



**AND THEN  
ALL HELL  
BROKE LOOSE**

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**TWO DECADES IN  
THE MIDDLE EAST**

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# PROLOGUE

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**MOST OF THE NATIONS OF** the Middle East can be divided into those with long histories and no oil, and those that have lots of oil and very little history. With a few notable exceptions, both groups share a common feature: they were cobbled together by outsiders. The borders of the modern Middle East were drawn by Europeans after the First World War with no regard for the interests or backgrounds of the people who inhabited it. The lines that separate Jordan, Syria, and Iraq were mostly drawn by England and France a century ago. Before that, for the first thousand years after the explosive birth of Islam, interactions between what has come to be known as the Muslim East and the Christian West were limited and often hostile. The Middle East was a mystery to Westerners. Pilgrims and priests occasionally visited the Holy Land, eager to walk in Jesus' footsteps, but few had much interest in the people who lived in the wider region. Early Christians generally envisioned the Muslim Prophet Mohammed as a sinister pretender, a false prophet who spread his faith by the blade of a scimitar. Some medieval Christians thought Mohammed was a scorned pope who created his own domain and credo like the Fallen Angel.

In Dante Alighieri's early fourteenth-century *Divine Comedy*, in the *Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, Dante actually meets both Mohammed and Ali, the patriarch of Shia Muslims. It is a gruesome encounter. The two Muslim leaders are condemned to the eighth circle, ninth sub-circle, of Hell. For Dante, Hell was like a prison with cell blocks set aside for different types of offenders. Dante put Mohammed and Ali in the level of Hell reserved for "sowers of religious divisiveness."

Since Mohammed and Ali were considered dividers of religious unity—that is to say they threatened the unity of Christians—their punishment was to have their flesh torn apart. It was poetic justice: the dividers were to be themselves divided. Mohammed was split with a sword down his middle. Every time he healed, a demon would flay him open again. Ali has his face cleft in two. Mohammed's punishment was acted out in the 1911 silent movie *l'Inferno*, the first full-length Italian feature film. It was far more graphic than the cartoons of Mohammed that have run in European newspapers, triggering reprisals from Islamic radicals.

Equally, the early Muslims of the Middle East wanted nothing to do with the West, discounting it as a land inhabited by Christians who were too stubborn or too stupid to accept Allah's final and complete message to mankind, as revealed to Mohammed and written down by his companions in the Koran.

The two worlds' main interactions were the Crusades and the taking of hostages to sell for ransom or to enslave at the oars of merchant and pirate ships. It's no accident that most of the historic towns along the coasts of Italy and Greece were built high on hilltops and surrounded by walls. The inhabitants were terrified of being captured by Muslim pirates. Sicilians still sing folk songs about the evils of the *saraceni*, the Saracens, one of several names Europeans used to identify their Muslim enemies. Spain's most famous author, Miguel de Cervantes, was himself enslaved by Barbary Pirates for five years until a ransom was paid. The few Westerners who did venture into the lands of the "Mohammedians" were pilgrims or, later, adventurers, foreign agents, and treasure hunters who usually went home to write books about the dark-eyed women cloistered in harems and the antiquities they stole or bought from locals who placed little value on pre-Islamic rocks.

Everything changed with the First World War. The Middle East was reorganized, redefined, and the seeds were planted for a century of bloodshed. The Islamic world, led at the dawn of the twentieth century by the failing Ottoman Empire, had made the fatal choice of joining the losing side. The Ottomans, under the rule of a group of reckless and cavalier reformers called the Young Turks, sided with Germany and Kaiser Wilhelm II, the vainglorious emperor who dreamed of being the conqueror of Europe and the mythical Middle East like his idol, Napoleon, but similarly ended up making a mess of both. After nine million were dead in the trenches, the Ottoman Empire was no more.

The Russian tsar, who joined World War I with visions of taking control of Constantinople and unfettered access to the Mediterranean, wasn't around to claim his share of the slaughtered goods. The Russian Empire had collapsed in wars with the Bolsheviks, leaving England and France to feast on the Ottoman carcass. They carved out mandates and anointed kingdoms.

Lebanon, a Christian enclave on the Mediterranean coast, was of special interest to France. Many French crusaders had passed through the Lebanese cities of Tyre and Sidon on their way to Jerusalem. Syria, once one of the most important of the semiautonomous Ottoman regions, went to France as well, although much reduced in size. The British took Jordan as their special project, then called Transjordan—a “desert kingdom” that had never existed. Further south, Sunni Muslim Wahhabi fanatics aligned with Ibn Saud, a warrior chief from a desert outpost in central Arabia, and conquered what is now Saudi Arabia with their unbending religious zeal and British-supplied guns.

Egypt, the greatest of all the Middle East's ancient empires, was a British-run show as well, largely administered from the UK's embassy on the Nile and the bar of the Shepherd's Hotel. Iraq was a jigsaw puzzle, a forced combination of three Ottoman provinces, each dominated by a different ethnic or religious group: the Kurds in the north, Sunni Arabs in the center, and Shiites in the south. The British began suppressing revolts in Iraq almost as soon as they took charge of the jumbled creation.

The tiny Gulf States of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates were considered of little consequence, convenient ports on the way to India, populated by a smattering of pearl divers and camel drivers. These little kingdoms were left to local emirs who later became among the world's richest men when oil was discovered under their sands.

The most problematic of Britain's new responsibilities, the child who cried loudest at night, was Palestine, promised to the Jews as a homeland without informing the Palestinian inhabitants that their farms and villages were part of the deal.

The mandates and European-advised kingdoms muddled along until Europe decided to attempt suicide again in World War II. After that, France and England had neither the money nor the political will to remain as the Middle East's shepherd. The United States became the region's new godfather.

The Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957 promised Middle Eastern countries economic and military aid in times of crisis. The Carter Doctrine specifically vowed to protect the Persian Gulf. The United States saw the Middle East as a battleground in its global struggle against Soviet communism. Cold War politics, support for Israel, and access to oil determined policy toward the Middle East.

