

THE NEW TOTAL WAR

—

MITCH SWENSON

PART I

We're running like wild banshees through this soil field in southern Turkey because a siren just went off and we don't know what that means exactly but it's not the kind of siren you find on game shows, it's the kind of siren you find in prisons; so we are just running. It started as a fast walk, maybe no one will see us, maybe they won't mind or they will think we're doing something else, maybe they will think we are not sneaking over the border. Anything besides sneaking over the border. But of course not, of course they saw us. What else would we be doing scuttling across this random Turkish field at sunrise? And now all of a sudden it's a head-first sprint to the finish. The siren is really going and we're looking pretty cartoonish right now, fire-tailing it across this sink-pit of a landscape. Behind me Axe is trying to hold his flip cam steady while running and staying low. You've gotta applaud the effort. You really do. He's got a *kefaya* wrapped around his shoulders and is looking like some kind of Ali Baba monster trying desperately to sneak across the Syrian border and then behind him is Thomas, our photographer, jangling two fat Nikons, a tripod, and one of those passport necklaces that are meant for geriatrics. Everything on his body is going every which way as we're running. The three of us are following Jumah, our Syrian fixer, who is leading us to what I imagine is where we want to be going.

Staying low, everything is going. I'm not going to say everything is going *well*, but it's definitely going in some sort of capacity and it's not stopping and we are straight going. Watch out for shit on the ground. Don't sprain your ankle, just fucking go. Going, going... and then we all hear it and the going stops for a moment. The sound of the shot reverberates everywhere: against the base of the Jabal Barisha mountains, against the clumps of pattied dirt on the range, and against the back of my teeth when I slowly open my mouth to yell...

I'm usually not like this---the ranting lunatic you just met. Honestly, I'm not. But, as you can see, I'm utterly terrified and it's not easy for me to say that because, at 26, this isn't my first *rodeo*, so to speak. Still, there's something about Syria right now that is much different than everything I've seen before. Don't get me wrong I'm far from a veteran in this arena, but having reported from areas of conflict---on and off---for about three years now, I've been around guys with guns before.

Syria, though, has become an all purveying, all consuming, merciless, heart-eating, machine of war. It might be what "total war" means in the Information Age. In fact, Syria might be the only kind of total war to come about in my lifetime. Back in the World War II days, total war meant that a nation mobilized its civilians on the homefront to support the war effort abroad. It's the idea that both sides were directing the sum of their resources towards victory. That means everything: labor, fuel, food, land, capital. All in, we've got to win. There's no other way. But in contemporary conflict, the term has evolved. After the Little Boy and Fat Man were detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively, the rules changed. The Cold War happened, there was the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), and full-scale invasion---tanks and troops on the ground---was no longer the hardest hitting punch in the ring. Therefore the all in, full on mobilization needed for the ways wars had been waged

since the beginning of time, wasn't necessary. Today Johnny Begood, training to be an IT professional, doesn't need to get his hands on those war bonds and his beautiful wife Marlene doesn't need to break her back on the production line in order for their government to arm a pair of nukes buried under the ice floes of Alaska. Today conflicts are mostly fought in two ways. They are either fought through asymmetrical warfare, meaning big guys vs. small guys (i.e. US vs. Al Qaeda) or through proxies, which are countries like Syria.

Syria at total war has a lot to do with everyone involved. The powers at play can mostly be carved up along religious and economic lines. First and foremost, Syria has a sectarian issue. President Bashar Al Assad and his people are Alawites, which is a branch of Shia Islam, which is what the Muslims in Iran and Hezbollah (Lebanon's incumbent party) practice. However, Assad and his people are the rich minority against a much larger poorer Sunni Islam majority. That was how it all started, Shia Syrian Army vs. rock-throwing Sunni Rebels. But after three years of air strikes and chemical attacks, suicide bombings and public executions, kidnapping and torture, Syria's infrastructure is not only annihilated, but the country is nearly spent on everything from bread to bullets. So Iran and Hezbollah have been propping Assad's cause with money, supplies, and soldiers because they are all in the same religious boat together and Russia and China have been giving Assad weapons and god only knows what else because *that's how it's always been*. On the other side Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, America, Israel, Al Qaeda, and a ton of other countries have been giving the rebels "things." Now whether those are surface-to-air missiles or cherry Capri Suns no one really knows seeing as those responsible don't want to talk about it because they know everyone else is listening. What Syria has become, by day 950, is the chessboard for the rest of the world. The two much bigger sides are perpetually jockeying *over* Syria while the two smaller sides are jockeying *within* it.

The biggest contributor to Syria's total war, however, is that fact that Assad doesn't possess nuclear weapons. Without the nukes, the threat of mutually assured destruction that would come with other nations or battlegrounds isn't there. This war simply would not have happened if Assad could leverage a nuclear threat on the world stage. Consequently the Syrians are grinding away at each other, ruthlessly, day in, day out, with little movement on either side for a long time. That's how you know this is total war. It's when the death count keeps climbing but the front lines never move. Syria is the trench warfare kind of total war. It's the *war is hell* kind of total war. It's the *war that will kill you like a dog for no good reason* kind of total war. The war permeates all facets of the country. Each side is using whatever they can to kill. That's why Assad was dropping Sarin gas. It's because it's all he's got left. His main advantage is air superiority. The rebels can't hit his planes and choppers because they've fired all of their rockets already.

Assad is not above using cyber warfare either. The Syrian Electronic Army has hacked pretty much every major western news outlet (AP, NYT, AFP, &c.) and although they claim not to be affiliated with the regime, confirmation on that has yet to be reached. Additionally Assad has used an American information security company called Blue Coat to "deep packet sniff" rebel identities and locations. He has even set up false Facebook pages and Skype accounts to lure opposition fighters out of hiding. This is total war.

