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## Pawns on the Global Chessboard

One summer evening in 2006, I was sitting in a hotel bar in the centre of Beirut watching the fruits of our labours on BBC *World News*. A terrible and destructive war between Israel and Hizbullah was going on outside the hotel, with more bloodshed a certainty. We could hear the Israelis bombing Hizbullah's power base in the city's southern suburbs.

My BBC colleague Simon Wilson mused, darkly, over his glass of beer. I wonder, he said, whether this is how it felt to be in Europe sometime in the 1930s. I knew what he meant: foreboding, a profound and debilitating malaise, the knowledge that a deeper crisis was on its way. Our Beirut bar was picking up echoes of W. H. Auden's uncertainty and fear in a bar in New York in his poem 'September 1, 1939': 'As the clever hopes expire / Of a low dishonest decade.'<sup>1</sup> They were just echoes. It wasn't a world crisis. But the Middle East was divided, angry, slipping into the hands of extremists, resentful and unsure of its place and oppressed by the weight of its history. On that hot night, with more bombs shaking the city and more beers chilled by the roaring hotel generator, it was bleak. Not Europe 1939 bleak, but the Middle East was in the middle of the worst decade most people could recall.<sup>2</sup> The war in Lebanon was more evidence of how fast things could catch fire.

On 12 July 2006, Hizbullah and Israel went from uneasy peace

to all-out war in less than a day. Around dawn, Hizbullah fired anti-tank missiles at an Israeli armoured Humvee that was patrolling the border, killing three soldiers. A Hizbullah raiding party followed the missiles in, captured two more Israelis, and killed five of the Israeli squad that chased them back into Lebanon.

After the initial skirmish, the war escalated quickly. Up to 1,300 Lebanese and 165 Israelis were killed in the next thirty-four days. When it ended, Hizbullah had fought Israel to a standstill and claimed victory; at the very least it was a draw. Well-prepared Hizbullah fighters mauled Israeli infantry in battles in small villages in South Lebanon. A local man who worked for UNIFIL, the United Nations peacekeeping force, told me that Hizbullah had built a network of bunkers near where he worked, a mile or so from the Israeli border, with such tight security that he had no idea it was happening. 'I didn't know they had brought in even a spoonful of concrete,' he told me with some wonderment. Israel had declared that the war was to stop Hizbullah rocket fire across the border. On the day before the fighting ended, it fired more rockets than on the first.

After the war, Hizbullah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, made the rare admission on Lebanese television that authorizing the kidnap operation might have been a mistake: 'We did not think, even one per cent, that the capture would lead to a war at this time and of this magnitude . . . You ask me, if I had known on 11 July . . . that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not.'<sup>3</sup>

Nasrallah claimed that his decision only sped up the timetable; Israel, he insisted, was planning an attack later in the year. The two kidnapped Israelis died, making them less valuable than Nasrallah had hoped, though Hizbullah still used their remains in an exchange of prisoners and bodies two years later. Both sides build up reserves in the bank of bodies; Israel has a cemetery in the Jordan Valley where the bodies of its enemies' fighters are stored until they are required to buy back their own.

Two overlapping streams of events defined and reinforced each other in the Middle East in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. As outside powers moved in with their own agendas, they

created new opportunities for the region's authoritarian rulers that were already exploiting the people. Without Russia, Assad might have fallen. Further east, without America, the government in Kabul collapsed. The first stream, the international dimension, flowed from al-Qaeda's attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 and the consequences of America's response – its war on terror. The other was a home-grown, chronic crisis of governance. Leaders repeatedly failed their people, with the social contract imposed by the military strongmen who seized power in the 1950s and 1960s left in tatters. The deal was that regimes would provide for their people, if the people stayed out of politics. They didn't promise riches, or a European-style welfare state, but there would be jobs, and food, and a new ideology of Arabism that would return a people who had been crippled by foreign interference to the glories of their golden age.

For a while, millions were bewitched in the middle of the twentieth century by the rhetoric of an Arab renaissance, but Israel's crushing defeat of all its Arab front-line enemies during six days in June 1967 proved that it meant nothing. On the first morning of the war, Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser's radio station, Voice of the Arabs, pumped out hours of lies about shooting down dozens of Israeli warplanes; the truth was that the Egyptian air force had been destroyed on the ground by a surprise attack. After the humiliation of defeat, people looked for new answers, and some found them in the comforting certainties of the mosques. Arabism was tarnished, but Islam was on the march. That feeling was reinforced by the sight of millions of Iranians overthrowing the shah of Iran in 1979, the same year that the Afghan mujahedeen went to war to drive out Soviet invaders.