A new generation of Arab leaders emerged under the American umbrella, a crop of Arab nationalists and autocrats. But they were paper tigers. While their leaders shouted over their state-controlled radio stations about Arab unity and Muslim power, the Arab states were serial losers.



wars against the tiny Jewish state of Israel, losing Palestine in 1948 and then, in a single week, large chunks of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in 1967. Only the strongest of the Arab despots survived the humiliations. They became the Middle East's strongmen. They were secular, nationalist, corrupt and without exception brutal to their own people. Their names became synonymous with the nations: The Assad family in Syria. Egypt's military men: Nasser, Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak. Tunisia's "Little Mubarak," Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali. Libya's flamboyantly bizarre colonel Mu'ammar Gadhafi. Iraq's gangster thug Saddam Hussein.

Over the years, I met many of them. Saddam had a terrifying gaze. I wanted to take a step back when he looked me in the eye. Even though I saw him through a glass screen in a courtroom when he was facing a death sentence, he still looked like a man who meant business and seemed as if he could order your death with no more concern than knocking the ash off his cigar. Gadhafi, whom I saw in Tripoli just months before he was killed, seemed like a washed-up, strung-out rock star with eyes hidden behind sunglasses, his face hanging and tired, but he had a commanding enough presence to draw crowds of adoring, mostly female, fans. Mubarak, whom I saw often at press events at his palace in Cairo, was initially considered to be a competent ruler, but with age increasing he seemed like a stubborn old man surrounded by generals in tight uniforms and civilian advisors in bad suits. When I met the second president from the Assad clan, Bashar, at his palace overlooking Damascus, he looked awkward and had the detached air of a rich kid who grew up abroad and had no feeling for his people or concern for their lives.

These were some of the big men who inherited the state system carved out of the Middle East after World War I and the brief mandate period that followed it. They were powerful enough to recover from their countries' losses to Israel. They were part of the system the United States depended on for decades to keep a volatile and religious region of rich governments and poor people in line, and to keep the oil flowing. In the end, however, the big men were all undone by a fatal combination of their own poor management and the actions and inactions of two two-term US administrations: Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

For twenty years, I watched the rise and fall of the big men, and the chaos that followed their demise. This was the slice of the Middle East's history I witnessed firsthand.

When I arrived in the region in 1996, Mubarak, Ben Ali, Saddam Hussein, Gadhafi, and the other big men were untouchable institutions. They were the embodiments of the states they ran. They were called al-Rais, an Arabic derivation of "the head," and without them the body didn't dare move. Insulting al-Rais in public would get you fired or arrested. It was a crime for fishmongers in Egypt and Iraq to wrap their Nile perch and red mullet in newspapers that had the president's photograph on them. It was understood that big men stole and appointed their children and wives to high-profile and well-paid charities and political posts. The people were under-educated and under-employed, but the states held together, maintained a cold peace with Israel, and kept producing oil and shipping it out.

Of course, all the big men had rivals. They were all opposed by Islamic dreamers and fundamentalists. Islam has never accepted a division of church and state. For Islamists the distinction is nonsensical and heretical. In their eyes, Islam is a perfect system handed down by Allah himself through his chosen vessel with specific instructions on how men and women should manage their daily lives. So why wouldn't states also use it to administer their affairs? If Allah dropped a user manual from heaven, shouldn't all humans and their leaders read it and follow it? The big men imprisoned and tortured their Islamist rivals. Gadhafi locked them in Abu Salim Prison where in 1996 guards massacred 1,200 inmates. Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, killed a

estimated twenty thousand residents of the city of Hama in 1982 to crush an uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Saddam is thought to have massacred over one hundred thousand Shiites and rebels after the 1991 Gulf War, although the exact number may never be known. He imprisoned Sunni fanatics too. Guards punished them by drilling perfectly round holes in their shins with power drills. I've seen the scars. Saddam imprisoned anyone who exhibited the slightest hint of religious radicalism. It was considered seditious and disloyal, which made the accusations by the Bush administration that he was in league with Osama bin Laden to plot and execute the 9/11 attacks so preposterous. Saddam was a murderous tyrant, but Islamic al-Qaeda-style radicals came to Iraq because of the US invasion and not, as the Bush administration claimed, the other way around.

The Middle East I knew under the big men was angry, oppressed, and rotten to the core. I like to think of the Middle East back then as a row of decaying houses that looked ornate, impressive, and sturdy from the outside but were full of termites and mold. Like hollowed-out trees, the states that looked strong from the outside could be toppled by a slight push. President George W. Bush gave them a hard shove. Through six years of direct military action, by invading, occupying, and wildly mismanaging Iraq, the Bush administration broke the status quo that had existed since 1967. He knocked over the first house. In the years that followed, Obama, elected by a public opposed to more adventurism in the Middle East, broke the status quo even further through inconsistent action.

President Obama encouraged uprisings in the name of democracy in Cairo, turned his back on Mubarak, supported rebels with force in Libya, and then wavered on Syria. Red lines were crossed. Promises were broken. Trust was lost. The combined impact of Bush's aggressive interventionism and Obama's timidity and inconsistency completely destroyed the status quo. The United States didn't create the Sunni-Shia conflict: it began over a millennium before the Declaration of Independence. The United States didn't create ISIS: its brand of backward intolerance and violence has been a part of wars in the Islamic world since the earliest days of the faith and helped found modern Saudi Arabia. The United States isn't responsible for giving the Kurdish people a state or denying them one. Although everyone in the Middle East tends to blame Washington for everything from car bombs to the weather, the United States isn't responsible for the woes of the Middle East. But like old houses that were barely standing, Washington's actions and missteps pushed them off their foundations and exposed the rot within, unleashing the madness of the Iraq war, the bloodbath in Syria, Libya's post-Gadhafi anarchy, and ISIS.

I have watched the Middle East in a momentous transition. I saw a historic turning point. For twenty years, I saw the big men at their prime, and chronicled their downfall and the mayhem that followed. It took from 1967 to 2003—over three decades—to build the big men. It took a decade from 2003 to 2013—to destroy them. I suspect a new generation of big men will return. No people can tolerate chaos forever. Dictators will offer a way out and many of the exhausted and brutalized people of the Middle East will accept them, and I suspect Washington will as well.

