.

As long as the UN Security Council does not adopt tough, binding measures, those who want to protect the Assad regime with Syrian blood will benefit from the political and legal cover this impasse provides. Canada repeats our call for the Security Council to impose binding sanctions and an arms embargo in order to increase pressure on the Assad regime to end the violence and recognize the legitimate democratic rights of the Syrian people.

In particular, Canada has been actively urging Syria's neighbors to stop allowing arms and other tools of war to reach Assad in his bloody struggle to cling to power. We commend Turkey on successfully stopping one such shipment. These efforts will help limit the Assad regime's ability to kill civilians in Syria.

—Ian Trites, spokesperson, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada via the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations

USA



The secretary-general has made clear that the international community has a special obligation right now to the people of Syria. He has said that the international community has a moral responsibility, a political duty, and a humanitarian obligation to stop the bloodbath and find peace for the people of Syria.

Regarding the reported use of weapons in Aleppo and other areas, the high commissioner for human rights, Navanethem Pillay, said last week that the indiscriminate use of heavy weaponry by government forces to destroy large swaths of cities such as Homs and Aleppo is inexcusable, as is the use of huge bombs by extremist opposition groups which kill and maim civilians as well as military targets. She said that these acts, and many other violations committed by both sides, may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity.

As for the suffering of children in Syria, the secretary-general has repeatedly drawn attention to the plight of women and children in the country and has called for a ceasefire during the Eid al-Adha holiday. He has appealed to all, in particular the government of the Syrian Arab Republic as the stronger party, to show wisdom and vision and stop the killing and destruction so that all the issues, however complex, can be addressed through peaceful means.

Navanethem Pillay has also spoken about the plight of Syria's children, many of who will be scarred for life by the dreadful and prolonged traumatic experience they are suffering. She has said that no child should have to go through what these children are going through, least of all at the hands of their own government, their own army, or their own neighbors.

—Farhan Haq, associate spokesperson for the secretary-general of the United Nations. 



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: An anonymous activist who participates in the graffiti movement; A paper stencil against a wall in Syria that reads: "The Martyr Ahmed Asham."

THE WRITING IS ON THE WALL

Anti-Regime Activist Tarek Algorhani Talks About Fighting Guns with Cans and Tags

BY ANGELINA FANOUS
Photos courtesy of Tarek Algorhani

When Tarek Algorhani walked out of a Syrian prison in June 2011, he had no idea that a revolution had erupted in his country—or that it had ignited over a cause he had been thrown in jail nearly six years for championing: inalienable human rights.

In November 2005, Tarek and eight other bloggers founded Al Domary, a political site that used cartoons and other drawings to criticize the Syrian government and demand an end to the Assad regime. It quickly became one of the most popular anti-regime sites in the country. The Al Domary crew successfully used masked IP addresses and pseudonyms to evade the Syrian secret police until, three months after the site's launch, one of their bloggers was arrested, tortured, and forced to give up the location and identities of his comrades. The authorities shut down the site, confiscated their computers, and destroyed all files related to the operation. In February 2006, the bloggers were convicted of treason and each sentenced to five years, except for Tarek, who received nine because the authorities considered him to be the site's mastermind.

Tarek was sent to Sednaya, a political prison 14 miles north of Damascus, where his jailers subjected him to marathon torture sessions. They stuffed him inside a tire, spun him around for hours, and beat him so badly he couldn't walk. "We had prisoners who were moved from Abu Ghraib to Sednaya. They would cry at night, saying, 'I want to go back to Abu Ghraib,'" he said.

The dark prison cells were filthy, and some of the inmates' wounds became so infected that their legs had to be amputated. Escape was impossible; even if someone managed to sneak out, the surrounding desert was seeded with land mines.

Five and a half years into his sentence, Tarek was pardoned for reasons he still doesn't understand. He returned to Damascus and discovered that a series of anti-regime demonstrations had begun. The thought of going back to prison didn't stop him from joining the movement, and he returned to agitation in no time, teaching activists how to shoot videos and upload them to YouTube. He kept detailed lists of the missing and killed to send to human rights groups, and established contacts to get first aid to anyone injured.

Barely six months passed before Tarek once again became a wanted man—his name had been flagged at security checkpoints, and he was listed as an enemy of the state on official records. In January, he fled to Tunisia and began another human-rights internet project—this one centered around tagging anti-regime graffiti throughout the streets of Syria. In mid-October I called him up to ask how the fight was going.

VICE: What prompted you to use graffiti to push back against the regime?

Tarek Algorhani: The revolution in Syria started because of graffiti. A small group of boys from Daraa watched the Egyptian and Tunisian revolution on TV, and they spray-painted the slogan "the people want the regime to fall." The *Mukhabarat*, the secret police, arrested them, tortured them, ripped out their fingernails, and that's when the rest of the country broke out in protests. At the beginning of the revolution, whenever people assembled, there were only a few of them. The police and security forces could easily split them up with no trace left



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FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

Activists upload pictures of their graffiti on cell phones to avoid using computers and possibly giving up their IP addresses or identities to the Syrian police.

Syrian graffiti artists tag walls with the word "martyrs" above a row of stenciled dead revolutionaries.

To avoid any incriminating spray-paint residue, taggers usually wear gloves, but paint still manages to seep through.

behind. That's where the idea of drawings came in. Even if the police came in and dispersed people, anyone walking by later would know, "There was a protest here, revolutionaries were here." It's a stamp, a mark. And it's difficult for the police, because they get tired. Every time they would clean up a wall, something else would appear.

What role do you play in this graffiti movement?

In the beginning, activists would just quickly spray the walls with words and phrases like "freedom" or "down with the regime," like the kids from Daraa, but it was rushed. I wanted to introduce an element of art to it, something to commemorate the martyrs we have lost in the revolution. Our goal is to use art to voice our concerns. In April, I started uploading videos on YouTube of how to spray-paint walls and put stencil drawings on Facebook for graffiti artists to use.

What happens if the security forces or the Mukhabarat catch you tagging walls?

The best possible scenario is that they kill you on the spot. If they detain you, you'll go to political prison where you're tortured and will eventually die a slower, more painful death. You'll die either way, but dying immediately while you're tagging something is definitely preferable to losing your mind while getting tortured.

How many people have died over graffiti?

They killed Nour Hatem Zahra, who was known as *Al Ragel al Bakeheh*, or Spray Man. He was like Spider-Man or Batman. They killed him while he was tagging. People know about Nour's death, because his family publicized how he died and held a funeral for him, saying, "Our son died for this cause." That's not always the case. Some graffiti artists who died, their families didn't want to release their name or even hold a funeral for them. They're scared the security forces could come after them. We think there are about 15 graffiti artists who have died for this cause so far in our particular movement. I have those names, but I don't want to release them. It's not up to me.

What exactly are these families scared of?

If a family holds a funeral, it's like they're proud or happy, so the security forces will then consider them a threat to national security.

What about your family? What's happening with them?

My parents joined the first protests—from the very beginning, when I was still in prison. They're still in Syria, but I have to

maintain my distance. I try to call them every 15 days or so, but we keep the conversations short. They're scared that they're under surveillance.

Do all of the artists work exclusively in spray paint?

We also have *Al Ragel al Dahan*, the Paint Men, who are the artists in Syria who use actual paint and brushes. They paint larger murals, like big Syrian flags or full portraits of the martyrs who've died in the movement. There are more spray men, because they have stencils. They come quickly and spray their stencils on the wall so the security forces don't catch them.

Are there any women graffiti writers?

Yes. We have *Al Mar'a al Behkaha*, Spray Women.

During the protests in Egypt, it was really dangerous for women. Some were getting sexually assaulted. Do you know whether the Spray Women experience that?

When we have women drawing on the walls, we usually take extra precautions to take care of them. As far as I know, none of the women tagging within our movement have experienced any sexual harassment since we take care of one another. We take care of the women just as much as we take care of the men.

What's the best piece of graffiti you've seen?

It was a picture of a lock with members of the Syrian security forces inside it. You'd see it on storefronts or in alleys.

Many of the people who are anti-regime are also very religious. Do the stencils or any of the drawings promote religion?

We're secular, and religion is a touchy subject right now. We believe in a peaceful movement and in condemning the use of weapons.

What did graffiti look like in Syria before the revolution?

It wasn't graffiti. It was mostly pictures of Assad. All the drawings on the walls in Syria were promoting the current government or regime. Sometimes you'd see giant paintings of the Syrian flag with government slogans underneath it.

What role do you think graffiti will have after the revolution?

I think that the revolution will continue, even if Bashar falls from power and the current regime ends. There are a lot of things we want and need, and I don't think graffiti will die. People may not write about Assad, but they will write about everything from human rights to social issues and express their desires that way. And the drawings of the martyrs will always be there, so people won't forget them. *Q&A*



YONE
JIMMY FONTAINE
VINCENT SKOGLUND
KEVIN ZACHER
ANDY WRIGHT

BRANDON LONG
ALESSANDRO SIMONETTI
ANGELA BOATWRIGHT
KASSIA MEADOR
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 **HOLDEN**



A cute kid named Florent shows his support for Bashar al-Assad. This is his second time protesting on behalf of the regime.

WHO LOVES YA, BASHAR?

Assad Regime Boosters Show Their True Colors in Paris

BY JULIEN MOREL

PHOTOS BY
HUGO DENIS-QUEINEC

On Saturday, October 20, in the Gardens of the Trocadéro in Paris, just across the Seine from the Eiffel Tower, around 40 protestors with signs and whistles gathered around an enormous Syrian flag to show their support for the country's president. In the photographs affixed to the signs, Bashar al-Assad wears a gray suit and a shit-eating grin.

As I approached the group, wading through two other protests taking place in the same square—one for Southern Moroccan independence, the other somehow affiliated with the Ivory Coast—I was overwhelmed with images of Assad, who most of the world holds

responsible for 20,000 deaths over the past 20 months of civil war in Syria. The folks who had assembled here are some of his biggest fans.

Saïd, a 30-something French Syrian who refused to give me his last name, said that he admires Assad's fashion sense, along with everything else about him: "Just have a look at the suit. He's stylish." Saïd told me that he and his family have been Assad supporters since the beginning of the uprising. His mother is a Sunni Muslim and his father is a Christian, and he's convinced that only Assad can maintain the secular Syrian state. "With Bashar, the different religions can coexist. If the United States helps depose him, it'll be over. Salafis will take over and kill everyone."

It's true that these protestors have a lot to lose if religious factions manage to take commandeer the country. Many of them are related to families of regime officials, Syrian Christians, and members of the Alawite sect that also includes golden-boy Bashar.



coal

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Three Syrian women who live in Paris smile for their favorite dictator.

Any and all of these groups could be persecuted if Islamic law is instated in the country.

Nordine, a French fighter pilot of Syrian origin, attended the rally in his military uniform and wore a cap decorated with a Syrian flag. "I studied and learned my job in the United States, to protect and serve my country," he said. "As a Syrian Alawite, I do my best to protect my people against barbarians." When I asked him whom he considers to be the most barbarous group in his homeland, his answer was immediate: "Those who kill women and children. Salafis, Saudis, Qataris." He paused. "And Jews."

Behind Nordine, a group had begun applauding and singing. After our conversation, Nordine walked toward them and took charge, proposing a new, manly chant in the form of a threat directed toward the French president: "[François] Hollande, go home, Syria is not yours!" Gathered around the huge black, white, and red Syrian flag, they then started to yell a new, somewhat cryptic slogan: "[French minister of foreign affairs Laurent] Fabius Hollande, UN in Syria? No place for fascists in our country!" This seemed to confuse several protesters, who just continued to clap and smile.

Florent, a French-born 17-year-old with braces, sang the slogans so loud that he irritated the Syrian mom standing next to him. "My parents agree with me, but they're not here today," he told me. "It's the second time I've [publicly] supported the Syrian Army." He said that he came to the square after reading about the protest on forums at the video-game website *jeuxvideo.com*. I asked him whether the other forum members share his pro-Assad views, and he mumbled an answer, trying to remain composed. "*Jeuxvideo.com* deals with a wide range of subjects: music, movies, politics... We don't have all the same opinions.

I'm nearly the only politically engaged individual," he said. "But when I reach the voting age, my voice won't go to the lefties!"

About 90 percent of the crowd were of Middle Eastern origin, and the remainder was composed of far-right activists, most of whom were associated with Alain Soral's *Égalité et Réconciliation*, a faction closely linked to the notoriously xenophobic National Front. These activists kept repeating "Go Syria!" and clapping, all the while seeming uncomfortably aware that the Syrian community doesn't accept them.

After a while, I almost forgot that these people are supporting a regime accused of war crimes; since I was the only journalist present, the protestors considered me a friend. A bunch of them came up to shake my hand—among them a 15-year-old girl wearing a camo outfit, two elderly Shia Syrians, and a middle-aged woman with a sign in favor of Muammar Gaddafi. "He embodies the freedom of the Arab people," she said. "He never surrendered to the American-Zionist empire. Just like me."

By this point, I had been standing in the rain for nearly two hours. The protest was turning into a series of heated discussions between protesters ("UN, assholes!" someone shouted nearby), so I decided to pack it in. On the way to the metro station, I ran into one last demonstrator, a friendly older woman who wanted to explain what had pushed her to come to the rally.

A Christian, her family still lives in Damascus. "I've been there four times since the beginning of the war. It's horrible," she said. "I saw people die in front of me. I cried during the entire flight back. The rebels will kill anyone." After listing all the nations involved in the Syrian conflict, she came to an exhausted conclusion: "You know who's orchestrating this, don't you?" *Uh oh*, I thought. "It's them, as always. The Jews." *VICE*

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Chavia with members of the Cultural Forum for People with Special Needs in Syria, outside the House of Peace in Homs, 2011.

THOUSANDS ARE LOSING THEIR LIMBS IN ASSAD'S WAR

While His Wife Pretends to Care About Syria's Disabled

BY MILÈNE LARSSON

Images courtesy of Chavia Ali

Chavia Ali is the 32-year-old chairwoman of the Cultural Forum for People with Special Needs in Syria and the most prominent activist fighting for the rights of the disabled in the Middle East. Attempting to uphold a semblance of basic humanitarian rights under Assad's rule is risky business. On top of that, to start a civil rights NGO under Assad as a woman of Kurdish descent (which Chavia is) is basically to beg for a life sentence in prison.

Chavia has been wheelchair-bound ever since she suffered from paralytic polio as a baby, but this hasn't stopped her from bulldozing her way through the impediments presented by the Ministry of Social Affairs and

Labor, and constant threats from the secret police as she strives to make life more bearable for Syria's disabled. She's received national and international recognition for her work, and after years of thwarting her efforts, Assad's regime realized a few years ago that it was in their own self-interest to use her good name to improve its image.

In 2010, Chavia's organization received funding through a trust fronted by Syria's first lady, Asma al-Assad, with whom Chavia had discussed her plight on several occasions. The novelty of the regime's slightly more open approach toward civil rights stirred the interest of international media, including the *New York Times*, who interviewed Chavia about the improbable collaboration. But within a year it became painfully obvious that the entire ordeal had been a dog-and-pony show of empty promises and unfulfilled assurances.

Before April 2011, when Assad's army opened fire on peaceful protesters and civilians, Syria was home to approximately 2 million people with disabilities. When we spoke to Chavia in October, a few months after she had fled Aleppo for Sweden, she estimated that number could have steadily grown over the course of the civil war.



PETER
RAMONETTA



VICE: How difficult is it for disabled people to live in Syria?

Chavia Ali: People with disabilities are being left behind when buildings are evacuated; those who depend on iron lungs, for example, must rely on spare batteries during frequent power outages. Medicine is hard to come by, and soldiers have no regard for whether or not a person is disabled. My friend Adul is almost completely paralyzed and can only move his head. He wanted to participate in the demonstrations in Aleppo, so he went out onto the street in his electric wheelchair. A policeman hit him in the face, and he fell to the ground. When two women came to help him up, they took Adul and the women to prison and locked them up for a month. They don't care whether you're a woman, a child, or in a wheelchair. They'll kill you if you're against them.



Chavia with Syria's first lady, Asma al-Assad, at the Open Hands Initiative's Youth Ability Summit in Damascus, August 2010.

Even before the conflict, I felt Syria was one of the worst countries to be disabled in. The government knows nothing about accessibility, and disabled people are treated as lesser beings. Instead of working toward including us in society and helping us get an education, we have been made dependent on charity. There are 514 organizations for the disabled in Syria, but none of them deal with disabled people's rights. They give people bread and sometimes money, but they have no strategies for rights and development. Many people with disabilities in Syria cannot get an education because the government never made schools disability friendly.

Was there a particular incident that drove you to become an activist for the disabled?

I chose to study law at a university in Aleppo that had an elevator, which would enable me to attend lectures and classes. I had such high expectations, but on my first day, when I pressed the elevator button, I realized it was broken. A passerby told me it had been broken for at least ten years. The university staff kept giving me vague excuses [about fixing it], and months passed and nothing happened. Finally, I went to the office of a local politician, a man with enough power to fix my problem in the bat of an eye, and do you know what he told me? He said, "Why do you want to study and have a career in law when you can't even move around?" I became so depressed I stayed in bed for two months, trying to figure out

what to do with my life. Finally, I decided to stop focusing on my problem with this elevator and instead work to confront the problems in this society for people with disabilities. If we achieve democracy, we will finally be able to give more power to people with disabilities, like the right to vote. In the old Syria, we never had any of that.

And this was the impetus for you to establish the first organization in Syria that focuses on the rights of the disabled?

Yes. Unfortunately, to this day I'm still the only person in Syria fighting for disabled people's rights. For years, my father and the families of people with disabilities—those who believed in our work and wanted to help—funded everything. We've tried to change people's prejudice against the disabled and teach people with disabilities to read and write and use the internet. There's a law that says more than 4 percent of public jobs should go to people with disabilities, but it's never been implemented. My dream was to make this law a reality.

How did you manage to get financial backing from Asma al-Assad?

It happened because I had become famous among international organizations for people with disabilities, and the first lady had heard about me through my work. The fund she controls put together a scheme to fund cultural projects, my association applied, and they decided work with us. It was supposed to last for two years, but we stopped after one because I didn't accept how they wanted to turn everything into a media show about how great they are and how much they're doing. When I told them I wanted to use the money to do real work and solve real problems, they stopped paying us. Then, when the revolution began, they started calling me every week because they were in desperate need of arranging public activities that would show they were doing something good, as a way of saying, "Look, we don't have problems in Syria." They begged me, "Please do this project with us. Imagine all the headlines you'll get for disabled people's rights." I told them, "People are dying, and you want me to talk to the press about how caring you are? Do you think I'm crazy?"

What is Asma al-Assad like in person?

She is a good speaker, well educated, kind, and smart, but I think she's a simple person. She would always ask a lot of questions, but it never felt like she was giving you anything in return other than a nod.

How was your first meeting with her?

I received a call on my cell phone from the first lady's office saying she wanted to meet me the following day in Damascus. She asked me questions about my work and ideas for change, and how it could benefit cultural life in Syria. We spoke for an hour. Ten days later, I received another call saying a car would pick me up at 7 AM and take me to meet the first lady, who would be in Aleppo. I had never in my life imagined I'd ride in such a beautiful vehicle because we only ever used to see the president in that type of car. This time she wanted to know about my life and family. I asked her some questions about her background and education too. I do remember asking her whether there were any kids with disabilities in her son's school, because I wanted to push the subject of inclusion and make her think about how important she could be in implementing such changes in Syria. At last she said, "Say thank you to your mother and father." I asked why, and she said, "Because they have given us such a beautiful girl for Syria."

A man stands in a field of crumpled white paper, looking off to the side. He is wearing a black t-shirt with 'KR3W' and 'MCMXCI' printed on it, light-colored jeans, and a baseball cap. The background is a dense field of crumpled paper, creating a textured, abstract environment.

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Do you think that she actually wanted to help your cause, or did she have another agenda?

She didn't do anything for the disabled; all that was just for show. But I want to say something, to be honest, about Asma. This woman helped me with something very important. Before meeting her I constantly had the secret police after me because I am Kurdish and the head of an association. It was a war against my work. I asked Asma whether she could use her power to tell them to leave me in peace. She promised to do her best, and since that day I haven't had any problems with the secret police. I must say that she protected me. Once I bumped into her at a dinner, and when she saw me, she came up and kissed and hugged me as if I were her friend. I don't know why she liked me so much. I didn't meet Asma ever again after the uprising had started; however, when her people called me and tried to persuade me to start up the project again, I asked them how the first lady was responding to so many civilians being killed. They just told me, "She's sad." And that was the last I heard from them.



Chavia at the Young Leaders Visitors Program organized by the Swedish Institute, 2012.

Before our interview, you told me that during your attempted collaboration with Asma, your cousin was arrested by the secret police. Do you think this was because he was fighting for the rights of Kurds in Syria while you were tackling a less politically sensitive subject?

That's just the government's way of working. In my case, they hoped that by paying me to take part in their work—giving me an opportunity—I would forget about my family and my cousin. In Syria it's very common for one brother to be in the army while the other joins the revolution. Or one brother will work for the government while the other is put in prison for defending his rights. A lot of people in my family are politicians fighting for Kurdish rights.

You were based in Aleppo until recently, and I'm sure you've experienced more than your fair share of fallout from the conflict. I haven't been home for five months because it became impossible to stay. I really didn't want to leave because I wanted to show the people I work with that I am there, with them and for them. I was helping a lot of refugees from other cities, and I knew that if I left they'd be afraid because they would know the situation had gotten very bad.

One night, my uncle called to warn me that Assad's troops would enter Aleppo the next morning and that I had to leave immediately. My assistant and my mom helped me pack a few things, and we drove off to Ayn al-Arab, the village where I was born. The next day, one of the biggest battles of Aleppo took place on my street. Because I have polio and need special food, and a special toilet and bed—my life is special everything—I became very ill after two months of sleeping on people's couches. Finally, I couldn't do it anymore and decided to go back to Aleppo, even if it meant dying in my home. That night there was a battle on my street once again, so I had no option but to drive back to the village and wait for a friend to help me cross into Turkey. I was afraid that if they checked my name at the border I would have big problems, because I had refused to collaborate with the government. Luckily, no one looked me up. Once I got to Turkey, I applied for a visa to Sweden.

Do you feel that the people of Aleppo have been empowered by the revolution?

There was definitely a sense of power and freedom. I think what happened around a year and eight months ago was great, because we need freedom and change. But the problem is that civilians—namely women and children—are paying the bill. When a bomb explodes and kills 20, 30, or 100 people, a lot of them don't know why they are dying. The kids, when they grow up, will wonder, "Why did my mother die? Why did my father die? Why did I lose my hand? Why did I lose my leg?" I think that even if we do get a new Syria we will need a lot of years to deal with these traumas. We now have a war that is far from a revolution. Maybe it will evolve into an international war or stay a civil war, I don't know. The government, with the support of Russia, China, and Iran, is killing people, and at the same time, the people who started the revolution are not here anymore. I believe a number of foreign militiamen, some of them extremists, have entered the Free Syrian Army, and they are killing civilians too.

Now that you've been in Sweden for a few months, can you elaborate on the differences in how the disabled are treated here compared to Syria?

I can't even begin to give you an answer. My organization had done a lot of work over the years, before the war. In Aleppo, for instance, we had made four schools accessible to people with disabilities. On the subway, on my way to a meeting with the Swedish Institute, I was looking at all the young children on their way to school. It made me think about what is happening today in Syria with schools: Some are homes for refugees; others have been destroyed completely by bombings, sometimes killing the children inside.

I wasn't able to stop crying for a very long time because I can't help comparing what I see here in Sweden with what I remember. I can't sleep. I have many nightmares, and during the day I get flashbacks of things I wish that, one day, I will be able to forget. But then I think of how many children have seen even more horrors than me. How will they be able to have a new life after having seen their father or mother killed? Nine months ago, in Aleppo, I helped out when a busload of people arrived, including small kids who had lost limbs. We didn't know where their families were or whether they were still alive. The youngest was three years old. We sent them to the orphanage, but the building is very close to a government building so it is not very safe. I dread to think what has happened to those children. 

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Mohamad in his apartment at Citlaltépetl Refugee House in Mexico City.

DISPLACED VERSE

A Controversial Syrian Poet Finds Asylum in Mexico City

BY BERNARDO LOYOLA

PHOTOS BY
MAURICIO PALOS

POEMS TRANSLATED
BY LERI PRICE

Depending on your definition of danger, at this very second Mexico is the only country that could arguably be considered more perilous and hopelessly fucked than Syria. And even then, it's a blood-soaked toss-up—but while Syria is dangerous for journalists, reporting on certain topics in Mexico is quite literally a death wish.

Over the past six years, 67 journalists have been killed for getting entangled with *narcos* who don't appreciate the attention or digging too deep into President Felipe Calderón's drug war—which has resulted in the deaths

of an estimated 47,000 Mexicans according to the government. Things have gotten so bad that some reporters have even applied for asylum in the US and Spain. Which makes it odd that Mohamad Alaaedin Abdul Moula, a talented and prolific poet from the war-torn city of Homs, decided to flee his home for crime-and-violence-ridden Mexico.

Just before the Free Syrian Army and Assad's forces decided to turn Homs into a pile of rubble, Mohamad, who is in his mid-40s, was forced to flee the country after earning a reputation as a sort of Arabic Henry Miller, writing books with titles like *Forty Days of Siege* and *Hymn for the Body*. In his poem "Pornographic Poetry," a priest muses on the moral conundrum presented by the cleavage of the young women in his pews. It's no wonder his books pissed off Bashar "No Fun" al-Assad.

Mohamad's poetry, however, isn't the only thing that's brought him trouble. In 1980, three of his brothers

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Photo: Vincent Sheppard

Three poems from “Forty Days of Siege”

1.

When will the play tell the director?
 A feeling of wolf saturates the depths of the soldiers
 And the actor repeats the massacre in every act
 No one turn up the lights
 No one wants the script
 When will the audience wake from the rabbits' laughter
 As the victims amuse them by
 Taking position, ready to explode
 How can the onlooker think that slaughter
 Is a blow for victory
 The lengthened play runs for another encore,
 And still no curtain call...

2.

The soldiers go home
 And the ghost camp remains alone, homeless
 The soldiers' wives rejoice in glad tidings:
 We killed a thousand of them;
 a thousand more to come
 Saturday descended
 And a tank shut its kingdom
 Even if Sunday came
 And the bells rang,
 The bell ringer is dead
 And the incorporeal Messiah has burned.

3.

We need to wake up without tanks
 To rearrange the time as we like:
 Flowerpots on the table
 A shoe abandoned by a lame little girl
 Books a young man read in the evening
 We need songs to respond to the plane roaring
 And we would like to spend the rest of our days
 With fewer casualties
 The least slaughter
 Sometimes we need our bodies
 To succumb to a natural death.

were arrested for criticizing the government and allegedly belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood (Mohamad insists the claim is false). In retaliation, the government denied the poet a passport for many years, and he was unable to attend important literary events abroad—even ones held in his honor, like when he won the Arab Writers Union Award for poetry in 1999. Shortly after this missed opportunity, he began to look for a way out of the country. This led him to the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN), an organization that helps persecuted writers find asylum. Last February, less than three weeks before the uprising started in Syria, the folks at ICORN told the poet they had found a place that would welcome him as a refugee.

That place was the Citlaltépetl Refuge House in Mexico City, located in a beautiful area in the Condesa neighborhood—one of the trendiest and safest in the city. It feels far away from the violence of both Mexico's drug war and Syria's civil war.

We contacted Mohamad to ask him about the uprising in his homeland and whether he has some sort of preoccupation with living in dangerous places, or whether it was all just the luck of the draw. He graciously invited us into his one-bedroom apartment, which could've been mistaken for a college dorm and was bright and sunny but almost completely undecorated. He's now been in Mexico for about a year and a half, but he barely speaks a word of Spanish, so our conversation occurred with the help of an interpreter.

VICE: How did your career as a poet begin?

Mohamad Alaaedin Abdul Moula: You don't really need to go to school to write poetry, you are just born with it. Actually, I barely finished high school. In 1980, when I was 15, agents from the secret police came and took my three brothers away, because they were against the political system at the time. That's when I started writing. My brothers spent a long time in jail. I loved them a lot, and that's when those words started to come out from inside me. I realized they were not regular words, but a poet's words.

They accused your brothers of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. What was the basis of their allegations?

They were Muslims, but they were never involved with the Brotherhood. They even thought that I was involved, too, but that was never the case. What is true is that they did not like the government, and only my older brother was politically active against it. But in a system like ours, when they find someone guilty of something, the entire family is guilty. Back then, the Muslim Brotherhood was fighting against the regime of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, but the secret police would capture anyone who was against the government and would judge them all the same way. I even knew people who were put in jail for allegedly belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood; after they spent years in prison, the government would finally recognize that they were Christians. The government killed two of my brothers in 1981. The third one spent ten years in jail.

Do you miss Homs?

There's no more Homs. Everything is destroyed. Homs is in the center of the country. Many centuries ago, Julia Domna lived there, and she ruled the Roman Empire for a long time. I worked for the Ministry of Tourism, cataloging and describing ancient things at the Homs Museum. Homs was a city full of poets and writers.



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When asked about his hometown, Homs, Mohamad's mood visibly changed. Then he said, "There's no more Homs."

You were fired from the Ministry of Tourism in 1996. What reasons were given for your dismissal?

Before the museum, I was working at a gas station. But one day the secret police came and said I couldn't work there anymore. Then I worked in the museum for seven years until the secret police showed up and said I had to leave that job, too. Because my brothers had been in jail, we all had to pay the price. In Syria, citizens don't have rights.

What sort of work were you able to find after the museum?

I was writing and sending stuff to competitions, and I also started selling clothes on the streets. That's how I supported my family.

How did your first collection of poems, 1990's *Elegies for the Family of Hearts*, come about? There seems to be a consistent mood and theme that runs throughout.

I got engaged to my wife on February 14. On that same day, my father passed away. He was an imam, but not affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and he died of a heart condition. I felt such sorrow the day he died, and that's when I started writing those poems.

What about your last work published in Syria, *Baghdadi Exercises for the Nightfall* in 2009? What inspired that collection?

I remember feeling a deep sadness on April 9, 2003. I thought the US invasion of Iraq was terrible. Everything was being bombed and destroyed. I knew Saddam Hussein was also to blame for what was going on. He wasn't a democratic leader. I felt very sad, and that's why I started writing that book.

Some of your work—including your poem "Pornographic Poetry"—has resulted in a lot of problems for you back home.

That poem is not really about pornography. I just talk, for example, in poetic ways about the parts of the body. In that poem and others, I wanted to lay things bare about a lot of taboo subjects—religion, sex, and politics. An imam who was close to the previous president, Hafez al-Assad, said that my work was bad, so he took all my books off the shelves of bookstores and libraries, and a huge controversy started about the things I was saying about religion and the dignity of the human body.

What kind of things did you write about, specifically, that brought you so much heat?

"Pornographic Poetry," for example, is about a Christian priest who is preaching, and all these girls with cleavage and exposed legs are sitting in the first rows, and he looks at them with desire. I've also written about the secretions that women have when they get turned on. Things like that got me in trouble.