By the end of the twentieth century, the social contracts imposed by authoritarian Arab regimes were as hollow as their boasts about destroying Israel before 1967. Only the oil-producing states had the money to keep their side of the bargain to provide a minimum standard of living for their people. The ageing leaders who did not have oil and gas revenue to buy off discontent embezzled billions from the people to make sure that their families and their charmed circles of cronies did not suffer. Regimes stayed in power not by consent, but by building ruthless police states, often with competing

intelligence agencies that spied on each other as well as on the people. Plans were made to transfer power to the next generation. It worked in Syria, where Hafez al-Assad was able to bequeath the presidency to his son Bashar when he died in 2000. Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya planned to do the same for their sons.

For anyone who believed that the Middle East, not to mention the rest of the world, would be happier and healthier without corrupt governments repressing their people, it was a bleak time. A short walk from the hotel where Simon Wilson and I compared the Middle East at the start of the new century with Europe in the 1930s was the gleaming headquarters of Lebanon's leading newspaper, *An Nahar*. The building had a trendy rooftop bar that looked down on the lights of Beirut's port and embodied the desperate hedonism of some middle-class Lebanese who are proud that they can party at the worst of times. On 4 August 2020, the bar and a big part of Beirut took the full force of the devastating explosion caused by a cache of ammonium nitrate in an abandoned and overlooked warehouse.

Even at the height of the 2006 war, a few restaurants stayed open in Beirut. I used to fumble my way along the pitch-black streets on moonless nights until I saw dim lights in dark windows. The biggest danger was stepping into an uncovered manhole. The Israelis were bombing Beirut, but they were concentrating on Hizbullah areas a few miles away. In all the wars I've seen in Lebanon, sun-worship has not stopped at Sporting, the beach and pool club on the Beirut Corniche. In 2006, people with skin like varnished mahogany only checked out the NATO naval flotilla that was evacuating foreigners when they looked up to order a drink or apply more oil.

A sign of the bad times hung down the front of the *An Nahar* building. It was a big poster of Gebran Tueni, the paper's editor and son of its founder, who was assassinated just before Christmas in 2005. His killing on 12 December came at the end of a year of assassinations in Lebanon. On 14 February, a huge bomb had blown up the motorcade of the former prime minister, the billionaire tycoon Rafik Hariri, whose company rebuilt Beirut after the civil war. Twenty-one others were killed alongside him. Hariri had argued with Syria's still relatively new president, Bashar al-Assad, who was promptly accused of

ordering the hit. Big demonstrations and international outrage forced Syria to end a military occupation of Lebanon that had started in the 1980s. A long investigation authorized by the UN Security Council failed to link the Assad regime to Hariri's assassination; years later, operatives from Syria's ally, Hizbullah, were convicted in absentia. Hizbullah will not give them up.

Gebran Tueni's assassination was part of the same wave of killings of people who dared to question Syria's rights over Lebanon. One more of 2005's car bombs killed another critic of the Assad regime, the historian and journalist Samir Kassir. He was deeply pessimistic about the stagnation and failure that had devastated so many Arab lives. The year before he was killed, he wrote that: 'The Arab people are haunted by a sense of powerlessness; permanently inflamed, it is the badge of their malaise.' Foreigners were not to blame for all their troubles, but Arabs were 'powerless to suppress the feeling that you are no more than a lowly pawn on the global chessboard even as the game is being played in your backyard.'<sup>4</sup>

The biggest game in the Middle East in the first quarter of the twenty-first century involved the unfolding consequences of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The Arabs that Kassir saw being stripped of autonomy by their country's leaders had received another deadly reminder of the power of others when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. Not only, Kassir wrote, could Arabs do nothing to stop the deployment of thousands of foreign troops. Just as bad was the realization that the US took only a few weeks to 'put paid to a state that was much feared, at least by its own citizens and neighbours'. Even more mortifying, international pressure had the best chance of stopping the invasion, not the 'Arab masses'.

It was a surprise when, at the end of that dreadful first decade of the century, the sun came out for a while in the Middle East. At last, it felt as if the people who had been crushed for so long by their own leaders and foreign powers were taking matters into their own hands. That pessimistic conversation in Beirut with Simon in the summer of 2006 felt like the result of too much work and too much beer in a city at war.

In 2011, millions of people across the Middle East rose up against their leaders in a season of revolutions. The comparison with Europe that counted seemed to be with the hopes of 1848 and 1989, not with the despair of the 1930s. The Egyptian novelist Alaa Al Aswany wrote that the eighteen days he spent in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the uprising against President Hosni Mubarak were 'without doubt, the most wonderful days of my life.'<sup>5</sup> His new comrades in Tahrir, and all the others who emulated them in squares across the Middle East, were much younger than Aswany. The revolutions were driven by anger and frustration in a region where at least 60 per cent of the people were under thirty. For a while, they lost their fear of the regimes they believed were stealing their futures.