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**MOROCCO, 1987. I GUESS THAT'S** when it all started. I was thirteen and staying with my parents at the Mamounia, a glamorous hotel in Marrakech. My father worked on Wall Street, and I had a comfortable upbringing. We traveled a lot.

Each morning the staff put copies of the *International Herald Tribune* in embroidered bags outside the guests' rooms.

One evening, while waiting for my parents to come down for dinner, I passed the time reading the *Herald Tribune*. I was entranced. It was the first time I had been exposed to international news. Not just breaking news such as earthquakes and wars and diplomatic breakthroughs, but also news of art fairs in Paris and theater in London and opera in Italy.

I remember sitting on a staircase, next to a horse carriage. My mother came down the stairs typically all dressed up—there was a bit of another era in my mother. And she said, “The *Herald Tribune* is based in Paris. I can imagine you working for it.”

I thought, That’s it. I want to live in Paris and I want to write for the *International Herald Tribune*. I’ll have an apartment overlooking the Champs-Élysées, and I’ll wear a white suit and smoke cigarettes out of a bone holder. That was the vision.

While at Stanford, I decided that vision would be my life. I was drawn by the romance of it, by the prospect of traveling to new and exotic places, by sitting in an apartment overlooking the city and writing dispatches about intrigues and politics and spies and damsels and all the rest.

The core of the vision never changed, but the venue did. As my college graduation approached, I asked myself, Where is the place to be? It’s not 1936, so I don’t want to go to Paris. It’s not 1986, so I don’t want to go to Eastern Europe. It’s 1996. What’s going to be the story of my generation? I thought it would be either China or the Middle East. I assumed China would be a business story and I wasn’t much interested in business stories. I thought they were a little bit boring and would keep me chained to my desk. So I settled on the Middle East.

I had mixed feelings about Stanford and felt cooped up in Palo Alto, but I’ll give it this: my international-relations classes got me thinking about the world geopolitically. With the Cold War over, the United States was the dominant hegemonic power, as my professors liked to say. And in a unipolar world, clashes between cultures, regional and religious groups would be the big foreign stories. That made the Middle East the biggest story.

I pulled out a map and traced the countries with my finger. Iraq? Saddam Hussein was in power and journalists couldn’t do much there. Jordan? Not much going on, and not an exciting place to be. Syria? Similar problem to Iraq. Jerusalem, Israel, and the West Bank? I thought Israel was an interesting possibility, but the country was already flooded with journalists, and I thought I would have a hard time finding fresh stories.

That left Egypt. It was the biggest country in the region, and I didn’t think many journalists were there. It also had the great value of simply being Egypt, with the pyramids and the whole pharaonic history, which I love.

So a few weeks after graduating, I embarked on the dream that began taking shape when I was a kid. I arrived in Cairo in June 1996 with two suitcases and about \$2,000 in my pocket. My apartment was in a seven-story walk-up in a neighborhood called Mit Ouba on the Giza side of Cairo. It was as barren and dirty as a flophouse, with almost no furniture and nothing on the walls. Dust was everywhere, a fine dust that gets between your teeth, in your eyes and nose, the kind of dust you can’t get rid of. When I sat on the sofa, dust rose like a cloud. Several of the windows had no glass. I covered them with cardboard in my forlorn battle against the dust. And this was one of the bigger and better apartments in my building.

President Hosni Mubarak’s state didn’t really have much reach in Mit Ouba. I never saw black government cars or soldiers or even police. The narrow alleys were filled with children and trash piles and piles of trash. I couldn’t understand why people didn’t pick it up. Cigarette packs, empty potato chip bags, and cookie wrappers swirled in the hot, dry air. Sheep stood tethered, splotched with pink painted on their fatty tails to show they’d been inspected and deemed halal. Goats

munched on plastic bags. This was the meat Egyptians could look forward to.

~~The water came in a trickle because the building was only supposed to be five stories and the~~ top two were illegal. So naturally the owner didn't buy an extra pump to push the water up the last two flights. When the water did arrive, the pressure was insufficient to use the handheld showerhead piece. I had to hold it almost to the ground to get any water out of it at all.

The building lacked central gas, and air-conditioning was an impossible dream. Everyone had a gas canister for his or her stove, and when the man who sold the canisters came by in his donkey cart, he would bang on them with a wrench. So when you heard his metal drum, you'd run downstairs and get him to install a fresh canister.

I came into my apartment one time and found six guys from the building cooking on my stove. They didn't even seem surprised when I walked in. They kept cooking and tactfully made something for me while I sat down at the table.

When they'd finished cooking their meals, they cleaned the dishes, thanked me very much, and took their food back to their homes. I guess they figured that a single foreigner had gas to spare. It was actually a pleasant evening, a good opportunity for me to practice my Arabic on them. I didn't feel as if they were exploiting me in any way; it was just the idea of borrowing salt taken one step further.

There was no crime in Mit Ouba, which amazed me. I had a computer and a fax machine in my apartment, but I left it unlocked. Everyone in the building left his or her apartment unlocked, not that people had much to steal. I never heard of anyone being mugged. I never heard about a rape, but I wouldn't have anyway. Victims were often married off to their attackers.

I went out on the streets dressed as a foreigner, and my light complexion made me stand out even more. I usually had money in my pockets, certainly more money than the local guys, who had little or no money in their pockets. But I was never accosted, never threatened in any way.

All the people in the neighborhood had debts, including me. Everyone kept a tab at the local grocery store. You paid for the canned meat (appetizingly called "luncheon meat"), cookies, or soap, and so on at the end of the month, or whenever the grocer decided the debt was too big for him to carry. It depended on the reliability of the customer. I usually got to around one hundred pounds, which back then was worth about \$35, before the grocer started asking for money. The idea of the tab was to give people time to get over the hump until payday. If someone was late paying his debt or disputed the amount, a cleric was called in, oaths were sworn on the Koran, and the matter was settled.