The Rebels, however, are no less guilty than Assad. When they aren't searching building to building for regime troops, an urgency for more weaponry has led the opposition to invent new types of killing pieces. Booby-trapped mannequins, Playstation-controlled rifles, jerry-rigged munitions, and massive mortars mounted to construction cars are just a few of the makeshift weapons spotted online. The rebel situation is dire. In many areas lawlessness prevails. There is infighting within battalions,

brigades, towns and regions. There is little command structure within the opposition and little confidence within world aid organizations. Dire straits call for desperate measures and the rebels are certainly not above desperate measures. The main measure that I'm talking about here, unfortunately, is kidnapping. If you haven't been following it, human snatching in Syria is pretty much at the level or worse than Somalia, the world's number one abduction destination. See, the kidnapping really doesn't bode well for the rebels' plight if they are trying to get international recognition *for anything other than kidnapping*. But with the rebels it's a mixed bag. Moderate, educated and metropolitan Muslims from Damascus or Aleppo fight alongside hardline Islamists who slipped over from Iraq to wage global Jihad. Even so, the rebel front is still unified to this mark: they are all hungry, displaced, dirty, and angry. And Assad, on top of everything else, you're going to pay for that.

The thing is that when Axe and I were talking about covering Syria eight months ago, the country wasn't in the state of bloody deadlock that it is today. Back then it was bad, yes. I can't deny that. But at least it was easier to tell the good guys from the bad guys. It was a binary situation: Rebel vs. Assad. Back in April there was no ISIS, the Kurds weren't up in arms, and the Free Syrian Army wasn't splitting apart at the seams. Then everything just kind of went pear-shaped. None of us expected it to turn into a four-way war. None of us thought it was going to be a free-for-all.

Earlier That Week

Axe, Thomas and I are in a bar in Mar Mikhael, an expat district of Beirut. We are set to leave for Reyhanli, Turkey, a border town, in two days. From there we plan to sneak into Bab Al Hawa along the western side of Syria.

Now we are just drinking though. We're not sneaking anywhere. They are playing American rock music at the bar and we are all having these Lebanese drinks called Arak, which kind of taste like

absinthe mojitos. This is the first time I've met Axe or Thomas in person. Mostly I communicate with Axe through email and Twitter. Before this I'd seen pictures of him. He looks like his pictures. I'd talked to him on the phone. He sounds like his voice. And now, I see him in person and we are in Beirut and he is, indeed, himself. Axe started an outfit called War Is Boring, which I write for. He has a lot more experience in war zones than I do. He also, I've learned, has less than stellar hearing because of it. That's ok though. He has a drone tattooed on one arm and an insurgent with an RPG on the other. When I first met him he showed me how they fight. He made blaster noises with his mouth when the tattoos touched.

Thomas doesn't have any tattoos and he has never been to a conflict zone before. That is also ok though. He is an ace photographer. I can tell he has a preternatural ability to blend into his environment and snap off a couple of frames when no one is watching. The shitty part is that if this were a horror movie, Thomas would be the first one to die. His inexperience would be his downfall. But, in real life, we're not going to let that happen. Hopefully.

Ultimately, that makes me the middle correspondent---landing somewhere between the greenhorn and the war junkie. Second in command, as it seems now.

The other person with us is Marc, a German photographer that I met in Juba, South Sudan. We were on the same flight here from Istanbul and he told me he's not shooting conflict any longer, which is surprising. His photos from the gold mines in DR Congo and the front lines in Libya were both extraordinary. He tells me he's out, signed on full-time with the UN to do video of refugee camps and the like. He says that he doesn't miss the bang bang. He also tells me that no girl wants to date him because he makes inappropriate jokes about countries in crisis. They say they don't want him to be eating breakfast with their father on a Sunday morning because Marc might crack a wise one about the

deplorable state of the Ugandan postal service or something. But regardless of what the girls say, I can understand where Marc is coming from. Sometimes the only way to get through strife is to laugh in its face.

Marc's sudden retirement from the field stirs a question that I find a lot of journalists trying to answer. For how long can you continue to cover killing? Axe, who is 35, says most war correspondents bow out after eight years. He tells me that usually they get into this business because they don't care about dying and then, at some point, that changes and they start to fear death and then they get out of this war zone bonuckery while they're still ahead. That's how he says he feels now, after doing it for ten years. But he also makes it clear that he isn't quite ready to throw in the *kefaya*. Not yet anyway. I get the feeling that, in all seriousness, this might be his last bloody go-round.

Soon after he asks me why, of all things, I would want to cover war. For a moment I consider asking him the same question, but I already know the answer. It's a kind of War Is Boring motto: "David Axe goes to war so you don't have to." I tell him that I guess it started with a compulsion to look evil in the eyes. But after Omar Al-Bashir and I saw each other, the only thing I really gleaned was that he was just another guy. The Sudanese dictator was a bit feeble, actually. Consequently I lost the evil fascination after that. Soldiers, fighters, rebels, militias, Mujahideen, Samurais, pirates, thugs, cops, fathers. All people, just like *his highness, Mr. Pure Evil himself*, tell truths and lies. I tell Axe that for a while I thought that War was the most important thing happening at any given moment in the world, that death itself doesn't lie. I thought that watching war was the realist thing I could do. But we both agree that everything is relative to the individual, the metaphor of war doesn't hold any less weight than its physical definition, and that people die all the time. Most people find it hard to care about dead strangers. There are just too many. Eventually, I say that I don't have a good explanation for why I

cover war other than maybe *why not?* Because no one else is here, I tell him. Because that seems to make it matter, I tell him. Because I'm drawn to strangers, I tell him. But a better question is, I tell him, "why do people want to kill each other?"

When I told my professors at Columbia that I needed to miss class because I was going to Syria, they didn't really know what to say. Most of them told me to be careful, all of them excused my absences, but the thing that they were really thinking and couldn't manage to ask was, "why?" Why leave the safety of New York City to get lost in some shell-shocked civil war that no one seems to care about and no one wants to touch?