In the Arab world, subjects such as those are taboo. Kids in the region don't hug or kiss one another in the streets, but that's something that is completely normal in non-Arab countries. I remember once that the principal of our local university found a guy kissing a girl behind a tree, and he was expelled. Why are those things banned in my country and considered normal in other places? If that university principal visited Mexico, he would have a heart attack. People here make out everywhere!

Do you prefer the way things are in Mexico?

I prefer a country where people are free, because those things are personal. Whoever wants to do those things, they should be free to do them, and whoever doesn't like them, they don't have to do them. I don't want someone that comes and tells me what to do. Things like these are personal. I prefer freedom.

What's your social life like in Mexico? You don't speak Spanish, and Arabic is not widely spoken here.

My life here is not complete. But thank God I have a lot of friends who are bilingual, and they take me out to visit museums or even to travel to other states. I've been to Puebla and Oaxaca. Most of my friends are of Lebanese descent or are Mexicans who studied Arabic in school. I have a Mexican friend who doesn't speak Arabic, and I don't speak Spanish, but we still manage to go out—even if we don't understand a word of what the other is saying. We smile. I met him when he came to interview me a while ago. We don't really talk, but we still hang out. I hope one day we can learn each other's languages.

Have you gotten in trouble or into uncomfortable situations because of the language barrier?

I had a funny accident. I went to the supermarket, and I can't really understand the text on the different products. I bought two cans of food without any images on the label, and after I ate one I started feeling a bit ill. Then a friend of mine showed up and asked me what I had done. I told her and showed her



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Mohamad's apartment is sparsely furnished, though he's lived there for over a year.

the cans, and she started laughing hysterically. Once she was done laughing, she informed me that it was cat food.

Is your family still in Syria?

I have two sons. One is at the university and the other one was doing his military service when I left. My wife passed away two years ago.

You left your country less than three weeks before the conflict began. Did you have a premonition?

I was feeling uneasy and unsafe. I knew the government was going to start killing people, and my family, my sons, were there. I knew that they were killing innocent people every day, so I was very afraid. I was also against the government, and there was nothing good for me there. Everything that was going on around me was asphyxiating. Everything was unjust. That's why I decided to find a way out.

Are you worried your relatives will be targeted because of your writing?

Of course. I want to bring them here. More than ten relatives of mine have been killed. My son, who is just 21, escaped

from his military service and joined the FSA. That worries me even more.

What do you think about President Bashar?

I hate this president, because he's committing crimes against humanity. He's killing Muslims and Christians all the same. He's destroying houses, churches, mosques, he's destroying tourism, he's destroying everything. I will be happy the day he's captured and sent to The Hague to be judged for his crimes.

What do you think would have happened to you if you had stayed?

If I had stayed there, it would be one of two options: I would either be dead, or I would be fighting against the government.

What are your plans for the future?

My residency here ends in February, but my Syrian passport expires next month. I need to get a new one, but renewing it here is not going to be easy. But I don't think I can go back to Syria anytime soon. I might apply for asylum in the US, Canada, or Sweden. I don't know what I'll do, but I know that, after February, things are going to be much harder for me. *VICE*



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THE ROAD TO RUIN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JIM KREWSON

SYRIA'S CIVIL WAR BEGAN IN SPRING 2011,

BUT THE ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT STRETCH BACK CENTURIES—NAMESLY, TO A BATTLE BETWEEN THE SUNNI MUSLIM MAJORITY AND A MYSTICAL SHIA SECT KNOWN AS THE ALAWITES, WHO THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE PISSED OFF THEIR FELLOW MUSLIMS BY DRINKING BOOZE, CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS, AND MAKING BABIES LIKE BASHAR AL-ASSAD, THE WORLD'S MOST NOTORIOUS ALAWITE. THIS RIVALRY WAS EXACERBATED OVER THE YEARS BY THE INTERVENTION OF FOREIGN RULERS, LIKE THE FRENCH IN THE 1920S, WHO FAVORED THE ALAWITES AND SUPPLIED THEM WITH WEAPONS TO POLICE THEIR SUNNI COUNTRYMEN. SO TO PROVIDE SOME CONTEXT FOR THE RECENT BLOODLETTERING AND ITS SUPREMELY CONVOLUTED BACKSTORY, WE'VE COMPILED THIS TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTING SOME OF THE FIGHTS BETWEEN SUNNI MUSLIMS AND THEIR ALAWITE NEIGHBORS, AS WELL AS A SLEW OF FOREIGN AND NATIVE CONQUERORS WHO HAVE REPEATEDLY FUCKED SYRIA WITH THEIR IRON FISTS OVER THE YEARS. AND SO WE DIDN'T HAVE TO USE THE PHRASE "PRESENT DAY" 8 BILLION TIMES, WE'VE GONE AHEAD AND SIMPLIFIED THINGS BY USING THE MODERN NOMENCLATURE OF THE MANY ANCIENT LANDS LISTED THROUGHOUT.

635 A.D.

FOLLOWERS OF THE PROPHET MOHAMMAD LEAD THOUSANDS OF MEN TO MARCH ON DAMASCUS, TAKING IT FROM THE ROMANS. AFTER THE BLOODBATH THEY OCCUPY THE COUNTRY FOR 600 YEARS.

LATE 800S

IN NEIGHBORING IRAQ, IMAM MUHAMMAD IBN NUSAYR MERGES CHRISTIANITY AND PAGANISM WITH ISLAM AND CREATES A NEW RELIGIOUS SECT: A BRANCH OF SHIA ISLAM THAT BECAME KNOWN AS "ALAWITE". AFTER BEING RUN OUT OF TOWN FOR HERESY, NUSAYR'S FOLLOWERS FLEE TO A BARREN STRETCH OF MOUNTAINS IN SYRIA.



1260

THE MONGOLS INVADE ALEPPO BUT ARE DRIVEN BACK BY THE MAMLÜKS, A LOCAL SUNNI ARMY FORMED BY TURKISH SOLDIER-SLAVES. IN THE END, THE MAMLÜKS DEFEAT THE MONGOLS AND TAKE CONTROL OF SYRIA. THIS IS NOT GREAT NEWS FOR THE ALAWITES, WHO ARE STILL BANISHED TO THE MOUNTAINS AND REMAIN UNRECOGNIZED AS "REAL" BY THE MAMLÜKS' ISLAMIC GOVERNMENT.

1299

OSMAN I, LEADER OF THE SUNNI OTTOMAN EMPIRE, HAS A DREAM THAT A TREE SPROUTS FROM HIS BELLY-BUTTON—WHICH IS OF COURSE A SIGN THAT HE AND HIS DESCENDANTS SHOULD TAKE OVER THE WORLD. THIS BEGINS A CAMPAIGN OF RAPE AND PILLAGE.



1914

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, BY NOW KNOWN AS THE "SICK MAN OF EUROPE" BECAUSE OF ITS DWINDLING STRENGTH, JUMPS INTO WWI, ALIGNING WITH THE CENTRAL POWERS IN AN EFFORT TO REVERSE ITS DECLINE. BAD CALL, GUYS.

1516

AFTER RAMPAGING ACROSS CENTRAL EUROPE AND ASIA MINOR, THE OTTOMANS TURN TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND TAKE CONTROL OF SYRIA FROM THE MAMLÜKS. THEY RULE THE REGION FOR 400 YEARS, CONTINUING TO OPPRESS THE ALAWITES.



1918



IN THE MIST OF WWI, EMIR FAISAL, A PAN-ARABIST AND A SCION OF MECCA'S HASHEMITE DYNASTY, UNITES ARAB NATIONALISTS AND (WITH BRITISH SUPPORT) LEADS THE GREAT ARAB REVOLT, FINALLY CAPTURING DAMASCUS FROM THE OTTOMANS AND EFFECTIVELY ENDING THEIR RULE IN THE MIDDLE EAST. IF THIS SOUNDS FAMILIAR IT'S PROBABLY BECAUSE YOU'VE SEEN "LAWRENCE OF ARABIA."

1920

EMIR FAISAL IS CROWNED THE KING OF SYRIA, BUT THE FRENCH, WHO WERE GIVEN CONTROL OF THE COUNTRY FOLLOWING WWI, HAVE OTHER PLANS IN MIND AND EXPEL HIM AT BAYONET-POINT AND TAKE OVER.

1921

WHILE RULING SYRIA, THE FRENCH BEGIN TO RECRUIT ALAWITES TO JOIN THEIR ARMY TO OFFSET THE SUNNI MAJORITY, WHO ARE OPPOSED TO THEIR RULE. THIS LAYS THE FOUNDATION FOR THE ALAWITE DOMINATION OF SYRIA'S MILITARY.



1922

THE FRENCH ESTABLISH AN ALAWITE STATE IN THE AL-ANSARIYYAH MOUNTAINS REGION, WHERE RESIDENTS FOLLOW A LOCAL GOVERNMENT THAT IS MOSTLY UNAFFILIATED WITH THE REST OF THE COUNTRY'S RULERS.

1924

THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF SYRIA AND LEBANON IS FORMED, TO BE LED FAMOUSLY IN LATER YEARS BY MOSCOW-TRAINED KHALID BAKDASH AND BECOME THE STRONGEST PINKO PARTY IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

1940

THE PRO-NAZI VICHY GOVERNMENT TAKES OVER IN FRANCE, MAKING SYRIA PART OF THE AXIS POWERS BY DEFAULT.

1941

THE BRITISH AND FREE FRENCH TROOPS REGAIN CONTROL OF SYRIA FROM THE VICHY REGIME, PROMISING TO END THE FRENCH MANDATE WHEN THE WAR ENDS.

1945

MASS SUNNI DEMONSTRATIONS SPROUT UP ACROSS SYRIA TO PROTEST FRANCE'S SLOW WITHDRAWAL. MEANWHILE, THE BRITS DIPLOMATICALLY PROD FRANCE TO RELINQUISH CONTROL IN HOPES OF IMPROVING THE BRITISH IMAGE IN THE ARAB WORLD.

1946

FINALLY, THE LAST FRENCH TROOPS LEAVE SYRIA AND THE COUNTRY GAINS ITS INDEPENDENCE - TO THE DISMAY OF SOME ALAWITES, WHO FEAR THE ADVANCES MADE UNDER FRENCH RULE COULD BE REVERSED.



1947

THE ARAB NATIONALIST BA'ATH PARTY HOLDS ITS FIRST CONGRESS IN DAMASCUS, SEEKING TO FILL THE POWER VACUUM LEFT BY THE FRENCH. BECAUSE OF ITS SOCIALIST AND SECULAR LEANINGS, THE PARTY DENOUNCES SECTARIAN DIVISIONS AND CLAIMS TO EMBRACE BOTH THE OPT-PERSECUTED ALAWITES AND THE SUNNI MAJORITY.

1949

A MILITARY REGIME LED BY SYRIAN ARMY GENERAL ADIB SHISHAKLI TAKES POWER, SEEKING TO UNITE THE COUNTRY'S ARABS.



FEBRUARY, 1954

GENERAL SHISHAKLI'S AUTHORITARIAN REGIME IS OVERTHROWN BY A COALITION CONSISTING OF MEMBERS OF SYRIA'S COMMUNIST AND BA'ATH PARTIES AND OF THE SYRIAN ARMY.

1955

ALTHOUGH THE SUNNI-LED NATIONAL PARTY HOLDS THE PRESIDENCY, THE BA'ATH PARTY BECOMES A MAJOR PLAYER IN SYRIAN POLITICS BY ALIGNING ITSELF WITH THE COMMUNISTS AND HIGH-LEVEL MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY.



1961

UNDER ABDEL, THE UAR PURSUES AMBITIOUS PROGRAMS LIKE LAND REFORM AND THE NATIONALIZATION OF LARGE BUSINESSES.

SEPTEMBER 28, 1961

THE UAR IS RIPPED APART WHEN A COALITION OF SECESSIONISTS LAUNCHES A COUP IN SYRIA, USURPS CONTROL FROM ABDEL, AND REPEALS THE SOCIALIST POLICIES IMPLEMENTED DURING HIS REIGN. THE BA'ATHISTS, MANY OF WHOM ARE ALAWITE, MAINTAIN CONTROL OVER THE MILITARY. EIGHTEEN MONTHS OF INSTABILITY, COUPS, AND POWER PLAYS ENSUE.



1976

IN THE CITY OF HAMA, THE WORKING CLASS SUNNIS OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD - THE WORLD'S MOST INFLUENTIAL ISLAMIC MOVEMENT - DECLARE WAR ON HAFEZ'S REGIME.



FEBRUARY 1, 1958

SYRIA MERGES WITH GAMAL ABDEL NASSER'S PAN-ARABIST, SOCIALIST EGYPT TO FORM A NEW, UNITED MEGA-COUNTRY CALLED THE UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC (UAR).

1963

THE BA'ATHISTS LAUNCH A COUP THAT OVERTHROWS THE GOVERNMENT IN SYRIA.

THE NEW RULERS PLACE THE COUNTRY IN A PERPETUAL "STATE OF EMERGENCY," WHICH ALLOWS THEM TO SUSPEND ALL CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS AND IMPRISON POLITICAL RIVALS.



1980

THE BROTHERHOOD, WHICH SEEKS TO RESHAPE SYRIA IN ACCORDANCE WITH ISLAMIC DOCTRINES, ATTEMPTS TO ASSASSINATE HAFEZ BY THROWING GRENADES AT HIM IN DAMASCUS DURING A RECEPTION FOR THE PRESIDENT OF MALI. IN RETALIATION, HAFEZ SENDS HIS SOLDIERS INTO SYRIAN PRISONS WHERE THEY EXECUTE 1,200 ISLAMIC POLITICAL PRISONERS INSIDE OF THEIR CELLS.

1966

HAFEZ AL-ASSAD, AN ALAWITE MILITARY OFFICER - WHO IS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE BA'ATH PARTY AND FATHER OF A ONE-YEAR-OLD BASHAR AL-ASSAD - STAGES A COUP IN COLLABORATION WITH HIS MENTOR, SALAH AL-JADID TO OVERTHROW THE BA'ATHIST CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP. HAFEZ IS CHRISTENED THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE, AND SALAH BECOMES THE DE-FACTO LEADER OF SYRIA.

1970

HAFEZ LEADS A MILITARY COUP, DECLARES HIMSELF PRIME MINISTER, AND IMPRISONS SALAH FOR LIFE.

1971

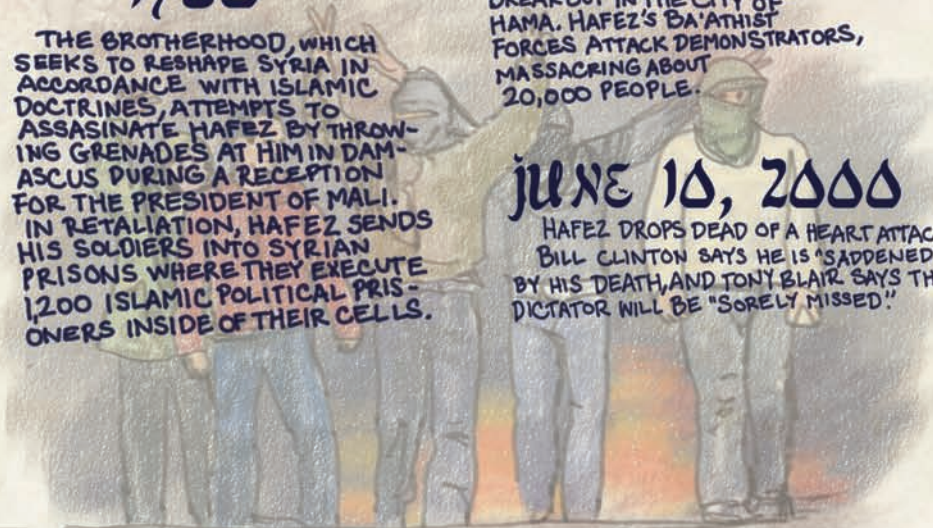
HAFEZ IS INSTATED PRESIDENT AFTER A RIGGED ELECTION, BRINGING STABILITY TO THE COUNTRY BY WAY OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE AND BRIBING THE SUNNI ELITE WITH CRONY CAPITALISM, AS WELL AS THE APPOINTMENT OF SUNNIS TO HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL POSITIONS.

1982

PROTESTS AGAINST HAFEZ AND HIS AUTHORITARIAN RULE BREAK OUT IN THE CITY OF HAMA. HAFEZ'S BA'ATHIST FORCES ATTACK DEMONSTRATORS, MASSACRING ABOUT 20,000 PEOPLE.

JUNE 10, 2000

HAFEZ DROPS DEAD OF A HEART ATTACK. BILL CLINTON SAYS HE IS "SADDENED" BY HIS DEATH, AND TONY BLAIR SAYS THE DICTATOR WILL BE "SOEELY MISSED."



JUNE 11, 2000

THE CONSTITUTIONAL AGE REQUIREMENT IS LOWERED SO THAT HAFEZ'S SON BASHAR - WHO IS 34 - CAN SUCCEED HIM.

JULY 10, 2000

SYRIANS VOTE IN A REFERENDUM PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION... IN WHICH BASHAR IS THE ONLY CANDIDATE. BEFORE THE POLLS EVEN OPEN, HIS SWEARING-IN CEREMONY IS ALREADY SCHEDULED. HE IS ALSO INSTATED AS COMMANDER OF SYRIA'S ARMED FORCES.

DECEMBER, 2000

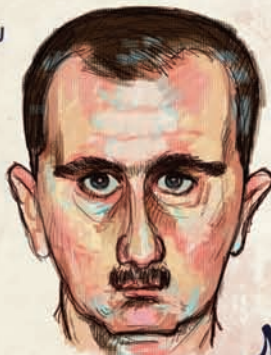
TO EVERYONE'S SURPRISE, PRESIDENT BASHAR FREES 600 POLITICAL PRISONERS, ALLOWS THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PRIVATELY OWNED MEDIA, AND PROMOTES SALONS IN WHICH OPEN CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT IS TOLERATED. MANY BELIEVE THAT THIS IS A SIGN THAT HE WILL DEMOCRATIZE THE COUNTRY, EARNING BASHAR THE NICKNAME "THE HOPE".

JANUARY-JULY 2001

ENERGIZED BY WHAT IS PERCEIVED TO BE A NEW ERA OF FREEDOM, THE "DAMASCUS SPRING" IS BORN, SERVING AS A PLATFORM FOR SYRIANS TO GATHER TO DISCUSS POLITICS, WRITE MANIFESTOS, AND PROTEST THE GOVERNMENT.

END OF 2001

BASHAR LETS OUT A BIG "UT-OH!" AND CHANGES HIS MIND ABOUT DEMOCRATIZATION, WHICH RESULTS IN THE ARREST OF TEN PROMINENT ACTIVISTS WHO ARE THEN IMPRISONED BY THE BASHAR REGIME FOR SPEAKING OUT AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. SECURITY FORCES CRACK DOWN AND KILL, HARASS, AND STALK THE OPPOSITION.



MAY, 2007

BASHAR RUNS FOR REELECTION IN ANOTHER RIGGED RACE IN WHICH HE'S THE ONLY CANDIDATE (THOUGH CITIZENS CAN CAST A "NO" BALLOT). NOT SURPRISINGLY, HE WINS, THOUGH MANY PEOPLE VOICE THEIR OPPOSITION TO HIS REGIME BY BOYCOTTING THE BALLOT BOX.

MARCH 6, 2011

BASHAR'S SECURITY FORCES ARREST 15 CHILDREN IN DARAA FOR PAINTING ANTI-GOVERNMENT GRAFFITI ON THE WALLS OF THE CITY, WHERE THEY REPEATEDLY TAGGED THE SLOGAN "THE PEOPLE WANT THE REGIME TO FALL." WHILE IN CUSTODY, THE BOYS ARE TORTURED BY THEIR CAPTORS.

MARCH, 2011

FUELED BY ANGER DUE TO THE ARREST AND TORTURE OF CHILDREN, PROTESTS ERUPT IN DARAA.

APRIL 8, 2011

IN DOWNTOWN DARAA, SECURITY FORCES OPEN FIRE ON DEMONSTRATORS AND KILL AT LEAST 21 PEOPLE.

APRIL 21-22, 2011

STREET SKIRMISHES AND GUN BATTLES BETWEEN BASHAR'S TROOPS AND ANGRY CITIZENS - SUNNI AND ALAWITE - BREAK OUT THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. IN AN EFFORT TO QUELL PEOPLE'S RAGE, THE ASSAD REGIME ENDS SYRIA'S "STATE OF EMERGENCY" AS THE COUNTRY - IRONICALLY - MOVES CLOSER TO A CIVIL WAR.

JULY 29, 2011

DEFECTORS FROM THE SYRIAN ARMY RELEASE A YOUTUBE VIDEO URGING SOLDIERS AND CITIZENS TO JOIN THEM TO TAKE UP ARMS AGAINST ASSAD'S GOVERNMENT. THEY CALL THEMSELVES THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY (FSA).

AUGUST-NOVEMBER 2011

AN UNTOLD NUMBER OF PEOPLE - ONE ESTIMATE PUTS IT AS HIGH AS 10,000 - TAKE THE FSA UP ON ITS OFFER. BATTLES RAGE IN AL-RASTAN, JABAL AL-ZAWIYA, IDLIB, AND ALEPPO.

DECEMBER 1, 2011

THE UN OFFICIALLY DECLARES SYRIA TO BE IN A STATE OF CIVIL WAR.

APRIL 12, 2012

KOFI ANNAN, THE ENVOY TO SYRIA REPRESENTING THE UN AND THE ARAB LEAGUE, ARRIVES IN SYRIA TO OVERSEE A CEASE FIRE. THE REGIME REFUSES TO WITHDRAW TROOPS FROM MAJOR CITIES LIKE DARAA, HOMS, AND IDLIB. PEACE TALKS ULTIMATELY COLLAPSE.

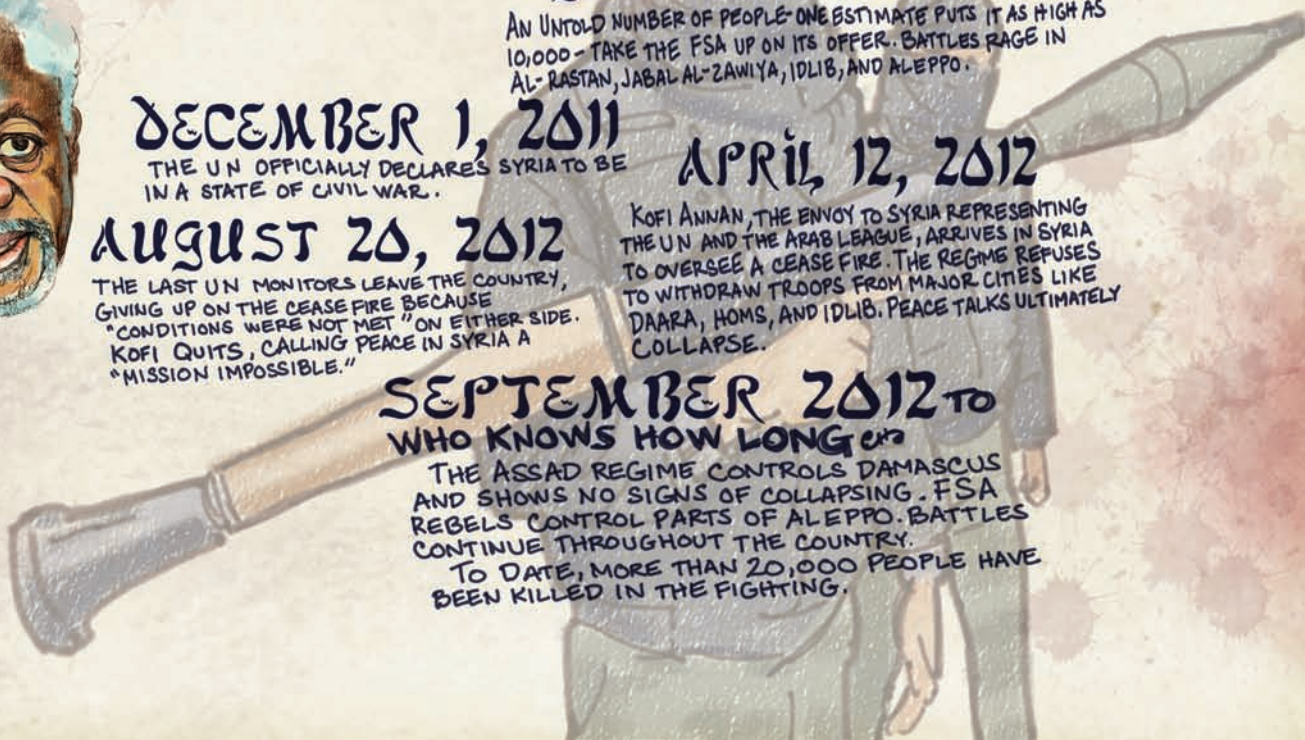
AUGUST 20, 2012

THE LAST UN MONITORS LEAVE THE COUNTRY, GIVING UP ON THE CEASE FIRE BECAUSE "CONDITIONS WERE NOT MET" ON EITHER SIDE. KOFI QUILTS, CALLING PEACE IN SYRIA A "MISSION IMPOSSIBLE."

SEPTEMBER 2012 TO WHO KNOWS HOW LONG

THE ASSAD REGIME CONTROLS DAMASCUS AND SHOWS NO SIGNS OF COLLAPSING. FSA REBELS CONTROL PARTS OF ALEPPO. BATTLES CONTINUE THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY.

TO DATE, MORE THAN 20,000 PEOPLE HAVE BEEN KILLED IN THE FIGHTING.



ALL IN THE FAMILY

PHOTOS BY SUNNY SHOKRAE
STYLIST: ANNETTE LAMOTHE-RAMOS

Photo Assistant: Jimmy Jolliff



At Home with Syrian Jewish Brooklynites

INTRODUCTION BY RYAN GRIM

A high school friend of mine used to live in the Syrian Jewish neighborhood of Gravesend, Brooklyn, down near Coney Island. He described it as an insular, conservative, and somewhat bizarre ethnic enclave that included many opulent houses.

As we were putting together this issue, we realized that coordinating a fashion shoot inside Syria would void our insurance. So I got back in touch with my old friend and asked whether he knew of any families who might be willing to be photographed and possibly interviewed. I stressed that it would be a respectful, straightforward fashion spread, and he was kind enough to put out some feelers.

Here's one of the responses sent to my friend from the father of a Syrian Jewish family (extended ellipses have been left intact): "Definitely not interested..... We do not like articles written about our community..... It is bad press, which causes unwanted attention.... Please discourage your friend from writing this piece...."

All the replies were in the same vein. Luckily, we tracked down a Syrian Jewish family living in nearby Sheepshead Bay who were willing to participate. The kids—Jack, Linda, and Etsik—were born in the US and said they feel no strong connection to Syria. Linda added that living near many other Syrian Jews can be good sometimes because "everyone you know is around you," but it can also be really annoying because, again, "everyone you know is around you."

"I don't like Syrian cooking," Jack said. "I hate it. It's all greasy, oily, fat. Ugh." When asked about his love life, Jack said that his past two girlfriends weren't Jewish, but he does plan to someday marry a nice Jewish girl.

Their mother, Mari, who was born in Syria, doesn't miss it. No surprise there: Like much of the Middle East and everywhere else on earth, Syria has historically acted like a nasty little fucker to its Jewish population, at times instituting bans on Jews leaving the country and other extreme restrictions. In the 1950s, Jewish cemeteries were seized and plowed over by the Syrian government. There were around 30,000 Jews in Syria in 1943; by 1968, only 4,000 remained. These days, all but an estimated 16 Jews have left the country, with many families relocating to Brooklyn over the years. I look at these photos and wonder what it would be like for them if their brethren had stayed any longer, and how wonderful life can be in a country where people don't try to kill you because your ancestors might've believed in some bullshit or other. 

Jack, Mari, Linda, and Etsik at their dining-room table, which is covered in plastic. "Thank God we're here, and not there," said Mari about the uprising in Syria.



Vintage vest, Diesel sweater and jeans, Louis Vuitton belt, New Era hat; vintage top; love shirt, Blank NYC pants, vintage bracelet; Hanes T-shirt, Nike shorts, New Era hat



LOS ANGELES

LAKERS



NEW YORK
9 FIFTY
SNAPBACK

NY

OPPOSITE PAGE: New Era hats **THIS PAGE:** Diesel Black Gold jacket, Diesel T-shirt, Ralph Lauren Black Label pants, Nike sneakers, New Era hat



OPPOSITE PAGE: Jack, while not a particular fan of any one sports team, nevertheless has lots of hats to go with any outfit. **THIS PAGE:** Jack, sitting in his room, never plans to visit Syria. "If you're Jewish? No way. You're visiting a life sentence," he said.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Joie shirt, Blank NYC pants, Christian Louboutin shoes, vintage bracelets, Michele watch **THIS PAGE:** Diesel sweater and jeans, Louis Vuitton belt, Gucci shoes



OPPOSITE PAGE: Linda poses next to the family TV, which played Arabic programming throughout the entire shoot. **THIS PAGE:** Jack admits his Arabic is "atrocious" and that he has no plans to pass it down to his children.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Vintage shirt and pants **THIS PAGE:** Joie shirt, Blank NYC pants, vintage bracelets, Michele watch

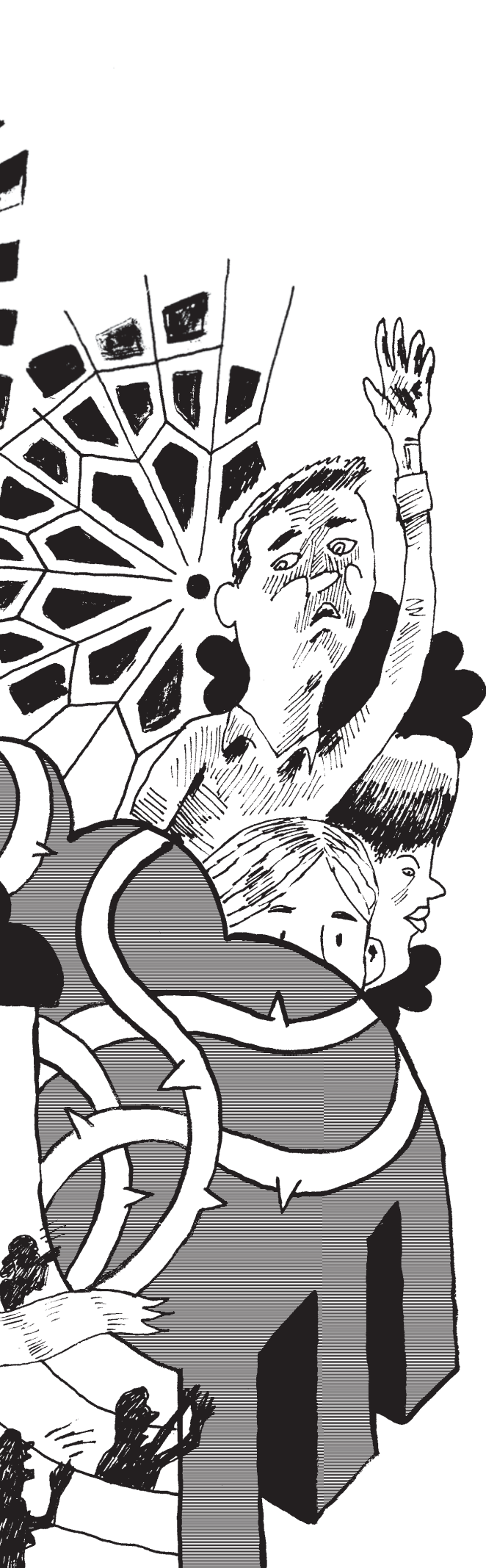


OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: A hamsa, a Middle Eastern symbol used to defend against the evil eye, hangs on Jack's wall. **OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM:** Mari offers the starving photo crew some flatbread pizza, which seemed slightly more Italian than Syrian but whatever. **THIS PAGE:** Linda sits on the marble coffee table in the living room, which is sparsely decorated except for the family hookah.

the
VICE
guide
to

SYRIA





BY VICE STAFF

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIKE TAYLOR

We have put together this guide in an attempt to condense the facts gleaned from thousands of pages of reference books, biographies, religious texts, firsthand accounts, reports, and other information that has informed this issue. We could've included dozens of additional entries, but in our opinion the topics below are the most important for you to begin to understand the complexities of the conflict. If you haven't yet, we recommend that you read our illustrated timeline of Syria's tumultuous history, "The Road to Ruin" on page 54, to provide some context before digging into the guide.