Egypt was a hard place to run, perhaps beyond the capabilities of any government. Back then around 60 million people lived on a tiny strip of green that zigzagged up the Nile River like a crack in the desert. People drank from the Nile and dumped sewage in it too. The education system was abysmal. What kept it all together was Islam. Islam was the solution, or at least that's what the Muslim Brotherhood was selling. The Brotherhood was a political and religious organization that was officially illegal. President Mubarak let the group work in the open so the government could monitor its activities. The Brotherhood took a strict religious line and effectively ran most of the schools, factories, and trade unions. It operated a parallel government, funded with donations from its 2 million members.

If you were a foreigner in Cairo in 1996, you could forget about privacy. You were never alone. Everywhere you went, people would come up and start talking to you. Some of it was just curiosity—about the United States and why I came to live in Egypt. Sometimes people were also trying to drum up business. If a man was a plumber, he'd talk to me for a little while, then he'd let me know

if I needed a plumber, he was my guy. No one was ever hostile to me. The people were wonderful, welcoming and often invited me into their homes. These encounters taught me a lot about the country and helped me learn Arabic quickly. Within a few months I was holding basic conversations and felt comfortable with the language after the first year or so.

The more religious people wanted to talk about Islam and invited me to convert. I became a “devout” Muslim by osmosis. I didn’t pray or believe, but in Mit Ouba you had to act Muslim. Language was culture out loud. I learned Arabic the way it was spoken in Mit Ouba. Every sentence began with “If Allah wills it” or “By the grace of Allah.” When a shopkeeper wished me *salawat alaikum*, “peace be with you,” I learned to answer with the forced poetry of “and peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah and His blessings.” I mumbled “In the name of Allah” before taking a sip of water. If I hiccupped, I said, “Praise Allah.”

For two years, I almost never spoke to an Egyptian woman, unless she sold bread or vegetables, but even those precious interactions—exchanges of produce and crumpled currency—were limited. There was never any physical contact. No hands on the shoulder, no hugs, and certainly no Parisian-style double kisses between *jeune femme et homme*. Even when the old, veiled woman who sold sprouting onions and parsley from a wet blanket handed me change, I was careful not to touch her fingers. The rules were clear without an explanation. I don’t know what the protocol was for sitting next to a woman. I never sat next to one.

In college, back in the States, if I was with a group of guys and an attractive woman came into the room, her presence would change the air, change the way the men interacted with one another. That’s a good thing. It’s the spice of life. But in Egypt they were afraid of that. It was like putting a contaminant in the water. Women are Eve. Women are to be protected and also to be feared; their sexuality is dangerous and can make you have impure thoughts and act in an impure way. You can lose control.

The result was a kind of social fraternity, a world composed almost entirely of men. In exchange for celibacy and seclusion, the fraternity was safe and even gentle. Men didn’t curse. They seldom raised their voices and were elaborately generous, especially with food. It was impossible to eat on a bus because you had to offer more than half of whatever you had to the person next to you. You were obliged to tear your sandwich and put it in his hands. He was obliged to refuse and say, “May Allah preserve you.” “May Allah preserve *you*,” you had to say, and close his hands around the half sandwich.

Shortly after I arrived in Cairo, I applied for a job with the *Middle East Times*, a weekly owned by the Reverend Moon’s Unification Church. This good, feisty paper covered news, sports, and culture and a page or two of society news. It was the same kind of paper that was put on our doorknob in Marrakech, but on a much smaller scale, written for diplomats, tourists, visiting businessmen, and expats.

The *Times* didn’t have any openings, but the publisher said he would keep in touch. Six months later, he called me at my apartment and asked if I was looking for work. When I said yes, he invited me to his apartment that night and offered me a job. The salary was \$1,000 a month, in cash. I accepted at once and asked when he wanted me to start. “How about tomorrow?” he replied.

When I got to the office, I quickly understood the rush. The place was virtually empty. The publisher had fired a popular editor in chief, and the staff had walked out in protest. The only people left were an Egyptian sportswriter, a few accountants and advertising managers, and a Sudanese reporter. I called all the stringers the remaining staff knew and asked them to write something, just about anything would do. Somehow we managed to put out a paper with sixteen

pages, half the usual number. I stayed on as news editor and chief reporter. I started writing about Islamic groups and the Muslim Brotherhood, subjects that would define my working life for the next twenty years.

One night, I invited a man and his son to my apartment. Before my guests arrived, I took a taxi to Zamalek, the ritzy neighborhood where most of the expats and diplomats lived. I bought imported ravioli and spent the next several hours mincing garlic and dicing tomatoes. It felt good to be doing something familiar. The falling of the knife relaxed me immensely. I bought a bottle of nice Italian olive oil for \$10. It smelled clean and earthy and far from Cairo.

My guest was a writer for a religious newspaper. He showed up with his son, who looked about six. I served them cheese ravioli in my homemade tomato sauce. I'd lived in Sicily for a year in high school. I make good sauce. It was still steaming in the plastic bowl when I brought it out. The boy was disappointed. My Arabic was just good enough so that I could follow him. He wanted meat. He thought since he was eating out, and with a foreigner, that there would be meat.

"I want *kofta*," the boy whined. In Egypt, *kofta* is grilled minced lamb. His father looked at him, horrified at his behavior, and tugged his arm in a way that showed he wasn't joking.

"Can't you see this man is very poor? Now eat your potatoes. We'll have *kofta* at home."

After the meal, the man thanked me with pity in his voice. He too didn't care much for my ravioli. He barely touched them. The boy maybe took one bite. But my poverty endeared me to the writer, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. He introduced me to the "family."

The Muslim Brotherhood's headquarters was a small apartment in El Manial, on an island straddled by the Nile near Zamalek. I waited in a big chair as fat men in oversize suits looked suspiciously at me until I was given an audience with Mustafa Mashhur, the Brotherhood's *murshid*, or supreme guide. I was interviewing Mashhur for the newspaper.