Demonstrating made people feel like citizens, with common purpose, dignity, and pride. Tawakkol Karman, a Yemeni human rights activist in her early thirties, shared the Nobel Peace Prize. In Cairo, thousands brought brushes and buckets to clean up Tahrir Square the morning after Mubarak was forced out. In 2011, authoritarian presidents who started out as military officers fell in Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt, as well as in Libya, where Colonel Gaddafi claimed until the end to be just another citizen.

*Time* magazine's person of the year, illustrated on the cover by a masked woman, was 'The Protestor'. The magazine said that 'In 2011, protesters didn't just voice their complaints; they changed the world.' Change was not only marked by wild scenes on the streets; in May 2011, American naval commandos killed Osama bin Laden inside a ramshackle mansion in Pakistan, and in December, the Americans pulled their forces out of Iraq.

It did not turn out the way that the protestors or their supporters wanted. The men who had the power were not just corrupt and authoritarian; they were tenacious. For a while, it looked as if the future belonged to political Islam. The Muslim Brotherhood was rooted in its communities and had won credibility after years of opposition to dictators. Senior British diplomats told me they were giving the Brotherhood the benefit of the doubt. The conservative, neatly barbered, middle-aged and middle-class engineers, doctors and other professionals who led the Brotherhood were a world away from the bloodthirsty, shaggy-bearded jihadist extremists of al-Qaeda and

Islamic State. The Brotherhood was cohesive and organized, unlike dozens of disorganized, brand new secular parties. But in Egypt, the template, things went wrong fast. The Muslim Brotherhood was good at running clinics and schools, but it was greedy for power and appallingly bad at governing the country. It turned out that Islamists could be as bad at governance as monarchs or generals.

Dreams, and people, died as dictators struck back and ISIS, the poisonous new jihadist variant, emerged from al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. Counterrevolution prevailed, and Iraq, Yemen and Libya sank into all-out war. Syria suffered the greatest disaster as Bashar al-Assad and his regime broke the country to preserve their power. No one knew exactly how many died in the first ten years of Syria's war. Half a million was a common estimate.

In Egypt, Abdul Fattah al-Sisi overthrew the elected Muslim Brotherhood government and became the latest general to become president after Nguib, Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. The Egyptian military was never going to allow democracy to break its hold on power, politics and the economy. The Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, the only Egyptian president not to have been a professional soldier, died in prison. Sisi became a tyrant more ruthless than Mubarak had ever been.

The second decade of the twenty-first century was kick-started by the optimism of the Arab uprisings of 2011; it turned out to be even worse than the first ten years. So what about the third decade? A lot that should go right is already going wrong. Just because the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel does not always make news headlines does not mean it is any less dangerous. It continues to leach poison into the region. In 2015 the Iran nuclear deal, the JCPOA, stopped a slide to war. Since the US withdrew from the treaty in 2018, the old dangers are back.

The bad news for authoritarian governments in the Middle East is that the grievances that drove millions onto the streets in 2011 still exist. If leaders cannot satisfy the needs of the people, they will be challenged again. Bashar al-Assad destroyed his country to save his regime, then faced renewed unrest in 2021 in areas that supposedly had been pacified, like Deraa near the border with Jordan. The Syrian

economy collapsed after a decade of war. It cannot improve without a political settlement that induces rich countries to start paying the huge cost of reconstruction; that would need stability and a leader who is not called Assad. Both are unlikely. Across the border in 2021, Lebanon was plummeting quickly towards becoming a failed state. Hyperinflation impoverished millions. A corrupt sectarian system desperately needed comprehensive reform. It was impossible while Hizbullah and an elite of superannuated warlords refused to let go, even as the country sank.

The Middle East still cannot find a comfortable place in the modern world. Saudi Arabia and Iran are two major countries that are struggling to rise to the challenge. Both rely on oil and gas. Saudi industry is well financed and efficient; Iran's isn't, because of years of isolation and sanctions. And by the middle of the century, if the industrialized world keeps its promises on climate change, hydrocarbons will no longer be a licence to print money.

Saudi Arabia is approaching the mid-century with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman waiting to succeed his father. The rise of MBS began after the late King Abdullah feared the Arab uprisings of 2011 would spread to Saudi Arabia; to stave off unrest he threw billions of dollars at welfare, housing, jobs and education. Longer-term, Abdullah believed the kingdom needed a young and energetic leader instead of another octogenarian. MBS has removed and imprisoned rivals and, even with his father still alive, has become the power in the land. According to the British Saudi social anthropologist Madawi al-Rasheed, Abdullah's original plan was enough modernization to satisfy impatient young people, without conceding fundamental political change. MBS has tried to encourage a Saudi national identity rather than one built on Islam and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Social life is more relaxed; he allowed women to drive, and cinemas to open. At the same time, his regime continued to lock up its critics, including women who had been part of the driving campaign. He has a plan called Vision 2030, to try to diversify the Saudi economy and reduce its dependence on oil. Donald Trump encouraged MBS to join the Abraham Accords between Israel and some Arab states. If the Crown Prince was tempted, it was too much for King Salman.