HAFEZ AL-ASSAD

Hafez al-Assad, the father of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, is the most important figure in Syria's short history as an independent nation. Nearly every aspect of modern Syrian life was shaped by Hafez, which isn't surprising given that he ruled the country with an iron first for decades—from 1970 until his death in 2000.

Hafez came from a long lineage of powerful men. His grandfather Sulayman was respected by his fellow villagers for his strength, courage, and marksmanship. They nicknamed him "*al-Wabbish*" ("The Wild Man"), which was apparently so fitting he adopted it as his surname. His son Ali Sulayman inherited many of his father's fierce characteristics, cementing his kin's reputation among the Alawite mountain tribes. In 1927, at the recommendation of some village elders, their last name was upgraded to the more distinguished al-Assad, meaning "The lion."

According to Patrick Seale's magisterial biography, *Asad: Struggle for the Middle East*, Hafez was born in Qardaha, when the northwestern village "consisted of a hundred or so mud or rough stone houses at the end of a dirt track. There was no mosque or church, no shop, no café, no paved road." Few people in the region could read, but Hafez got lucky and snagged a spot in the nearby French colonial primary school. At 16, he joined the secular Pan-Arabist Ba'ath Party and quickly made himself into an invaluable asset by distributing Ba'athist literature, holding secret meetings at his house, and fighting rival groups and the police.

By 1963, Hafez played a major role in executing a coup that put the Ba'athists in charge. Three years later, he helped to engineer an even bloodier takeover that resulted in his appointment as minister of defense. Four years later, he staged *another* coup, clawing his way to the top and into the presidency—an office he would hold for the rest of his life.

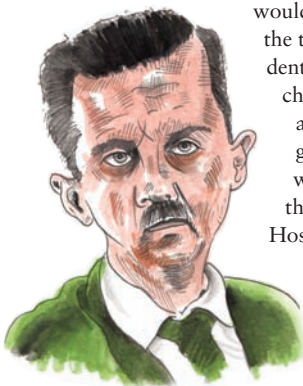


A slick but uncompromising leader, Hafez managed to avoid the fate of previous Syrian overlords by undercutting his competition and brutalizing the opposition. He centralized the country's political system, changed its constitution, and allied with the Soviet Union. Leveraging propaganda to present himself as a man of the people, he pushed Syria's infrastructure toward modernization while suppressing dissent of any kind. In the process, he expanded the reach of Syria's security forces and created a Soviet-style cult of personality for himself, commissioning thousands of statues, portraits, and posters to be displayed across the country. In 1982, he ordered the massacre of thousands of Sunnis in the country's fourth-largest city, Hama, and a year later quashed a coup attempt by his younger brother Rifaat.

In a just world, Hafez would have been punished long before he died for his decades of iron-fisted rule. Instead, he passed away relatively peacefully, in 2000, from a heart attack.

BASHAR AL-ASSAD

Bashar al-Assad was born in Damascus in 1965, five years before his father finished his ascent to the top of the Ba'athist Party. The third of five children, Bashar had a "normal" childhood that included frequent soccer games and ping-pong matches with his father. Few expectations were placed on Bashar, mostly because it was understood that his older brother, Bassel, would inherit his father's presidency when the time came. Bassel—charismatic, confident, and good at sports—was the natural choice for a successor; Bashar was shy and uninterested in government. He graduated high school in 1982 and went on to become an army physician, then went to London's Western Eye Hospital to study ophthalmology.



In 1994, Bashar's life was forever changed when Bassel died in a car accident. Immediately after the funeral, Bashar was deemed the heir apparent, and his preparation for the presidency began: He joined the military academy and began working out of his deceased brother's office.

Hafez died on June 10, 2000, and Bashar assumed the presidency at the tender age of 34, so young that parliament had to lower the minimum age so he could

"run" for office. A sham election was held, followed by another in 2007 that "reelected" him.

If the lesser-son-unexpectedly-takes-over-the-empire narrative sounds familiar, that's because it's the plot of *The Godfather*. Except Bashar is more like Fredo than Michael. Regime insiders told the *Financial Times* that Bashar is insecure and prone to mood swings. His uncle Rifaat, who fled the country after trying to take it over in 1983, told CNN that Bashar "follows what the regime decides on his behalf." Bashar might have been a decent doctor, but as a dictator he was both brutal and prone to waffling, a deadly combination. "You discuss an issue with him in the morning and another person comes along and changes his mind," said former Syrian Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam.

Whatever combination of poor choices and bad luck led him here, Bashar is quickly painting himself into a corner with a whole lot of blood. Some accounts attest that he refuses to step down because he fears his Alawite clan will be massacred by the rebels. "Syria's Assad Has Embraced Pariah Status," read a *Washington Post* headline over the summer. That seems like a fitting epitaph for a man who didn't ask for a regime or revolution to fall on his head but seems unwilling or unable to do anything about it.

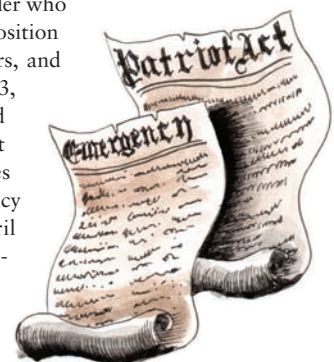
Looking back on his early life, it seems crazy that this nerdy goofball—who, by the way, took the Hippocratic oath—would end up being mentioned in the same breath as Muammar Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, and Kim Jong-Il. From time to time he probably asks himself: "For fuck's sake... what am I doing? I wanted to be an eye doctor and bang English broads."

CIVIL LIBERTIES AND THE EMERGENCY LAW

As you might've guessed by now, Syria's never exactly been a bastion of freedom or human rights. In the colonial era, the French government routinely executed villagers without fair trial and displayed the corpses of "bandits" in Damascus's central square. After WWII, Adib Shishakli, a military commander who ran the country, dissolved all opposition political parties, banned newspapers, and persecuted ethnic minorities. In 1963, the Ba'ath Party took power and declared a state of emergency that gave the country's security forces wide-ranging powers; the "emergency law" was finally revoked in April 2011, ironically, just as the real crisis began.

Syria's emergency law dictated that citizens can be arrested, detained, tried, and sentenced without due process or access to an attorney. All this continues today. Elections are held, but only as a formality.

Freedom of assembly is written into the constitution, but the Ministry of Interior has to approve any gathering of more than five people. Before the revolution, protests against Israel were usually approved,



while their pro-Islam, pro-Kurdish, and antigovernment counterparts were quickly broken up. Last year, as demonstrations spread, security forces were given the green light by the regime to disperse protests by shooting civilians and leaving them to die in the street.

THE DAMASCUS SPRING

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Back in 2000, when Bashar took over, Syrians were hopeful that the new Western-educated president would begin dismantling the security state. Proud citizens met in private homes to discuss reforms in a movement that was called the Damascus Spring. Intellectuals signed the "Statement of the 99," a manifesto demanding an end to martial law and the freeing of political prisoners. Bashar even gave them a reason for hope when he shut down Mezzeh Prison, long reviled for its brutal treatment of inmates. But this hope did not last long.

In August 2001, the regime cracked down on would-be reformers, arresting prominent members of the discussion groups that it had been tolerating, charging people with "attempting to change the constitution by illegal means" and "inciting racial and sectarian strife."

The hope in the West is, of course, that once Assad is toppled, the rebels will institute a free and democratic society and everyone will live happily ever after; however, the presence of jihadists fighting alongside the Free Syrian Army indicates that the country could potentially replace secular authoritarianism with theocratic oppression if religious extremism is left unchecked.

RUSSIA

Russia is Syria's oldest and most powerful ally, and its government is one of Assad's last remaining friends outside his domain. They have blocked all UN resolutions condemning the regime and vetoed (occasionally alongside China) any attempt to sanction a government that has been killing its own civilians.

All the while, the Russians have continued to sell weapons to Assad. One of the biggest transactions happened back in January, when the Kremlin signed a deal to send 36 fighter jets to Syria at the cost of \$550 million. The jets won't be delivered for years, and by making the sale, Russia is assuming that the current government or some iteration of it is going to be around for a good long while.

Damascus's cozy relationship with Moscow dates back to the Cold War. In the 50s, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev sent more than \$200 million in aid to Syria as part of the neocolonial chess game that was being played out among the Arab nations. The USSR-Syrian alliance held strong after the successful coup launched by Hafez in 1970. The Soviets sent boatloads of arms

to counter Israeli influence, and Syria's love for Russian guns, planes, and missiles hasn't abated. Russia sold Syria \$1 billion worth of arms in 2011, and at this point the sky is the limit.

More geopolitically important than the arms dealing is the Russian naval facility in Tartus. Hafez gave permission to the Soviets to establish the base back in 1971, and it's been a vital port operation ever since. It's also Russia's only military port still in operation outside the former USSR. Through the realpolitik lens of Vladimir Putin and Co., it makes perfect sense to keep Bashar in power. He is a valued munitions customer, but more important, he gives them a place to resupply their nuclear subs.

LEBANON

Syria's long and tangled history with Lebanon dates back to its separation from Syria in 1920, when European powers still dominated much of the Middle East. Syrian troops have been a continuous presence in the country from 1976 until 2005's "Cedar Revolution," which kicked Syrian security forces out of Lebanon. But Syrian intelligence agencies still hold sway in the country and have been blamed for a series of high-profile assassinations of Lebanese officials over the last decade.

The close political, economic, and cultural ties between the two countries are beginning to fray under the weight of the recent conflict. Lebanon's government is roughly divided into two blocs: the majority, pro-regime March 8 Alliance and the opposition, pro-rebel March 14 Alliance. The Shia militant group Hezbollah dominates March 8 and is by far the strongest political element in the country, and Assad's regime is one of Hezbollah's biggest supporters in terms of money, weapons, and political cover. This relationship has been lowering Hezbollah's standing across the Arab world, as the group has been widely accused of sending fighters to back Assad's sociopathic meltdown.

Some pro-regime Lebanese politicians support the creation of a pan-Arab "Greater Syria," which would encompass Lebanon. For its part, the Syrian government and its many supporters still consider Lebanon a province rather than a sovereign neighbor. Similarly, many Lebanese bristle at the thought of being one with Syria, as its residents are considered by much of the country to be lower class.

Widespread talk of spillover from the conflict into Lebanon is rooted in the close relationship between both nations and their peoples. These days, the civil war in Syria occasionally plays out in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, where local Sunni gunmen, who support the rebels in Syria, have reportedly battled Lebanese Alawites. Beirut has recently become



the scene of deadly fighting and bombings between pro- and anti-regime forces—a terrifying prospect in a country that has not yet healed from its own brutal civil war, which ended only a few years ago.

During the Tripoli clashes, a pro-rebel Lebanese commander named Abu Ibrahim told us, “This has been going on my whole adult life,” referring to fighting Syrian-backed militias fighting in Lebanon. He showed scars that he said were from battling Syrian troops in 1983 and added that, for now at least, he would not let his sons fight. The Syrian Army and its local proxies are also widely accused of massacring Sunnis in Tripoli during the civil war, a dark episode that will never be forgotten by Lebanese residents.

The deep hatred and mistrust of the Syrian presence in Lebanon is exacerbated by Syrian forces’ almost-daily incursions into Lebanese territory. With a weak military and a security establishment still largely loyal to the Syrian regime, Lebanon has so far failed to react to these exchanges in any meaningful way.

KURDS

Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Syria and number around 2 million. These mainly secular Sunnis have been concentrated in Syria’s northern provinces since the time of the crusades.

After being stripped of their passports in the 1960s, over the past decades the Kurds have struggled to survive as noncitizens. Kurdish language and culture were forbidden, and thousands of Kurdish activists were disappeared and tortured in Assad’s prisons. This ongoing repression led to an uprising in 1986, after hundreds of Kurds gathered in Damascus to celebrate Newroz, one of their most important holidays.

Recently, Kurds have tried to put a stop to their factional infighting and have begun to organize against the Assad regime. Their moment came this July, when the government withdrew their military from Kurdish areas to fight the FSA in Aleppo and Damascus. Seizing the opportunity, the Kurdish militia known as YPG (Popular Protection Units) took over one Kurdish town after another; roadblocks were set up, and Syrian security forces were placed under house arrest.

The Kurds occupy a third position in the war, opposing both Assad and the opposition. While they loathe Assad, they fear that the Free Syrian Army will establish an Islamist state. The fact that Turkey is harboring the Free Syrian Army and supplying them with weapons makes the Kurds even more suspicious, because the Turks and Kurds have enough bad blood to fill an entirely separate guide. This fall, Turkey’s prime minister gave Assad an ultimatum: If he permitted the Kurdish independence movement or guerrilla PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) cells to operate in

his country, Turkey would attack. The Kurdish movement is now preparing for full-on war with Turkey, another crackdown by Assad’s forces, and the infiltration of extremists into their autonomous territory. Once again, the Kurds find themselves stuck in the middle, fighting for their survival and independence, and the future is looking pretty bleak.

JEWIS

In 2005, the US State Department estimated that there were 80 Jews living in Syria. Jews have made the country their home for at least 2,000 years, even as they have been subject to unfair impositions like a special religious tax that only they were forced to pay. Waves of Sephardic Jews fled the Spanish Inquisition in the late 1400s to Syria but found the country deeply inhospitable.

Still, life didn’t become unbearable for Syrian Jews until Israel was founded in 1948. After Israel spanked Syria’s ass in the Arab-Israeli War, the embittered Syrian government implemented a slew of laws forbidding Jews from owning property, drivers’ licenses, or telephones. In 1967, after Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War, 57 Jews were allegedly murdered during a pogrom in the city of Qamishli.

Anticipating an exodus, the Syrian government paradoxically made it nearly impossible for the Jews to leave. Hafez would only allow Jews to travel if they could provide a bond of \$300 to \$1,000, in addition to leaving a family member behind as collateral. Starting in 1972, the human rights activist Judy Feld Carr, known only as the mysterious “Mrs. Judy” to her charges, secretly smuggled more than 3,000 Jews out of the country via Syria’s version of the Underground Railroad. Those who didn’t successfully complete the crossing were found guilty of unauthorized travel and were frequently tortured during their time in detention. In 1977, under pressure from Jimmy Carter, Hafez finally allowed some Jews to leave the country freely.

In 1994, the Israeli government admitted to conducting a two-year covert operation that whisked many Jews out of Aleppo and into Israel. Many of them “visited” New York City—home to the world’s largest population of Syrian Jews (75,000 as of 2007)—and from there traveled to Israel, never again to return home. In total, Israel helped almost 4,000 Jews flee Syria, and by the end of the operation only 300 remained in the country—largely because they were too old to flee. Most of these stragglers are dead now. The Knieset Ilfranj synagogue in Damascus is the last Jewish place of worship in the country. Mrs. Judy estimates that there are 16—yes, 16—Jews remaining in Syria today.



JIHADISTS

No one is really sure what percentage of the Syrian rebel force is made up of “jihadists” and “foreign fighters.” While it’s true that hardline young men from Libya and the Gulf States are sneaking in to fight, their actual numbers and influence are probably exaggerated in the Western press and by tinfoil-hat conspiracy theorists. The jihadists—devout, clean-living martyrs—have come to be known among the opposition for their fierce and uncompromising fighting style. They make the secular, four-pack-a-day-smoking FSA look ragtag by comparison. It’s indisputable that the opposition has taken on a more religious tone in recent months—but that’s bound to happen when the secular middle class flees the cities and towns during a war in a heavily divided and deeply faithful country. Poor country folk are largely the only ones left in these areas; when their families are killed and villages razed, the only thing they have left is Allah.



To better understand the predicament the opposition faces, imagine that civil war broke out in the US or any Western country, really. You’re fighting with the secular, leftist young people who are completely unprepared to face a high-tech military and, as a result, are getting slaughtered. Some armed-to-the-teeth evangelicals and bumpkin dirt farmers step

in and offer their help. And while you know that if your side wins, these hardline elements will try to seize power, incorporate their belief system into the new government, and outlaw abortions, in the fog of war it’s an alliance you can’t refuse.

Western fears of jihadists hijacking the Syrian revolution have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We refused to send weapons to the secular opposition because we were scared they would fall into the hands of extremists, so the secular opposition was forced to turn to the jihadists for help. The Salafi groups have guns and money coming from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and al-Qaeda’s involvement in the conflict has supposedly become more focused since mid-July. VICE correspondents on the ground in the region report seeing notably few foreign fighters—a Libyan here and there, but not the terror pit some politicians are making it out to be. The secular opposition is obviously worried that the revolution is going to fall into the hands of the religious zealots. But for the moment, the FSA and its allies need these mysterious, vaguely threatening bearded men who aren’t scared to sleep on the front lines and are absolutely unafraid to die for the cause.

MEDIA

Syrian law restricts the press from publishing information that “causes public unrest, disturbs international relations, violates the dignity of the state or national unity, affects the morale of the armed forces, or inflicts

harm on the national economy and the safety of the monetary system.” The media has been completely state-controlled since the 60s. As of 2001, private media outlets have been permitted to operate, but the government retains the power to quash and censor anything.

The internet is likewise restricted. Most of the ISPs are owned by the government, which doesn’t think twice about blocking any and all content that they perceive to be anti-regime. Social-networking and video-sharing sites were banned across the board until February 2011. But even after Facebook and YouTube were unblocked, human rights observers noted that the regime still routinely censored information—in particular, it tried to keep images of protestors being beaten and shot from leaking out of the country. Those who successfully circumvent the censors and post antigovernment content can face prison terms and torture.

TV sucks a whole lot of balls in Syria, no matter which direction you flick the channel. All but two TV stations in Syria are satellite-broadcasted, and most are controlled by the state-backed Syrian Arab Television and Radio Broadcasting Commission. The handful of private channels operating in the country live in constant fear of pissing off their government minders. This means that almost all Syrian “journalists” must cling tightly to Assad’s jock in order to safeguard their careers (and, in some cases, their literal survival). This doesn’t keep them from being aggressive and publicly attacking or undermining anyone who disagrees with their pro-regime view.

In recent months, TV has turned deadly. In June, the privately owned pro-Assad station Al-Ikhabariya was attacked by FSA forces, which resulted in the death of seven of its employees. This was followed by an insurgent sniper attack on Iranian broadcast correspondent Maya Nasser in September. Expect these attacks to become more common as the conflict progresses.

Arab League foreign ministers have asked the region’s satellite-TV providers to block transmissions from Syria in order to limit the Assad regime’s influence, and Syrian television companies halted the production of new shows at the beginning of the revolution. This included the filming of some of the most popular soap operas in the Arab world, as well as propaganda like the 29-part series *Ash-Shatat (The Diaspora)*, largely based on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—a fabricated anti-Semitic publication that details attempts by Jewish leaders to take over the world and was propagated by Hitler before WWII. The series includes a scene that suggests that, at one point in time, Jews murdered Christian children and used their blood as an ingredient in matzo.



UNDERGROUND NEWSPAPERS

In Syria's state-controlled media landscape, it can be difficult for those inside the country to get access to information that hasn't been turned into mystery meat by the Ba'ath Party sausage grinder. The regime's monopoly on news, however, has spawned a number of underground antigovernment newspapers made with home printers and copiers. Unabashedly partisan, these papers provide a counterweight to the misinformation and skewed facts presented by the mainstream Syrian media and give a voice to the opposition.

We contacted Kareem Lailah, the editor in chief of the *Hurriyat*, which according to him was the first of these opposition papers, founded last August. Kareem told us that *Hurriyat* is hand-delivered by activists who moonlight as the world's ballsiest paperboys, delivering their message to the doorsteps of homes in Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. Standard operating procedure is to drop a copy on the doormat, ring the doorbell, and haul ass out of there before anyone sees you. While their success rate is impressive, Kareem said, "Two of our brave journalists have been arrested... one was imprisoned for some days, and the other for about three months."

While the bulk of the editorial content within these handmade publications is dedicated to reporting and op-ed pieces, many include political cartoons and reports on local culture. Zeina Bali, a Syrian journalist who wrote a piece about the papers for *Syria Today*, told us that the paper *Surytina* even publishes book reviews that link their narratives to developments in the civil war.

When we asked Zeina how she thought these papers were being received, she put it quite succinctly: "I think they present the antigovernment movement in a very peaceful way. In my opinion, especially since they are still running this, it is a very positive thing. It will prove to the people that there is a civil aspect to the uprising. I think a lot of people have just lost faith."

URBAN LIFE VS. RURAL LIFE

Like most of the revolts that kicked off the Arab Spring, Syria's revolution incubated in rural and semirural areas after the protests in Daraa. This is not a coincidence. The mishmash of FSA fighters and activists has rapidly become the country's equivalent of the Occupy movement—if Occupy had guns, RPGs, and an actual goal. People are angry and confused, and as always, the urban rich are the ones being held accountable.

Approximately 54 percent of Syria's population lives in the cities, while around 44 percent are out in the sticks, including a sizable Bedouin population that roves the country's vast desert. As you can imagine, this breakdown creates a yawning class disparity. But the conflict has produced an inverse

effect in migration patterns. Many Syrians are fleeing the violence in Damascus and Aleppo to head back to their ancestral villages, while the rural poor are taking refuge in overpopulated suburban slums. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reports that during the course of the conflict around 1.5 million people have been displaced. According to a joint report by the UN and the Syrian government, at least 3 million residents are in need of supplemental aid to ensure an adequate harvest and livestock supply over the course of the next year. Half of those people will be nearing starvation within the next three to six months.

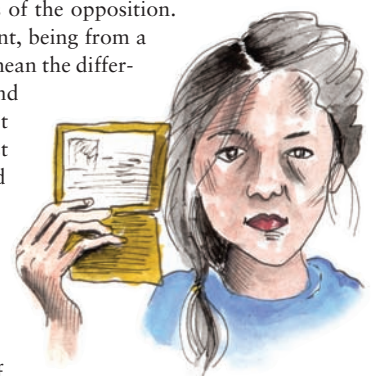
The past few years of drought conditions have been exacerbated by the conflict, and the agricultural sector has lost \$1.8 billion this year. Economists say that the fallout from fighting could contract the national economy by 14 percent or more. Businesses throughout the country are definitely feeling the squeeze (if they haven't already been reduced to a steaming pile of rubble).

CITIZENSHIP

The Syrian national ID card includes its holder's ancestral name and "place of origin," i.e., the neighborhood and city most closely associated with his or her family name. Before the uprising, the ID card caused the kind of minor travel-related annoyances we're accustomed to in the West. But in the past 20 months, the ID card has become a potent tool for profiling and weeding out suspected members of the opposition. If you get stopped at a checkpoint, being from a rebel city or neighborhood can mean the difference between life and death. And while an individual's religion isn't blatantly listed on the ID, most officials can make a pretty good guess about a citizen's sect based on the information.

Syria has a long history of using citizenship restrictions to decide who's in and who's out. In 1962, the state arbitrarily revoked the citizenship of 120,000 Kurds. These Kurds and their descendants were all considered *ajanib* (stateless) until last May. Ajanib are not permitted to marry, own cars, rent houses, or possess national IDs. Below the ajanib are the *maktoumeen* (hidden)—those who live in stateless limbo, unable to leave Syria legally but also forbidden from getting a job.

After oppressing the separatist Kurds for decades, three weeks after the uprising Assad issued an amnesty, giving them full citizenship. This conspicuously timed



move was a cynical political bid to keep the armed Kurds from allying with the opposition. It worked; the Kurds have become a third position of sorts, quietly laying the foundations for their own autonomous Kurdish revolution in the North while the FSA and the regime slaughter each other.

Even if you're not against the regime, your ID can be used to punish you if you don't take good care of it. This fall, the regime released 267 people from prison who had been found with broken ID cards. In recent months, a firebrand Syrian sheikh has been calling for Syrians to break their ID cards to protest the regime. One man told Agence France-Presse that he had been on his way home when security forces stopped him and found his ID card broken. Another unlucky soul told AFP, "They beat me and forced me to confess that I was following the sheikh's instructions, which I didn't know existed." When these Syrians were released, their heads were shaved, and they bore signs of torture. The lesson is to take good care of your driver's license, especially if you live under a paranoid-schizophrenic wartime regime.

CHEMICAL WEAPONS

In late July, the government publicly acknowledged that Syria has chemical weapons. They then immediately backpedaled on this statement. In reality, Turkey and the West have known about Syria's chemical-weapons stockpile for decades: Sarin, VX, even WWI-era mustard gas. The Syrians have a grand collection of heinous munitions that have been largely denounced by the civilized world.

Syria used to import the chemical agents needed to make their nerve gases, but by the 70s they developed a moderately sized chemical industry and now manufacture their own. It's still unclear whether Syria possesses biological weapons—the processes used to develop them can be carried out under the guise of legitimate defense research.

Whatever they have can be deployed via their Russian-made Scud missiles, which have a range of about 300 miles, putting them easily in range of Jerusalem.

Luckily for the world, any deployment of Syria's weapons of mass destruction would likely sour the regime's cozy relationship with Russia and China. Regardless, one of the international community's major concerns is that when Assad falls, al-Qaeda and its affiliates could commandeer the WMDs, and the conflict will morph into something even more hellish. Whatever happens, it's almost guaranteed that the next Syrian government will use the country's chemical arsenal as a geopolitical counterweight to Israel's nuclear capabilities.



AIR DOMINANCE

The Syrian Air Force is stocked almost exclusively with Russian-made aircraft, but most of this Cold War-era fleet is obsolete or in disrepair. Reports indicate that as many as half of the aircraft are unable to operate at any time. Much of the fleet is made up of MiGs, but video evidence shows that the regime has sometimes relied on Czech-built training aircraft to attack rebel strongholds, presumably a sign of further deficiency within the force.

Although camera-phone videos show the rebels downing Assad's helicopters and jets, the regime still maintains total air supremacy, constantly carpet-bombing rebel areas with explosives and helicopter gunships. An air attack on Maarat al-Nu'man on October 9 reportedly resulted in the deaths of at least 40 civilians.

The rebels have called repeatedly for an internationally enforced no-fly zone, like the one imposed on Libya in 2011 that significantly undermined Gadaffi's efforts to crush the armed rebellion and eventually toppled him. The US and NATO have so far declined these requests.

GAMBLING

The Koran is clear on gambling being a big no-no—it's considered a "great sin" on par with getting drunk—so it's not surprising that casinos are basically nonexistent in many Middle Eastern countries. Even though the Assad regime is secular, Muslim clerics had enough sway with the government to officially ban gambling and close the existing casinos back in the 70s. Since then, Syrians who lust for forbidden pleasures have had to cross the border to Lebanon or find underground games.

In 2010, the ban on games of chance was openly challenged by Syrian entrepreneur Khaled Hboubati when he opened the Ocean Club, a casino near the Damascus airport. Though the Ocean Club didn't have a gambling license—such a license doesn't exist in Syria—the *Guardian* quoted a source saying that the government had given the casino "the quiet go-ahead." This tolerance was seen by some as a sign that Syria is becoming more modern and Westernized.

But as with most indicators of liberalization in Syria, the Ocean Club turned to shit awfully quickly. In mid-February, less than two months after it opened, the Ministry of Local Administration shut the place down. There had been calls by hard-line Muslim members of parliament to close it.

Two months later, the Syrian uprising was in full swing in Daraa, and the legality of gambling became a moot point. It's hard to say whether other entrepreneurs will attempt to open casinos after the war ends and a new government emerges, but you can definitely bet on a complete shutdown if the extremist elements gain control.



WOMEN

For many young Syrian women, the grass is greener in Lebanon. Beirut is seen as a sparkling bastion of liberalism and free expression—a place where familial pressures fall by the wayside and the clubs bump all night. For others, Lebanon serves as a much-needed escape from Syria's claustrophobic dating scene or a discreet place for a weekend tryst.



Syria's constitution guarantees religious freedom to all. Women are free to wear whatever they want; the choice to cover or not cover—and how much is left revealed—is personal and generally based on familial traditions. Christians and Muslims, dressed in a variety of ways, hang out together. The hijab is typically reserved for formal engagements where it is worn for cultural rather than religious reasons.

Throughout the country, mothers wearing *niqab* (a face veil worn in conjunction with a hijab) can be seen walking alongside their uncovered daughters in Hello Kitty backpacks. Moderately covered women shop in the local souks with their uncovered friends. It's all pretty casual.

Syrian Christian women, unfairly or not, have a reputation for showing off God's blessings. Tight pants and revealing shirts drive men of all faiths wild. In Syria, both Christian and Muslim men thank Jesus for the invention of skinny jeans. Some conservative Muslim guys find it offensive that "Christian girls wear tight trousers" because it can lead to lustful and impure thoughts, but most are quietly grateful.

LINGERIE

Syria is considered to be one of the most fashionable countries in the Middle East. The men like sharp suits, bedazzled Ed Hardy-looking T-shirts, and limited-edition Nikes. But the majority of the garments manufactured in the country are for women: colorful headscarves, blinged-out *abayas* (long tunics), and a hell of a lot of high-tech trashy underwear. Syrian women love lingerie for the same reasons women have loved lingerie since time immemorial—to feel good about themselves and keep their men from straying. Most females in the West would be mortified if their future mother-in-law gave them a gift in the form of a fluffy g-banger with LEDs and a crotch that magically flies open when you clap and scream "Open sesame!" but this is totally acceptable behavior in Syria. Bachelorette-party gifts could include feathered panties with



tassels, python-skin-patterned and sequined bras, or a vibrating cell phone that covers the lady bits—there is nothing taboo about this cheesy lingerie, as it's meant to only be seen by husbands.

THE SAYYIDAH RUQAYYA MOSQUE

In the year 632, the death of the Prophet Mohammad precipitated a split between his followers that provided the catalyst for the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. The Shias believed that Mohammad's cousin Ali should take over, while the Sunnis were gunning for Abu Bakr, Mohammad's close companion and father-in-law. Abu Bakr won the political dispute and ascended to the caliphate—the scene was set for 1,500 years of Sunni dominance and Shia resentment. Adding insult to injury, Ali's son Husain was murdered and decapitated, and Mohammad's great-granddaughter Sayyidah Ruqayya was locked away in a prison and murdered at the tender age of four.