We talked about Afghanistan. He supported the Taliban, which had just taken over Kabul, but he said they were making some mistakes. Girls should be educated, but kept at home as mothers and nurturers. He told me about Jews and how their religion was holy and godly, but that as individuals they were crafty warmongers and land thieves. He said sex was good and should be enjoyed, but that veils were needed because men and women couldn't contain their carnal nature. Female circumcision—in which a girl's clitoris is dug out of her vagina with a razor—was good, he said, provided it was done safely. Israel had to be destroyed, but he didn't think Egypt should attack right away. He was an extremist preaching moderation. He supported hateful nonsense, but he always dialed it back a few degrees. It was the Brotherhood's way of pretending—and believing—that they were moderates.

Meeting Mashhur was my secret handshake. After that, I had access to the bureaucrats and government offices that made Cairo creak along. The men I met were all members of the Brotherhood. They were the middle managers in this country of tens of thousands of middle managers.

Cairo was, and remains, an ugly, cement-colored, park-free city, dotted with a few bewildering mind-expanding splendors that make the whole place manic and magical. There was always noise, dirt, and exhaust, the honking of horns and the screeching of brakes.

My Brotherhood contacts made life easier for me. They held the ubiquitous stamp required for every inane piece of paperwork. They kept the giant logbooks in government offices. When I needed to renew my residency permit at the Mogamma, the government administration building at Tahrir Square, I didn't have to wait in line with all the Sudanese refugees. I knew a guy who knew a guy. The Brotherhood, as the name promised, was a family. I wasn't a relative, or even a distant

cousin, but I was in its orbit. In Mafia terms, I wasn't a wiseguy, or a made guy, but a trusted guy, friend of the family's.

I became obsessed with the Brotherhood and their hit-and-run battles with the thugs from Amn al-Dawla, the State Security service. I wrote about the Brotherhood every week. The expats and diplomats loved it. I was their inside man. The members of the Brotherhood loved it too. I was their window to the outside. This was before the Internet was a big thing. I was invited to the Brotherhood's *iftar* dinners, at which they broke their Ramadan fast. The Brotherhood called me whenever their members were arrested or there was a symposium at *Al Shaab*, a religious and socialist newspaper. Printed in blue ink, the paper ran cartoons of Jews with pointy ears, blood dripping from fangs, and swastikas on their foreheads. The Zionists had been transmogrified into National Socialists. The symposiums at *Al Shaab* were usually about Gaza or the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and how the West was raping both of them. America was the new crusader, blinded and tricked by Jews and their lobby in Washington.

It wasn't long before the government started to wonder what the hell an Arabic-speaking twenty-four-year-old American kid was doing hanging around with the Brotherhood. I was followed constantly and my phone was tapped. I could hear men listening to my conversations. They must have been smokers, judging by their coughs. Sometimes I heard clinking, like a tin glass bell somewhere in the background. The agents from Amn al-Dawla were stirring their tea.

I grew to hate talking to members of the Brotherhood. Their minds were a cage of their own creation. Their pronouncements were always the same. Everything wrong with Egypt and their lives was somebody else's fault. The world wanted to keep Muslims down so they wouldn't restore the caliphate and take over civilization again. Jews were bloodsucking cheats, scorned even by their own prophets. America was afraid of Islam's greatness. There was a plot against Islam because the plotters knew if Allah's will—as written down in the Koran—was truly carried out, the capitalist Zionist system of American hegemony would be destroyed.

The Brotherhood's diatribes against Israel, women, gays, and the Elders of Zion made me nauseated. Sometimes I would rush to one of the many casinos in Cairo to drink whiskey and play blackjack until dawn. I needed to escape the caged mind. I wanted to deliberately do something the Brotherhood wouldn't like. Gambling and drinking felt like streaking through a football stadium. I made more money at the blackjack tables than I did as a journalist. I was an über-infidel and my nose was under the Brotherhood's tent.

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**THE BROTHERHOOD'S LOGO IS TWO** crossed swords with a Koran floating between the blades. Beneath the swords is a single phrase, "And Prepare," a quote from the Koran on "the spoils of war." The full quote is "And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged." The two-word slogan is an instruction to the brotherhood to prepare for battle against Allah's enemies.

By the 1990s, President Mubarak was in his late sixties and had already become an old fool. His main concern was making the army rich and loyal. He let the Brotherhood dominate the mosque. Worst of all, he let the group infect the Egyptian mind with its hateful nonsense.

The revolution Egyptians needed wasn't for political power and democracy, but a revolution in thinking, a revolt against the Brotherhood's bile. Egyptians needed to strip away the conspira-

theories, anti-Semitism, and litany of victimization that passed for education. Sometimes ~~thought the only way to fix Egypt would be to drop books on it. Open the bomb doors of B-52~~ and let Kant and Locke, Hemingway and Gloria Steinem, rain from the heavens. But the big men let the Brotherhood and extreme Wahhabi clerics pollute their people's minds. It kept them angry with the West, Israel, Washington, and an international American-Zionist conspiracy instead of blaming their leaders for the nation's pathetic performance on the global stage. The Arab world at the time the big men was a deliberately stupid place.

For decades, Egypt—and every autocracy in the Middle East—was obsessed with controlling the media. Anything that had the potential to influence crowds, including newspapers and movies, was censored. I knew how rigorous the process was because I met frequently with an Egyptian censor. Every week we had to submit a proof of the *Middle East Times* to the censor before going to print. We had to finish writing on Wednesday night so the proof would be on the censor's desk Thursday morning. The censor got back to us Thursday afternoon so we could make the required changes and catch a flight to Athens, where we printed the paper. The next day the newspapers were shipped back to Cairo to go on sale. We printed in Greece so the newspaper would be classified as a foreign publication. If we printed in Egypt, we would have been considered domestic press, which was even more tightly controlled.

The censor was proud of his job and felt he was doing us a favor by allowing our little impostor scam. He even agreed to sit for an interview, in which he denied there was any censorship in Egypt. I ran the interview under the headline "Censor Denies Censorship in Egypt." Luckily, he missed the irony.