Assuming Mohammed bin Salman follows his father – and the

enemies he has made during his rise might not be strong enough to stop him – Saudi Arabia will be led by a man who has shown himself to be ruthless, impulsive and ready to crush any opposition. He took Saudi Arabia into a war in Yemen that it could not win, with disastrous results. Any dissidents who criticize the ruling family and the Saudi system can end up exiled, imprisoned or dead.

The Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a leading critic of the regime who wrote for the *Washington Post*, walked into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 to sort out some legal documents. A hit squad was waiting. Minutes later, he had been murdered and dismembered. Turkish intelligence had the building bugged. They recorded Khashoggi's attempts to fight for his life as he was suffocated, and the sounds of a bone saw cutting up his corpse. The Crown Prince denied ordering a murder he called 'a heinous crime'.<sup>6</sup>

No one who had seen how closely he controlled the Saudi intelligence and security agencies believed him, including the US government. In February 2021, one of Joe Biden's first acts after he was inaugurated as US president was to release a report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence declaring that MBS was responsible for what happened. It concluded that the Crown Prince 'approved an operation to capture or kill Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi . . . we base this assessment on the Crown Prince's control of decision-making in the Kingdom, the direct involvement of a key adviser and members of Muhammad bin Salman's protective detail in the operation, and the Crown Prince's support for using violent measures to silence dissidents abroad, including Khashoggi'.<sup>7</sup>

For a while, MBS became an international pariah. Lucrative Saudi contracts persuaded international business to return. The Americans took no further action against the Crown Prince. Saudi Arabia was too important to them, for arms sales, intelligence, its growing relationship with Israel, the fear China was waiting to fill any gaps, and because of its influence on world oil prices. Most of all, America needed the Saudis on side because of Iran. Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States are all united by a deep mistrust of Iranian intentions. In 2022, as a world economic crisis bit harder after Russia invaded Ukraine, Joe Biden underlined America's need for the Saudis by visiting King Salman and the Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia.

In 2021, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei managed the presidential election to guarantee victory for his protégé, the hard-line judge Ebrahim Rantisi. The new president is believed to be manoeuvring to succeed Khamenei, who was born in 1939. In the third decade of the new century, in the Middle East the confrontation between Team America and Team Iran looks to be the most potentially destabilizing contest of them all.

It was pushed back into acute crisis after Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear agreement. He claimed, incorrectly, that it was a bad and dangerous deal. Once the US was out, Iran started once again to enrich uranium. By the start of 2022, hopes that the Biden administration could revive the deal were waning. With negotiations stalled, the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Iran had almost enough enriched uranium to make a nuclear bomb. New enrichment plants buried deep within mountains were coming on stream. The slide towards war arrested by the JCPOA in 2015 was tipping again.

The Middle East is a region of the world where instability is infectious because everything important is connected. Islam's troubles run along the fault line between Shia and Sunnis. Unscrupulous leaders with more interest in power than religion have exploited it to whip up support. It amplifies the regional rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, which has fuelled wars in Yemen and Syria. Saudi Arabia and Israel both see Iran as their worst enemy, so they have formed an unlikely alliance. This, in turn, could heat up the old conflict between Israel and Lebanese Hizbullah, which gets most of its weapons from Iran. Hizbullah's leader Hassan Nasrallah was a guest of honour at President Rantisi's inauguration in Tehran, and so it goes on: Iran and Hizbullah are key military players in Syria, as are the US, Russia and Turkey. And after Turkey intervened in Libya to support the Tripoli government recognized by the UN, the United Arab Emirates and Russia increased their support for a rival government based in Benghazi. It is geopolitical Jenga. Miscalculations and misperceptions could bring it crashing down.

Iraq is another connected country; Iraqis have fought each other,

while outside powers have both helped them and used the country as their boxing ring. In January 2020, I drove out of Baghdad Airport, past the burnt and twisted remains of the car that an American drone strike had destroyed a few days earlier. The attack killed General Qassem Suleimani, the mastermind of Tehran's regional strategy and the head of the Iranian Quds Force that helps enforce it. A leading Iraqi Shia commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was there to greet Suleimani, was also killed. Muhandis was a senior player on Team Iran, a key leader of the Popular Mobilization forces, the Shia militias that were raised to fight ISIS in 2014. Killing Muhandis, who the Americans might not have realized was in the car, weakened the US position in Iraq. Its parliament voted to expel US forces, and the militias increased attacks.