Today, observant Shias bus from all over (mostly Iran) to pay their respects at the opulent mosque in Damascus erected where Sayyidah Ruqayya's millennia-old infant body is entombed. Black-clad pilgrims buy children's toys to leave on top of Sayyidah Ruqayya's tomb, in remembrance of the grave injustice of her murder. After these acts of religious piety, the pilgrims make a stop at the Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque (named for Husain's sister) before the long bus ride back to Iran.

RAMI MAKHLOUF

While a foreigner would be hard-pressed to know his name, Rami Makhlouf is seen as the poster boy of corruption and nepotism. The infamy of the most powerful businessman in Syria is so great that popular proverbs are regularly altered to slander him. He also happens to be the maternal cousin of Bashar al-Assad. Aided by the regime's mafioso patronage system, Rami's business ventures—Syriatel (one of the country's two mobile-phone companies), real estate, and banking—have a virtual monopoly on 60 percent of Syria's economy. His net worth is around \$6 billion. Many in Syria consider him a thief and representative of the problems that have kept Syria's wealth concentrated in the hands of the chosen few.

In a June 2011 interview with Reuters, Rami asserted that he would remove himself from Syrian business and donate much of his wealth to charity. A central part of this vow was to sell 40 percent of his shares in Syriatel. Opposition figures question his commitment to philanthropy, perhaps with good reason—reports in *Al-Akhhbar* suggest that he has been buying significant shares in many banks throughout 2012.

PLASTIC SURGERY

The Ministry of Health regulates the price of cosmetic surgery in the country. A nose job in Syria is only \$700 to \$800, a third of what you would pay in Europe. And for a little extra cash, you can get giant fake boobs. But you definitely get what you pay for; plastic surgery in Syria is notoriously shoddy. In Beirut, if your nose looks like it got caught in a meat grinder, they say, “She probably got that done in Syria.” Many cosmetic surgeons are unlicensed and run their “practices” out of unsanitary offices.

Another less common surgery is also available in Syria: For \$17,000, Middle Eastern women can have their brown eyes turned green or blue. Doctors cut directly into the eye, remove the iris, and replace it with a prosthetic. If surgery goes badly, the patient goes blind. The Syrian Ministry of Health is attempting to rein in the country’s sketchy cosmetic market, but as Syria remains in a state of perpetual war, the demand for cheap plastic surgery is understandably leveling off.

FOOD AND SUSTENANCE

The ancient city of Aleppo’s status as a culinary powerhouse can be attributed to its prime location along the Silk Road, and its cuisine could be classified as antiquity fusion. For centuries, the region’s chefs have had access to the widest variety of spices, grains, fruits, and vegetables that the Ottoman world had to offer.

Before the civil war decimated large parts of Aleppo, there was no better place to experience the city’s lauded cuisine than the Armenian neighborhood of Jdeideh. Beit as-Sissi, or Sissi House, was widely considered one of the best restaurants in the country and served some of the finest *kebab karaz* (spiced ground lamb soaked in cherry sauce) on earth before it was burned to the ground at the beginning of October. The open-air courtyard was surrounded by private wood-paneled dining rooms.

Leading Aleppo historian Abraham Marcus recently told us, “Sissi House offered the perfect ambience. It represented the best of the city’s traditional architecture: sober and elegant, with solid limestone walls whose golden patina and delicate carvings surrounded you with their warmth. So much money and care in recent years has gone into the restoration of this and many other historic buildings in Aleppo. Now a city widely held as a model of historic preservation has become the scene of shocking destruction.”

GAY LIFE

For hot homosexual action in Syria, look no further than a gay *hammam* (bathhouse). Just like any spa, hammams have private rooms, and are cheaper

and more discreet alternative to a hotel. Since 2010, however, the owners of hammams have been more suspicious of newcomers due to frequent police raids. Many gays have gone back to cruising in Damascus’s parks.

Gay men used to gather and socialize freely despite a Syrian law that technically outlawed homosexuality. The police flexed their homophobic muscles by cracking down on hammams—an easy target, since it’s considered despicable to be gay in the Middle East. In April 2010, 25 gay men were arrested, raped, and tortured for three months according to Mahmoud Hassino, publisher of the gay magazine *Malaweh*.

ANTIQUITIES

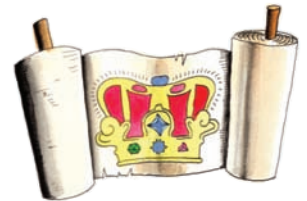
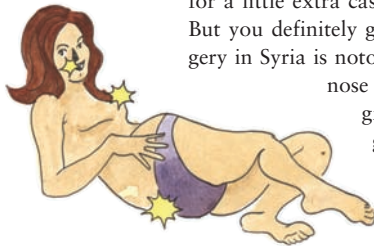
Syria’s cities, towns, deserts, and villages are littered with the remains of the ancients. Kingdoms have been built atop kingdoms since the earliest days of antiquity. The Hittites, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Ottomans, and French have all, at different times, had a stronghold in the region and left behind monuments to their respective legacies.

The perfect example is the famed Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. It was constructed as an Aramaean temple nearly 3,000 years ago. When Rome conquered Damascus in 64 AD, they repurposed the site as a shrine to Jupiter, the king of the gods. The temple was converted into a church near the end of the fourth century and then converted into a mosque in 706.

Monumental archaeological discoveries are common on the Syrian steppe. In the 1970s, near the Turkish border, the 12,000-year-old settlement of Tell Qaramel was discovered. Archaeologists uncovered five massive round stone towers that were built 2,000 years before the tower at Jericho, previously thought to be the oldest tower on earth.

UNESCO’s World Heritage list protects six of Syria’s historical monuments: the ancient cities of Aleppo, Bosra, Damascus, regions of northern Syria, the crusader castle of Crac des Chevaliers with its citadel at Qal’at Salah El-Din, and the ancient desert town of Palmyra.

Five of the UNESCO sites have suffered heavy damage due to the conflict. UNESCO’s director general, Irina Bokova, recently issued a statement saying, “The Umayyad Mosque, heart of the religious life of the city, one of the most beautiful mosques in the Muslim world, is being severely endangered—the extent of which we do not know yet. In northern Syria, the region of the Ancient Villages inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2011 [has been] heavily struck and it seems that the invaluable Saint-Simeon byzantine complex might have been touched.”





PRELUDE TO ‘SOLO PIANO MUSIC’

Why the World Should Read Syria’s Fawwaz Haddad

BY MAX WEISS
ARTWORK BY KHALED AKIL

Syrian writers have been marginalized for decades, left to languish on the Middle Eastern edge of a genre that is often reductively labeled “world lit.” Since the March 8, 1963, coup d’état that brought the Ba’ath Party (and later the Assads) to power, loyalty to the state has been a defining aspect of the country’s literature. The distinctions between “faithful” and “treasonous” writing are determined by a convoluted array of institutions, ranging from the General Union of Arab Writers to Ba’ath Party officials; however, the censorship matrix in Syria doesn’t neatly fit into Western notions of “freedom” and “totalitarianism.” Writers in Syria must operate under conditions that, in my opinion, can best be described as “freedom with restrictions.”

Syrian writers are particularly well positioned to comment on the historical progress and degradation of the political situation in their country even though many are persecuted. Novels banned in Syria can still be smuggled in from neighboring Lebanon. But a ban functions as a scarlet letter for authors, a way for the government to distinguish between who is with them and who is against.

Like much of the literary elite in Syria, the novelist Fawwaz Haddad has watched his country disintegrate over the past 20 months without explicitly taking an outspoken position for or against the regime. As an author, he evinces a fusion of clear-eyed realism and careful optimism in his assessment of the Syrian situation. He signed off one recent email to me expressing his wish that we would see each other soon, “once peace arrives in my country.” But as his homeland falls deeper into civil war, Fawwaz’s neutrality may have reached its limit. He has left the country, although he intends to return to Syria, as much of his family is still there.

Fawwaz was born in Damascus in 1947 and studied law before moving on to work in the private sector. His early writings consisted of

historical fiction, with an emphasis on Syria during the French Mandate and the early days of its independence. But he was a late bloomer—*Mosaic Damascus* ’39, his debut novel, wasn’t published until he was 44. His more recent work has veered toward hard-boiled realism, which has vastly increased his notoriety. In 2009, Fawwaz was short-listed for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction for his novel *The Unfaithful Translator* and in 2011 long-listed for *God’s Soldiers*. His stories explore the limits placed on the state and Syrian society, zig-zagging between high-minded principles and the dirty business of everyday life while offering insight into the workings of a broken system—one that seems impervious to both reform and revolution.

Fawwaz’s 2009 *Solo Piano Music*, an excerpt of which appears over the following pages for the first time in English, tells the story of Fateh al-Qalaj, a solitary secular intellectual who is assaulted in the stairwell of his Damascus apartment building. After he’s paid a visit by an investigator from the shady Terrorism Affairs Bureau, Fateh comes to believe that he is being targeted for his outspoken views on religion and the state.

In this Kafkaesque crime novel, the dance between “the investigator” and “the secular intellectual” is central to the narrative tension. Following Fateh’s assault, a childhood friend pays him a visit while he is recovering in the hospital. Fateh’s old friend reveals that he is mixed up with radical Islamists, and the role he played in the assault grows ever murkier.

In the book’s climax, the Syrian regime violently stamps out the perceived terrorist threat. Fateh is left feeling remorse for the murdered “terrorists.” He questions whether the Terrorism Affairs investigator had been lying to him, and whether he even works for the government. Fateh comes to the bleak conclusion that one has to rely on oneself alone.

SOLO PIANO MUSIC

BY FAWWAZ HADDAD, TRANSLATED BY MAX WEISS
ARTWORK BY KHALED AKIL

“You didn’t notice a single distinguishing feature that might help us ID this guy?” the investigator said.

“No, I told you. I was walking up the stairs with my head down as he descended,” Fateh replied.

“When he attacked you, though, the two of you were alone there, face-to-face.”

“It all happened so fast.”

“You must have seen him, it was the middle of the afternoon.”

“I couldn’t see very well. The staircase and the landings between floors aren’t well lit.”

The case had been assigned to a young investigator who was accompanied by four armed men. He had been granted unlimited privileges to look into the matter. The investigator’s job was to determine whether the incident had anything to do with terrorism, which was the claim made in the petition that, as of the night before, more than 30 people had signed.

Before reading the official report, the investigator announced his intention to use every tool at his disposal to protect Fateh. He kicked out everyone who had gathered—the journalists, political activists, civil-society organizations, and curious onlookers—and forbade them from coming back. When they balked, he rebuked them and refused to let them get near the door. After a while, they regrouped and tried to break back in, but he threatened to have them all arrested. Before they even had the chance to disperse into the hallway, he ordered that they be evicted from the hospital, warning them not to say a word about what had happened. Their chattering created an atmosphere of grandiloquent gibberish in which they batted about clichés concerning religion and fundamentalism and civil liberties. They hadn’t rallied together and shown up for this. No, they came to support the victim of the forces of darkness and *takfir*,* as if they were the forces of light and tolerance!

“Before the assault, this guy strolled through the market asking shopkeepers about you,” the investigator said, talking more to himself. “They pointed out your building. He hung around inside waiting for you and then... well, you know the rest. He moved freely, took his time. He didn’t make much of an impression on anyone. Isn’t that strange?”

“He didn’t take any special precautions, either,” the investigator continued. “Many witnesses in the market saw him. Some even talked to him. But he didn’t raise any suspicions. All the descriptions we have of him are quite unremarkable.”

He enumerated on the description of the suspect: middle-aged, tall, powerfully built, narrow forehead, thin mustache, thinning black hair, and a barrel chest.

This contradicted Fateh’s testimony. He had stressed several times in the official report that his forehead had been wide, his mustache and hair thick, and his face round.

“Had you ever seen him before, maybe noticed him somewhere?”

“No.”

“And he wasn’t wearing a robe.”

“I never said that.”

“Was he clean-shaven?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means he wasn’t a terrorist.”

“They wouldn’t send someone with a turban and a beard.”

“He didn’t run. He left confidently, just smoothed down his clothes and walked away.”

The investigator was trying to insinuate something through this line of questioning that contradicted what the people outside were whispering.

“Do you really believe he was a terrorist?” the investigator prodded.

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“A well-dressed terrorist, without a machine gun or grenades?”

“Who was he, then?”

“He sounds like a businessman, or like those young men who get hired to protect them. More like a bodyguard.”

The victim’s mouth fell open, astonished.

“There’s a lot of difference between the two.”

“They both wear black suits and white shirts and dark glasses.”

“He wasn’t wearing glasses.”

The investigator drew away and sat down on a chair near the closet. He wanted to tell the victim, whose head was wrapped in white muslin, to stop pretending his injury was some kind of major event in the ongoing struggle against the forces of darkness.

Cherchez la femme! If only the victim revealed whatever it was he was hiding, things could be cleared up in no time. Besides, people disagree about all kinds of things. But terrorist operations had become commonplace, and with them came phony victims, who rushed to link themselves to incidents.

The investigator stared into the distance, his gaze piercing the windowpane, watching something coil upward, rising very slowly. It wasn’t a cloud, but smoke curling into the sky.

THE LAST VISITOR

As his visitors dwindled the following day, Fateh prepared to check out of the hospital. That evening, he called Haifa to arrange for a driver to pick her up from work so she could escort him home.

A little before noon, a visitor arrived. He didn’t bring a bouquet of flowers or a card, but instead slinked into the room as if trying to enter unnoticed, his broad smile contaminated by a tinge of deep sorrow.

Fateh looked up, surprised to see this stout man whom he didn’t recognize standing in front of him. His cheerful features and sorrowful gaze overlaid each other in an odd way, giving the impression that the men knew each other—why else would he exude pain, so capably and convincingly, for what had befallen Fateh and, simultaneously, joy for his

*The declaration by a Muslim that a fellow Muslim is a nonbeliever.

having survived? This was enough to convince Fateh that he knew this man, even if who he was didn't immediately come to mind. He apologized with a shake of his head for not remembering, trying with a perplexed gaze to excuse himself for not properly welcoming him. The silence was an invitation for this man to step forward and introduce himself.

Even though he had expected Fateh to recognize him, this man was undeterred. He conveyed his generosity with a broad smile, without failing to notice that the victim had indeed forgotten him in the 30 years that had passed since they had seen each other.

"We were childhood friends."

Fateh grew tense and straightened himself up in the bed, wondering, *Did I share a childhood with this man?*

"Back in elementary school," the man clarified.

His mind reeled back to the Sheikh Muhyiddin neighborhood of Damascus, immediately remembering the boy who had been by his side for five years, from first through fifth grade, but he couldn't come up with his name. It was right there on the tip of his tongue. Perhaps he was able to remember this man's face so quickly because his childlike features had hardly changed; they remained stamped on him in spite of the fact that he was now bloated and middle-aged.

"What made you think of me?"

"When I heard about what happened, I decided to come and see how you were."

"But why didn't you ever come looking for me before?"

"Too busy—I mean, *you* were too busy, so I never bothered getting in touch. But I followed what you were up to, reading whatever you wrote. Forgive me, my friend; honestly, what I used to read and hear about you didn't make me very happy. After I heard about the assault, duty called, duty alone, to come and see how you were. I cut things off with you. I'm the one to blame. I should have looked the other way about a few things, just some of them, mind you, not all of them. One mustn't dishonor friendship, no matter how much time has passed."

Fateh didn't feel like asking him what he had read or had heard that displeased him. Sometimes his opinions didn't even satisfy those who were closest to him, so why should it bother him what a forgotten childhood friend whom he hadn't seen for years thought? In all that time he hadn't remembered him or thought of him, not even for a second.

"Don't blame yourself. Time just got between us," Fateh said.

He was flooded by old memories. This man had been his close and loyal pal, a boy who was always doing good deeds. One prime example of his exceedingly kind heart was how he would give his daily allowance to whatever beggars he crossed paths with on his way to school in the morning. He would share his food with his less well-off friends. Even though he was an exemplary pupil, he had never competed with his schoolmates for the highest spots—he studied not to rise above them but rather to extend a helping hand when it came time for oral and final examinations, sharing his work sometimes even if he were punished as a consequence.

Fateh was stunned by the presence of this forgotten past and the rediscovery that he had once been a little boy. He somehow believed that he had never passed through that stage.

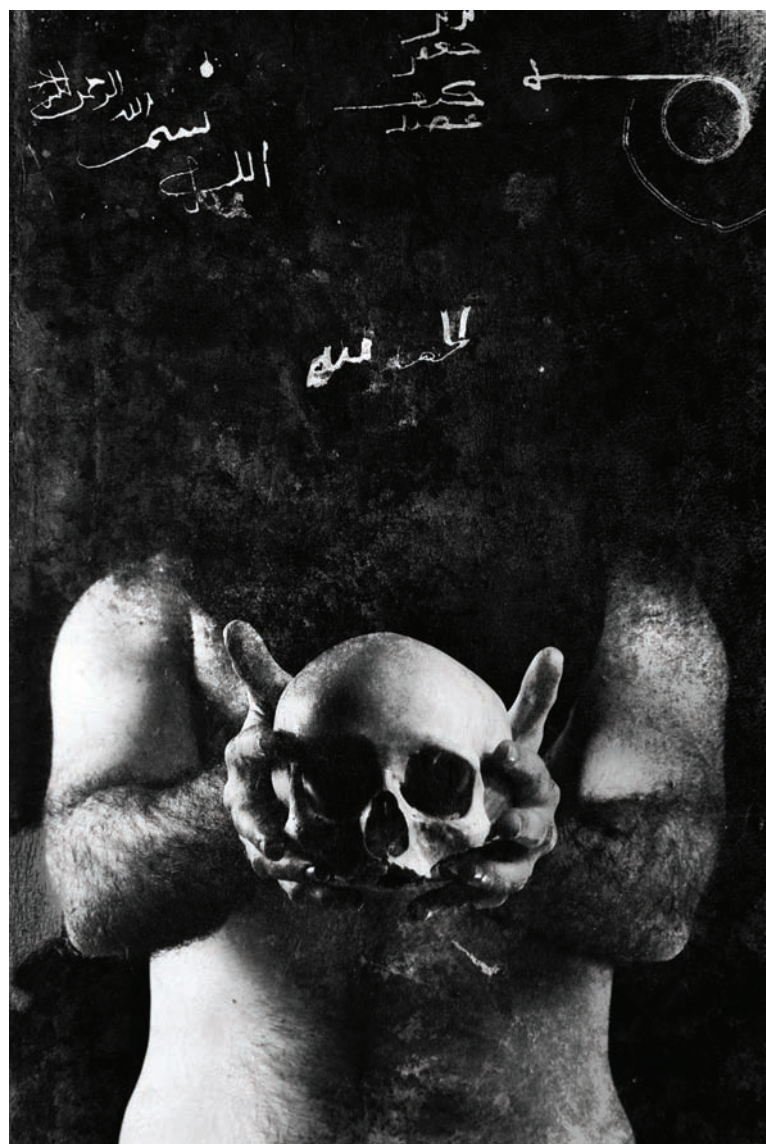
"You were a model student," his old friend said. "Back then I expected brilliant things for you."

After such a long separation, it seemed appropriate for Fateh to ask his friend certain unavoidable questions all at

once: Where have you been? What do you do? Are you married? How many children do you have?

With both hesitation and humility, his old friend summarized 30 years of his life. He had never pursued a university education. After his father's death he took over the shop selling housewares wholesale in the Asruniyya market. He married young and had five children, two sons and three daughters; two daughters had been married the year before. Now he had left the shop to his eldest son and retired.

"So young?"



He wondered in astonishment whether his friend had contracted a terminal illness and was forced into premature retirement to focus on prayer and prepare himself for death.

"Are you sick?"

"No, not at all."

He spent his days volunteering for charitable organizations. He helped the poor, the widows and orphans, and anyone in need, acts he struggled through with God as his only reward. That was the best he could hope for in the end.

After summarizing his life story, it was his old friend's turn to ask questions. He pointed to the white bandage wrapped around Fateh's head.

"My friend, what have you done to yourself?" he said reproachfully.

"I haven't done anything. I was attacked."

"I'm afraid you've incited someone against you."

"I wouldn't know. The investigation hasn't reached any conclusions yet."

He kept his reply brief so as not to spoil the mood. But his friend drew in close and spoke in a hushed voice.

"The people who they say did this to you, they've got nothing to do with it. Your crowd is making unsubstantiated accusations."

"What do you know about it?" Fateh asked, now on edge.

"I know much."

Fateh's agitation diminished, and he couldn't suppress a laugh. That kind-hearted little boy used to say the very same thing in extremely unusual situations, back when his knowledge still had an innocent side. He was just as he always had been. He had become even more what he once was.

"What is it that you know, exactly?"

"A lot, more than you might expect."

"You're the same as ever, you haven't changed a bit."

"And for so long I had hoped I would."

Fateh marveled at how he could maintain such simple-mindedness, much like his childlike features, which appeared not to have undergone any noticeable change indicating his advanced age, aside from a creeping tuft of gray hair and faint wrinkles that drew lines under his eyes. Otherwise it seemed as though he had been frozen in time.

Life generally cannot tolerate a man of this nobility and largesse; honest interaction with people can have unintended consequences. He was nothing more than a little boy in the rough-and-tumble world of grown-ups. How had death not found him during one of his do-gooding fits? He was willing to sacrifice himself for others and had probably been duped on more than one occasion.

"But the world has changed."

"Let's hope we never do."

"Still, we have changed, we've changed a lot."

"If you need anything..."

"I don't need anything," Fateh said quickly, revealing his exasperation.

His friend turned toward the door, but then wheeled back around.

"I want to say to you that what you're calling for is bad, very bad."

He meant what Fateh had been calling for in his lectures, and what he sometimes wrote in the press.

"That's right. It doesn't sit well with many people. You're right, this is what I've become. I'm not the way I used to be. And you won't like it, but no matter what you say, this is who I am."

His old friend took out a piece of paper and wrote down his telephone number.

"I'll pray for your speedy recovery. Feel free to call if you ever need anything."

Fateh took the paper, folded it up, and placed it in his pocket. No, he wasn't going to call him, no matter what. In the sunny past, he had been the perfect boy. But in this

unhappy present, he was nothing more than an unpleasant and insufferable man. The world was progressing while he continued to live in a dusty era gone by.

One thing Fateh should have asked him for, though, was his name. He couldn't remember it, and his old friend hadn't written it down next to his phone number. He took the piece of paper out of his pocket and tore it up.

THE ABOMINABLE SECULARIST

All these visitors to the hospital intrigued the young investigator, raising questions in his mind. He asked his superiors why there was so much interest in the victim. They told him that Fateh al-Qalaj was a distinguished intellectual and an independent thinker.

What had caused him to think ill of the victim and his case?

His reliance on first impressions and intuition (which are so often wrong) had been prodded along by bits of information he had received from the victim's neighbor.

The information he had cobbled together didn't cast Fateh in a positive light. His neighbor didn't know much about him. The investigator didn't know what he did for a living, but was aware that he was a widower who lived alone. His neighbors left him in peace because they found him to be avoidant and pretentious.

It wasn't hard for the investigator to understand those negative impressions. For as long as Fateh had lived in the old apartment building near Mezzeh Prison, he never paid visits to anyone and wasn't visited by anyone. A car picked him up in the morning, took him downtown, and then dropped him off at home after work. It was a beat-up 1986 Peugeot, rarely driven after work hours, and didn't indicate any special status.

What little official information the investigator managed to get his hands on revealed that Fateh was an outstanding mid-level manager but had no serious influence. He had been appointed to a distinguished yet powerless post in exchange for taking a series of progressive positions.

His neighbors didn't know that he was a noted secularist thinker; he had decided not too long ago to put his faith in science and to align himself with the rational mind, uprooting superstitions, illusions, and all beliefs that had any connection to the soul—that is, to anything that wasn't visible or tangible.

Fateh hadn't chosen intellectual work to make money. In some ways, he was an amateur, interested in ideas, the most modern ideas, without having to live by them or through them, giving occasional lectures and moderating discussions at no extra charge. He was known for his profound interventions and his antipopulism, and he was sincere in his defense of rationalism, questing for the truth, irrefutable truths in particular.

If his neighbors had known what he was calling for they would have certainly been against him, but they never read anything more than the police blotter; they were uninterested in ideas, which were often incomprehensible and had no value in their day-to-day lives.

Over the years, whatever they knew about the victim remained stagnant. He was still the new guy in the building, even though more than ten years had passed since



he'd moved in. He was still the man whose wife had just died, although it had been three years since her passing. He appeared to be in his mid-30s, even though he was already drifting into middle age.

He had made a limited number of bold statements in the newspaper and became well known within a small circle of celebrated readers, and suspect among the agencies that were particularly sensitive to his public criticism of domestic policies. He never proffered his loyalty to the regime, but he didn't clash with it either. Convinced that he would only embarrass them with his bold ideas, they opted to bribe him with a managerial position. They ignored him as long as he didn't pose a threat to them, even if ordinary people were annoyed at times by his going on and on about their traditions and dogmas.

His lectures about secularism revolved around one concept, namely, the separation of mosque and state. He would explain it ably, expounding upon profound issues at a high level, and—owing to the depth of his enthusiasm for the subject—he would chart a path from the detestable state to the regime that respects freedom of conscience and protects itself from coming under the aegis of one religion, one sect, or one school of law.

His greatest enmity was reserved for supernatural truths. He didn't attack them in the open or deny their spiritual status. But he would cunningly beam out atheist propaganda against them that wasn't lost on his supporters or his adversaries. He was adamantly opposed to religion, wasn't concerned with freedom of thought or oppositional, diverse expression, and voiced aloud his refusal to concede the veracity of anything without first subjecting it to investigation and experiment. His slogan: "No truth but the truth of science." And although he boasted that science had eliminated magic from the world, it was only in order to demonstrate that religion is no less superstitious than magic.

When the regime was roused to caution intellectuals against articulating extreme viewpoints and attacking religious beliefs—as part of a campaign to uproot any disunity among the people and ensure public order—it succeeded in achieving that impossible golden mean.

But Fateh didn't view such caution with an eye of understanding or prudence, and he gave up his intellectual subtlety as he sharpened his criticisms of the religious; he once nearly caused civil strife between religious and nonreligious people over a matter of tremendous legal importance, which the secularists found odd and worthy of derision. This pushed

the regime to curb the secularist intellectual. They summoned him to one of the security headquarters and made him understand that if he was an infidel, they were even worse. And so they obliged him to put an end to his attacks on religion in public gatherings. After that, he limited his criticism to private sessions, which were attended only by his supporters. He sufficed with playing defense, defending secularism from the standpoint that it maintained civil peace and gave religion back its spirituality. As a result, he regained the respect of the decision-makers. They considered him a rational resource in an irrational and insecure state, rounding out the multitude of perspectives that were indispensable on television talk shows, which demanded that guests be petulant and disputatious and use fancy words lest it be thought that the country wasn't sophisticated. He gave the networks a liberal dash of open-mindedness.

Although he only got called out once, he learned his lesson. As far as those in power were concerned, so long as he was well in hand there was no danger in either keeping him in his current position or promoting him. As long as he didn't ignite even small fires that would be difficult to contain and extinguish when it became necessary to do so.

His neighbors failed to develop normal relationships with him, and because they didn't approve of his extreme isolation, they came to believe he was arrogant. His serious demeanor gave him a bewildered appearance, the kind that envelops pessimistic intellectuals and stays with them through their daily activities. Even though he was actually preoccupied with tremendously important matters that had humanitarian implications—the garbage bags thrown from the balconies, the interruption of water and electricity for long periods of time, and the interminable work being done on the roads. His facial features were discomfiting when he mulled over ideas in his mind. He would knit his brow and wrinkle his forehead, putting on a frown as disgust washed over his face and his appearance became loathsome, so his neighbors loathed him, showing no concern for whatever befell him, and anyone who showed concern only did so in order to take pleasure in his misfortune.

From time to time, whenever they brought up his deceased wife, they took pity on him and expressed sympathy for his plight. Their feelings softened toward him and were even marked with some admiration. But as they tried to get closer to him, he would surprise them with his arrogance, which wasn't arrogance so much as an attitude he had grown accustomed to. They, in turn, would go right back to loathing him the way they had always done. *VICE*



Members of the Free Syrian Army's mughaweer (commandos) and Ah al-Rassi (Freedom for the Assi River) brigades return to al-Qusayr after a battle near the Lebanese border in Homs. (The photos contained within this piece were taken by an independent photographer before the author visited the region. The Lebanese rebel-supporters and Hezbollah members interviewed throughout the piece refused to be photographed for obvious reasons.)

ON THE LAM IN LEBANON

Syria's Violence Bleeds Over the Border

BY MITCHELL PROTHERO

PHOTOS BY SAM TARLING/EXECUTIVE MAGAZINE

It's dusk when the rebels move into position within a cluster of lemon and olive groves about 300 feet from the Syrian border post north of the bleak and dusty Lebanese farming village of al-Qaa. I'm watching the operation from behind the troops with their commander, a Lebanese man I'll call "Hussein" who oversees 200 rebel fighters in the area.

"We're moving some guys into [the nearby Syrian town of] al-Qusayr and need to distract Assad's troops," Hussein tells me. His brigade is tasked with keeping the guns, money, and fighters flowing between Lebanon and Syria. He interrupts our conversation to bark out an order on his walkie-talkie, keeping it short and sweet so his signal has less of a chance of being intercepted.

"OK," Hussein orders. "Move in."

His soldiers fan out across the olive orchard, preparing to attack the concrete buildings, ringed by sandbags, distracting the border guards while another unit of fighters seven miles away slips across the border undetected. A classic diversion.

The idyllic orchard explodes into war. Three rocket-propelled grenades fly toward the border post. A dozen automatic rifles and machine guns release a rain of ammunition; muzzle flashes light up the darkening sky.

"We do this every few days," Hussein laughs. "But so do they," he adds while pointing toward Assad's troops.

The Syrian Army returns fire with machine guns and AK-47s of their own, sending bullets whipping through the grove at the rebels in front of us. Hussein and I are standing a few rows back, but we are still somewhat in the line of fire. I realize I'm uncomfortably close to the front line, even if I'm not right up on it. The bullets that hit the nearby trees aren't aimed at us, but marksmanship is a moot point after you're dead.

A moment later, Hussein's troops pull back. They've distracted Assad's border guys long enough for the other unit to cross into al-Qusayr undetected.

"Let's go," orders Hussein. "The [Syrian] helicopter will be here soon." We retreat as bullets continue to fly our way. The trees in the orchard are our only cover, and they don't offer much protection.

The skirmish is part of a nearly nightly series of clashes along the Syria-Lebanon border that seems to indicate the civil war is morphing into a regional conflagration. A week after my visit with Hussein, a car bomb exploded in Beirut, killing an important pro-rebel Lebanese intelligence officer and sparking battles in the streets of the capital and Tripoli that

resulted in at least seven deaths. Neighboring Jordan and Iraq are accepting refugees in an attempt to contain the spread of civil strife while simultaneously avoiding direct involvement.