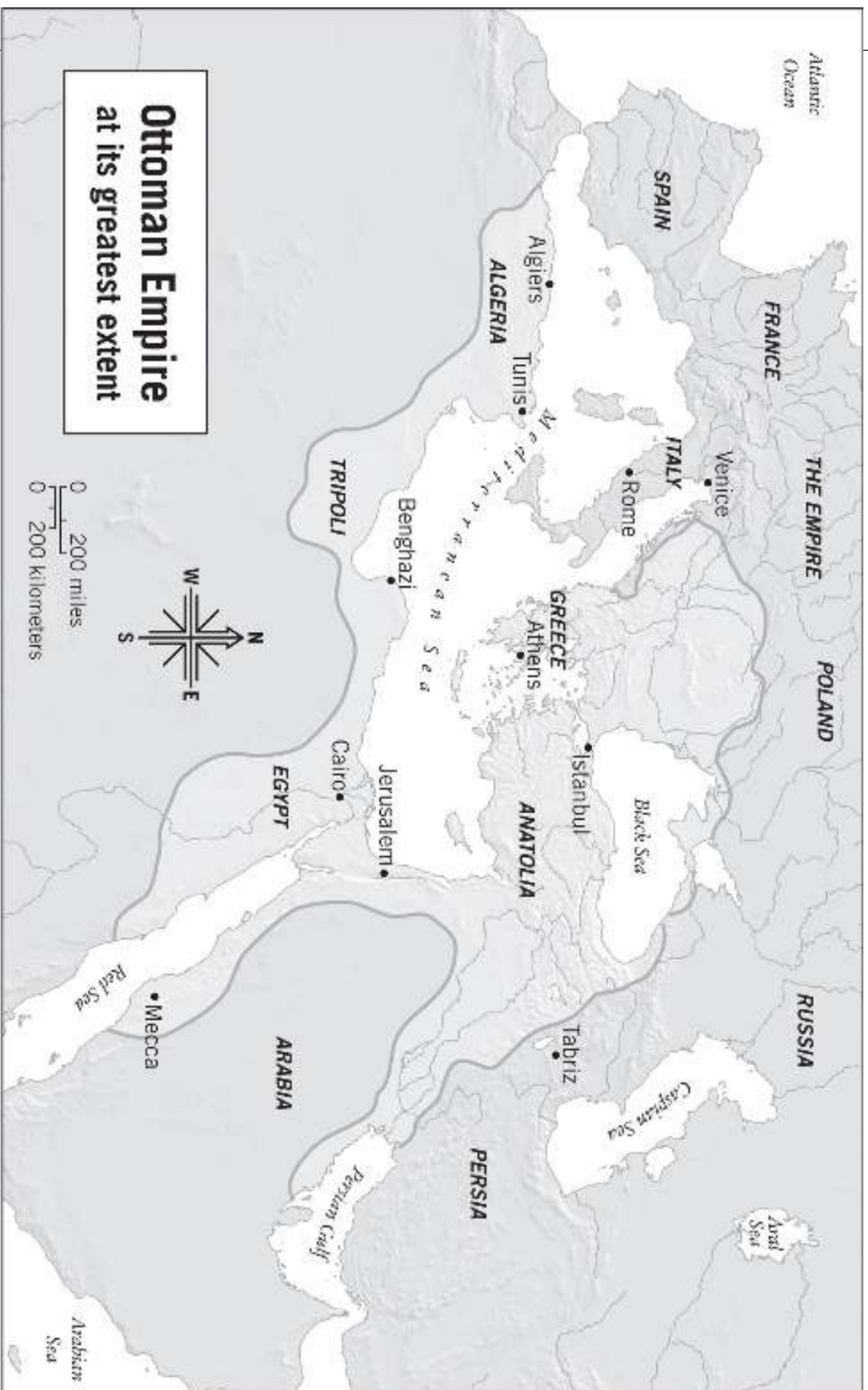
Sometimes the censor would cut a few sentences. We would fill the extra space this created by making the advertisements a little bigger. If an entire article was cut, however, we'd have to run a blank space. I thought it would be amusing to print photographs of President Mubarak in the white spaces where the articles had been removed. Not everyone got the joke. Some of my friends thought I was overcome by Egyptian patriotism. We decided instead to run a caption in the white space stating, "The article here was removed by the censor." The censor demanded that we stop. We stopped for a few weeks, but then went back to it.

By then I had learned that the rhetoric of the Brotherhood and Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group, a party that advocated the most austere form of Sunni Islam) was only the outward manifestation of deeper rage that could not be sated by praising Allah and extolling virgins who smelled like mangoes. This rage could only find expression in violence, as I learned when my phone at the paper rang on the afternoon of September 18, 1997, two days after my twenty-fourth birthday.