The greater Middle East is a huge circuit board of connections, never ending, feeding into the balance of forces in a region of great strategic importance. The Americans want it to be different. Since President Obama's time, the US has been trying, unsuccessfully, to 'pivot' away from the Middle East towards the Asia-Pacific side of the world, to counter China as it surges to global power in the way that the US did in the mid-twentieth century. At the same time, China is executing its own pivot towards the Middle East. It made a deal with Iran that could give it a toehold in the Gulf. At the end of 2021, the UAE suspended negotiations with the US about buying advanced F-35 warplanes, after the talks stalled over the UAE's links with China and its reliance on Chinese technology. On the other side of Arabia, China's People's Liberation Army opened its first overseas base in 2017 in Djibouti on the Red Sea – just a few miles from Camp Lemonnier, the only permanent US military hub on the African continent.

Superpowers have such outsize influence that their exits can be as destructive as their entries. The Americans demonstrated how not to disengage in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, with a withdrawal so badly handled that it precipitated the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. After he took office, Joe Biden announced that he would honour a deal that his predecessor Donald Trump made with the Taliban, dismissing criticism that it gave the Taliban too much, and betrayed US allies in the Kabul government. Biden plunged forward, announcing that all American troops would be out by the twentieth

anniversary of al-Qaeda attacks on 9/11, which had brought them to Afghanistan in the first place. It was a neat target, with obvious political appeal, but it ended in a debacle with chastening echoes of 9/11 for the Americans. The sight of Afghans desperately clinging to the wheels of departing military aircraft and falling to their deaths was a terrible reminder of people jumping from the burning towers in New York before the flames could reach them.

Jihadists attacked the American cordon at Kabul Airport. Almost 200 people were killed, mostly Afghan civilians but including thirteen members of the American military. Khorasan Province, an affiliate of Islamic State, said it carried out the attack. Twenty years after America invaded Afghanistan in response to attacks by al-Qaeda, bin Laden's heirs were still spilling blood. The rhetoric coming from the White House was remarkably consistent. In 2001, President George W. Bush responded to the Taliban's refusal to give up Osama bin Laden with words every American understood: 'I want him . . . Dead or alive.'<sup>8</sup> President Joe Biden's speech after the bloodbath in Kabul could have been made twenty years earlier: 'To those who carried out this attack, as well as anyone who wishes America harm, know this – we will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay.'<sup>9</sup>

Invading Afghanistan in 2001 and removing the Taliban, the group that harboured Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, was legitimate; America's mistake was to stay for twenty years to try to impose a remade, Westernized country on the Afghans. A better idea would have been to allow Afghans to find a negotiated way ahead. It might have neutered the Taliban, would have cost a fraction of the money spent in twenty years of war, and it could not have left Afghanistan in a worse state than it reached in 2021.

I reached Kabul again a few days after the last Americans left, with my mind rewinding more than thirty years to the same airport in February 1989, when the Soviet Union had pulled out its last troops. America was not on its last legs when it left Afghanistan, as the USSR had been; it had the world's most powerful economy and military. But it was still defeated, and this was final evidence that the freedom of action the US had enjoyed in the Middle East and beyond in the years after the Cold War was as much of a memory

as the Soviet Union. Echoes kept coming as America counted down its last days in Kabul. Helicopters evacuating their embassy brought back Saigon in 1975 and the Vietnam disaster. A better comparison was the scramble to get out of Lebanon in 1983, three months after a truck bomb killed 241 Americans at the US Marine barracks in Beirut. That withdrawal gave Osama bin Laden ideas: he believed it showed that Americans were weak.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the chaos of America's last days, Kabul Airport was orderly when the Soviets went. No crowds rushed onto the tarmac, even though mujahedeen fighters were so close that we could hear their artillery and rumours were everywhere that they were about to enter Kabul. On my way to Afghanistan in 1989, I heard colleagues reporting that trees were being cut down on Kabul's avenues to improvise landing strips for last-minute escapes. I arrived expecting something like hysteria, but the city was remarkably calm and did not fall for another eighteen months.

On a reporting trip through Helmand Province, the Taliban heartland, in the weeks after their takeover in 2021 I could see that the country had changed, in the way that the world has since the 1990s. The Taliban insisted that one of their fighters, a man with a large American assault rifle, travel with us as 'security'. Every hour he watched the latest news from BBC Pashtun on his smartphone. In the town of Lashkar Gar, where the British fought the Taliban, we were surrounded by young Talib fighters who responded to our cameras by filming us with their phones and taking selfies. In the 1990s their fathers were told that photography was banned. I met the Taliban on the road to Kandahar when they were on the rise in the early 1990s, when they were mainly young men who knew very little more than the grindingly traditional culture of Pashtun society in southern Afghanistan. Now cheap data meant they could tour the world on their phones.

In 2021 the new governor of Helmand sat in his office in front of a large Taliban flag, a white banner printed with the Shahada, the Muslim declaration of faith. His men, heavily bearded and dressed like the governor in turbans and traditional shalwar khomeez outfits,

listened and nodded as he gave us a history lesson. Their Kalashnikov assault rifles were never far away. The young Talibs on the streets taking selfies might have changed, but the governor and his lieutenants had not. Women, he lectured, needed to respect the teachings of Islam and their duties to the men who were their guardians. Western invaders needed to learn their lesson.