In Lebanon, staying neutral isn't so easy. The nation's deeply divided population and weak central government have left it vulnerable to spillover from nearby conflicts. While most of the world is focused on the slaughter in Aleppo and rising tensions between Syria and Turkey, another, potentially devastating conflict is breaking out right next door.

Lebanon and Syria's fates have been intertwined for a very long time. The Syrian military occupied Lebanon from 1976 to 2005. Though Syrian security forces were brutal and corrupt, they were a central authority that eventually forced Lebanon's 17 different religious sects and dizzying array of political factions to live together in some semblance of peace after 15 years of civil war and intermittent occupation by Israel. Over the years, Shia supporters of the militant group Hezbollah came to see Bashar al-Assad's regime as both a guardian of the status quo and an invaluable ally in the never-ending war against Israel.

Syrian rule of Lebanon fell apart in 2005 after Rafik Hariri, Lebanon's most important Sunni Muslim politician, was murdered—allegedly by a Shia militant. Government officials were initially blamed for the assassination before suspicion turned toward a combination of Syria and Hezbollah. It was never conclusively determined who killed Rafik, but this led Syria—under domestic and international pressure—to end its military occupation of Lebanon.

This withdraw also paved the way for street battles between Lebanese Sunnis and pro-Syrian factions, the latter usually led by Hezbollah's ruthlessly effective and powerful military force. Tensions came to a head in May 2008 when Hezbollah publicly voided a promise to the Lebanese people that its heavy weapons would only be used on Israel and moved into Beirut to clear the city of armed Sunni opponents. The result was a resounding Hezbollah victory, followed by tremendous Sunni bitterness.

When the revolution in Syria began, the dividing lines were clear: Hezbollah backed Assad and his regime in their fight against the largely Sunni-led FSA, and Lebanon's Sunnis jumped on a chance to take down the regime they saw as their domestic rivals for power. It would be virtually impossible to convince either faction to stay on the sidelines.

For the past five years, Hussein's life has tracked alongside this sort of dual consciousness. At first glance, Hussein is a small, dark-skinned man in his early 40s with the slight but powerful build of a manual laborer, but then his tightly coiled muscles make it apparent he is a highly trained soldier. He's from the impoverished rural northeast of Lebanon, but like so many Lebanese, he moved to Beirut decades ago for the job opportunities. A Sunni of no particular devotion, Hussein lived and worked in Beirut's Shia-dominated southern suburbs. His free time was spent as a fierce fighter for the Syrian Social National Party, a secular group with more than 100,000 members that fights for all Arab countries to be united under the banner of "Greater Syria." The SSNP has conducted suicide bombings against Israeli troops and, at times, allied itself with Hezbollah in the fight against Israel. Hussein was never a jihadist, but as a member of SSNP from the early 1980s to 2008, he became a famed fighter in that struggle.

"We'll deal with Hezbollah directly inside Lebanon," Hussein said. "But only after we remove the Syrian regime."

"I wanted to free my country from the Zionists," Hussein told me. "I believed in the Syrian resistance agenda and loved Hezbollah and its members with all my heart. I fought alongside them as a patriot and a brother for 20 years. I was one finger in their fist."

Even as he leads Sunni men—both Lebanese and Syrian—in a bloody struggle to take down the Assad regime, Hussein uses skills he honed over two decades of fighting alongside Hezbollah against Israel as a salaried employee of Syria. He literally embodies the insanely complex clusterfuck of contradictions and tensions that define the dysfunctional relationship of the two nations.

Despite being a Sunni, Hussein took part in the May 2008 Hezbollah and SSNP takeover of West Beirut, helping to coordinate fighters who stormed the streets to remove Sunni politicians who were attempting to wrest control away from Hezbollah. "He's a legend for his courage," one Hezbollah fighter told me. "But we lost him."

In the eyes of Hezbollah members I spoke with, how and why he defected is completely pointless. Despite being a Sunni who lived in a predominately Shia neighborhood, it never occurred to Hussein that anyone would see him as an opponent of Hezbollah. But even as he was helping lead the fight against his fellow Sunnis who were then in control of the Lebanese government, someone in his neighborhood decided to throw a Molotov cocktail through his window. His wife and 12-year-old daughter escaped the flames. Three of his other children—two very young sons and a daughter—were burned to death.

Hussein told me this story one day as we sat in his home, or these days the place where he crashes and gets to see the surviving members of his family when he's not coordinating the movements of troops on the border. He sat under three large pictures of his dead children, surrounded by his wife and remaining family members.

As Hussein spoke, his eyes were eerily emotionless: "I know who did it. The time wasn't right for me to take any revenge, so I just quit the SSNP and moved my family back up here." He paused. "I still see the men I know did it, and now I can take my revenge."

I asked a Hezbollah contact of mine whether he had heard about Hussein's loss. "Hezbollah doesn't burn children to death," he said. "It was local thugs in his neighborhood. But we know at any time Hussein might come after any Shia for what happened. I would do the same, and we know how tough he is; it's a problem for all of us."

Instead of going vigilante, Hussein waited and plotted his vengeance. The Syrian civil war gave him the perfect chance to retaliate, although he denies that punishing Hezbollah for what he believes they did to his family is his sole motivation. He also points to a version of pan-Syrian-Lebanese brotherhood as his reason for supporting the Sunni-dominated Free Syrian Army. He believes that Hezbollah has chosen to support Assad out of insipid self-regard, not the justness or rightness of the cause.

"How can I let my brother fight an oppressor like this filthy regime in Damascus and not help him?" Hussein said. "How can I not want to free Lebanon from a militia like Hezbollah? This is an obligation for my people and my religion."

Now he trains small groups of Syrian and Lebanese troops to fight against the Assad regime and, increasingly, Hezbollah, which continues to deny that they have forces stationed in Syria despite all of the tactical preludes that many in the region think point to a larger scheme.

Back at the border, I witness an exchange that makes me a believer. Assad's troops are sending mortar rounds into the fields around us. We retreat into a nearby refugee camp filled with FSA fighters who have fled Syria and are now camped here, on a barren stretch of no-man's-land on the border.

"A mortar landed 50 meters away last night, but thank God none of us were hurt," a 12-year-old boy tells me as shells continue to explode in our general vicinity. It seems to me, and my hosts, that Assad's troops are firing indiscriminately.

Then I hear something unexpected. A series of loud whistles that sound like they are moving in the wrong direction—from Lebanon into Syria. I've heard this squeal before. It's the sound of a Soviet Katyusha rocket launcher.

The rebel fighters seem nonplussed when I ask whether the rockets are being shot from Lebanon into Syria.

"No, that's not the FSA," he says. "That's Hezbollah shelling al-Qusayr; they do it every single night these days."

The previous day, the rebels had taken me to where their FSA comrades said they had ambushed a convoy of what they alleged to be Hezbollah-driven SUVs en route to Syria. It was clear from the debris on the road—broken rearview mirrors, shell casings—that a battle had taken place. Two days later, Hezbollah announced the funeral of a commander who had been killed in "pursuit of his jihadi activities," a standard description used by the group when a member falls in battle.

After viewing the scene, I speak with both Hussein and "Younis," an FSA commander.

"Our patrols from here and in the area around [nearby] Aarsal encounter Hezbollah troops on both sides of the border



almost every night,” Younis tells me. “Neither the FSA nor Hezbollah wants to admit we’re having regular gun battles inside Lebanon, but we’re very close to Hermel [a famed Hezbollah stronghold], and so our men encounter their men every night.”

The fights inside Lebanon are usually brief, with both sides just covering their asses enough to allow for a hasty retreat. This may be due to the fact that if the body count rises too high inside its borders, the Lebanese government will be forced to address the fact that swaths of its territory have become an extended battlefield for Syria’s civil war.

Without an official statement from any side, the exact extent of Hezbollah’s potential involvement in Syria is hard to determine. When I asked several of my Hezbollah contacts whether they were firing into the country or directly participating in conflicts, they denied both charges and only agreed to be quoted on background. They admitted they are on “standby” to join the fight if the situation demands it, though they didn’t specify what turn of events, exactly, would push them to get involved.

“We’ll deal with Hezbollah directly inside Lebanon,” Hussein says, as Younis nods in agreement. “But only after we remove the Syrian regime.”

Still, after all of this, I am dubious of the claim that Hezbollah is openly shelling rebel-held cities in Syria. But there’s an easy way to find out whether they’re telling the truth. I ask to see where the rockets are being launched from. They agree.

We jump in a truck and head away from the border toward Hermel, next to the range of Mount Lebanon on a wide plain that stretches through the embattled city of Homs in Syria. On a clear day, standing on even a slight rise reveals a clear line of sight—Lebanon to the south and Syria to the north.

As we’re driving, the windows reverberate as a salvo of rockets is launched. When we arrive at what I suppose is our destination and exit the car, Hussein points to a hilltop about three miles away. Smoke is rising from the crest. We’re not close enough to see the launchers, but it’s obvious that the smoke is coming from a cluster of Shia villages along a portion of the border that’s squarely within Hezbollah’s jurisdiction.

The sky darkens as a lightning storm breaks over the southern Beqaa Valley. We all freeze at the sound of helicopter rotors coming in our direction. I spot a Russian-made Mi-18 chopper gunning for the orchards and groves where we were positioned just a few hours before.

“You need to leave now,” Younis says. “If it sees this truck, it’ll come after you unless you get back behind the Lebanese Army checkpoint.”

This checkpoint, about a mile behind us, is the only trace of the Lebanese Armed Forces’ authority over the border. As the chopper gracefully arcs into a firing run and a series of large explosions rips across the ground under it, the outpost seems like a long way away.

“Barrel bombs,” explains Younis, referring to homemade devices constructed by the Syrian Army: 55-gallon drums packed with explosives that are then dropped imprecisely from helicopters. They’re frequently employed against rebel cities inside Syria. Although I’ve never heard of their use inside Lebanon, I’m watching it happen right now.

As we exchange hasty good-byes, Younis, like any good host, invites me to come back at my leisure. “You can come into al-Qusayr with my men any time,” he says. “Or I can take you to see a barrel bomb they dropped two days ago. It didn’t explode, it just sits in the field near my tent.” *VICE*

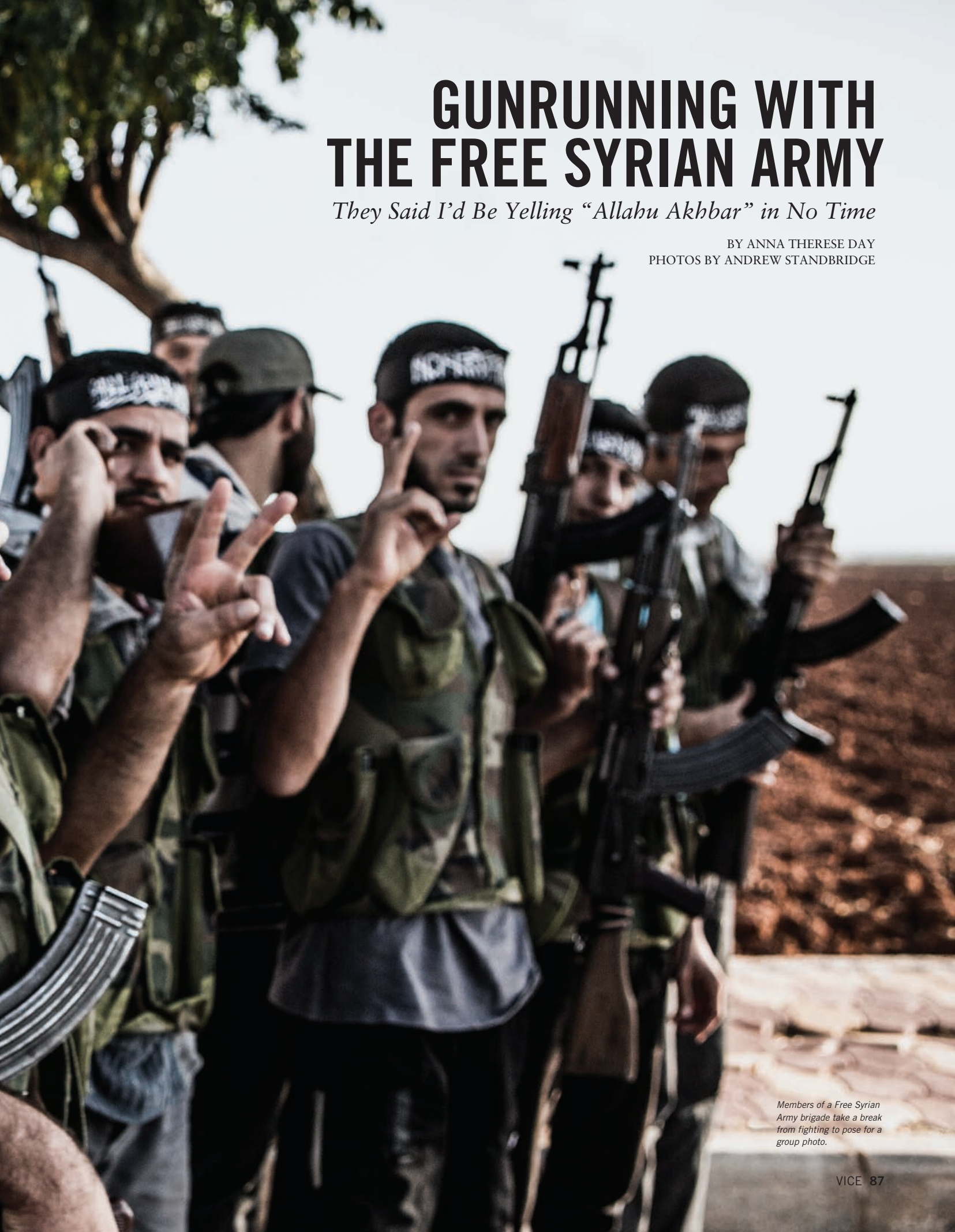
FSA fighters celebrate after an attack on Assad’s forces in the village of Nizareer, near the Lebanese border.



GUNRUNNING WITH THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY

They Said I'd Be Yelling "Allahu Akhbar" in No Time

BY ANNA THERESE DAY
PHOTOS BY ANDREW STANDBRIDGE



Members of a Free Syrian Army brigade take a break from fighting to pose for a group photo.

Blindfolded, I fidgeted nervously in the back of an unmarked car, squished between a gunrunner and a young Free Syrian Army soldier. It had been at least an hour since we left the border town of Kilis, Turkey, and we were now off-roading across the Syria-Turkey border. One of the top colonels of the FSA was up front, and the trunk was packed with ammunition and small arms. The men sang anti-Assad jingles and joked with me that I was their “hostage.” When we finally arrived at our destination, they removed my blindfold. The Colonel (who, of course, asked that his real name be withheld), a kindly older gentleman, smiled and welcomed me to “Free Syria.” We had arrived in the liberated border town of Azaz, just opposite Kilis. Azaz’s liberation, however, looked as though it had come at a high cost—homes, schools, mosques, and hospitals all lay in ruins, the highway cratered from regular shelling. Children played among the rubble, using the abandoned tanks as jungle gyms.

In the past few months, Assad’s forces had launched a devastating aerial campaign on FSA-occupied towns in an attempt to stamp out the democratic experiments they had built—schools, postal services, and new public-works projects had all been targeted. In recent weeks, the FSA’s supply of munitions had been bottoming out. Opposition leaders had gone to Turkey and to Sunni financiers in the Gulf in hopes of securing anti-aircraft missiles to shoot down Assad’s jets, but turned up empty-handed. Rumors that heavy-arms shipments were coming in by boat from Libya and France turned out to be bogus. Meanwhile, the US reprimanded Gulf countries for sending arms to support the rebels, citing fears of a growing jihadi presence within the FSA. Saudi Arabia shrugged its shoulders along with Qatar, officially stating that private donors were funneling money and guns to Salafists and foreign fighters. They warned that the absence of meaningful intervention could result in a “popular jihad,” one that would run along dangerous sectarian lines.

Since the uprising began last year, the Turkish town of Kilis has been transformed into a Casablanca of sorts—a dusty border limbo for hustlers, spies, and arms dealers. At a backroom bar in Kilis, I had met Hassan, a used-car salesman turned FSA gunrunner, who offered to take me with him into Syria. “I’d rather sell cars than run guns, but the regime shelled my garage,” he said. “What am I supposed to do?” The regime had devastated his wife’s village the year before, and so Hassan, a father of eight, had decided to organize a local militia.

Many of Hassan’s neighbors sold their land to buy weapons from sympathetic army officials stationed at a nearby regime airbase. As fighting in Aleppo intensified, more weapons and funding began to flow in from Sunnis in the Gulf. As a secular Syrian, Hassan wanted to maintain the distinctly Syrian character of his militia; he refused to work with foreign jihadists. “They aren’t like us,” he told me. “They find complete fulfillment in death for jihad. I don’t understand it and have never seen anything like it. My friend tried to light a cigarette in their presence and they told him that it was *haram* [forbidden]. They’ve got to be joking. This is a war.”

Hassan feared that deep pockets in the Gulf were allowing foreign fighters to wield disproportionate influence. Among some members of the FSA, the possibility of jihadists in their ranks elicits fear mixed with profound respect. The jihadists are known as fierce, untiring diehards, often upstaging the FSA boys on the front lines. Hassan despises these religious

extremists but also acknowledges their combat expertise. Many of the FSA members I interviewed said they’d prefer Western support to the help of jihadists, but have to take what they can get at this point. Yet reports of tensions have begun seeping out—one young Salafist was allegedly executed for failing to obey an FSA colonel. As he sipped on his haram beer, Hassan said, “I’m afraid we’ll need two revolutions in Syria. The first against Assad, the second against the jihadis.”

We dropped off Hassan and the fighters in the small town of al-Bab, and the Colonel and I went on to Aleppo, where he had to deliver weapons and inspect brigades. Like so many FSA officials, the Colonel had defected from Assad’s army. A middle-aged man with a worn expression, he had come from a military family. His father had been al-Bab’s colonel under the Assad regime. Life had been good for them before the war broke out—officers in the north had been able to operate with relative autonomy from Damascus, providing them with a comfortable, respectable life outside the state-security apparatus. But following the uprising, the officers were ordered to move on Aleppo, their own community. “That’s when everything changed. Not just for me, but for many colonels,” he said.

The Colonel followed his orders while clandestinely supporting the rebels, selling them arms from the al-Mashaab Air Force base. “My family was furious with me that I didn’t defect, but I couldn’t tell them the truth.” He sighed. When the time was right, he worked with FSA contacts to move his family to a new home while he vanished among the armed opposition. “My defection went smoothly, but others, many others, were not so lucky.”

When the Colonel found out that I was accompanying Hassan on one of his weekly smuggling trips, he insisted on joining us. He gave me the nickname “Ayoosh” and said that within 24 hours he’d have me on the front lines in a hijab, yelling “Allahu Akhbar!” after witnessing the regime’s brutality.

Jets circled overhead as the Colonel and I cruised down the wrecked highway leading to Aleppo. The hum of their engines grew louder until a single plane appeared directly above us, trailing us down the road. Our driver slammed on the gas and then abruptly hit the brakes, skidding the car into the shadow of an abandoned farmhouse. I clutched my flak jacket and pulled my helmet to my head, shaking. “Are you scared?” the Colonel asked calmly. He wasn’t wearing any armor—just a prayer card around his neck that had been passed down to him



Hassan drove us out to places he called “candy factories”—hidden arms workshops where Syrian rebels manufactured makeshift explosives.

by his father. These prayer cards, which are sometimes bought and sold for hundreds or thousands of Syrian pounds, supposedly protect their bearers from physical harm. The Colonel called it his “special flak jacket” and insisted that I shoot at him to test it, while a cameraman we had met earlier filmed the exchange for CNN.

We sat in the shadow of the farmhouse until the roar of the jet faded away. Then we rerouted, taking a detour down back roads and into the sprawling ancient city of Aleppo—one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and Syria’s economic hub before it was decimated by the regime earlier this year.

The Colonel took us to Tariq al-Bab, a neighborhood near the center of Aleppo, to meet his son Ahmad, who was the leader of a local militia. Ahmad was an excitable young man who immediately began to brag about his latest brush with death courtesy of pro-regime snipers. As he talked, the Colonel looked into the distance, concerned. That night, over a dinner of mezze and hummus, Ahmad’s men grilled the Colonel about his trip to Turkey, asking about family members in refugee camps and for the latest news from Istanbul. The conversation inevitably turned to the status of the coveted anti-aircraft missiles. “I wish the reports of foreign weapons were true,” the Colonel sighed, “We’re still using Russian-made weapons here.”

One of Ahmad’s fellow soldiers leaned in and said to me: “You heard we took an airbase last week though, right?” I had heard about it, but that the particular victory had been secured by Jabhat al-Nusra, a fundamentalist sect with reported ties to terrorist organizations who has fought alongside the FSA. The jihadist paramilitary group, whose name translates to Front for the Protection of Greater Syria, has taken responsibility for all the major bombings of regime officials and generals in Damascus, al-Miden, and Aleppo, as well as an attack this summer on a pro-regime television station in the town of Drousha. Recent reports indicate that fighters from al-Qaeda factions in Iraq and Hamas have been sneaking into Syria to join the group. Although many FSA fighters consider themselves to be conservative Muslims, they typically seek to distance themselves from Jabhat al-Nusra’s blood-soaked dream of restoring the Sunni Islamic caliphate. When I brought the group up at dinner, one fighter said, “Jabhat al-Nusra is very good at what they do, and they have arms and experience that our men don’t have.” Another fighter also spoke up: “We’ll need at least three years of fighting experience before we can keep up with them.”

Most FSA soldiers are fighting for a pluralistic Syria that would ensure the protection of political and religious freedoms. The fighters in Jabhat al-Nusra are struggling for Islamic dignity and greater, Sunni-focused rule. The Colonel

Boys stand on a Syrian Army tank next to a destroyed mosque in Azaz.



A FSA soldier bares his tattoo, which says: "Why is love disastrous?"

explained that a lack of support from the West had undermined the original, pluralist FSA commanders. "We just can't deliver the same way Jabhat al-Nusra can until we have some meaningful support," he said.

With each empty promise and failed arms transfer the Colonel and other FSA commanders were put in a more vulnerable position. "Jabhat al-Nusra is small, but when men want to join the fight and we can't give them arms, more are drawn to that group," he said. "I'm afraid it will get to a point where if they ask me for a favor, I won't be able to say no."

The next morning, Hassan and I drove out of Aleppo to the countryside to deliver ammo to rural FSA fighters. He was glued to his phone the entire drive, organizing distribution. "I have a good job because everyone's always happy to see me," he joked.

Out in the country, Hassan drove us out to places he called "candy factories"—hidden arms workshops where Syrian rebels manufactured makeshift explosives and rudimentary weapons. Hassan relaxed and joked with blacksmiths, farmers, and engineers as he dropped off strings of ammo and tools.

Later, after a short hike, we went to a candy factory that had been set up inside a small cave. As we walked inside and my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw four men crowded around a generator, diligently working with power tools. We took a break for tea in the cave, which seemed to put Hassan in a bad mood. "You see what we've been reduced to?" he complained. "We're building bombs in caves to fight Assad's Hind D helicopters. What is this? Afghanistan?" He went on to describe the disorganization of the FSA leadership. "The generals were

inside Turkey for days, and all they got was ammo! Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra is hijacking our revolution. Tell Obama thanks a lot for leaving us to these religious fanatics!"

That evening, we set off back to al-Bab—which had been one of the original enclaves of the Free Syria movement, a liberated town with a fledgling civilian council that rebels hoped could serve as a model for the future of the country. This also made it a prime target for Assad's Air Force; the town's landscape had been forever changed by seemingly endless shelling. The plan was for Hassan's brother to smuggle me back through the border and into Turkey. But just as we were about to leave, we spotted jets overhead, gliding into position for a bombardment.

After the explosions abated, neighbors peeked out of their windows to survey the damage. I scanned the streets and saw a white Islamic flag—the symbol for the revival of the caliphate—waving in the wind. When I pointed it out to Hassan's brother, he raised an eyebrow. "That's new," he said, but wouldn't offer any further explanation.

After another day of waiting, Hassan's brother blindfolded me again and drove us over the cratered back roads that led to Turkey. Apparently forgetting I was blindfolded, he yelled things like "We'll be having chai in Kilis in no time!" and "You promise to find me an American wife, all right, Ayoosh?"

When we reached Kilis, he removed the blindfold and dropped me off at my hotel. "We'll miss you in Free Syria, Ayoosh," he smiled. As he waved me off, he said, "Give my regards to the American people. But make sure they know that the American government is not a friend of Free Syria." 



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THE DELUSIONS OF ASSAD

Diving into the Psyche of Supporters of the Regime

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY DAVID DEGNER



Twice, I have received visas to photograph pro-Assad districts in Damascus. Many journalists are denied entry; no reason is given. In September, I flew to Damascus for five days to document supporters of the regime. It was my second trip to the country. I didn't have government minders while working in Damascus and the rural towns of Ma'loula and Douma, but there were many other obstacles I had to overcome to obtain the coverage I desired: checkpoints that prevented me from entering rebel-held areas (I snuck past a few), overbearing restrictions, and conversations that crashed into walls of illogical ideology.

PREVIOUS PAGE: A Humvee decorated with the pro-government flag sits on one of the main streets of Damascus. The owner added the paint job soon after the start of the rebellion and went on almost daily parades through the streets, blaring patriotic music while pretty girls hung out the windows. Over the past few months, it has become too dangerous, so now the vehicle is perpetually parked on the curb, guarded by men with AK-47s.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Students at Bunat Al Ajial, a private school in Damascus, during a math class.

A family in the process of moving to another house. The city they're leaving, Zabadani, is under bombardment; however, they said they aren't moving because of the danger but instead due to a recent marriage.

Rama Hamdi tries to coax her son, Hadi Shaban, to leave for his first day of school in Damascus. Even in peaceful parts of the city, the daily routine has been disrupted—students are going to schools closer to home since the roads are unsafe after dark. Even in the supposedly secure neighborhood of Mezzeh, the low thud of artillery shells is a constant.

Most pro-Assad Syrians espouse variations of the same narrative: The Free Syrian Army is composed of foreign-backed terrorists bent on destabilizing Syria who are at the service of Saudi Arabia, Israel, and America; Assad has been forced to use measured violence to crush them, and he is the bulwark keeping Syria from fragmenting into bloody sectarianism; many of the atrocities Western journalists are blaming on Assad's army and *shabiha* (Assad-hired thugs who dress like civilians and sneak-attack protestors) are actually being committed by the rebels and their criminal milieu.

In my experience, when Assad supporters are asked about reports of the state officials torturing activists or the overwhelming use of indiscriminate force on civilian populations, they say either that these claims are exaggerations, if not fabrications, or that violence is necessary. One Syrian journalist even pointed out that if the US is permitted the use of extrajudicial arrests and torture to thwart "terrorists," then Assad's government should also be allowed to do so.

The storylines of rebels and loyalists are constantly competing in the Arab media. Satellite-television stations like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, networks that made their names with impartial coverage, have had a noticeable pro-rebel tilt. Inside Syria, the Damascus-based array of state-run television channels and Addounia TV (a privately owned station

viewed by many as a mouthpiece of Assad) broadcast the government's line. These Assad-backed channels have been blocked by satellite-television services in Egypt and many countries throughout the Gulf.

The one and only time I ran into a Syrian state-TV reporter in downtown Damascus, she was conducting street interviews on a pressing issue: "Which fruits and vegetables do you freeze so you can eat them out of season?" It made the smoke billowing on the horizon all the more surreal.

Earlier that day, I had been sitting at a coffee shop on the slopes of Mount Qasioun, taking in the sweeping view of Damascus. I saw smoke then too, rising up from the southern suburb of Qadam. A man walked up to me and identified himself as state security. He told me that I was not allowed to photograph anything, explaining that the smoke on the horizon was black, which, according to him, meant that the rebels were burning tires to make the government look bad. He had no explanation, however, for the thud of artillery fire that had been audible since dawn.

The roar of such fire fades into the background of Damascus but doesn't ever dissipate. On the first day of primary school in the upper-class neighborhood of Mezzeh, the sound seeped into a closed-window classroom where I was photographing young students. One mother tried to comfort her son by claiming it was thunder. Eventually, he didn't believe her anymore and asked, "When will it rain?" A couple of young hairdressers hanging out in Mezzeh joked with me that it was "the sound of romance."

The only place in the city where artillery fire couldn't be heard was during karaoke night at a place called the Mood Lounge. There I watched a small crowd of the rich and well-connected crack jokes and prod one another to sing patriotic songs, French classics, and Amy Winehouse.

Just two days before my visit to the Mood Lounge, a writer, translator, and I were heading down a back road into Zabadani, one of the rebel-held towns

along the Lebanese border. We were stopped at a checkpoint outside town and escorted to a house that had been turned into a makeshift command post. Inside, a military officer firmly told us that, for our own safety, we wouldn't be allowed into the city. He confirmed that the artillery constantly sounding in the distance was being lobbed at Zabadani.

Paradoxically, while the officer prevented us from entering his jurisdiction, he also demanded that we, in our journalism, "tell the truth." He told us that Assad would rather watch 100 of his soldiers die than allow a single innocent civilian to be killed. The next day, a Syrian activist tweeted that about 20 people had died at the hands of the Syrian Army in Zabadani.

The officer speculated that his nation's erupting civil war was just the beginning of World War III—after an attack by Israel, he said, Syria would be forced to defend itself by invading and eventually liberating Jerusalem. And with that, we were ordered to turn around and join the line of cars evacuating the area. The other vehicles were mostly filled with families of civilians.

In Ma'loula, a small southwestern Christian mountain town, I had a drink in the home of a soldier who fought in the 1973 war with Israel. He said that he was a former member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and that while fighting in the Sinai he and a group of fellow soldiers had wanted to prove themselves to their Egyptian counterparts—their allies in that ill-fated assault on Israel—so they had roasted a dead Israeli soldier on a spit and pretended to eat his flesh. They were actually eating from a lamb that had been cooked nearby. His explanation for their barbarity? "It was a time of war."

The soldier then pointed to my jawline, to a patch of white in my brown beard, and said that terror alone can cause such a spot to appear almost instantly. He was probably right; I noticed the discoloration after my first trip into the fighting in Homs, a city that has been devastated in the war. The cure, he told me, was to rub it raw with steel wool until it bleeds, for three days straight. Then let it scar over. *over*





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A mural of Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, on the hills outside Damascus.

Sheep owned by a Bedouin family are fed on the outskirts of Damascus. Sheep are one of the few populations faring better than normal during the war; fruits and vegetables that can't be transported to the city are being used to feed local livestock.



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One of the nuns of Saint Thecla Monastery in Ma'loula—a historically Christian town built into a mountainside that's one of the last Aramaic-speaking communities in the world—steps outside the sanctuary during prayer to answer the phone. The village is notable for not having anything in the way of sectarian or revolutionary violence, though small groups have tried to incite protests and fights.

The family portraits and icons of a man who refused to be named who lives in Ma'loula.

An elderly man walks through a cut in the rocks beside Saint Thecla Monastery. Local legend says that the mountain miraculously opened here to protect Thecla, a devout virgin Christian, from her unbelieving pursuers.