Back in Beirut, Marc and I talk about how shitty Congolese aviation is, how all of their planes are cold war relics from Ukraine and how only pilots from the former Soviet Union can fly them because the controls are written in Cyrillic and no one really knows the Cyrillic alphabet in Africa. Apparently the national Congolese airline is supposed to be the most dangerous in the world. They also apparently have photos of John Travolta from the 1980's pinned to the bathroom walls because, wait for it, *hey he's a pilot*. Marc says simply that he is glad he never has to fly in that country again. Not unless he is on a UN plane, of course.

The conversation sways towards Syria, and Sabine, an Agence-France Presse reporter at the bar, tells us that we should absolutely *not* go into Syria. She says that there are AFP reporters in Aleppo that can't get out and that Syria is a beast of a conflict that can't be tamed. She says ISIS is everywhere: on all the roads, in all the towns. She says there are checkpoints on every street. She makes it sound like guaranteed suicide. Because of this, part of me wants to tell her that Syria has become the new benchmark for total war in the modern era, but I don't. There are more pressing issues to harp on, like ISIS.

In the last six months ISIS, which stands for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, has become a big problem in the region. ISIS is a radical Islamic faction, with ties to Al Qaeda, that snagged a foothold in Syria over the summer after a large prison break at Abu Ghraib bolstered the depth of their movement. Since then ISIS has swept through northern Syria, imposing Shariah law. They assassinate. They carbomb. They kidnap. They torture. They are the worst. They specifically hate foreigners. They are the cause of our headaches right now. We are going to try very hard to avoid getting kidnapped by ISIS when we are in Syria. It's our biggest fear. Nevertheless ISIS in the recent days has taken over Idlib and Azaz, two Free Syrian Army hubs that are close to the border we are going to cross.

There was a *New York Times* article last month about an amateur photographer that was kidnapped in Syria and forced to give up his passwords, pins, and bank account numbers. His entire identity. The kidnapers impersonated him online and assured his friends and family that he was ok, meanwhile they drained his savings. They ran over his knees with their SUV. They broke him and rebuilt him until one day he escaped through a small window in his cell and then managed, somehow, to get home. There are thousands of missing people in Syria, many of them abducted. Syria is the most dangerous place in the world for journalists. I don't know if I can say it any other way, Syria is the most dangerous place on earth.

Axe, Thomas, and I fly from Beirut to Istanbul and then from Istanbul to Hatay, Turkey, which is close to where we plan to cross the Syrian border. On board the pilot makes a point of clarifying the flight pattern, to ensure that the plane will not be passing through Syrian airspace.

When we land in Hatay we learn that an emir of ISIS has been killed along with 13 of his men in Bab Al Hawa, which is the town next to our hotel on the Syrian side. We wonder if there will be a retaliation by ISIS. We wonder what the collateral damage to such an attack could be. The war has

spilled into Turkey before. In May a car bomb went off on the Turkish side of the border and last week another one went off just over the Syrian side.

Jumah, our Syrian fixer, tells us that he was kidnapped by ISIS once and then set free because he knew the prison guard. He got very lucky, he says and while we are walking to a restaurant in Reyhanli, the Turkish town that borders Syria, Jumah stops and talks to three men on the street. One of them is in a wheelchair.

Because of the conflict, there are an inordinate amount of injured people on the streets of Reyhanli. Introduced to a better standard of living in Turkey, some of them stick around after their surgery. Some of their conditions are inoperable or they don't have the money or they just came along with everyone else. It's eerie seeing so many at once: a group of men, all with crutches or casts or chairs. Some have complex swaths of rods and screws to reset broken or shattered bones. Others have little more than pinned trousers and phantom limbs, small reminders that larger parts of themselves are still missing.

When Jumah returns he says that those men were ISIS guys, but he is on good terms with them. Reyhanli is a strange neutral camp. It is this overflow buffer zone, an invisible holding pen for those that need to get patched up, or live somewhere else, or transport what they need to transport. Maybe they come to Reyhanli because they don't want to be bothered, like I imagine these ISIS guys are doing. You can do that here. Before the Syrian uprising, Reyhanli had a population of 60,000. Since then it has swelled to 200,000. There has never been a better time or place for terrorists to hide in plain site. The influx of refugees creates a natural civic interference to blend into. It's easy to float around anonymously here.

Reyhanli is the proof that the Syrian fallout is broaching borders. The totality of the conflict and

its players involved have and will continue to spill into the rest of the region for as long as everyone is still trying to kill each other.

A pack of shirtless boys on motorbikes whistle and then wheelie down the town's main road, their engines ripping in the early fall evening. Some on the street turn momentarily. Others walk on unflinchingly. Reyhanli is a place for drifters, a base for those who traffic, deal in greys, and run. They are running weapons, diesel, or bread across the border or running *from* death, sadness, or fear that's back home.

Jumah suggests that we should leave our passports in Turkey when we sneak across. Maybe we should pretend to be Bulgarian or Hungarian or from a European country that isn't too far west. He tells us that everyone pretty much hates the West, right now. He tells Axe to wear a long sleeve shirt to cover his drone tattoo. An aid worker tells us that ISIS is building schools in Aleppo and other cities in Syria in order to recruit the next generation of suicide bombers. The border is completely closed for foreigners after the car bomb. No one other than Syrians and Turks can cross and even then it is painfully slow.

Jumah tries to get the Al Farooq brigade to convoy us to Syria. To traffic us, essentially. We meet with their leader. We ask nicely. He makes a joke about selling us off to ISIS that makes us laugh nervously. Later he goes into a tirade about how the US didn't help them so why should he help us. Finally he tells us no, says it is too dangerous. He tells us that ISIS members whisper and if his brigade is seen with foreigners they might be marked with a suicide bomb like what happened in Al Raqqa not that long ago.