'We fought the British and the other foreigners for twenty years. They were defeated. They destroyed our country and they saw how their rented Afghan army collapsed in a few days. We were not paid salaries in twenty years but you didn't see us running away.

'We have a simple message for the British and the foreigners . . . you should help the Afghan people. You've made them suffer enough.'

The uncomfortable truth for the Americans was that the Taliban won, and the real gains in education and equality, mostly in Kabul, were based on a corrupt state that collapsed when its foreign backers left.

The manner of the Americans' withdrawal left doubts about how much they would support allies in moments of crisis. Defeat in Afghanistan was not the only reason why less than two years later the USSR collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions, but it marked the end of the Soviet Union as a global power. Afghans did almost all the fighting, though Arab jihadists like Bin Laden claimed it as their victory too and went home with their ideology and ambition on fire. Without the Soviets to worry about, the US saw itself as the world's hyperpower. Overwhelming military strength did not, however, remove the consequences of its actions. The hubris of power without apparent constraint drove the illegal invasion of Iraq, a catastrophe for all concerned – except Iran, which was strengthened and presented with a menu of new possibilities by the profound alteration of the geostrategic order in the Middle East.

One circle closed with the Taliban's reconquest of Kabul, twenty years after the Americans removed their regime. Only a tiny proportion of Muslims are attracted to the ideology of al-Qaeda and the other jihadist groups that emerged later, but 9/11 still inflicts deep cuts on the Americans, and Kabul showed it. Bin Laden and his men, mostly dead or in prison, and a tiny minority of Muslims, left a poison pill that still works. Every time the consequences of the wars that

came out of 9/11 damage the United States and its Western allies, it gives jihadists who revere Bin Laden's memory something to cheer.

In 2010, the year before war started to destroy Syria, I travelled around the country with my mother and my nine-year-old daughter. We knew how vicious the regime was towards anyone who opposed the Assads, but the paradox of police states is that if you're a visitor, they can feel safe. Everyone knows that the security agencies are always watching.

In Aleppo we stayed in the walled old city, which was dominated by the largest covered market in the world: thirteen kilometres of winding lanes. Trade was the reason why Aleppo grew. The narrow street where our hotel stood had a butcher, a baker and a candlestick maker, as well as a small workshop where they blended olives and bay leaves to make Aleppo's legendary soap, the only one in the world which is left to mature like wine.

I found the street again just after the Assad regime recaptured all of Aleppo in 2017. It was difficult to get there because the old city was badly damaged and hard to recognize. In our street, the shops were looted, the hotel was closed and the soap factory was empty, with the moulds they used to shape the square green bars scattered all over the pavement. One of the great *khans*, grand covered squares where traders once sold their goods in warrens of shops, was banked high with sandbags, and the minaret of the eleventh-century Umayyad Mosque was a pile of rubble. Soldiers had built positions in the prayer halls, protecting themselves with oil drums full of stony earth and more sandbag walls. The narrow, covered streets were empty. Outside the hotel where we had stayed in 2010, an unexploded artillery shell stuck out of the road. I was glad that I'd known the place when it was packed with people.

I retraced the route we had taken during our holiday to the great citadel of Aleppo. Mattie, my daughter, had been a subject of great interest to a group of Syrian girls who were a few years older, wearing headscarves when of course she wasn't. The girls grouped round her and took photos, not quite able to believe they were seeing a little girl from London. I wondered what had happened to them. Were

they dead or alive? Were they refugees, or did they stick it out in Aleppo? A whole generation of children across the Middle East had grown up without education, stability or safety. By the time Aleppo fell, Mattie was doing GCSEs and planning to go to university.

In 2015, a German photographer called Jörg Brüggemann took a picture of a tourist on the Greek island of Kos on a sunbed, reading a German newspaper. A woman luxuriates behind him in the warm Mediterranean Sea. The photograph on the front of his newspaper shows a woman in a lifejacket hugging a small child – one mother and one son among hundreds of thousands of refugees, mostly from the Middle East, Afghanistan and south Asia, who were trying to find safety in Europe. The land border between Greece and Turkey was closed to them; Kos was only three miles from Bodrum on the Turkish coast, across a stretch of the Aegean that was easy enough to cross for anyone who could handle a boat on a calm summer day. But when smugglers crammed refugees into inflatable plastic dinghies, the narrow strait could be deadly, whatever the weather.