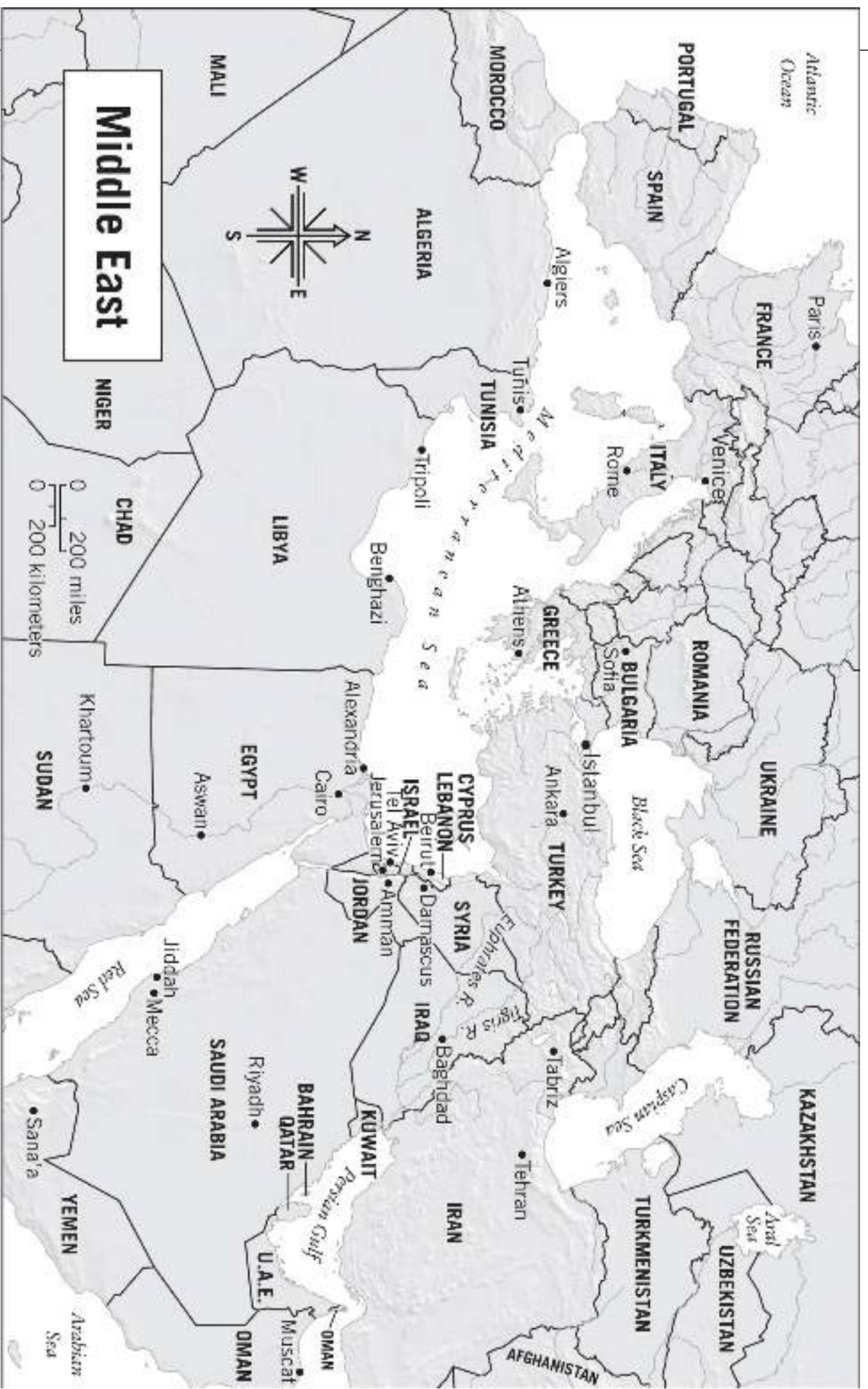


**THE OFFICES OF THE MIDDLE** East times were in the Zamalek neighborhood of Cairo, on an island in the Nile. Zamalek was a cosmopolitan oasis, with nineteenth-century apartment blocks and villas. It was known for its restaurants and cafés and was a favorite of European expats. You could go into a restaurant in Zamalek, find a waiter who spoke English, and get a beer and Western food.

When the phone rang at midday, one of our tipsters said there had been a shooting on a tour bus in front of the Egyptian Museum. The museum is in Tahrir Square, the busiest part of downtown, the Times Square of Cairo. The newspaper was a short hop away. You go across one bridge and you're almost there. I jumped in a cab and arrived five minutes later. Our tipster had been fast because the attack had just happened.



**Ottoman Empire**  
at its greatest extent



The scene was chaotic. The bus was still burning. The police and soldiers had their guns drawn but hadn't put a cordon around the bus. They were still looking for the attackers. I got on the bus and looked down the rows of seats and didn't see any blood.

I just saw people who were melted to their Styrofoam seats. Fat was dripping off them because they had literally been roasted alive. Some were dead on the floor because when the attacker got on the bus, he killed the driver, opened fire with his assault rifle, and then started lobbing Molotov cocktails. Nine German tourists were killed.

It was so senseless. These people were just going to the Egyptian Museum. They had done nothing wrong. It was the opposite of a crime of passion. It was a calculated crime to achieve a political objective. The militants wanted to hurt the Egyptian government by scaring tourists away. By killing Christian tourists the attackers could also claim they had struck a blow against the infidels.

This was the first time I had come face-to-face with the other side of fundamentalism. The fundamentalism that I saw in my neighborhood was sexist and misogynistic and small-minded, but it wasn't violent. It was giving and loving and brotherly. It was about helping the poor, and since everybody was poor, that meant everybody helping everybody. There wasn't the kind of urban meanness you find in many American cities. It was as if a farm community had been transplanted to the city.

The attack on the bus showed the dark side of the fundamentalist mentality—the rage, the anger, the hate, the feeling of being left behind by history, the sense that Islam was under attack and needed to defend itself. The gunmen at Tahrir Square, and the terrorists who have gone on murderous rampages since then, see themselves as vigilantes for Islam. In their twisted minds, they are serving the greater glory of Islam.

Two months after the Cairo museum attack, assailants dressed as security guards and armed with automatic weapons and knives approached the Temple of Hatshepsut, the queen pharaoh, in Luxor in southern Egypt. They went on a forty-five-minute killing spree in the temple, mutilating many victims with machetes. Four Egyptians and fifty-eight tourists, including thirty-six Swiss and ten Japanese, were killed. The savagery was breathtaking. The gunmen shoved leaflets identifying themselves into the mouths and wounds of victims. As they fled to the hills, one terrorist was wounded by police, then shot dead by his compatriots. The five other attackers, taking refuge in a cave, machine-gunned themselves to death rather than be captured.

I count Tahrir Square and Luxor as the first al-Qaeda-style attacks. They were savage attacks, what terrorism experts and security officials would later call “spectacular.” They were designed to be both brutal and headline grabbing. Within months, in February 1998, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and three compatriots announced a “jihad against Jews and crusaders.” That August hundreds were killed in simultaneous bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

I had been looking into the militant groups and started digging deeper after the Luxor attack. The name that kept coming up—this was before the declaration of jihad—was al-Zawahiri. An Egyptian surgeon from a prominent family, he had lived in an affluent neighborhood of Cairo called Maadi before going off to Afghanistan to fight with bin Laden. He was bin Laden's right hand man and became al-Qaeda's leader after bin Laden was killed in 2011.