The next night a car bomb goes off just across the border, perhaps a mile away from us, in front of an FSA brigade headquarters. ISIS claims responsibility. Many FSA brigades split off and create

their own alliance which further weakens and fractionalizes the strength of the moderate Islamic opposition. Another journalist, this time a Spanish photographer, is kidnapped near Hama, a central city in Syria. Things are turning in ISIS' favor. They seem to be everywhere and still somehow getting closer to us. The Westgate Mall hostage situation continues in Nairobi. It seems to be emblematic of an internationally growing Al Qaeda front, one that is already at our hotel door and one that is instigating horror to foreigners abroad. Jumah tells us that ISIS has just declared cigarettes illegal in the town of Al Dana, a mere 12 miles away from us.

We talk to both the Syrian Military Council and the Syrian Support Group to see if either of them can convoy us across. They won't do it. It is way too dangerous they say. So dangerous in fact that they are not sending their own guys across.

It is becoming evident that few people speak English in Reyhanli and every time we need to talk to someone we need to talk through Jumah. He is our lifeline liaison. Without him we would all be powerless. It is peculiar to think that a thing like language could be trafficked as well. But that's what Jumah is doing. He is brokering a language, a human connection. His skills rest in transmission. It's not that dissimilar to what foreign correspondents do, really. Jumah and the correspondent both accept information and reinterpret it in another way to a different audience. For him that is translating Arabic into English, for us that is filtering the things that matter from the things that don't and then presenting those things in a way that people at home understand. He is another intermediary here in Reyhanli. Maybe you could call him a communication runner. Maybe you could call me an information mule.

The strange thing about this type of transmission is that something is always lost in the process. There are residual effects. The diesel smugglers water down their gasoline, and, subsequently, their purity is gone when they sell it to their client. In Syrian Arabic there are idioms that are untranslatable,

there are sentences that are shortened, for ease, when said in English, and there are words that are omitted when Jumah tells us what the other side is saying. Everything that I am getting then is second-hand, second in line. It's not his fault of course, it just makes me think: what is it that is lost when correspondents report from places they do not know? What am I losing in transmission?

We pass a ripped dollar bill on the street. Everyone here is furious at the United States for backing out of the intervention. We decide to say we are from Canada from now on. That night I have a dream that I am abducted by ISIS and they inject some sort of ugly chemical into my spinal cord continually for hours upon hours until I wake up in what feels like a swimming pool of my own damp sweat.

Jumah, Axe, Thomas, and I go to the Bab Al Hawa border in the morning. We talk to some of the smugglers that ferry people and goods along the roads and through the mountains to Syria. These are the best go-betweens, the merchants and middlemen that have a foot in both worlds. They are the ones that transcend the threshold of war and peace. Khaled, a 17-year-old with swagger, says he leads about 20 people into Syria everyday and claims to have taken nearly 10,000 people over the border in his lifetime. It is hard to say why I find these fringe characters so intriguing. Perhaps it is because they seem to embody the flux of Reyhanli more than anyone else. Perhaps there is no more myopic way to view the war than through them. These smugglers, perhaps we're not so different in the end. We're both trying to bring something to the same place: the other side.

Later that day Jumah gets a call saying that ISIS has kidnapped his brother and his best friend. They were working for Syria Aid and ISIS hijacked their truck and broke into their homes. Jumah doesn't know where either of them are being held. It's almost paralyzing, the fear that ISIS is everywhere. It's the fear that they can so easily travel through this liminal town and it's the anger that we

are the only ones that are not able to cross this porous border. It's the anger that we are the only ones caught in this holding pattern, while everyone else is moving around us.

At 8pm that night Jumah tells us that the Sham Falcon brigade can bring us across tomorrow morning. We will have to get dropped off by taxi and run across a field until we reach a hole in the fence. Sham Falcon fighters will be waiting for us on the other side with a car, he says.

We are suspicious. Everyone seems *so* terrified for our safety and now this group we know *nothing about* says they can take us *immediately*? We wonder if Jumah is trying to sell us to ISIS in return for his brother. We question everyone's allegiance. We shouldn't but we do. In an environment like Reyhanli, a place that is forged on trust over law, it is irresponsible to mess with the fragile social order at play. This seems especially true if we don't really understand who is at the table and if that social order is the only thing that is guaranteeing our safety. It's just that we are so used to getting "no" that it somehow seems impossible to hear "yes".

We plot the trip on the map. The Falcons promise there is no ISIS, that we will drive through the mountains, that they know everyone in that area and that they will protect us. They say they have enough guys to move us safely and that it won't be a problem and that they have done it before. At this point it is our only option. This is it or we go home with nothing. So we eventually just sort of all say fuck it because we are already here. And what kind of reporters would we be if we backed out now?

Later that night Thomas and I watch Sham Falcon videos online. We try to find clips that comfort us about our handlers, about the current situation in total warmachine Syria a mile or so from our beds. We look for the Falcon videos that have the biggest explosions, the most "Alluh Akbars," the deepest crews with the heaviest weapons. This leads to rebels firing anti-aircraft guns off of the backs of camels, to RPGs hitting tanks, to RPGs hitting buildings, to RPGs hitting helicopters, to rebels strapping

GoPros to the muzzles of their rifles and charging the front line, to rebels holding two weapons and firing, to rebels wrapped in bullet chains, to rebels wearing masks, to rebels killing rebels, to rebels killing civilians, to rebels *torturing* civilians, and finally to a video of a rebel cutting out and eating the lung of a dead regime soldier. Afterwards, when Thomas and I finally get to bed, comforted would not be the word I would necessarily use to describe my state of mental health.

The yell doesn't come out. None of us have to say anything. There is no need. We all know the sound came from a rifle. We can see the silhouette across one of the ranges, two football fields away from us, standing with his weapon. But we are only one football field away from the border so we are going again. Immediately it is back to business as before: head down going, going like there is fire coming out of my ass and I can tell you, right now, that there is no way I am not making it to that fence. Even if that rifleman shoots me, I'm making it into Syria. Axe and Thomas are of the same ilk. I mean we are on the Turkish side for god's sake, the safe side. If we can't survive the safe side what will happen when everything is ratcheted up on the *other* side.