In the summer of 2015, millions of Europeans were being reminded of what life could be like beyond the horizon of their summer beaches. Jörg Brüggemann took other photographs of the collision between the affluence and safety of Europe and the tumult on the other side of the Mediterranean. In one, two dark-skinned young men ponder their next move now they have reached Europe, while a pale-skinned man walks past with a selfie stick, wearing a holiday T-shirt and sunglasses. In another image, two European women in bikinis hold their flip-flops as they pick their way past piles of lifejackets, discarded by refugees who had crossed the sea from Turkey.

The photograph that made front pages all over the world that summer showed the dead body of a small boy wearing blue shorts and a red T-shirt, lying face down in gentle waves. The toddler's name was Alan Kurdi; his family's attempt to cross the sea to Kos had failed, and the current washed his body back to the Bodrum coast. Alan drowned along with his mother Rihanna, his older brother Ghalib and perhaps ten others. Their boat had capsized in one of the Mediterranean storms that blow up quickly as summer turns to autumn.

Only Alan's father, Abdullah, survived to take the bodies of his family home to their village in Syria for burial. Abdullah's sister Tina, who had left Syria for Canada in 1992 and was trying to get permission for them to settle there, too, remains wracked with regret over the \$5,000 she paid the smugglers. The appalling fate of the Kurdi family became headline news because of the symbolic power of Alan's dead body, but many more children were killed and families destroyed trying to cross the Mediterranean to get out of the Middle East and into Europe without bothering the headline writers.<sup>11</sup>

Since the late 1980s, most of my time as a journalist, in the Middle East, Afghanistan and beyond, has been spent trying to report on and understand the way the world was changing as it emerged from the Cold War. By 2022, global power was already being reshuffled; Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine on 24 February was the definitive end of the post-Cold War era. President Putin's move into Syria in 2015 paid off for Russia. It enhanced his project of restoring his country's prestige, position and power, and left America and the West looking flat-footed. Invading Ukraine was different. Within days, the US and its NATO allies were nose-to-nose with Russia in a way that had not been seen since the height of the Cold War. That mattered, because between them they had most of the world's nuclear weapons. President Putin did not hesitate to remind his enemies that Russia might use them.

The immediate fallout from Russia's invasion was in Europe. Buried, bad memories of the years of the Iron Curtain came back. The war did not have the same resonance in the global South. Western rhetoric about the need to oppose Russia to uphold a 'rules-based' international order went down badly with audiences that believed it was code for the powerful and rich countries of the West making rules that were in their own interests, which they could break when they chose. Invading Iraq in 2003, or tolerating Israel's illegal settlement of Jews in the occupied Palestinian territories, seemed to be particularly egregious examples of Western countries choosing when to enforce the rules.

Israel, the biggest beneficiary of Western support in the Middle

East, did not rush to support its NATO allies' confrontation with Russia. It needed to protect the arrangement it had with the Kremlin that allowed the Israeli air force to bomb its enemies in Syria without interference from Russian forces based there.

Arabs, once again, became pawns on the global chessboard, as identified by the Lebanese writer Samir Kassir. They were the poorest, because of the fundamental human need to eat. Middle Eastern countries had become dependent on imports of food, especially wheat, from Ukraine and Russia. Before the February invasion, more than a quarter of global wheat exports came from Russia and Ukraine, and the Middle East was dependent on them as a relatively affordable source of food. Then sanctions hit Russian exports. War stopped most of Ukraine's. Egypt, the world's biggest importer of wheat, had been sourcing 70 per cent of its needs from the Black Sea. Overnight, it became a theatre of war, not a safe sea route for ships carrying food and fertilizer. Prices rose steeply. Lebanon, already in one of the worst economic depressions since the nineteenth century, had been buying three quarters of its wheat from Ukraine and Russia. Hunger in Yemen became even worse as prices rose. Relief organizations like the UN World Food Programme found that budgets that had already been cut did not buy as much as they had. Other countries in the region that bought at least a third of their wheat from Ukraine and Russia included Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Tunisia, Iran, Jordan and Morocco.<sup>12</sup>

People often talk, during bad times in the Middle East, about subsisting on bread and tea. When the wheat to make the bread comes from Ukraine or Russia, that makes difficult lives even harder.

One dank afternoon during the war to destroy the jihadists of Islamic State, I was in Mosul in Iraq, the city where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi conjured their caliphate into existence following a lightning advance across Syria and Iraq. The winter light was fading fast when our team climbed into an armoured Humvee belonging to a special forces unit of the Iraqi police. The door was heavy, and I grunted as I pulled it shut. The catch was faulty – I didn't want to have to open it in a hurry. We kept the microphones recording, and they picked up bits of chat between our team as we skirted a front line. Every minute or so, a rocket with a fiery tail streaked out from the ISIS

positions, followed by lines of tracer bullets. I wasn't sure the danger was worth it.

My phone pinged with a message from London. A British man, radicalized in jail as a Muslim convert, had killed five people, including an unarmed policeman, and wounded around fifty others in Westminster before being shot dead by the bodyguard of a government minister. I could see the irony of a would-be jihadist killing innocent people in London while we were a few hundred metres from ISIS jihadists fighting for their bloodstained caliphate. More connections. My musings were stopped by gunfire and explosions. It was not a good place to park.