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A tailor in Al-Salihiyah sews the pants of school uniforms. With the rise in violence, many schools have relaxed their dress codes.

A market in the Al-Salihiyah neighborhood in Damascus, where fruits and vegetables are imported from the countryside. Prices have risen because transportation has been disrupted. Loyalists say that rebels attack the food trucks, while rebels say that all the checkpoints and security rules are preventing them from reaching the cities.



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A mosque in the Old City of Damascus.

A correspondent for Syrian state television interviews a woman in the streets of Damascus. Syrian state-TV channels have been blocked from two of the largest satellite-TV networks in the Middle East, Arabsat and Nilesat, reducing the range of their influence. The government says that the fighting was started due to foreign agitation and funding.

Patrons enjoy karaoke night at the Mood Lounge, a bar popular with the elites of Damascus. Nights out end earlier than usual for those who have to drive home on dangerous roads, but the remaining crowd proudly belts out everything from patriotic songs to Amy Winehouse.



I WENT TO SYRIA TO LEARN HOW TO BE A JOURNALIST

And Failed Miserably at It While Almost Dying a Bunch of Times



The local
Free Syrian
Army crew
in Baba al-
Nasr, outside
Aleppo, gears
up for a battle.

WORDS AND
PHOTOS BY
SUNIL PATEL

As told to Wes Enzinna
and Omar Katerji

Sunil Patel had never been published before he decided to go to Syria in August 2012 to become a war correspondent. Before his trip, the 25-year-old worked as a community-support officer for the London Police, lived with his mom and dad, and occasionally volunteered in Palestinian and Kurdish refugee camps. On one of his activist trips, Sunil befriended an ever so slightly more experienced freelance journalist from Canada who promised to take him into parts of Syria that were almost impossible for a foreigner to get to through legal routes. It was a foolish idea for sure, and he almost died several times during his trip, but we still think his story was worth the risk. And no, VICE did not send him there. He did this of his own accord, and we found out about it after the fact.





I met Carlos in an internet café in Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan (and, obviously, “Carlos” is not his real name). I overheard him talking about something involving Palestine and Syria over a Skype call, and when he had finished we struck up a conversation.

Carlos told me that he’d already been to Syria, shooting as a freelance photographer, and that he was going back soon. I told him how I’d been thinking about going there to write about the conflict, but that I didn’t have any experience as a journalist. “You know what?” he said. “I’ll take you to Syria.” He didn’t seem to mind that I was a novice.

That night, Carlos crashed at my hostel. He didn’t have his own place to stay or money for a room, so he slept on the floor. It was a bit dodgy sneaking him in, but worth it, because we spent the whole night talking about Syria.

I got the impression that Carlos wanted someone to travel with. I already had a ticket home to London, but we came up with an arrangement: I would fly back, and when Carlos was ready to return to Syria he would call me and we’d meet up in Turkey. From there, Carlos explained, we could cross the border. “I’ve got contacts,” he said. I was a little nervous, but this sounded like a good plan to me. We’d never have war reporters like Robert Fisk or Seymour Hersh if they’d stayed at home with their moms instead of going into the shit.

Back in London, my parents were not too keen on my plans to travel to a country in the middle of a civil war. They thought I was going to get killed. My sister was really mad. I told them that I’d always wanted to be a war correspondent, and that if I ever was going to have a chance to become a real journalist, this was it. If people want news, somebody’s got to go cover it. But they didn’t care. They were upset.

The very next day, Carlos called. “Listen, man,” he said. “I’m going in. You coming or not?”

My mind was already made up. I told Carlos I’d meet him there and booked the next flight to Turkey.

My plane landed in Istanbul, and then I took the bus to Hatay, where Carlos was staying with friends. The Syrian border is about 25 miles to the southeast. We wanted to get there as soon as possible, but neither of us spoke more than a few words of Turkish or Arabic. Luckily, we met a Turkish family who helped us get there. They took us into their home, gave us tea, and we ended up talking to them using Google Translate, typing words into their computer. We explained that we were trying to get to Syria. Somehow they understood and helped us call one of Carlos’s contacts, who was supposed to meet us near the border to help us cross. We just had to get there.

At this point, Carlos promptly informed me that he was a veteran hitchhiker and had bummed rides all over Eastern Europe, so we decided to hitchhike to the Syrian border. We probably made a funny pair—I’m Indian, so I wasn’t as suspect, but Carlos is a white guy with black hair and a camera slung around his neck. I don’t know whether this made truck drivers more or less likely to pick us up, but we thumbed it all the way down the narrow two-lane road outside Hatay. It took us about seven rides with truck drivers and more than three hours to make it the 25 miles across the border. Carlos’s contact, a guy named Muhammad, drove us the last few miles, into a town called Reyhanli near the Syrian border.

One of the busiest border crossings between Turkey and Syria, Reyhanli is about 35 miles from Aleppo, where the war was really heating up. As we roamed around and tried to get oriented, loads of refugees were streaming into Turkey—to escape the war, I assumed.

We walked across the border. No one stopped us or asked us any questions. We just walked right in. On the other side, more refugees milled around, waiting to cross into Turkey in cars and on foot. We didn’t have an interpreter because we couldn’t afford one. Carlos didn’t have any more contacts, and at this point we were just hoping we’d see some rebels hanging around whom we could talk to and who would show us what war was like.

Just then, some men in military uniforms came up to us. “Journalist!” they shouted in Arabic. “Journalist!”

“Yeah, we’re journalists,” I said, in English. I think they understood me. “We want to get some coverage. Can you take us with you to the war?”

Then another man appeared. He was a Syrian journalist and spoke some English. “Don’t worry,” he said, “These guys are Free Syrian Army. You can go with these guys. Trust me, you’re safe.”

Naturally, we were a little bit uncertain. But we realized this was our only chance. So we thought, let’s just go for it and see what happens. It didn’t seem that dangerous.

We’d never have war reporters if they stayed at home with their moms instead of going into the shit.

We all piled into a beat-up little hatchback Toyota. There were two soldiers in the front, fully armed, and the Syrian journalist, Carlos, and me in the back. The journalist translated for us and said that the soldiers were taking us to their base. There was no noticeable fighting in the towns we passed along the way; homes were still standing, and everything looked fine.

It took about 40 minutes to arrive. When we got to what looked like a school building, the soldiers took us inside, where there were about 30 more soldiers and a Syrian guy who spoke much better English than the guy we’d ridden with. He told us that we were in Idlib. “You’re journalists,” he said. “We will look after you. If you want to do stories, if you want to go out with the rebels, I’ll help you.” He wasn’t a rebel himself, he was just their friend. Then the FSA soldiers fed us a huge meal of hummus and falafel.

We ended up spending four days in this area, not doing much. Some children we met nearby in the town of Binnish told us, “Don’t go to Aleppo! We love you! We don’t want you to die!” I told them I didn’t want to die either, but I just thought they were joking. Eventually we grew impatient because there wasn’t any fighting where we were, so one night we asked one of the FSA soldiers whether someone could take us into the ancient city, currently under siege. He said, “Of course.”

Just before midnight, a commander drove us about an hour east, to the town of Jabal al-Zawiya. I remember thinking: *Now we’re traveling with a commander. Things are going to get serious. There are going to be battles all the time.*

Jabal al-Zawiya is situated up in the mountains, and we spent that night in a little mud house on a hill. It was filled with old men. They wore military gear and were fully armed. I remember seeing what looked like a coatrack with M-16s draped from it. Bombs exploded in the distance. In addition to the old guys, there was also a young Syrian who had been an English-literature student at university, so he translated for us.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Bloody Assad posters after a battle in Baba al-Nasr.



The next day, the former student took us around the area, and we interviewed people who had been affected by the war, including a man who'd lost his 11-year-old daughter a week before when a missile from one of Assad's jets struck his house. Our guide took us to another nearby town and showed us the remains of a house that the *shabiha*—thugs who were loyal to Assad—had burned down. We went inside this charred building and took pictures of everything we could.

Still, it was a bit of a letdown. We weren't in Aleppo, where the real fighting was, and we wanted to go. We wanted to see the bombs we were hearing up close. So a few days later, an FSA commander offered to take us closer to the front lines, to another rebel base on the outskirts of the city. I said, "Yeah, mate, we're ready to go," and he took Carlos and me in his car, just the three of us.

The road was rough. We passed some towns that had been totally destroyed: Most of the structures had been shelled and were collapsing, with the few homes that remained having been totally looted. Ghost towns.

A few hours later, the commander dropped us off at an FSA base just outside Aleppo. There were about 25 rebels there, and the commander told them, "Tomorrow, take these guys into Aleppo. They really want to go see the war." And with that, the commander left.

None of the soldiers spoke any English, but we tried our best. They didn't offer us any food like the rebels in Jabal al-Zawiya. Things were obviously a bit rougher here. They'd seen more combat and had been battling Assad's forces for months, which was made apparent by their gruff attitudes. Somehow, though, they were still friendly. All night long we heard bombs exploding over and in Aleppo, which was about 13 miles away.

In the morning, three FSA soldiers drove us into downtown Aleppo. I had heard that all access to the city was blocked off by Assad's forces so I was expecting that we were going to have to somehow sneak past enemy lines. I pictured us ducking down in the backseat and dodging snipers. But it wasn't like that. We just drove right into the city. The whole place was wrecked—buildings smoking and bombed out, entire blocks ruined. But on some streets there were a few shops open, and occasional civilians in the streets who were going about their business. Every few minutes we heard a missile or mortar explode somewhere.

The FSA guys dropped us off at this big house in downtown Aleppo. There were lots of FSA fighters both inside and outside, where they were running around and firing AK-47s. They were trying to take out one of Assad's snipers, who was in a building across the street that served as the current dividing line between Assad's troops and the FSA. This line consisted of rows of FSA-controlled buildings that had been devastated by missile strikes. The buildings on the Syrian Army's side of the street were relatively intact.

The shooting died down eventually, and the guys who had driven us there left—but not before introducing us to some other FSA guys and telling them we needed a place to stay.

"So here's the deal," one of these rebels later explained. "We're out here to be martyrs. We want to help the Syrian people. If a tank comes by tomorrow and puts our people at risk, we're going to go out there and risk our lives." He rubbed his chin and paused. "And I'm sure *you* don't want to risk your lives. We will die for the cause of Allah. I don't think you want to."

I just thought: *Holy fuck*. We just got dropped off in the middle of a war zone. Our ride has left, and he's not coming back. What are we going to do if these guys don't let us stay with them?

Eventually we talked to our new rebel friend long enough to gain his trust, and he let us tag along with him. The sniper exchange had died down, so he took us on a little walking tour of nearby blocks in the FSA-controlled part of the city. He showed us some buildings that had been destroyed by Assad's jets and an ambulance that had been torched. Then he took us to a little mosque, outside of which was a corpse. It was a dead policeman. He was one of Assad's men, and a few weeks earlier he had tried to throw a grenade at the mosque but it had detonated in his hand. The rebels had left his body, and it had since turned purple and yellow. The stench was awful. That's when I thought: *All right. I should not be here.*

Our FSA guide then took us to a huge shopping mall. On the ground floor there were still stores selling necessities like food and toothpaste, but the second story was a total wreck. Nobody was around, and there was old food and trash strewn throughout. The windows were smashed, and the stores had all been looted. It looked abandoned, except for the mattresses where local rebels managed to catch a few winks in between battles.

A second later, another bomb dropped, followed by another tremendous boom that snapped me out of my stupor.

Inside, our anonymous new best friend explained that there was going to be a battle nearby in a few hours, and that we'd get a better view up on one of the higher floors. His unit had received intelligence that one of Assad's tanks was going to come down the street, and they were going to ambush it. I said that I wanted to go to the top floor—the tenth floor—to shoot photos. "You can stay up there if you want to get hit by a sniper," he said. But he said the seventh floor would be safe and took us up before he joined his comrades. The view was great. Carlos and I snapped some shots of rebels running around the streets, preparing for the battle at hand.

Three or four hours passed and nothing happened. We smoked some shisha. I became convinced that the supposed battle was the result of misinformation. This is when Carlos decided to head down to the ground floor to shoot some more photos, leaving me on the seventh floor of this abandoned mall.

That's when it occurred to me: *This is a really big building, and the government is targeting the rebels... who have obviously been using this building as a headquarters for a while. This building could get bombed any second.*

Maybe my innards heard it before my ears did, but a jet whizzed by just as I was thinking this.

A huge, thunderlike sound exploded from above. My instincts were malfunctioning. I knew it was a bomb, but I just stood there, dumbfounded.

A second later, another bomb dropped, followed by another tremendous boom that snapped me out of my stupor. I grabbed my stuff and starting running down the stairs. I was screaming Carlos's name because I had no idea where he was, or whether he was even alive. I found him at the bottom of the stairs, terrified. I must have looked the same way.

On the ground floor of the mall, shopkeepers scrambled to collect merchandise from their stores so as to not leave bait for the inevitable looters. Most of the FSA guys had already taken cover, except for the two rebels who stayed on the ground floor with us.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A dead Syrian police officer outside a mosque in Aleppo.



A few minutes passed without incoming fire, enough time for everyone to relax a bit. Carlos started laughing, and I laughed along with him, the way you sometimes do after something really terrible and unbelievable has happened.

The next thing I heard was *bam!* And suddenly people were screaming. I turned around and saw one of the FSA guys who had been standing next to us splayed out on the floor, bleeding from his head. His skull had been split in two by a chunk of debris from one of the collapsed upper floors. A minute ago, he had been standing five feet away from me. Now he was lying on the ground, bleeding to death. I pulled out a T-shirt from my bag and tried to stop the blood, but it soaked through. He went unconscious as other FSA soldiers ran over, dragged his body into the street, and loaded it into a jeep.

"He's a martyr now," one of the rebels told me in English.

That night, an FSA soldier whom we met inside the shopping mall took us to a rebel base in another part of town where it was safe for us to sleep. These new FSA guys were extra-nice. They even gave us our own mattresses and said, "Stay for as long as you want. We want journalists to write about the war."

The next day, thankfully, was much quieter. This new camp included a rebel-staffed media center, with access to computers and the internet. The connection wasn't very good, though, and a group of Syrian journalists were hogging the equipment. I wrote up a quick story and sent it to an editor at the *Independent* in London, along with my photos. I'd still never published anything, but I hoped they'd run the story. One of the Syrian journalists kicked me off the computer before I received a reply.

The rebels then took us to Salaheddin, a district in Aleppo that Assad's men and the FSA had been battling over for weeks. The neighborhood was devastated, and nearly every building had been destroyed. It was hard to tell that any sort of community had existed there in recent times.

At nightfall, sounds of war began again and didn't cease till the next day. By now I was used to it and managed to get some sleep in between explosions, at one point lifting my head up to realize that no one else was awake and thinking, *Fuck it, I'm going back to sleep.*

Our third day in Aleppo was pretty tame, aside from seeing another dead body. We were in the middle of a battle in the Bab al-Nasr neighborhood. Somewhere around 20 FSA fighters were trying to take out a sniper perched in a building above, and one rebel got hit. I didn't actually see it happen, but I definitely saw the guy screaming after he was shot. Everyone on the scene helped drag him into a pickup truck, where he died shortly afterward.

That night, back at the base, we met a really interesting guy who was in charge of radio communications for the FSA. He spoke to us in English, explaining how the rebels were all using walkie-talkies and that this was a big problem. Assad's troops could easily tune in to their frequencies.

On our fourth day in Aleppo, I was awoken by a nearby bomb blast around 7 AM. A few more shells dropped and then it went quiet.

I walked outside to see what had happened. A missile had hit a playground about 100 feet away from our base and left a huge crater in the ground. Another missile had torn a wall off a man's home nearby.

Near the guy's home, a big mob of Syrians had formed. Carlos and I walked over to check it out. Some French

journalists who were staying at the base came along, too, as did a bunch of FSA rebels. Half of the guy's house was gone, and his neighbors had crowded into the courtyard. The French journalists were interviewing people, when suddenly the crowd of Syrians started picking up stones and throwing them at us.

"Ah, you French bastards!" someone shouted. "You Western pieces of shit! You don't care about us!" Then the people turned on the rebels, directing their stones at them. "Get out of here," they said to us, "and take the FSA with you!"

(An FSA guy later translated for me exactly what the mob had said; but even without being able to understand their words in that moment, it was pretty clear they didn't like us.)

I didn't know it then, but civilians in Aleppo are targeted because they're in the vicinity of a rebel base. So there are tensions between civilians and the FSA. Later, I saw a bunch of FSA guys beat a shopkeeper when he asked them to get off of his roof. He was afraid a jet would bomb his store. The rebels got down off the roof and punched and kicked him, then locked him in his shop.

"You Western pieces of shit!" someone shouted. "Get out of here and take the FSA with you!"

But back to the mob: The people were just screaming at the FSA guys and throwing stones at them, and the FSA guys were shouting back, and the French journalists were recording it all. There are a lot of citizens in Aleppo who do not fully support what the FSA is doing. They don't support what Assad is doing, either. There are, of course, plenty of people who *do* support the FSA. It's just not everybody. The spectrum of views is varied and complex.

Later that afternoon in Aleppo is when everything really got crazy. First, our guide drove us to a couple of desolate neighborhoods to see more battles. At one of them, we met an 18-year-old Syrian-American kid. He walked up to us and just started talking in this American accent. He said he was from Virginia and had come to Syria to join the FSA and help kill Assad. "You think I'm going to let my people be murdered?" he said. He wouldn't give us his name.

At this point we were being led around by a different FSA guide, and he took us to a base where he did an interview with Agence France-Presse. He told them a whole bunch of lies. When the French journalists asked him whether they got their weapons from smugglers coming in through the Turkish border, our guide said, "Oh, what weapons? These weapons? We're not getting them from the border. The weapons that we have are the ones we had in the army before we defected. We're still using the same weapons." It seemed like total bullshit to me.

He also told the French journalists a story about how, earlier in the day, he'd been in a battle in which he had blown up eight tanks. And I thought: *What fucking tanks?* I'd been with him all day, and the only vehicle he'd almost blown up was his car, which earlier he had filled with the wrong type of gas. When we confronted him about this, he said, "Oh, you guys just didn't see the tanks get blown up." But that's bullshit. Still, I understand, I guess. It's propaganda, and the FSA believe they have to do it to make people think they're beating Assad, to get them on their side.

OPPOSITE PAGE: An FSA fighter, after being shot in the stomach by a sniper, in Baba al-Nasr.



After the interview, we got a call that a bakery had been bombed and we should come to the hospital where the victims were being treated. It took 15 minutes to get there and turned out to be a total horror show. The “hospital” looked like it had previously been a little hotel.

Out front there were seven or eight bodies lined up along a wall. They were covered up in sheets, their stiff arms and legs sticking out from beneath the fabric. Next to them, a woman was crying hysterically over her son’s corpse. Reporters flocked around her.

This was when I realized that maybe I wasn’t cut out to be a journalist. I couldn’t work up the gall to take a picture of her. Eventually, I took a few, but it was excruciating.

Inside, people were hauling in a mess of mangled bodies. Most of the victims were conscious and breathing, but there was blood everywhere. They had a vacuum hose with which they were trying to suck all the blood off the floor. The doctors were trying to treat everyone at once, and it was apparent they were having a miserable time—especially trying to treat one man whose head was oozing pools of blood.

I’d never seen anything like it and absolutely could not handle my shit, so I went back outside. But outside wasn’t much better. A truck had arrived, and a group of men was loading a young guy’s corpse into it. Men and women were crying.

Another man walked up with his daughter in his arms. She was bleeding from her head. He was sobbing and seemed so tired from crying and carrying his daughter that he looked like he was about to fall to the ground. Someone took his daughter and brought her inside; the man collapsed.

How does one report on something like this? What was I going to do, ask people, “Hey, mate, how do you feel about this?” They’d be like, “Oh, you know, I think I feel all right. The bakery’s being bombed, my daughter’s dead...” The whole thing was fucking horrific. I just wanted to get the fuck out of there.

Carlos and I had planned to stay in Syria for six weeks. This was our *fourth* day in Aleppo, but it was at this hospital that I decided we had to leave. But Carlos didn’t want to go. “We’re being total fucking cowards,” he said. “Everything will be fine tomorrow morning.”

Shortly after we left the hospital, Carlos lost his shit, too. We left the bakery and were driving with an FSA guy. We wanted to go back to the media center, but the driver told us that throughout the day it had been attacked by Assad’s planes and that it was no longer safe for us to stay there. A mortar exploded every couple of minutes as we drove. And suddenly, a jet appeared right over our car. Our driver, terrified it was going to shoot at us, swerved into a tiny alleyway. We hid there, trying to stay out of sight.

I thought we were safe, but Carlos suddenly started to freak out. “Shit! Shit!” he shouted, “They’re gonna come for us! We have to get out of the car.”

And I said, “You’re out of your fucking mind, mate! That isn’t gonna help. If they see a stranded white guy with a camera running around in the street, they’re gonna bomb the shit out of you.” That calmed him down.

That night, because the place we’d been staying had been destroyed, we were directed toward a safe house for journalists on the outskirts of Aleppo. It was where the French journalists and *New York Times* reporters stayed. We hadn’t even known it existed.

We accompanied four journalists on the drive there, during which we had another close call when one of Assad’s

jets began following our taxi, which prompted one of the reporters I was with to take a photo with his flash. The pilot responded by swooping back around and firing two missiles at us on the highway. They missed, but our taxi driver almost had a nervous breakdown. I couldn’t really believe what was happening anymore. It was the most ridiculous ten seconds of my life.

The taxi driver was screaming at the guy who took the photo, and I thought he was going to burst into tears. And I said to Carlos: “Do you still want to stay in Syria?” Finally, he admitted we should leave.

Somehow we made it to the safe house, and the next morning the Syrian guy who ran the place arranged for a taxi to come pick us up and take us out of Aleppo. But when it arrived, Carlos and I didn’t have enough cash. I’d only brought about 5,000 Syrian pounds (less than \$75) into the country with me, and I only had about 800 left. The driver said that wasn’t enough to get us all the way into Turkey. He said that for that amount he would take us as far as the town of Azaz. That wasn’t too far down the road, but we just wanted to get the hell out of Aleppo and so we got in.

There were seven or eight corpses covered up in sheets, their stiff arms and legs sticking out from beneath the fabric.

On arriving in Azaz, it was apparent the town had just been completely obliterated by the war. But we found another taxi there. We didn’t have any money, and he said it would be \$20 to the border. I ended up bartering, giving him my iPod for a ride.

When we finally got back to the Turkish border, three FSA soldiers on the Syrian side wouldn’t let us through. They were nice but firm. Apparently, we’d entered Syria illegally and therefore we couldn’t exit legally. Our passports weren’t stamped. They told us we’d have to *go back* to where we got the taxi and find some other way to get through to Turkey.

The only choice we had was to catch a ride back to Azaz with some other FSA guys who were buddies with the border guards. They drove us there and then helped us get another ride from Azaz to a part of the border where it would be easier to sneak through—a barren stretch of land with an industrial plant on it.

The guy who dropped us off there turned to Carlos and me and said, “OK, we’re here. Now just run!”

“What if some Turkish soldiers decide to shoot the fuck out of us?” I asked.

“That’s why you’ve got to run!” he said.

Shitting ourselves, we sprinted across this stretch of desert for five minutes. We made it back to Kilis, Turkey. It wasn’t the same as being back in London, but I was just happy to still have my cock and be wearing socks. And to not be in Syria anymore. I no longer wanted to be a journalist. I was thinking maybe I’d go into politics instead.

In Kilis, I checked my email for the first time since arriving in Aleppo. The editor at the *Independent*—the one to whom I’d sent my only dispatch and some photos—had replied. His message said that, unfortunately, they’d have to pass on my story.

That was officially, without question, the end of my career as a war correspondent. 

OPPOSITE PAGE: Doctors scramble to treat the wounded after Assad’s troops bombed a bakery in Aleppo.



THE MAN WHO WAS THERE

*Robert King Has Been Covering the FSA So Long
They Named Him "Haji Memphis"*



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY ROBERT KING/POLARIS

As told to Aaron Lake Smith and Rocco Castoro
Additional reporting by ST McNeil

VICE reached out to photographer and videographer Robert King in an attempt to arrive at the twisted core of the matter in Syria. Robert is a man with a heart of gold, a preternatural gut, and balls of pure lonsdaleite (an ultra-rare mineral 58 percent harder than diamond). For more than two decades he has documented the most volatile places in the world at their most violent times, including Iraq, Albania, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and many others. We won't get into all he's done and where he's been here because the following 20 pages of reportage he sent us speak for themselves.

I became interested in the conflict in Syria for the same reason I've always wanted to cover anything—it seemed to be underreported. There weren't very many news organizations willing to commit resources needed to inform their readers about the situation on a continuous basis, so I took it upon myself to do so.

I genuinely believed in the Syrian people's call for more than just demonstrations, especially once it was made apparent that Assad's regime was using helicopters, jets, detainment, and torture to squash the rebellion. During a stint in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2005, I was kidnapped by a brigade of Sunni fighters. I managed to escape, but I was wary of going back to the region—especially to a country where a violent battle had erupted between rebel forces and government troops. Still, I knew I had to go, and before I left my home in Memphis I established connections with relief and aid groups working inside Syria.

My initial contacts directed me toward other people who, once I was inside, would hopefully point me in the direction of activists who could smuggle me in via a city near the Syrian border. When I felt confident that I had ensured my safe passage as much as I could, I began to move into Syria very cautiously.

For about \$1,000 round trip, I was able to take a back door into the country and was guaranteed—as much as a smuggler can guarantee—safe passage for ten days inside the governorate

of Idlib. They took me to a town called Binnish, where they told me they could find me a place to stay for about \$100 a night.

The first round wasn't a very easy go. At that point, late March through April, there were still very few publications willing to assign long excursions into Syria. I also quickly discovered that the activists I was embedded with were in the habit of staying up and drinking Pepsi till the wee hours of the morning and then sleeping in until 3 PM.

The reality was that Binnish was pretty dead. There wasn't much fighting or anything else going on, and it was difficult to get my guides to take me to the places I wanted to go. Looking back, hiring these people was probably not the wisest investment. Around Easter weekend, toward the end of my three-week trip, a horrific massacre broke out about ten miles away in Taftanaz. Dozens of people were slaughtered. And I was one of the only Western journalists there.

After the onslaught, there were fears that the fighting would spread to Binnish. The Free Syrian Army rebels who had tried

OPENING

SPREAD:

September 30, 2012: Fighters with the jihadist Tawhid brigade in the midst of a battle with Syrian Army troops inside Aleppo's hotly contested al-Arkoub neighborhood.



to contain the attack in Taftanaz left about two hours after they arrived because they had run out of ammunition. It quickly became apparent that they were incapable of protecting or enforcing anything.

My guides began running out of patience, specifically with my requests to transport me to potentially dangerous places I wanted to cover in the region. They totally flipped out when I informed them that Human Rights Watch had said they would pay for me to document the aftermath of the recent massacre, so two days later I returned to Turkey and holed up in Antakya for a bit. I began calling contacts in Lebanon to see whether they could get me into the city of al-Qusayr, where, it seemed to me, most of the intense fighting in Syria was taking place at the time.

I had now been working in and around Syria for a month without much to show for it, at least anything that had been published. I was very frustrated. When I had reached out to *Time* they said a story about Syria had already run the week before. *Newsweek* was going to run one of my images from a massacre, but a senior editor pulled the story without explanation.

I had these photos of the mass killings in Taftanaz, as far as I know the only ones that were offered to American publications, and no one wanted them. I was pissed off, upset with the industry and what it had become. I kept thinking, *You can't do*

this anymore. It's not worth it. But I went to al-Qusayr anyway and ended up staying for two months.

I was determined to remain in al-Qusayr until more of my photos were published. But I was also shooting video, and on my birthday the BBC bought 30 seconds of my footage. Then Al Jazeera reporters arrived in the region, and finally I thought things might be rolling along—maybe even snowballing. Meanwhile I was witnessing the most horrendous civilian casualties, some of the worst I've ever seen. Sometimes I'd see ten children a day wounded from indiscriminate shelling and other attacks.

By the time I arrived in al-Qusayr, it was under siege, surrounded by the Syrian Army, which had taken two positions inside the city—the state hospital and the mayor's building. Snipers were perched in both locations, while the highway was locked down, with convoys of additional troops heading into the city. Surveillance aircraft and drones scanned the area frequently, and it was bombarded with mortars and other heavy artillery on a daily basis. About 200 FSA troops held down their positions, but they were clearly outnumbered and outgunned. Adding to the severity of the situation, most of the people from the city of Homs—which was also occupied by Syrian Army troops—had fled to nearby al-Qusayr or into the surrounding countryside.

Overall, I think the majority of the American media was ignoring the situation—especially after the UN's peace plan fell

OPPOSITE PAGE: August 28, 2012: A man holds up his Koran in front of an FSA flag at a protest after Friday prayers in Aleppo.

THIS PAGE: April 5, 2012: During a ceasefire, the Syrian Army allowed local villagers to collect and identify their dead following a massacre in Taftanaz.



THIS PAGE:
June 8, 2012: Wounded children are treated inside a makeshift field hospital in al-Qusayr. The volunteer doctors and nurses in these hospitals face torture and death if they are captured by the regime and work under harsh conditions with few supplies, the majority of which must be smuggled from Lebanon. Despite these odds, the doctors are able to treat more than 100 patients per day.

OPPOSITE PAGE: October 3, 2012: A young boy killed during a rocket attack on civilians is carried through the streets of Aleppo by his weeping father.



apart. Anderson Cooper has been an exception. He is probably one of the only people on television who has been willing to cover it on a regular basis. I think reporters have shied away from it because the issues are very complex, it could make the US and other Western governments look bad in an election year, and journalists like Paul Conroy (who compared what had happened in Homs to Srebrenica or Rwanda) have been wounded while reporting. News agencies were scared that it was too high a risk to send reporters into the area. It wasn't like Egypt or Libya or other places fighting erupted during the Arab Spring, where you could just fly in and do whatever the hell you wanted. If you didn't have any real contacts before getting in, it was prohibitively expensive because you'd have to sit around in a hotel and try to establish in 30 days or less what should be three or four months' worth of preparations. The story required a lot more homework than most.

My appearance on *Anderson Cooper 360* in June got me more work, and other outlets started covering the uprising. Something clicked, and higher-up editors and producers said to their staffs, "Hey, what the fuck are you doing on Syria, and why aren't you using this guy's pictures?"

I had gotten some attention for covering a field hospital in al-Qusayr that was supposedly strictly for civilians, but in the chaos of the situation everyone who made it there got some sort of treatment. The Syrian Army had taken the main hospital in

the city, so this group of doctors began using a little bombed-out house. One of them, a gastroenterologist trained in Russia who spoke a bit of English, explained the situation to me. The other guy operating had worked as a veterinarian before the uprising, and the rest of the staff was made up of volunteers. Power was supplied by a generator, and their position was known by the Syrian Army, who continued to attack the hospital, which is unquestionably a war crime. In my experience, the Syrian Army considered everyone in the small agricultural village to be an enemy combatant.

One rebel media-center staffer I met had dug his own grave in a cemetery reserved for martyrs.