Suddenly we are closing in. Going, staying low, just get there, just get there, going, get there. And then we are at the fence and we are pushing the branches of some foliage out of our way and we are ducking through the opening in the barbed wire and then we are straightening up and then we are inside. On the other side. We finally transcended the two worlds.

Runners, traffickers, smugglers, couriers, ferriers, interpreters, reporters, brokers, transmitters. However you want to describe the people that bring something from one side to another, we're now those people.

It's quiet on this side and we are in a pomegranate field. The siren has stopped. The red fruits

are beautiful and formed and are so much different than the ravaged soil on what is now our other side. Jumah plucks one of the fruits from a tree. I can see some diesel smugglers behind him filling up a plastic barrel with dark liquid. One of them waves at us and then, slowly, I wave back.

PART II

Jumah, this smuggler, and I are all by-products of Syria's subsumption in total war. What all three of us share is our simultaneous connection and detachment from the conflict. Jumah because he talks to Syrians in Arabic and translates it to me in English. The smuggler because he talks in Syrian diesel with Syrian Pounds and then translates that into Turkish Lira. And me because I'm here to talk in Syrian hardships with Syrian people and translate that into American news. Not only are all three of us trafficking in our own right but we are doing it because of the war. We are capitalizing off of the war.

There will always be someone profiteering off of bloodshed. War is its own industry that needs a special breed of employees. Organic industries can sprout from economies submerged in long-lasting conflict. America, during World War II, created a federal bonds market that financed military production. They did it because they had to. It was a plight to fight off surmounting debts and it worked. These bonds lauded patriotism, controlled inflation, and established an interpersonal exchange between

buyers. In a similar way the war has put the Syrian government in shackling debt, which has resulted in the freefall of the Syrian Pound. The freefall, however, has allowed for this young smuggler chap, the one who waved at me, to exploit the low gasoline prices in Syria as well as the high gasoline prices in Turkey. His livelihood has been directly predicated on Syria's total war.

Jumah and I can say the same for ourselves. The demand for Jumah's vocation as a fixer only exists because of the influx of journalists (at one time) in order to report on the conflict. In the same way, the reason that I am here and have things to report on is because of the war that has engulfed this place.

Thomas kicks a pebble as we walk down an alley of the pomegranate grove. He's trying to conceal his heavy breathing after that mad dash. In fact, we all are. It's just that Thomas is doing the worst job at hiding it. He smokes the most cigarettes, that's why. It is so quiet that his breaths really stand out against the slight sounds of the grove. The ground is laden with carmine skins and berries. The sun has pulled itself high in the sky. It's bright, all right. Looks like it's shaping up to be a beautiful day in sunny pomegranate city, Syria. You would never know that, technically, we're inside the worst fucking place in the world.

What makes the grove so visually intense is that no one seems to be tending to the fruit. At one time, sure, but now there are so many of the sandy red orbs around, either on the trees or on the ground. Now, the pomegranates just grow and are leisurely eaten off of the trees by the smugglers or they drop to the ground and rot. There don't seem to be any farmers that maintain the orchard or export its cache. Perhaps the owners fled a long time ago, leaving their till behind. Maybe they were killed in the fighting or maybe the farm was just taken from them by one of the many militant groups roaming the country with guns.

I fixate on the dirt road ahead as we walk and Axe takes this opportunity to point out how war actually *is* boring and that he didn't name his collection ironically. Well in the beginning, anyway. He says that everyone thinks war is immediately parachuting out of a C-130 into live fire and burly explosions, when really it's mostly downtime. He would know. He's been to Afghanistan six times, broke his coxis bone there in a two hour humvee ride through the bumpiest mess you can imagine. That's how he says it and that's how he broke it, with bogus bravado on a bumpy car ride.

When we get to the dirt road Jumah tells us that this is where we wait and we sit down on some large granite rocks and all smile just a little bit because, no lie, it's really happening now.

It's not long before an aqua-colored compact Kia sedan rolls down the road, carpeting the nearby pomegranate trees with a patina of dust in its wake. As it gets closer we can hear the call to prayer being played through the car stereo. Jumah told us there would be two cars, that we would be stacked to the gills with rebels so that if we were stopped on the road we would be stronger than the checkpoint. That was our plan to avoid getting kidnapped. But alright, I guess one aqua-colored Kia compact will have to do. No other choice, really.

It was like this in Libya, too. We were supposed to have an escort full of rebels but it never showed up. Libya was not total war. The fighting moved too quickly. Everyone was incredibly invested, yes, but there was never that period of slow and long death without progress. It's the bloody stalemate that makes the danger seem endless and unavoidable in this contemporary total war. It is the thing that causes the effects of the war to seep into the culture, the fashion, the food, the pomegranates. It forces a fight or flight reaction throughout the country. Those inside of Syria have to constantly reevaluate their living situation, their safety.

In less than three years Syria has seen two million refugees pour out of its country with an

additional four million people displaced internally (IDP). That means that *six million people* have already had to leave their homes in Syria. In a country of only 22 million that means that more than one-fourth of the nation's population has been forced to migrate because of the conflict. To put that in perspective, since 2003 Iraq has seen four million people displaced in a nation of 32 million, Afghanistan since 2001 has seen 3.5 million displaced. Sudan, a country of 31 million and long thought to have had one of the worst refugee crises ever during the 1990's, has seen 5.5 million people displaced since 1983. Simply put, Syria has quickly overshadowed them. Syria, with the smallest population of all, has seen the most people flee their homes in the least amount of time. It is easily the worst migration crisis in my lifetime. And with 10,000 people still leaving Syria everyday, it is perhaps the worst refugee crisis in history. Not a single person in Syria is left untouched by this war.

The car stops, the prayers get turned down, and two men in sand camo hop out with Kalashnikovs. Then the driver pulls the lever on one of the seats so it folds forward and a plain clothed man gets out from the back seat. The man is carrying a small black plastic bag, tied at the end. He waves goodbye as he goes into the orchard and disappears out of sight. Just another casual daysmuggler is what it looks like from here. It's like he's crossed too many times to be nervous.