That evening, the Humvee drove through a broken town. Apart from its headlights the only light came from campfires lit by soldiers, who were burning bits of wood dragged out of wrecked buildings. The lumps taken out of the windows in the Humvee's armoured glass by ISIS snipers diffused some of the light. I tried to think of a way to describe the chunks dug out by the bullets. What were they? Spider holes, maybe. Nasty contusions, love bites gone mad. It didn't matter much in the ruins of Mosul.

Iraq was one of the most advanced countries in the region, in everything except freedom, the first time I visited in 1990. I sat in the back of the Humvee and thought about everything that I had witnessed in the intervening years, all the trouble, violence and pain. In the 1990s, the Middle East was stagnant, waiting for a generation of authoritarian rulers to die; discontent and pressure for change was smouldering but mostly failed to catch fire. After 9/11, everything was different. Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, Hamas and Israel, the Arab uprisings, overthrown and exiled presidents, Gaddafi's brutal death, al-Qaeda, ISIS and Iran's nuclear programme. From the back seat of the Humvee it felt like a long transition, hopes for change that turned violent. That evening in Mosul, I couldn't see where it would end, and it was the kind of place where getting through each day was more important than reflecting on the future that the war was going to create. We were not nearly through to other side, and we still aren't. It will go on for a while yet – another generation, perhaps.

Foreigners – the meddling West – carry heavy responsibility for everything that has happened over many years in the Middle

East, through unwanted interference, invasions, arms sales and the encouragement of dictators who did their bidding. Being a bulwark against the Soviets forgave many sins. So did Israel's close relationship with the United States. Building strong alliances without asking too many questions helped authoritarian regimes prosper and prevented proper opposition. Donald Trump didn't even bother to cover it up. 'Where's my favourite dictator?' he quipped as he waited for a meeting with Egypt's president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi at the G7 summit in France in 2017. In the end, much of it came down to a crisis of governance. If corrupt rulers repress their people, rob them blind and steal their freedom, extremists will always find recruits.

Millions of people wanted change when they rose up to protest in 2011, and when their hopes were smashed they did not want it any less. Repression, war and a lack of champions to follow made it harder for people who wanted to try to make their lives better, but that wasn't simply the fault of the West. Their countrymen who had taken the top jobs used their power to enrich themselves, their families or their tribes, and they didn't care if fellow citizens they made into their subjects were crushed, killed, imprisoned, swindled or defrauded. All that is much easier in a country that has plenty of guns and poor men prepared to pull the triggers, and an absence of laws and courts to enforce justice.

The Humvee stopped suddenly on a dark Mosul street. I watched as the young gunner on the fifty-calibre in the turret threw away his cigarette and looked around, a bit too keenly. Shooting was always in the background, but I hadn't noticed anything louder, or closer. Our safety advisor Baz Kenny, an ex-para with jump wings tattooed on his forearm, told us to stay inside the vehicle. It was nothing, in the end, just a checkpoint, and more Iraqis trying to stay warm next to fires.

The Middle East is relatively small, but it matters because it is right in the centre of the world. The new forces unleashed by the war in Ukraine do not change that. The shockwaves of everything I saw in Mosul that month – and in many other places, over more than thirty years – were transmitted all over the world. We feel them in Europe,

see the refugees, the political killing and terrorism that links back to events in the region. So Iraq and Iran, Israel and Palestine, Libya and Egypt, Yemen and the rest are everybody's problems, and they should not be ignored. Powerful states looking in from outside need to stop making it worse. Do no more harm. Then try to make things better.

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I owe a huge debt to all those people who've agreed to talk to me about the lives they were living in tumultuous times. Quite often, meeting a Western reporter – with or without a microphone and a camera – was a considerable act of courage.

The idea for this book came from a series I wrote and presented for BBC Radio 4, called *Our Man in the Middle East*. It was commissioned by Gwyneth Williams, the then controller of the network, who pushed me to come up with a series, aided and abetted by Mohit Bakaya, her successor. Cara Swift and Mark Savage did the hard work of producing twenty-five programmes and forcing me to boil down my thoughts. Cara excavated from the archives and transcribed vast amounts of my reporting in the Middle East since 1990, which was also invaluable when it came to writing this book. Cara and her predecessor, Jane Logan, have been my producers, friends and the driving forces of dozens of trips to the region since the BBC appointed me as Middle East Editor in 2005. Jane introduced me to Jerusalem as my first producer there when I moved to the city in 1995. Cara was with me throughout most of the turmoil that followed the Arab uprisings of 2011. So was Nik Millard, a great cameraman, editor, journalist and friend since the first story we did together, in Libya, in 1991.

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