FSA members started to dig out bunkers and bomb shelters. One rebel media-center staffer I met had dug his own grave in a cemetery reserved for martyrs. And this was when the UN was still trying to broker a ceasefire. So there weren't as many jets in the air as there are now, but helicopters, snipers, and other large munitions were still constantly assailing townspeople. It was never-ending.







**PREVIOUS
SPREAD:**

October 3, 2012: A father cradles his dead son who was killed after the Syrian Army attacked a civilian populated area in Aleppo.

THIS SPREAD:

September 28, 2012: Syrians line up to buy bread outside a bakery, one of the few remaining in Aleppo. The army has targeted bread lines, killing hundreds of innocent, hungry civilians in the process.

When I left al-Qusayr in mid-June, it was still encircled. I returned home to Memphis to visit my family and regroup. By this time, the heaviest fighting was taking place in Aleppo, one of Syria's largest and most ancient cities, which, before the revolution, was Syria's center of commerce. After some downtime, I decided to crowdsource my next trip through a Kickstarter project and received enough funds to fly back to Turkey, where I then walked across the border at Kilis (which, at this point, was recognized as FSA-controlled by the Turks—the FSA even stamped my passport) and met with a prearranged contact, who arrived on a motorcycle and drove me to Umm al Marra, where I stayed for a few days while arranging to travel to Aleppo.

Around this time I met a guy from Long Island who is currently working as an activist in Syria. He organized a trip for me and another journalist into Aleppo, where I would be embedded with the FSA media center. Over the course of my visit, they took me to the front lines, a local hospital, and other places ravaged by the war.

Aleppo is a big city, one considered metropolitan before the uprising. But most of the university students had fled at this point, replaced by villagers who had moved in from the countryside. What struck me the most about Aleppo, in comparison with cities like al-Qusayr and Homs, is that not many people would flash the victory sign when the FSA passed by.

Surely, not everyone in the city supports the rebels, but in my opinion the lack of public support was because no one can trust his or her neighbor in Aleppo at the moment. Paranoia abounds because there are still Assad supporters in the region, sending back reports to regime forces. And the portions of the city where the major fighting is happening are largely deserted.

That said, the FSA has a strong foothold in Aleppo. They control bread distribution and gas prices and have overtaken key municipal buildings. But some things are still out of reach. For instance, there's no chance they could set up a school for the children right now—it would be irresponsible. And as in Homs, the Syrian Army has been indiscriminately targeting civilians and FSA soldiers alike.

One day while I was in the hospital, this poor kid was brought in who had his head damn near chopped off during a rocket attack on his house. Another day I saw two fathers holding their young dead sons; they were crying and completely inconsolable. As a dad I could relate. It was heartbreaking—one of the saddest moments I have experienced in my life.

Based on what I saw, I believe that Assad's troops are purging a certain gene pool. I do not believe it's a stretch to say it amounts to ethnic cleansing, because they are targeting three generations of Sunnis: those who started the revolution, their children, and the children's grandparents. Their goal is to ensure there won't be enough offspring left to create a truly secular



state, even if the revolution succeeds. I've seen enough piles of dead Syrians to wholeheartedly believe this is the case. Western governments and the UN want to say it's a civil war, but it's not. The FSA and their allies don't have enough resources for there to be a semblance of balance in terms of armaments and people on the ground. It's a slaughter.

In late August I shot an anti-Assad demonstration in Aleppo. I had been to similar gatherings in Binnish and al-Qusayr. The demonstration in al-Qusayr was much more organized and began with a prayer. It was as if they brought a bunch of somewhat disparate causes and demonstrations together to converge in one area. Aleppo was different. The black flags of Islamic extremists were flying, and they were handing them out to kids and families who had gathered around. I can only think that the FSA's desperation is why they're incorporating jihadist groups into their ranks. Extremists are the only ones willing to step up, and when things are this bleak you'll take all the help you can get.

Another atrocity I witnessed in Aleppo was the burning of the ancient souk (an Arab marketplace or bazaar) in the Old City. On our way to the scene we passed Haji Mara, one of four commanders of the FSA unit operating in the region. He was riding his motorcycle, on his way to meet with the fighters in his unit and check on their positions, so we turned around to pursue him. I wanted to speak with him; I had been wanting to photograph him for a while, and this was my chance.

After my interview with Haji Mara (see page 122), my driver took me to the burning souk. When I arrived at the old market, I was fixated on the sunlight piercing the atriums, as well as the flames and smoke emanating from its walls. All the while, the regime's snipers were shooting at the rebels.

As the smoke began to clear, holes opened up and the snipers took shots at vendors who were trying to remove merchandise from their rapidly incinerating shops. Just about everyone was weeping.

Extremists are the only ones willing to step up, and when things are this bleak you'll take all the help you can get.

The medieval souk was one of the best preserved of its kind and had been listed as a historic site by UNESCO. It has since served as a rallying point for supporters of pan-Arab culture, and its destruction is yet another war crime that will exacerbate the conflict in untold ways.

The situation in Syria is like many others throughout history—the eventual fallout of a religious minority ruling and oppressing the majority. I'm just trying to record it all, and I'll be back soon. That's the best I can do.







An Interview with Haji Mara, the Commander of the Largest FSA Brigade in Aleppo

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

September 29, 2012: A small business owner checks out his destroyed shop while walking through a burning souk in Aleppo's Old City.

THIS PAGE:

August 28, 2012: Former commodities trader Abdul al-Kader, better known as Haji Mara, commands the largest brigade of FSA fighters in Aleppo.

VICE: How are your men doing?

Haji Mara: To be honest, we're nothing next to the army. The army has well-equipped units, planes, and arms. And we just have Kalashnikovs. One shot hits and another shot misses. Even given that, we now cover 60 to 70 percent of Aleppo. And this sacrifice is the highest priority. Of course, our main focus is, first of all, God, and second, the concerns of the young people.

What can you tell the people in America and in Europe and around the world about your movement?

First, I want to send a message to all the world leaders. All of the world leaders are shameful. There is shame written on their foreheads because our women and children are being killed every day, and they remain silent. We're no longer concerned with world leaders. We're sending our message to the people of life, people who have a conscience. Right now we want to take a stand. We are brothers in humanity. We are brothers in Islam. So let's take a stand, a real stand with these people who are being murdered and slaughtered daily. Consider a citizen who wants to buy bread and there's a bombing at the bakery. Is that order? If you go now, you'll see people sleeping in the

streets. And after all this, the people are silent? Why? Where is the soul? Where are the Muslims? My message is to have them take a genuine stand with the people, to have their voices reach the ears of their oppressive rulers.

What does freedom in your country mean to you?

Of course, we started the revolution to have freedom. This freedom is for all of us. Freedom to practice my religion and carry out my duties as God wishes, without anyone objecting. My freedom is my right to express myself and speak out. My freedom is to take part in everything. We're not little. Since we were little, they told us, "Shut up, my son, the walls have ears." We have learned about and been brought up on this horror since we were young. We were reared on horror. That is the thing we need to break. We want to live like the rest of the people.

What can the world do to help Syria?

The world can do a lot. They can come out and protest and condemn the world organizations that haven't committed to helping the Syrian people; they can force these governments to make a move.



There are a lot of rumors of foreigners here in Aleppo fighting with you. What do you say about the reports that the FSA is made up of extremists?

My brother, the Free Syrian Army and the revolutionaries are all from Syria. But yes, you will find, other than them, people who choose to come here and support their brothers. They came from Tunisia, Libya, and other places. But there are very few of them. And God bless them, we tell them. In regard to all the revolutionaries, they are Syrian revolutionaries, you understand? They're revolutionaries from this soil. And you are here with cameras seeing things. Maybe there will be a few foreign individuals out of the hundreds. But that doesn't mean that the entire Free Syrian Army is made up of foreign fighters.

Why did you decide to join the revolution?

It started off with peaceful demonstrations. The youth came out with olive branches. Then they shelled and attacked the youth. We couldn't remain angels after that. For six or seven months we didn't even think of picking up our weapons. We thought that "our Bashar" would receive the same fate as Hosni Mubarak and Ali Abdullah Saleh. We thought that the revolution would be over in a few months. But it turned out we didn't have a president. It turned out we have a murderer. And this

murderer took up arms, and our only option is to take up arms and take him out of office.

How did you become a commander?

In my opinion, I'm not an officer. I'm a servant and a brother. We're not like other organizations where I just wave at them as I pass. No, I am hand-in-hand with my men, and I'm killing with them to silence this regime. And right here, we're only 200 meters away from the battlefield. In regard to how I was appointed, the brothers are the ones who have been so generous with the title. They're the ones who put me up here in this position.

What are your plans if you win the revolution?

I will get some rest. I'm getting tired. It's been about a month of me focusing hard like this. God willing, we want to look after the state of the country. God willing, the situation will be stable. Because these people, their safety is in my heart. Like you're seeing, there's still oppression. There are opportunists claiming the name of the revolution. But these people are liars and criminals. We're fighting, and they're coming up behind us and stealing. We're going to deal them justice. We're not going to rest until we deal them justice and see the situation stabilize. At that time, I'm going to try to return to my original job.

An Interview with Abu Turab, a Carpenter Turned FSA Rebel from Homs

VICE: Where were you in March 2011, when the 13 boys were arrested in Daraa for spraying anti-Assad graffiti?
I was at work.

Were you involved in protests? If so, what was your experience at those protests?

I took part in the protests, where I took a bullet. But I was not arrested.

Was there one specific moment when you decided, *I need to fight against Assad militarily*?

I began thinking about joining the FSA during the occupation of my city when the *shabiha* swept through.

When did you first hear about the Free Syrian Army?

The first I heard about the FSA was on TV.

Do you have family who is also fighting?

My entire family is fighting.

How did you join? What is the name of your battalion, and how was it formed?

I cannot mention the name of the battalion, but it was formed by neighborhood residents.

What qualifications does one need to fight as part of the FSA?
Anyone can join the FSA.

How is it organized? How are decisions made in your battalion?
We make decisions collectively.

Who decides where and when you will fight?

All of us decide, together, about the fighting.

What was the very first battle you participated in with the FSA?
My first battle with the FSA was liberating Az Zahrawi palace [a historic site in Homs].

Who exactly were you fighting against?

I was fighting the shabiha.

Who were you fighting with?

I was fighting with people from Homs.

Have you seen anyone killed? If so, what was the situation?

Every day I see many people getting killed by tanks and barrel bombs. These are filled with *baramael* [a mixture of TNT, oil, and other substances that explodes, burns, and destroys everything] and dropped from helicopters. People are torn into small pieces.

What has been the single worst personal moment for you since the civil war began?

Since the siege started around the old parts of Homs, many injured people cannot get medical help. We are forced to use primitive tools to amputate limbs when wounds become infected. I will fight again soon.

Have you changed since you began fighting?

Yes, I am a better person now.

Have any of your opinions changed since you began fighting with the FSA?

I am more confident in God now. It became clear during this conflict that the international community had lied.

After the war, what will you do?

After this, I will go back to my job.

An Interview with Abu Ahmad, a Civil Engineer and Defector from the Syrian Army

VICE: Where did you grow up?

Abu Ahmad: Salaheddin, Aleppo.

What did your parents do for work?

My mother does not work, and my father is a real estate agent.

What did you do before the war?

I was a civil engineer and a lieutenant in the military.

Where were you in July 2000, when Bashar al-Assad became president of Syria?

I was still doing my studies at university.

What experience did you have with Assad's soldiers or police before 2011?

Personally, none, but I was not happy with their behavior.

Where were you in March 2011, when the 13 boys were arrested in Daraa for spraying anti-Assad graffiti?

I was doing my military service in the countryside of Damascus.

Was there one specific moment when you decided that you needed to fight against Assad?

Many things made me join the Free Syrian Army. I saw the security forces dragging a woman after stripping her naked. She was being cursed and accused of calling Al Jazeera.

Before you defected from the Syrian Army, did you participate in any actions against protesters?

I did not participate in the killing, but I witnessed the killing of protesters in Daraa, Saqba, Zamalka, and Kafr Batna.

Did you see civilians killed in these battles? If so, what happened exactly?

I saw many young men and elderly getting killed when they left the mosque after Friday prayers.

Have you killed anyone?

No.

How is the FSA organized?

The organization of it is nonhierarchical.

What has been the single worst personal moment for you since the civil war began?

When a boy was sniped in Daraa, smashing his lower jaw, in the beginning of the revolution.

Are you going to fight again soon?

Yes.

What will you do after the conflict?

After Assad has fallen, I will go back to my job.

September 30, 2012: An FSA fighter in Aleppo's al-Arkoub neighborhood aims at Syrian Army troops.



An Interview with Akhi Muhammad, a Defected Free Syrian Army Officer from Damascus

VICE: What did your parents do for work?

Akhi Muhammad: My father was a retired office worker, and my mother was a housewife.

What was your occupation before the war?

I was a volunteer officer in the Syrian Army, but I had a diploma in geography, which I obtained while serving in the army.

Where were you when Bashar al-Assad came to power?

I was in Damascus.

What experience did you have with Assad's soldiers or police before 2011?

I had a lot of experience. The least of this oppression and humiliation that I experienced during my military service was that I felt a clear distinction between the ranks of the Muslims and Alawites. Another small part of it was bribery. The traffic cops would stop anyone and ask them for a bribe openly, trying to find any pretext to get some money, like 25 Syrian pounds [about 36 cents].

What did you think of the news about the fall of leaders like Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Gaddafi since last year?

I was happy to see tyrants falling down anywhere in this world. I wished that Gaddafi were tried so that we could see all the secrets that he had. It is easy for me to say that, but I understand that the Libyan people, whose families and kids were killed because of Gaddafi's stupidity over a few decades, had a different opinion from mine. Maybe if we get Bashar we will do the same to him, or maybe more.

Where were you in March 2011, when the 13 boys were arrested in Daraa for graffiti?

I was at my military base in Damascus.

Were you involved in protests?

No, we were on alert when the revolution started. We were hardly allowed to go and see our families.

Was there a specific moment when you decided to fight Assad with weapons?

My brother was arrested. He told me that when you are arrested, you feel that the world is collapsing, and when you are under torture in jail you do not feel that you are a human being anymore. Physical torture is not as bad as when everything you believe in is humiliated. You feel that you are an insect that is being smashed. They stepped on his head and made him say that my sisters and mother are whores, and said that they would have sex with them. They cursed God and made him say that Bashar al-Assad is the real God. My brother could only get out of jail after we gave 300,000 Syrian pounds [about \$4,300] to an Alawite officer. He was completely collapsed. When my brother told me what happens to those who go to jail, I knew that peaceful protests cannot stand against this regime.

When did you first hear about the Free Syrian Army? And from whom?

The first time I heard about the FSA was through the state radio

and the state television. The state media was talking about the great achievements of Assad's army against "terrorist gangs."

How did you transition from the Syrian Army and into the FSA?

As time passed, I realized that my colleagues in the army were starting to feel less anxious about speaking about what was going on in the country. Gradually, the wall of fear fell. One of my colleagues suggested that we should defect, and three others liked the idea as well as myself. We started planning for defection for a few weeks. We were able to communicate with one of the FSA battalions in the Damascus countryside. While we were on one of the checkpoints, we managed to escape to a nearby town, and there the residents helped us reach the battalion that we were communicating with.

As a soldier in the Syrian Army, did you participate in any actions against protesters?

I did not kill anyone, I was mostly working in the military base, but after that, when the Syrian regime needed more soldiers to fight, we were deployed to the checkpoints.

Where were you and what were you doing in April 2012 while the UN "ceasefire" was being discussed?

I was in my battalion; we wished that the ceasefire would be observed, but the regime continued to attack civilians, and that made all our hopes disappear.

What qualifications does one need to fight as part of the FSA?

He must believe in what he is doing. And he must know that death is coming whether he will be killed or he dies naturally.

Can you describe the battles you've fought in?

How can I describe that? There is a different goal for each, but the ultimate goal is to prevent these criminals from reaching the civilian areas. When we go, we say a pledge of death, meaning we will fight to the death if necessary, and we pray. I feel that my pulse is increasing and cold sweat is going down my back. When we reach the battlefield, I receive the start signal from our leader, and then I only hear the sounds of the bullets and I forget everything else. All feelings freeze, and everything else disappears.

Who have you fought against? What kind of weapons did they have, and what was the outcome?

We fight everyone who targets civilians, namely the army and the shabiha, but particularly the shabiha because they do not have any moral or religious constraints—no limits for what they do. They are gangs that are only interested in stealing and killing. I cannot say that we always win. Sometimes we withdraw because of the intensity of the enemy's gunfire or their medium and heavy arms, or when the enemy is much more numerous than what we were expecting. During these battles we attack and withdraw.

Have you seen anyone killed? If so, what was the situation?

I saw some civilians being killed at the hands of shabiha. My task was to use the binoculars to assess the situation during one of the battles in the countryside of Damascus. Three soldiers

forced a lady out of her house. They talked to her, then killed her. They had tanks and were accompanied by an armored personnel carrier. I do not know what they said to her.

Have you killed anyone? If so, what was the situation?
Do you think that I was shooting for pleasure?

What has been the single worst personal moment for you since the civil war began?

The most difficult moment I went through was when I decided to defect. It was a mixed feeling of happiness because I was freeing myself from the slavery of the Assad regime, and a feeling of fear for my family and what the regime could do to them, especially because I was in the army and will be treated as a traitor if I return. Only execution will be there for me.

What do you plan on doing after the war?

I feel that I am unclear about the future. Now I am doing something for myself and for my people. I might go back to my work in the army or I might look for another job. I do not know. This is not the type of life that I was hoping to live. But my friends and I were forced into it. I will never give up. We will continue to the end.

*September 26, 2012:
A wounded fighter from the Tawhid brigade in Aleppo.*

An Interview with Ahmed Al-Hajji, a FSA Media-Center Coordinator in Aleppo

VICE: What is your role in the revolution?

Ahmed al-Hajji: I'm responsible for the media center. We take videos of what's happening: shellings, jets, and fighting, sometimes.

What were you doing before the war?

Before the war, I was studying mechanical engineering. Now I'm officially a mechanical engineer.

When the revolution began, did you have hopes that America and Europe would help to overthrow Assad?

In the beginning, yes, I did. In the beginning of the revolution, of course I hoped that, and I thought that America and Europe would support us and help us. But after a few months, I saw that it's impossible for any country to give us help.

Are there any groups that are giving you help?

Groups like what?



Are any Islamic groups coming to help fight for the revolution?
There are some Syrians who help us. They live outside the country. They help us with some equipment. They help teach us what to do. They give us some important information.

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama said they were going to give the Free Syrian Army and people in the media center communications equipment. Have they fulfilled this promise to the people of Syria?

Until now, no. And really, we don't wait for them to give us anything. It would be such a good help if they did it. But we know they won't do it.

During the beginnings of the revolution, were there ever people waving American flags, hoping that America would help to free oppressed Syrians?

No, during the beginning we thought America was going to help us and Europe was going to help us. Not because we raised their flags but because we thought they believed in democracy and human rights. Now we know they don't believe in it. They just believe, "What can I get from this?"

Why do you think America and the rest of the West haven't offered any military or logistical support?

Because Syria is a very important country, and we border Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey. It's a very important place in the world. So they don't want us to be strong. They don't want the FSA to be strong. They don't want us to have heavy weapons or medium weapons.

What does freedom mean to you?

It's a big question. Freedom is not only saying, "We want freedom, we want freedom." It means a lot of things. Freedom means to be human. When you don't have your freedom you're like an animal. You're like a slave. And the life of a slave? It's hard to live.

Do you feel like you've been a slave under the Assad regime?

No. Because my father and my mother taught me what freedom is. I'm young, not old. So I have not had this experience of the pressure from this society. I've lived my freedom before. But most of the people? Yeah, they used to be slaves, because they have to go to work in the morning and come home at night. They didn't have time for anything. They couldn't say anything. They were just doing things and didn't know why. They don't even have time to think.

What was it like living under the Assad regime?

It's like being in Iran. You have everything, but not for you. Everything's around you, but not for you.

Who is it for?

Assad's family. His group, his mafia.

You go out in the mornings, film the dead bodies, and then you upload it to the internet—that is your work. Why do you risk your life to document these things?

I do this due to thinking life is not to be lived like this. If I didn't have my freedom, death would be better. And our children deserve our giving of our lives for this land, for freedom. You have to pay a price for freedom. It's an expensive price to pay, but we should pay it. Even if the price is very, very expensive.

Before our interview you told me that you have been reported dead two times. Can you explain that to me?

I can't even explain it to myself. Five days ago, we were in a big situation and we were surrounded by Assad's army. Some people thought I was dead because there was no way to get out of there. And we had surrendered. But, thank God, we survived. So when I came back, everyone was surprised. They thought I was dead. It had been published.

Are there foreign fighters who are fighting alongside you in Syria?

Yes.

What groups that you're aware of?

There are a few groups of people fighting here in Aleppo. Outside Aleppo, I don't know. But in Aleppo, we saw them and everybody saw them. A few guys—100 or 200 maximum. We thank them. We thank them because they came here to help the Syrian people. We appreciate that they give their lives for our freedom. It means a lot to us.

Do you think al-Qaeda has infiltrated Syria?

Officially? No. But there is a little group of guys who think like al-Qaeda, but they didn't organize with al-Qaeda officially. Let us back up to the question about why America and Europe don't want to help us. Why? They want it like this. They want al-Qaeda to come here. And when al-Qaeda comes here, they want al-Qaeda to be killed here.

At a demonstration I attended on Friday there were a lot of Islamic flags, like the type al-Qaeda uses. Is that something new that's taking place here and, if so, why do you think it's happening?

Two things: Aleppo is not like most cities in Syria. There are a lot of religious people here. It's famous for that. People wear hijabs and go to mosque. It's not like Homs, not like Damascus. The second thing is, when life becomes so hard, when killing comes fast and the enemy is taking more lives—young kids, girls, women—anybody in the world would turn to their God. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists. Many intellectuals say religion is created just for dangerous situations. Because in danger, man should have someone more powerful above him, someone he can beg to help him. In any crisis, any group of people is going to become more religious. Even in America, if Obama started shelling his people, American people would go to their God. I know a lot of Americans don't believe in God, in any god. But in something like that, they will be back to God and go to church and put Bibles around them everywhere. Something like that would take them from darkness to heaven, give them a spot of hope that anybody would need in that situation.

Do you like working with foreign media?

I like it because I want the world's people to see what's going on here. We're going to fight, not just the FSA fighting Assad's army. We at the media centers have to fight the propaganda of Assad's media. His media is not for people inside Syria, because he knows that they know that he lies. We have to work with the foreign journalists, take them where the shellings and dead people are, where there's destruction. Like for example, I took you today to the Old City, to see the fire; Assad's army set fire to our historic city.





An Interview with Dr. Osman, a Doctor at a Hospital in Aleppo

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

October 2, 2012: The body of an FSA fighter who died during a battle against the Syrian Army is carried to an Aleppo hospital.

THIS SPREAD:

September 30, 2012: Wounded civilians, children, and FSA fighters are treated inside an Aleppo hospital.

VICE: How long have you been a doctor?

Dr. Osman: Since 2005.

Your hospital has been hit numerous times by Assad's forces, is that correct?

Yes. It has been hit five times and more than 15 times around the hospital.

Do you consider these actions to be war crimes?

Yes, of course, but the Syrian regime considers medical staffs and doctors military targets.

Why do you think that is?

Because when you kill one doctor, it's much better than killing 1,000 fighters.

Is your life in danger?

My life has been in danger for a long time, but my concerns are for my family and my father and my mother because the

Syrian regime will capture me and make trouble for everybody I know here.

But you're willing to take that risk. Why?

I'm not a man who escapes from his duty; this is my duty, this is my life, this is my message. We save lives.

Did you sign the Hippocratic oath when you finished university, agreeing you would save lives and do no harm for the term of your service?

Yes, all doctors do that.

Assad is a doctor by training, so he must have signed it too.

Assad is a doctor by law, but in his blood he is a dictator.

So you're saying he doesn't honor his oath?

No, and he has had many doctors killed. Three of my friends were captured by Air Force intelligence. They captured medical students and killed them and one of their buddies.



You doctors are considered heroes in this revolution. Would you consider yourself a hero?

No, I am a normal person. I just do my duty. We worked from the beginning of the demonstrations and revolution. I was arrested two times; I stayed in prison for five months. Many more people are arrested and have trouble.

Why were you arrested?

I was arrested because I treated a wounded person who was injured in a demonstration.

How long can you keep patients at your hospital?

This is not a safe area—the hospitals are not safe. We can't make patients stay here for a long time, so we send them to a safe area if necessary.

Does your hospital lack medical supplies?

Yes. It's good but not good enough. We have some materials and supplies. The biggest problem is the surgery supplies. Many of my patients have died because there is not always enough proper surgery equipment and anesthesia.

On average, how many patients do you treat?

Between 100 and 150 in a week. Most are civilians. Some are from the Free Syrian Army.

Are you getting any outside support from the West?

Yes, we have doctors working at the hospital who are British, and many others support us. But our biggest support comes from our brothers in Egypt.

“Many patients have died because there is not enough equipment and anesthesia.”

Is it hard for you to sleep at night?

Every night I see bad dreams about children who have leg amputations, and every day I think about going outside Syria to continue my normal life. But if I left, who would take these patients? I hope this war will end soon and we will change this problem and not see these bad dreams. 



SYRIA: BOMBS AWAY!!

To Investment and Development!

BY BOB ODENKIRK

President Bashar al-Assad and the remaining Syrian leaders* want to invite your investment, commerce, and tourism as we say BOMBS AWAY to speculation and development in Syria—***"A Country Exploding with Opportunity... and Bombs!!"***TM



Starbursts indicate places where bombs have exploded and will explode more in what President Assad himself has declared: ***"Syria's Bright 'Explosive' Future!"***TM



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R&D

Are you a video-game designer? If you want to instill that vérité vibe in your next war game, why not dispatch a crew of designers and planners to Syria to get an up-close vision of real danger, real terror, and real bombs and bullets going off all around you so that you can make your next gaming experience THE REAL DEAL! That's why we're saying, ***"Syria: Bomb Me Once, Shame on You; Bomb Me Twice, THANKS!"***TM

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COMBOVER: THE OCTOBER WAR

BY BRETT GELMAN, PHOTOS BY JANICZA BRAVO

Featuring Liz Lee and Jenn Schatz



“At times one must make time for personal projects.” I think the Torah says that. Or maybe I thought it up. I don’t know. And I don’t need to know. Who really cares who thought what up? It’s a matter of who likes what. It’s a matter of what sparkles.

I’m working on a little personal film about the October War. I need to say *something* about my people’s persecution. What a mess it is over there. Such a happy little place surrounded by nothing but enemies. Haven’t we gone through enough already?! How many times do the Jewish people have to be killed or enslaved? Haven’t they figured out we cannot be destroyed? Haven’t our enemies realized that yet? We are protected by God, and that’s just the way it is. Sorry Arabs! You’re shit out of mazel tov, cause we ain’t goin’ anywhere. Sure you might be able to kill a lot of us, but you will never wipe us out. You will never make us disappear. God has chosen us to flourish. He has chosen us to succeed. That’s why God gave us show business. We have been given an industry and medium that we can run. But not only run. We have been given a medium and industry that we can use as a way to help people. To use to lift peoples’ spirits. We use show business to give to the world, even though the world has done nothing but take from us. In this way we are superior. In this way the Jewish people are selfless, much like God himself.

I’ve cast Liz Lee and Jenn Schatz. It’s quite a story, because they just went head to head at the Oscars. Liz was up for *Sophie’s Decision* and Jenn was up for *Deadly Affair*. Like I have to tell you this! You know who these legends are! To get them to agree to do the film I also promised that the film wouldn’t just be for Jewish rights, but it would also have a feminist agenda. I also happen to be shtupping them. Neither of them knows, but these are professionals, and I’m sure it won’t be an issue.

I play a wealthy Syrian, and Liz plays my wife. Jenn is a Jewish woman that we attack one day, during lunch. However you quickly learn that Liz is only joining in on Jenn’s oppression because I’ve forced her to do so. I’ve told her that for every Jewish woman we come across that she doesn’t punch in the face, she gets twice as many punches. (I know this is dark, but sometimes you have to go dark to deliver a powerful message that’ll win an Oscar.) Then what’s supposed to happen is Jenn stands up to Liz, they fight, then they realize that they are not each other’s enemy. That I am, in fact, the enemy. The ladies then band together, kill me, and then Liz’s character converts to Judaism, and the two of them live a long happy life together on a Kibbutz. Oscar winner, right?

Action! The first scene goes great. It’s the scene where Liz and I come to Jenn’s Israeli home. We shake our fists at her, and scream out soon to be classic movie quotes:

“Jew!”

“Dirty Jew!”

“Give us your gold Jew!”

“Give us your dirty gold you dirty Jew!”

Jenn gives us one of her patented cries, and it’s very moving. The scene is beautiful. After shooting for about an hour we take a break. And here’s the thing about me: If things are running smoothly on a set, I get horny. Real horny. I can’t contain myself. And Liz and Jenn are looking tastier than ever in their woman suits. Since my character is married to Liz’s character, I choose her to flirt with. Thinking it might help our acting even more. Not that we need any. I throw her some air kisses, and she catches them, and throws some right back.

Unfortunately Jenn catches us.

“What the fuck are you two doing? Are you fucking Liz, Combover?!”

“Yeah we’re fucking! What’s it your fucking business, Jenn?!”

“It’s my business, because I’m fucking him too!”

“You slut! I’m about to give you some business! Some fist business!”

The girls go at it. They’re screaming. They’re punching! They’re pulling!

I try to break it up. Big mistake! They both look at me and realize I’m the one they should actually be beating the shit out of.

“You can’t keep it in your pants can you, Combover?! Can you, you fucking Jew!”

They kick, they pull, they scratch, they pelt me with prop tomatoes!

“Jew!”

“Dirty Jew!”

After I’m good and bruised and covered with tomato, the legends storm off set. Never to return. Too bad. This would have sparkled!

But it’s not a major loss. It’s just a little personal project, and I financed it myself. And I’ll still get a lot of the money I spent back after taxes.

This is the eighth chapter of Combover, Brett Gelman’s new novel about Hollywood, the beauty of the Jewish tradition, baldness, and murder. We will be serializing it throughout the rest of the year. Read the previous installments at VICE.com.



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THE CUTE SHOW PAGE!

BY ELLIS JONES

Syrian Hamsters

A photo of a fat, furry hamster sitting on a bed of pillows chowing down on some grain with a hookah in the background may seem like an inappropriate usage of one of the last remaining pages of an issue dedicated to Syria. But we want to make it clear that this ancient culture isn't all guns and explosions and death and crackdowns by the secret police—there's cute to be found, if you look hard enough. Syrian hamsters, also known as golden hamsters, are native to Syria (duh) and were first discovered in 1830 by British zoologist George Robert Waterhouse. These furry bags of joy love desert climates and stuffing as much food into their cheek pouches as possible—in fact, their Arabic name roughly translates as “Mr. Saddlebags.” Not joking. But don't let their overwhelming cuteness fool you: These guys are extremely territorial and frequently get into scraps with neighboring hamsters or even other family members. And if baby hammies happen to come into contact with humans, their mother will kill and eat them since any unfamiliar scent is considered a threat. Even the smallest of creatures DO NOT fuck around over there. Damn, and this was supposed to be the cute part of the issue.