Salam alaikum, salam alaikum. Hussein and Abu Araf, nice to meet you both, Jumah translates from me to them. They smile and Abu Araf asks me where from? Just like that, no extra words, and I say Canada, like we practiced (Quebecois from Montreal), which makes him nod and simultaneously welcome us into the Kia.

It's not long before my knees are practically down my throat, crammed, middle seat, in the back of this Kia as we're driving. Thomas has the right window, being the photog, and Axe has the left, being the leader. So I'm in a tight spot. Middle correspondent guy over here, this fool in the middle seat.

Jumah sits on Hussein's lap in the front and sticks his head out of the window when he isn't translating. Two AK47s rest, barrel up, on the foot mat near the stickshift. At one point Abu Araf accidentally grabs one of the gun barrels when he tries to downshift and then lets out a small laugh.

For a while we curve around corniches through the broad Levant mountains, every so often passing an outpost of diesel smugglers or a cadre of motorbikers at which point Abu Araf says to Jumah who says to us to not take photos and then we move past them. We go through a small town called Haram, along the eastern mountains and then are waved through a checkpoint by a man wearing a black ski mask. The checkpoint is nothing more than an old rusted barrel and a thick rope that is being used as a speedbump for the cars on both sides. Behind the man flies the black Tawhid flag, it's what the salafists and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria use as their rally point for spreading Sharia law. Jumah says Abu Araf is friends with that man in the mask and as we near the apex of one of the small mountains the landscape becomes speckled and then littered and then blanketed with grey ruinous stone.

As we work our way out of the hinterland and into the heartland, everything looks ancient and lunar and cratered, beaten and leveled for centuries by civilization after civilization. There are few houses here, only strange grey rock and lonely bits of shattered classical columns. Often these timeworn vestiges overlook the colorless valley underneath the road and for a moment I try to visualize what this Mediterranean cultivation might have looked like before it so definitively died. Then I think about Syria today and wonder if this faded rubble is the entrypoint, the harbinger for us travelers into a darker part of the country. Perhaps this mountain is the outer limit and this blasted, archaic matter is the final border. Is it unreasonable to ask if Syria is going through its own modern leveling? If the only way for the nation to be revived is for it first to be fully destroyed?

Jumah tells us that sometimes during airstrikes one or two of the explosive barrels end up not exploding. He tells us that after the dust settles from the strike the rebels flock to the site to see if they can salvage some of the keg powder to reappropriate into their own makeshift weaponry. We pass more diesel smugglers and a trip of mountain goats standing haphazardly on the slopes of the rocks. Later on the road we overtake a car that has several plastic barrels roped to its roof and it occurs to me just how prevalent and expansive the illegal gasoline trade in Syria must be. With the currency plunge, it is probably one of the few viable methods of income left in the country. Jumah explains that many of the oil fields and refineries in Syria are hard to protect at night, which makes them targets for smugglers to make off with free barrels of the lucrative liquid. While shortages of gas have caused prices to spike in central areas of Syria like Damascus, the outskirts have seemingly survived the panics because diesel traffickers have kept the region wet with gas. But with the winter approaching, Jumah says that Syria will be more pressed than ever to stay fed, warm, and mobile.

There's another checkpoint that we traverse while Thomas films quietly and Axe listens to music on his headphones and some sort of prayer music is playing coolly at a low volume in the car until Abu Araf radios into one of the bases and we enter Bab Al Hawa through a gate of twin Tawhid flags.

Bab Al Hawa is not a city as much as it is an inhabitation. There are low concrete buildings wedged below overpasses and clustered in cordoned parking lots. There are large corrugated storage freights that remain stacked and empty in corners of the compound. Everything appears to be built at the same time, 1970's, and the wide roads are laden with Syrians---some with guns, some not---and pop-up cigarette stands. On the fringe of the road are the refugee tents that sprawl outside of the encampment and down the sides of the highway. Children peek their small heads through dusty industrial plastic to meet our eyes with confusion as we slowly roll past them.

Abu Araf waves to someone he knows and then another man comes over and says something quickly to him and adjusts the FAL rifles over his shoulder while they talk. The two exchange words while the three of us swivel our heads looking out every angle of the car and Thomas films with the camera low against the window frame. When the man leaves Jumah tells us that the PKK, the Kurdish Worker's Party, has been clashing with the FSA to the east. Axe asks if we can go but Jumah says there is ISIS there and that's pretty much the end of the conversation.

The Kurds in Syria add an interesting dynamic to the conflict. Considered by some to be the bedouins of the Middle East, this ethnic population of Muslims has long been fighting for the establishment of an autonomous Kurdistan, which overlaps into Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. In the last 50 years they have become increasingly marginalized and persecuted by the countries they inhabit, which has forced their population of 30 million to defend their borders against religious sectarianism and governmental oppression. In Syria, Kurds make up about 9% of the population. They have seen various bans of their culture enforced by Assad's regime throughout the years, which has led to sporadic clashes with all Syrians. While the Kurds mostly support the ouster of Bashar Al Assad, the area of northern Syria that borders their homeland is controlled by the rebels and tensions that predate the start of the revolution still remain. Every day, spats between FSA and Kurdish soldiers erupt and diffuse. In the recent months hostilities have increased between pretty much everyone because of ISIS' involvement in the region and the FSA is now fighting a war on two fronts: The regime to the South and the Kurds to the East.

We pass other structures and Jumah tells us which brigades live where and how strong they are militarily until we get to the Sham Falcon's barracks. Many of the windows in the barracks are broken. There is electrical wiring coming out of the walls and ceiling and some of the rooms are without doors.

When I look into one of the rooms I see several young men with beards and slippers, lying on ground-cushions, chatting on Facebook, and drinking coffee next to their guns. Abu Araf leads us up a staircase and down a long hallway where we pass a guy dressed in all black with a black Tawhid flag headband, shiny black Steyr rifle, and dark black aviator sunglasses. The man walks through the hallway silently and for a moment I wonder what he was doing before the war made him the shadow of a person who just barely drifted next to me.