Considering the current hostile environment, we thought it best not to travel to the Syrian desert to find a hamster to rub against our faces, but you can buy them at basically any pet store. To see some other cute animals we were actually able to hang with, check out episodes of The Cute Show! on VICE.com.

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DOs&DON'Ts

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In honor of it being 20fucking12 already, VICE is pleased to bring you the DOs & DON'Ts Book 2 for iPad, e-reader, or whatever electronic jimjam box you kids read books on. Finally you can distress the elderly woman next to you on your flight with the most cutting street fashion criticism of our brave new age without cramming a 3-pound paper block into your filthy backpack. And you can still roll joints on it.

ON SALE EVERYWHERE

VICE

SKINEMA

BY CHRIS NIERATKO



BARISTAS

Dir: Joanna Angel
Rating: 9

Burningangel.com

I started taking steroids yesterday as an act of thanks and joyous celebration. I felt it was my duty as a native of New Jersey because the pieces of shit on the most atrocious public-relations disaster in the history of the Garden State, *Jersey Shore*, are not returning for another season. Hopefully by the time you read this my balls will have shrunk to a microscopic size (like those of the cast of the show), and I'll be starting senseless bar fights because I have no other way to channel my latent homosexuality.

Sadly, the steroids I've been prescribed are not the kind that will turn me into the Incredible Hulk. I asked the doctor how long before I'd be able to lift cars above my head. She laughed and said, "You're thinking of anabolic steroids. These steroids are to get rid of that hacking cough you've had for three months. The only real side effect is that you'll have very vivid dreams."

I was hoping for wet dreams, but instead got an entirely different brand of delight. Last night I dreamed I was on a road trip, heading to the Grand Canyon with five other fellows. We stopped at a greasy spoon on some desert highway in some nowhere town.

"What kind of beer do you have?" I asked the red-haired, middle-aged waitress. "We got both kinds: Bud and Bud Light," she replied, accented with a look of disgust, as she walked past me. My eyes and head followed her to the end of the counter, but my torso didn't move. I caught a reflection of myself in the mirror and was nearly knocked off my barstool.

I leaned back to get a good look at my fellow travelers. We were all dressed as famous female musicians. And we looked pretty damn good if I do say so myself. I was Dolly Parton, and as my dream camera panned down the bar like in *Goodfellas* there was Aretha Franklin, Lady Gaga, bald Sinead O'Connor, Cher, and Madonna. After we finished eating, things took a real *Beverly Hills Cop* twist, and Aretha Franklin got killed. (Yes, even in dreams the black guy is always the first to die.) Next thing, we had guns and were hunting down the killer. I remember saying the classic Eddie Murphy line, "I ain't fallin' for no banana in my tailpipe," and one of the other ladies saying, "Ooh! Ooh! I will! I will!"

I woke up at 4 AM, before we solved the murder, because I had to take a dump. Seems that these steroids have another side effect: shitting like you've been on a weekend-long ex-lax-snorting bender.

Did I ever tell you about the time I was on tour in Utah and my buddy met this girl from Turkey or Syria or somewhere and went back to her place after drinking shitty, cheap 3.2 percent beer for 13 hours, and she fed him the darkest Turkish coffee known to man and as they're making out he started farting and shitting himself? Long story short, he ran out without saying good-bye and barely made it outside before having to rip his pants down and spray poop all over her front door. It's times like this that I'm thankful I'm not single and always have a toilet nearby.

More stupid can be found at ChrisNieratko.com and twitter.com/Nieratko. Also, check out the Skinema show on VICE.com.



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VICE

BEATS, RHYMES, AND DEATH

Hip-Hop in Syria Is Seriously Dangerous Business

BY KATHY
IANDOLI

PHOTO BY
MOHANNAD
RACHID

While hip-hop in the West has evolved into a platform for radical political discourse juxtaposed with mindless party anthems, things are obviously a bit more complex in Syria. Centuries ago, Arabic poets held *hijas*, which were basically proto-poetry slams, and by extension, freestyle rap battles. But these roots never blossomed into much of a scene, mostly due to the constraints of the authoritarian Assad government. The lack of availability of decent tunes in the country is exacerbated by the fact that, in general, music is a touchy subject for Muslims (some interpret verses of the Koran as favoring a ban on music altogether). These extreme levels of censorship and sensitivity clash with the traditionally rebellious nature of hip-hop, and to violate them by recording a track with incendiary lyrics can be a deadly decision.

On July 4, 2011, the poet Ibrahim Qashoush's body was found floating down the Orontes River, which flows through Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. According to residents, Qashoush's vocal chords had been ripped from his slit throat. The poet was rumored to have coined the mantra "*Yalla erhal ya Bashar*," or "Come on Bashar, leave"—a battle cry demanding the ouster of the familial regime that has ruled Syria for four decades. This slogan, along with the Arab Spring's famous rallying cry "*Al-sha'b yurid isqāt al-nizām*" ("The people want to bring down the regime"), has inspired both revolutionaries inside the country and Syrians living in exile around the world to support the resistance. One of the most interesting examples is LA-based rapper Omar Offendum, whose anti-regime track "#SYRIA" got so much attention that he won't be able to visit his homeland again unless Bashar and his followers are overthrown.

Omar has deep family ties to Syria (his late father was a native of Hama, and his mother currently lives in Damascus) and identifies as a Syrian American, even though he was born in Saudi Arabia and grew up in Washington, DC. "I'm American for all intents and purposes, but I'm very much connected to Syria," he said. Omar's early lyrics consisted of the typical party fodder and other bullshit embraced by most young MCs. Then, while he was in college, 9/11 happened. "I realized really quickly that all of a sudden I had this microscope on me," he said. "I went from just

being another kid on campus rapping to 'the Arab rapper' or 'the Muslim rapper'—people were questioning my Americanness after a show because I was against the war."

For the next decade, Omar rapped about the many injustices in the Middle East and performed at fundraising events for Palestine and Pakistan. Then, last year, the conflict in Syria erupted, and he embraced the cause of the rebels as his own. His last visit to the country was in 2010, the same year he released his solo debut, *SyrianamericanA*. In 2011, he penned the one-off track "#SYRIA" and included the hashtag symbol in its title because "Syria was a trending topic more on Twitter than it was on any news site." Its lyrics incorporated a powerful mix of recitations of the Arab Spring's slogan and Qashoush's chant, interspersed with lines like, "I have a dream the regime will fall/ And that what comes next will be better for us all." Omar realized that releasing the track would jeopardize both his safety and that of his family back home. He only made it available to the public earlier this year, after his relatives in Syria gave him their blessing.

Omar had good reason to wait for their approval: The hip-hop scene in Syria is as sectarian as its politics, and the government listens to everything that's released. The most famous rapper in the country is Murder Eyez, an Aleppo native who's landed on Assad's bad side in the past but now rhymes in support of the president. His competition includes Eslam Jawaad, a Syrian-Lebanese MC who lives in London and whose stance is also pro-regime.

Some might say it's odd that some Syrian rappers have subverted a genre that has traditionally taken an antiauthoritarian stance, but Omar can explain: "It's always been assumed that hip-hop would be the mouthpiece for the street and the struggle, but then in Syria for the first time you had this unique situation where all of a sudden it was also being used by the regime—but not really by the regime, by people who felt that this regime was something to be proud of. To them, they were standing up to the world superpowers that they felt were against Syria."

Omar, however, is not alone in his musical support of rebel forces. Artists like MC Roco and the band LaTlaTeh combine elements of hip-hop and Arabic music while gently challenging the current situation in Syria. "What's interesting is that the overwhelming majority of the artists either had to go into exile because they were threatened by the government, or they just straight-up disappeared," he said. "I can't tell you how many people were jailed or disappeared. Every once in a while, they would hand-pick someone suddenly whom they would let get away with saying something, as a form of pressure release, maybe, and give off the impression that they were supporting the arts or the culture, but there were always lines that were drawn."

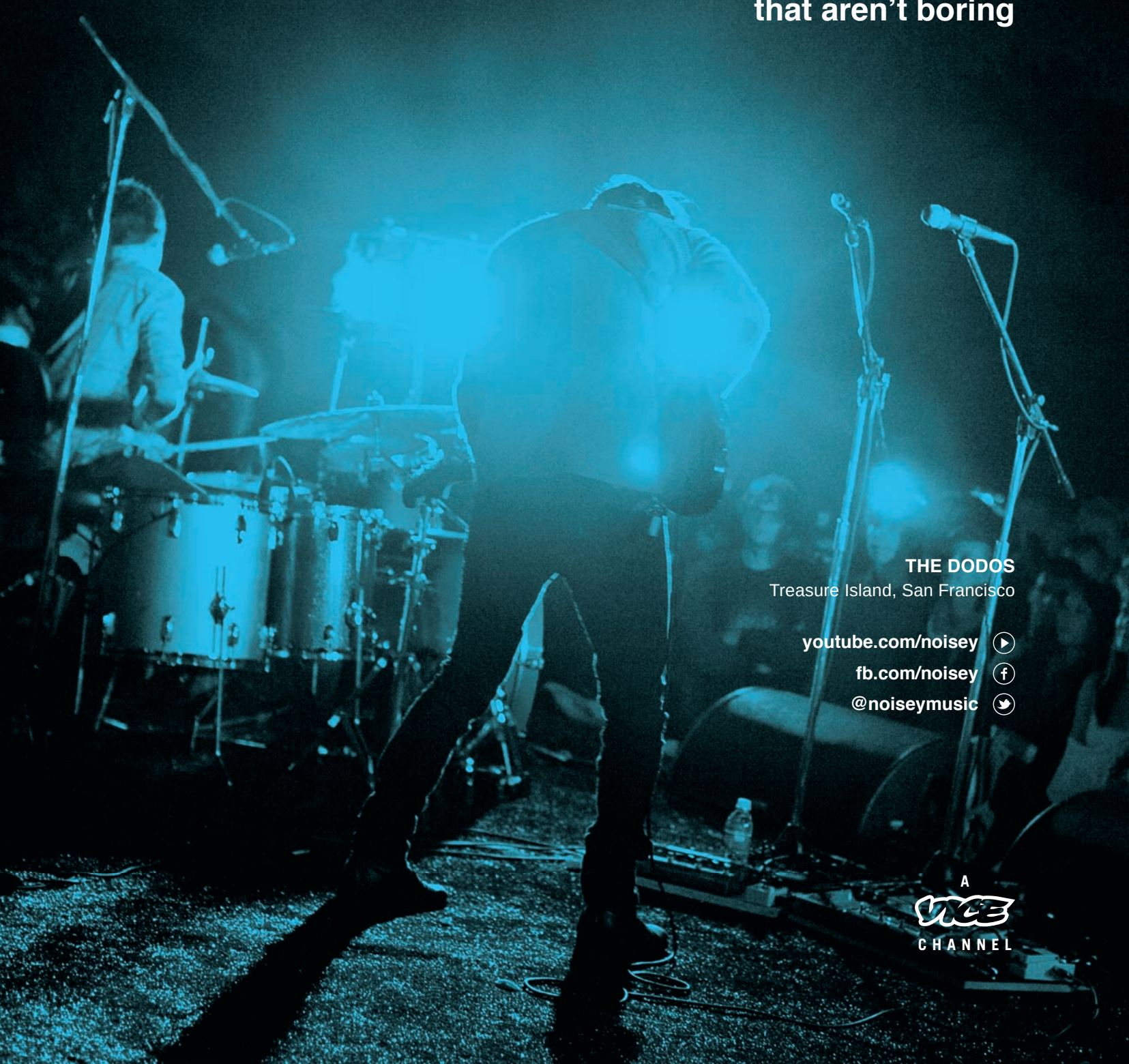
While Omar acknowledges that rhyming about Syria from the sunny confines of LA is safer than doing so from within the country, he still receives plenty of death threats, especially online. And the potential danger of returning to his homeland isn't the only thing keeping him away; the Syrian government formally notified him that he has been banned from entering its borders. "Until this stuff is resolved, I'm technically exiled even though I'm not really from there," he said.

For now, artists like Omar and a few brave Syrian residents will continue to express their frustrations and political views through hip-hop, but what's next for the country and the future of the art form there remains to be seen. Omar told me that he hopes he can return to Syria at some point in the future. "I love and cherish Syria, and *insba'Allah* [God willing], I'll be able to go back and maybe have a house there and show it to my kids someday," he said. "But right now, this is the reality of the situation." 



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A

CHANNEL

You may be asking yourself, “Hey, where are VICE’s usual pissy yet strangely on-point reviews? I was looking forward to reading about the latest release from my favorite _____-wave band!” Well, this month we decided to do things a little differently, apropos of our Syria Issue. Below, you’ll find reviews of (mostly) Syrian music, written by Syrian Americans, or in the case of Shalib Danyals, a person who has spent a shitload of time in the country. So far, Middle Eastern music hasn’t really had a ton of crossover appeal—unlike J-pop, K-pop, or Yanni, for instance. That said, you’ve probably been exposed to small doses of Middle Eastern music at some point, maybe without even knowing it.

The thing about a country at war is that what you hear on the news revolves almost exclusively around violence, suffering, and destruction. Hence we felt it relevant to offer insight into the listening habits of Syrians. Of course, the volatile political situation does change things and offers worrisome inspiration. Some Syrian artists have reflected on the turmoil of recent months via their songs, while others avoid the situation entirely—probably because weighing in on the conversation can easily get a musician thrown in prison or even killed.

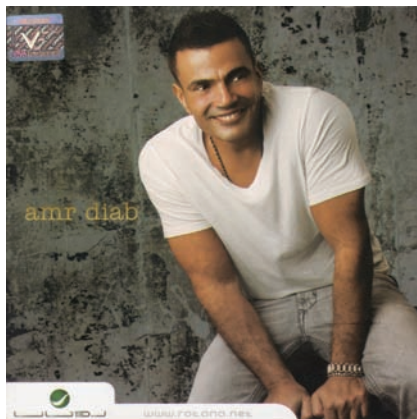
As far as the “scene” goes over there, trends in music aren’t all that much different from their Western counterparts. Saccharine, hook-heavy pop reigns supreme. A couple of singers made popular by the Arabic version of the *Idol* franchise (*Arab Idol*, naturally) have risen up the pop charts. Hip-hop in Syria and other Arab states is slowly but surely developing into a legit genre. Since the beginning of the uprising that began about a year and a half ago, protest songs have steadily increased in popularity. And, of course, music that incorporates traditional sounds and instruments always has a strong following. Most Arabic music tends to rely on this sort of sonic commingling, and that’s what makes it unique. Even the catchiest pop song might include a customary *dabke* rhythm, or the twang of an oud (a traditional stringed instrument) among a plethora of synths and Auto-Tuned vocals.

Of course, because of the ongoing political tumult, there’s just not a ton of stuff being released at the moment. And as far as the standard music industry goes... Well, let’s just say it wasn’t super-easy to confine this reviews section to recent releases. Still, what we did find runs the gamut from slick pop to raucous techno-dance to heart-wrenching folk.

So read on, and give some of these albums a listen. Keep an open mind. Who knows? Maybe you’ll love it. And even if it’s not your thing, maybe when the next hot Jay-Z song drops, you’ll be able to say you know where a certain sample originated. And, if you’re into bragging, that you knew all about it before it was popular. Enjoy.

NADA HERBLY

REVIEWS

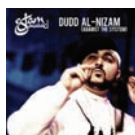


MURDER EYEZ
The Revolution
Big Change Recordz



Murder Eyez is NWA and Public Enemy combined on many different levels. He has shocked and challenged Syria’s hip-hop community for years. As a rapper in a conservative society that grew up listening to the Syrian equivalents of Lawrence Welk, having your message taken seriously is a constant uphill slog. But Murder Eyez has the look, the sound, and, most importantly, the earnest sentiment. He’s been calling for justice for years and has had his share of run-ins with Assad’s regime, though he’s released pro-government tracks as well. His message has been misunderstood and championed by all sides of the conflict, but Murder Eyez stands hard, spittin’ flow and keepin’ it real, in an environment that only seems to stunt any creative growth—which is both brave and powerful.

SHALIB DANYALS



ESLAM JAWAAD
Dudd al-Nizam
Self-released



Rap is a tough genre to translate into other cultures. Maybe it’s just me, but there’s just something a little disconcerting about hip-hop in other languages. Weirdo baroque harpsichord sample in the background notwithstanding, this song (released via YouTube) from Syrian-Lebanese rapper Eslam Jawaad is notable for being on the fence about the revolution. It’s not explicitly pro-regime, but it advocates stability and caution—not something the genre usually represents. Slick production and manufactured beats abound; the song isn’t very noteworthy aside from its surprising stance, nor is there anything too offensive about it. Jawaad’s delivery is gruff, but it certainly isn’t bad. But come on, rap that advises against change is lame. Hip-hop should inspire strength and the desire to speak your mind, regardless of the consequence, although in this case, the consequences kill, so...

NADA HERBLY

BEST ALBUM OF THE MONTH: AMR DIAB



AMR DIAB
Banadeek Ta'ala
Rotana



Everyone loves a good tan on a great chest. Pecs or boobs, it doesn’t matter—they both look better slightly exposed, glistening, and darkened. The timeless look of bronzed skin speaks universally to anyone, anywhere. Whether naturally kissed by the sun or sprayed to perfection, a quality tan can turn the tame into a tiger. And, my friends, Amr Diab is Egypt’s official Tan Ambassador. He has been making music since the 80s and has the legacy to prove it. So, of course, he wears his shirt half-unbuttoned to bare his chest, has a sculpted right eyebrow, is groomed perfectly, and provides monthly exercise routines via his website and online newsletter, all while supplying some of the most popular music in the Middle East. Amr combines the energy of the tanning community with traditional Arabic beats and rhythms, creating some of the most seriously energetic and romantic dance music in the world. His dedication to the craft has inspired many a Syrian lady to shake it on the dance floor, and Syrian men tend to wonder why their women fuss over this diesel, tan Egyptian.

SHALIB DANYALS



ASALA
Shakhseya Anida
StarGate



When I think “Arabic pop music,” I immediately think of a woman’s voice crooning a long, drawn out “*habiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii*” (“my dear”), with extra syllables inserted, Xtina-style. And that’s exactly how the recently released Asala record begins, over the backdrop of Latin-tinged, house-influenced beats. So, as you’d suspect, nothing too groundbreaking here. It’s pretty catchy, but not overwhelmingly deep or life-changing. Regardless, you’ve got to give the lady credit: In a fiercely patriarchal society, Asala has weathered quite a few tabloid scandals, openly criticized the Assad regime from her current home in Bahrain, and still looks pretty great for being over 40. It’s kind of funny: The Middle East has such a reputation for suppressing women’s expression, but man, those

outspoken, opinionated Arabic ladies are out there, and they are going to tell you what they think, and probably feed you way too much at the same time. I'm down for all that shit.
NADA HERBLY



OMAR SOULEYMAN
*Haflat Gharbia:
The Western Concerts*
Sublime Frequencies



A few years ago, if I had to pick a genre of music that I thought would never have the slightest chance of crossing over to American hipster audiences, Syrian dabke wedding music would easily top the list. Yet here we are, and Omar Souleyman's live record of his concerts in Europe, Australia, and the US is out on Sublime Frequencies. Frenetic synth jam freak-outs and electric sax solos back Omar's shouted lyrics and repeated cries of "Yalla!" (It means "come on" and it's something Arabic people say. A lot.) Most of the songs are more than six minutes long, and it's kind of what I'd expect to hear at your weird aunt's wedding. But like the music at the aforementioned wedding, it's almost impossible not to dance when it starts playing. No matter how embarrassed you are. Also, you are probably wearing way too much makeup.
NADA HERBLY



MORBID ANGEL
Covenant
Giant



For decades, information was heavily restricted inside Syria, affecting all aspects of society—from college textbooks to music. The government ruled under what they called an "emergency law," allowing anyone at anytime to be rounded up if it was thought that he or she posed, or could pose, a threat to the regime. Syria's metal scene was perpetually under suspicion; if you dressed in black and had long hair, you were a Satanist. You couldn't congregate in public, so a handful of small record stores served as meeting places for fans. Syrians tend to gravitate toward power metal like Stratovarius and traditional American death metal like Decide and Morbid Angel. A handful of death-metal guys in Damascus were forced to cut their hair and were sentenced to bizarre punishments like standing in a dark room for six hours a day for months on end. They now have short hair and wear polo shirts while thrashing in the privacy of their own homes.
SHALIB DANYALS



ABIDETHEREIN
Paralysis Engulfed the Myth
Domestic Genocide



"We play heavy metal because our lives are heavy metal." That's what Reda Zine, a founding member of Morocco's metal scene, explained to writer Mark LeVine in his 2008 book *Heavy Metal Islam*. If the past 19 months in Syria are any indication, one might expect a new

THE STREETS OF LONDON WILL BLEED

ONE OF THE MOST HIGHLY
REGARDED ANIME OF ALL TIME

Remember when vampires had fangs? Remember when they were known as terrifying monsters that stalked the night, instead of moody teenagers that sparkle in daylight? It's time to drive a stake through the lovesick heart of contemporary vampire nonsense. Satisfy your bloodlust with Hellsing Ultimate, the definitive action-horror anime.

The rogue vampire Alucard is the Hellsing Organization's deadliest instrument in its mission to protect the British Empire from satanic ghouls and Nazi freaks. He is not alone in his assault on the occult; the master has a servant. Policewoman Seras Victoria accepted Alucard's gift of dark salvation after falling in the line of duty, and now the remnants of her human soul struggle against her growing vampire urges. Together, they haunt the shadows as a sinister force of good – and tonight the foggy streets of England shall flow with the blood of their evil prey.

For over a century, the Hellsing Organization has been secretly protecting the British Empire from the forces of darkness. When Integra Hellsing, the organization's head, died, she left behind a legacy of a rogue vampire who had become a monster. Alucard, the most powerful vampire in the world, and her vampire servant, Seras Victoria, are the only ones who can defeat the undead. The Hellsing Organization is a secret organization that has been protecting the British Empire from the forces of darkness for over a century. The Hellsing Organization is a secret organization that has been protecting the British Empire from the forces of darkness for over a century. The Hellsing Organization is a secret organization that has been protecting the British Empire from the forces of darkness for over a century.

While Sir Integra reports her death, the Hellsing Organization is in a state of chaos. The Hellsing Organization is a secret organization that has been protecting the British Empire from the forces of darkness for over a century. The Hellsing Organization is a secret organization that has been protecting the British Empire from the forces of darkness for over a century. The Hellsing Organization is a secret organization that has been protecting the British Empire from the forces of darkness for over a century.

In a rare moment of cooperation, Iscariot – the Vatican's Special Operations 13th Division – calls a meeting with Integra to reveal classified information about the origin and motives behind the subversive Millennium Organization. The shocking truth spurs her to send Arucard, Seras, and Captain Bernadotte to South America on a search and destroy mission, only to be entrapped by the enemy who always seems to be one step ahead. However, these ploys only serve to fuel Arucard's thirst for blood and destruction, leading to a carnal bloodbath of epic proportions.

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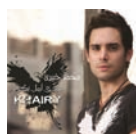
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REVIEWS



generation of angry yet resilient metalheads to rise from the ashes of civil war. One such band to look out for is Abidetherein from Damascus who formed in early 2010. They call their sound black metal “with some Oriental influences,” and in their debut album the East’s oud and *darbuka* (a type of drum) jibe with the West’s fast surf-guitar riffs, reminiscent of a certain Lebanese-American named Richard Monsour, aka Dick Dale. But there’s enough rage in the shrieks and frenzied rhythms (with a hat tilt toward French counterparts Deathspell Omega) to prevent this from sounding like a feel-good “fusion” record you’d have found on the shelves of your defunct local Borders book store. *Alhamdulillah* (Thank God). ENASS KHANSA



MOHAMED KHAIRY
Andy Amal Bokra
Top Music Production

☺ Mohamed is Syria’s answer to Italian-Canadian crooner Michael Bublé. He sings traditional Syrian songs to packed crowds all over the country. His talent was recognized early on, and he was taken under the wing of legendary singer Sabah Fakhri. Mohamed has collaborated with Syria’s Murder Eyez and is a member of the Castle Productions family. With the realities of war raging daily and a likely forecast of long-term instability, Syrians should take comfort knowing that a dedicated new generation of musicians has grabbed the torch to proudly keep the Syrian musical legacy burning among car bombs, gun fights, and bloodshed. SHALIB DANYALS



SAMIH SHUQAIR
Ya Haif
Self-released

☺ The internet has played an important role in the Syrian uprising of the past 19 months, most notably in the dissemination of images and first-hand accounts, since the Syrian government has not been too kind to reporters. YouTube in particular has become an outlet for protest songs to circulate. “Ya Haif” (“How Ridiculous”) is a

BEST COVER OF THE MONTH: OMAR SOULEYMAN

sparse, mournful, yet fiery indictment of the Syrian government’s actions on what is known as “Black Wednesday” in Daraa, where the revolt first began last year. “They shot us dead with bullets, we were killed by our brothers,” sings Samih over a backdrop of oud and sparse percussion. It is repetitive but driving and insistent, reminiscent of the finger-picking American protest ballads of the 60s but perhaps angrier and more sorrowful. Still, Samih alludes to a brighter future for Syria: “Hope is achievable.” NADA HERBLY



SAMER GABRO
I Love Syria 2011
Self-released



Commemorative quilts, flags, coins, mugs, shirts, stickers, and haircuts allowed the American people to passively express their emotional scarring from the attacks of September 11, 2011. “These colors don’t run” turned into “These colors sing... in the face of terrorists!” “Take my liberty, you son of a bitch????!! How ‘bout a dose of Lee Greenwood in your face!!! Terrorize deez!” The soul of America had been crushed by Osama bin Laden, and musicians took to the studio, for better or worse, in hopes of inspiring and healing. Samer Gabro has done Syria the same service with the “timeless classic” *I Love Syria 2011*. Gabro’s vibrato has become a national rallying point, unifying the people as war ravages their ancient land. Quilts are to follow, I’m sure. SHALIB DANYALS



NANCY AJRAM
Fi Hagat
Qanawat



Faith is admitting we don’t know everything, coupled with a willingness to accept what we don’t know. Whether it’s faith in string theory, quantum mechanics, Jesus, or Krishna, faith is humanity’s attempt to comprehend itself. Faith can unify and divide, create and destroy, liberate and enslave. However, men of all faiths can agree that Middle Eastern broads are hot. Men of all faiths can also agree that SINGING Middle Eastern women are EXTRA hot. And men of all faiths are in absolute agreement that Nancy Ajram is one of the hottest singing broads from the Middle East ever, period. Nancy hails from Lebanon and is God’s reminder that

women need to be seen *and* heard. A commercial vixen to be reckoned with, she has nearly 3 million Facebook likes and her “Fi Hagat” video has received close to 28 million views. Even sexier, Nancy is blessed with all the right moves in all the right places, inspiring Syrian men and women alike. It’s no wonder a poem about a hot Lebanese lady made it into the Bible.

SHALIB DANYALS



MAJIDA EL ROUMI
Very Best of
EMI Arabia



Remember the scene from *Saving Private Ryan* where Tom Hanks plays an Édith Piaf song on an old phonograph? Édith’s voice echoing through the decimated village provided soldiers with a moment of calm amid the insanities of war. Music by Majida El Roumi provides the same sentiment for Syrians. She’s been an international voice for decades, and in 2001 committed to service by becoming a food and agricultural organization ambassador for the UN. Syrians young and old find solace in her songs as they struggle to survive daily chaos.

SHALIB DANYALS



OMAR SOULEYMAN
Dabke 2020: Folk and Pop Sounds of Syria
Sublime Frequencies



When a Ugandan American suggested that I listen to Omar Souleyman following a mention of Syria’s most famous wedding singer via a Björk interview, I first thought he was referring to Omar Suleiman, the late spy chief who served a brief tenure as vice president of Egypt during the January 25 Revolution and who passed away due to heart and lung complications in July. My friends from Damascus had never heard of him either, which speaks both to his hyperlocal roots—which stem from the northeastern country province of Hassake—and to the fact that music, art, and revolutionary fervor are not confined to Syria’s capital. And the fact that he has released more than 500 albums throughout his career—and that we had to list him under two distinct genres in

this review section—speaks to his quite frankly insane prolificacy. My first listen to the frenetic, groove-affirming *Dabke 2020: Folk and Pop Sounds of Syria* transported me back to the distinct sounds of the modern Syrian wedding: Think a techno version of an ululation by way of a Korg synthesizer, followed by the sound of syn-copated heels grating layers of paint off the dance floor. Whether responding to the daily prayer call, fasting during Ramadan, or lingering at a café over a water pipe and palpitation-inducing Turkish coffee, rituals very much matter in Syria, as they do throughout the Middle East. But Omar, as he proved at a recent packed Hollywood Bowl gig at which he opened for the equally dance-worthy Hot Chip, is more than just a “Syrian wedding singer”/current hipster darling. His words invoke the daily rituals of life—love, pain, the mundane—and there are no themes more universal than all that crap.

ENASS KHANSA



BASSEL AL-HARIRI
Music and Light
Self-released



The adage of “Don’t judge a book by its cover” transcends time and place, and the same goes for the phrase “Don’t judge a Syrian violin virtuoso by his hat.” Bassel Hariri is the 100-percent total package. He plays everything from the classics to jazz to hip-hop, and he plays them all well. His first recording was at the age of 13, and Bassel had charmed governments, royalty, and fans all over the Mediterranean by his mid-20s. Recognized as a prized member of Syria’s new musical generation, Bassel is respected by peers and elders alike, even if he dons a goofy straw hat every now and then.

SHALIB DANYALS



VARIOUS ARTISTS
Titanic: Music from the Motion Picture
Sony



So you’re living in Syria, working for Assad’s highly feared *Mukhabarat*. You’re a badass with one of the most feared positions in the country. Someone’s speaking against the regime—“Come with me!” Someone’s logging into Facebook—“You are going to jail for the rest of your life, nerd!” Your job is tough, and you are tougher. Day-to-day life can take its toll, and you need a soundtrack to channel your complex range of emotions—a soundtrack to provide a voice to your innermost thoughts. You’re sure that someone somewhere has captured your emotions through song, and you need to hear it. For many Syrians, that person is Celine Dion.

Aside from offering relief in the form of the perfect combination of vocals and wind instruments, Ms. Dion also provides the solid comfort of possessing firsthand knowledge of the culture itself. Her husband and manager, René Angélil, has a Syrian daddy. Perhaps Celine herself should personally call Assad, offering salvation to his devastated nation by holding a free concert in Damascus at which she will appease all sides with a wave of her hand and the serenity of her voice—“Near, far, wherever you are...”

SHALIB DANYALS

HELLSING

The Bird of the Hermes is my name,
eating my wings to make me tame.

SOME THINGS ARE WORSE THAN DEATH.
SOME HEROES ARE WORSE THAN EVIL.

HELLSING ULTIMATE: **VOLUME I-IV**
10.30.2012
IN BLU-RAY/DVD COMBO

HELLSING ULTIMATE: **VOLUME V-VIII**
11.13.2012
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