Abu Araf shows us into, what he calls, his office. Inside there are a few couches, one that has a landmine scanner resting against it, another with a pair of Desert Eagles wedged between the cushions. There are some flags, not the Tawhid but similar, pinned the wall nearest to the door and there are salmon colored curtains that are drawn causing pink light to filter into the room. I sit down next to an m60 heavy machine gun on his desk. It's the kind that is too heavy to run with, so it's used to kill the people that are running toward you. I imagine Abu Araf in the corner of this office, wide-eyed with the m60 propped on his desk, enacting his last stand as his enemies search for him room by charred and bloodied room.

We take photos of him as he tells us about the moment he knew he was going to fight Assad. He was at a peaceful protest in Daraa. It was 2011 and the army started indiscriminately firing live rounds into the crowd. After his neighbor was killed by his side he knew he was in this fight for good. That was before the FSA was formed. He tells us about how the Sham Falcons pioneered a new type of attack that has brought the FSA success. The tactic involves freeing captured regime soldiers into boobytrapped cars. The Falcons have been rigging the cars so that Assad's soldiers drive them back to their home base. When the driver turns off the car, it explodes; Not only inadvertently killing him in the process but also (hopefully) killing others like him in the explosion as well.

Following that Abu Araf goes into his closet and puts on a pressed button-down shirt and a shoulder holster carrying two large handguns and two rows of bullets streaming down the sides. He stands in front of the Sham Falcons flag and as I snap a shot of Abu Araf in his best war outfit, I notice that his pride is not lost in the picture.

Axe asks if he can take any of the videos that Abu Araf might have of the Sham Falcons in combat, scenes that are not yet on the internet. Or if they are, they are not on the internet *in English*. So Axe loads about 10 gigabytes worth of Falcon footage from the computer, next to the m60, onto his thumb drive and I walk outside still thinking about the boobytrapped cars Araf and his team have been using. I think about how much easier it was to listen to Jumah tell me the evilness of the trap in a straight translatory monotone than it would have been if Araf could have said it in English. It was also somehow easier to ask Araf blunt, to the point questions because I'm really only asking them to Jumah. Because I didn't have to look my responder in the eyes when I ask them.

In many ways I don't need to be in Syria to be able to report on it. There are enough Youtube videos uploaded everyday to be able to triangulate more than enough reportable information. But the reason why *I am here* is to be able to decrypt the puzzles of this war that can't be done through the videos. It is to look into the responder's eyes. To relate to him on a human level. It might be easier to ask him questions, to get him to talk, but it isn't easier to empathize with him. The linguistic, cultural, and religious barriers really don't make it easy. We can drink coffee together and we can smoke cigarettes together and we can just kind of blankly smile together but that's not really enough to get to the heart of it.

Syria is the first war where everything is recorded. It's amazing actually how there can be these amateur armchair analysts located all around the world, live tracking the combat and weapon

proliferation in the country. It is so important, in fact, for these videos to exist in public that Youtube seemingly turns a blind eye on content that violates their Terms of Service Agreement. You were never allowed to upload or watch clips of live executions on Youtube before the conflict in Syria. Yet, they are online now. Because the threat of kidnapping is so great for foreign journalists, this mode of citizen journalism has become crucial in illuminating and validating human rights violations like the Sarin gas attack in Ghouta on August, 21st. This is a symptom of the new type of total war, where the lines between watchers and fighters are blurred so much as to be almost nonexistence. It has always been the protocol that journalists in war zones are there to be objective, to see things from a neutral stance. It's for that reason they don't carry weapons, because if they did they would seemingly be shifting from an observer to a fighter. These rebels like the Sham Falcons, however, are filming their buddies firing RPGs and then picking up their sniper rifle and going right back into the firefight. That, to me, is not objective. But it is the future of war reporting. The conflict in Syria is just too big for the news agency photographers to be able to cover every front line.

On our way to talk to the Al Farooq brigade we pass the burnt remains of the car bomb that exploded two nights ago. Jumah tell us that it was meant to go off in front of the Farooq barracks but it detonated prematurely. We do a slow drive-by in order to photograph the steel skeleton of the car. There is another car that was affected in the blast that seems to have been abandoned as well. Now comes the challenge of who will move them, how they will move them, and where they will go. Or perhaps nothing will be done with them, which is probably what will end up happening. The explosion wasn't reported by the US Media, probably because they don't have any stringers in the area. No one does.

When we get to the Farooq barracks we see a stray cat and Axe takes a photo of the animal

for the album he is making about cats in conflict zones. He tells us the idea is an add-on to his previous collection of felines called Catistan, from Afghanistan.

Even though Farooq promised to speak with us, their spokesperson continues to give us the run around, probably because the brigade knows we are American and they hate us for that. Eventually we leave after an hour of waiting under the extended tent of a cigarette vendor.

Axe wants to interview some refugees but all of us beside Thomas know that if we go into the camp, we will be swarmed by the children. Jumah says that we can try to do it quickly before word spreads and they all start asking us for money. So on Axe's decision we go in and ask several people if they want to talk about life in the camp but none of them do and the children start following us. By the time one man agrees to speak on the record there are twenty hungry children hovering around our waists, weakly gripping our pants. The man pretty much says what the Farooq brigade said to us, which is that we, the West, can go fuck ourselves because we didn't help Syria. He also says the US promised to provide food and blankets for the refugees in Syria but he and no one else at the camp have received anything from anyone. It's heartbreaking having the children stand next to us. It's difficult to think that there is the possibility that they may spend their most formative years in the squalor of this tent city. The worst part is knowing that there is little we can do right now to help and even if we could help them it would be an overwhelming task to even know where to start. So we leave. There is nothing else to do. We have to duck and weave through the tents rather quickly for a while before the children following us begin to thin out. Eventually we exit the camp all silently wishing we had never gone in.

Because we stipulated we couldn't spend the night in Syria, we only have time for one more interview before we need to go back through the mountains. The last interview is with a pilot who defected from the Syrian army and when we sit with him he directs us to a boy that was in a chemical

attack in early March.

The boy, Abo Zyed, isn't wearing a trace of camouflage on his body but, like many other young fighters, he is always holding his rifle. It's either between his legs while he sits or in his hands while he stands. His friends found him passed out near his home after the attack and rushed him to the hospital where doctors were able to calm the shaking in his body over the course of a week. In a room surrounded by a dozen other members of the Qadesyya Brigade, Abo Zyed says he isn't afraid of anything except the helicopters and fighter jets. It was because of the chemical attack that he started training with anti-aircraft guns.

It's then that a soldier in sand camo comes into the room and says something speedily in Arabic, which draws everyone up from their seats. Abo Zyed asks if we want to go to the front lines. There is this twinge of excitement in his voice, like this time he will be able to payback Assad for the Sarin canister that sent him to the hospital.

As they leave we meet Abu Araf and Hussein by the aqua-colored Kia. We watch the Qadesyya brigade pull out on pick up trucks and gun mounted technicals, their faces saying that they want us to come along but also knowing that ISIS has a heavy presence in Areha. They understand that the threat of kidnapping there is too great, that we would be hurting them more than helping.

On the drive back through the mountains Axe tells us about the cultural phenomenon of chai boys in Afghanistan, how they are prepubescent male sex slaves that wealthy Afghans keep to serve tea and entertain guests. He tries to explain to us that chai boys are well respected in Afghanistan and many mothers try to sell their sons into chai boydom because they think it is an esteemed profession and that it may be the child's only shot at a better life. We wind through the ruinous greystone region again and listen to Axe talk more about child sex slaves in Afghanistan until Jumah turns on an anthemic revolution

song that is about all the different ways the rebels are going to topple Assad. It's pretty catchy. After a while I'm able to sing the sounds in Arabic and it isn't long before Abu Araf turns the chant a little bit louder and lowers the windows all the way and lets the melody echo along through the peaks and valleys. The song plays over and over again until we get back to the pomegranate grove. On the way we pass packs of smugglers who cheer and give us thumbs up when they hear the anthem blasting from the aqua Kia.

Eventually we made it back to Reyhanli. It wasn't easy but we made it. A Turkish soldier caught us trying to sneak through the same route and we were all sent back to the pomegranate grove. The soldier even pointed his gun at Axe after the drone tattoo accidentally made an appearance. In the grove, of course it was a diesel smuggler who showed us an alternate way to the other side. I told you the smugglers and the correspondents understand each other. We ran just as fast the second time but luckily no shots were fired. After another trip inside I returned to New York. I began to wonder if all wars in the future will have the same totality as this one. Will there be another conflict in my lifetime with such chilling effects on its people? The answer is probably yes. Time and time again, we as humans prove to have an extraordinary proficiency in finding new ways to hurt each other. Syria just seems to be the latest inculcation, the proof that it is easier to rip down than it is to put up. Aleppo took 5,000 years to build and only two years to destroy.

I wondered if foreign correspondence would die out. I wondered if it was worth it going into Syria. With all of the precautions, complications, expenses, and terror did I find anything that would ultimately change the course of the war? The answer is probably no. My role just seemed to cause more trouble. Syria is just one of the many conflicts that, in the chronology of humanity at odds with itself, will

be laid before the next. But for me, it is the one that broke the few unspoken rules that I thought were still left in warfare. In the last total war, somehow, everyone understood that there needed to be reporters, noncombatants at the frontlines. It was the news. For everyone's sake, the news needed to get out. It was for that reason, perhaps, that journalism was one semblance of order, of faith in the future of humanity against the backdrop of horror and death in World War II. It was perhaps the belief that World War II would be the war to end all wars. That the violence and death was so great that we as a race would stop fighting. The unfortunate part was that it wasn't the war to end all wars and the truth is that Syria won't be either. Syria is, however, the war that ended *the way we cover war*. That slight impunity that was once held by those unarmed observers in combat has been flipped on its axis. They, me, Axe, all of us, are now targeted for that very reason. Survival doesn't have rules. It doesn't have observers. It has teeth and muscle and scars and nails and sinew and hate and a need to get even. The future of journalism won't be waged by the constant observer but by the total fighter. Everyone just wants the most authentic picture of war, right? I can't do it as well as they can. I have neither the emotional investment nor the access that they do. Much in the same way that there were rules for engagement there were also rules for reporting, things that couldn't be shown. Those are gone now as well. Now we get a dangerously unfettered view of killing's gruesome reality. But this time it is in double HD, with an ultra wide lense, from every angle imaginable. Syria was the war that showed me what a true dead body looked like. It was the war where I watched a child watch a man in a black mask cut off another man's head with a chainsaw. It was in a video. It's as if truer realities are streaming from my computer right now than they are in real life. Perhaps because I have no hangups about looking at these men on my computer directly in the eyes...

In the end, more than anything else, Syria wasn't the place that scared me with its honesty. It

didn't tell me that this was the worst conflict in recent memory. I didn't feel a new kind of fear or compassion, compulsion, or empathy. After a while, I didn't feel anything at all, really. Syria was the place that taught me to lose feeling. It taught me to be selfish, like everyone else in the war. I didn't even ask Jumah if his brother got out alive. I didn't care. I wasn't thinking in those terms. Nor did Jumah expect me to. No, Syria won't be the war to end all wars. It is total and all consuming and ultimately one of the first great failures of humanity in my lifetime. But it isn't the war to end all wars. What it is, is the assurance that it's not the struggle of Assad nor Al Qaeda that matters. Because there probably won't be a decisive winner. What matters is how the next war will be fought and how much worse that one will be and how there is nothing any of us can do to stop it.

So maybe I get it now, why most of the war reporters check out around year eight. And then I remembered when Axe asked me why I wanted to cover war. And then I remembered what I said back.