I think of bin Laden as an angry historian. He was quite widely read and thought a lot about what he was doing and why. He was eloquent and soft-spoken. He didn't come across as bloodthirsty. He was a bit effeminate in his mannerisms and in his speech. His speeches were hard to understand because they were so full of poetry. He obviously thought of himself more as

philosopher and spiritual guide than as someone who mixed explosives.

The anger of people such as bin Laden came from what they witnessed in their own lives, but also had deeper roots. It dated to AD 610, when the Archangel Gabriel came to Mohammed and roughly demanded that he "recite" Allah's dictation, which the Prophet did for twenty-three years. These words from Allah were written down by his followers (Mohammed was illiterate) and collected in the Koran. Islam offered an appealing message: that all men are equal in prayer, humbled together in communal submission, rich and poor side by side. Mohammed kept the rituals of the new faith simple and conversion easy. He asked for five daily prayers, a weekly gathering with a short sermon, partial fasting for a month each year, and a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca, called the hajj, for those who could afford it.

From the beginning, Islam also provided the foundation for an empire. Unlike Christianity, Islam had no concept of what in more recent times became the separation of church and state. Islam expanded by conquest as well as by conversion. The early Muslims were hardy and effective fighters, attacking in small bands and retreating into the desert. After Mohammed's death, Islam spread rapidly into the Persian and Byzantine empires despite internecine strife that resulted in the assassination of three of its first four caliphs, the "successors" to Mohammed and rulers of the faithful. Those early assassinations led to the split between Sunnis and Shiites, battle lines drawn fourteen centuries ago that US troops would encounter, and help reignite, in Iraq. There is no distinction between modern and ancient history in the Middle East. No region is more obsessed with its own past. Islam began as a force to be reckoned with, and Muslims have longed to return to their former glory.

Christianity, by contrast, spent three centuries in the shadows, dodging Rome's irregular but sometimes massive persecutions. Its fortunes began to change in 312 when Emperor Constantine the Great embraced the Christian God as his protector and then, in an audacious and revolutionary move, not only legalized Christianity but made it the empire's officially favored religion. He moved the seat of his empire from Rome to Byzantium, soon to be renamed Constantinople (which became Istanbul after it was conquered by a Muslim-led army in 1453). Through divisive councils and synods, Christianity refined and established itself over the next several hundred years.

In the eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, the Islamic world was a main center of culture and civilization. It was a leader in astronomy, algebra, and poetry, experiencing a golden age as Europe sank into the Dark Ages. While Vikings were plundering Europe, Muslims were translating Aristotle, building libraries, and developing surgical procedures. Muslims today know about this golden age and are nostalgic about it. There are costume dramas about this period on television in the Arab world every Ramadan. They are extremely popular.

The Crusades, waged intermittently from 1095 to 1291, but which continued in waves for centuries after that, were military campaigns sanctioned principally by the Roman Catholic Church to reclaim the Holy Land. American students barely learn about the Crusades, but they are essential to understanding the wars of the last decade.

As Islam spread after Mohammed's death, Muslim armies began to threaten the great eastern Christian empire founded by Constantine, Byzantium. Constantine founded Constantinople and with it the seat of Christian Rome in AD 330, but within only three centuries Islam was already challenging it. Byzantium tried to fight back, but the armies of Islam were winning. By the end of the eleventh century, Byzantium was so weakened and frightened by the growth of its Muslim neighbor that the emperor in Constantinople reached across the Mediterranean to ask fellow Christians in Europe to come to their rescue. By now European Christians were pulling themselves

out of the Dark Ages and were in a position to help. Those wars, launched by Europe to save Byzantium and free Jerusalem from Muslim occupation, were the Crusades. They were ping-pong wars, some won by Christians, others by Muslims. From a Muslim perspective, modern wars launched by Christian powers into Islamic lands are still considered Crusades because they reflect the same basic East vs. West, Islam vs. Christianity, power struggle. When President Bush said he was launching a crusade after 9/11, many Muslims took his words at face value. The medieval Crusades left both Muslims and Christians politically and militarily exhausted. But the worst was yet to come. The two sides were about to be blindsided by a people from the harsh plains of Asia. The Mongol invasions of Genghis Khan and his descendants came like tidal waves. Constantinople was saved by negotiations and its three layers of walls, but Baghdad wasn't as fortunate. In 1258 the Mongols sacked Baghdad and executed the caliph. Several accounts say he was rolled in a rug or put in a sack and trampled by horses. Others say he was strangled or locked in a cell and starved to death.

Mosques and libraries in Baghdad were burned. Estimates of the number killed range from one hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand. The Mongol armies pursued a scorched-earth strategy. If Muslims surrendered, their cities were spared. If they resisted, every living thing was destroyed. The destruction of Baghdad ended the classical Muslim empires established by Mohammed's successors. The Mongols killed the first and most glorious Arab caliphate.

From the debris left by the Mongols, new Muslim empires rose, absorbing both the shattered Arab caliphate and emasculated Byzantium. It was the time of the House of Osman, the Ottomans, as they came to be known, a Turkish Muslim tribe. For six hundred years, the Ottomans, "the Turk," as they were called in Europe, would rule Islam's most extensive empire. The Arab caliphate was weakened by the Crusades and killed by the Mongols. The Turkish Ottomans picked up the pieces and forged a massive Islamic empire.

The Ottoman Empire grew so powerful that it was finally able to deliver on Mohammed's prophecy and capture Constantinople for Islam. The Ottoman sultan Mehmed II camped just outside Constantinople's walls. He fought with the conviction that the world should have only one leader, him, and one religion, Islam. Once again, Constantinople's triple wall was its greatest defense. Mehmed had engineers tunnel under the walls to collapse them from below. He forged massive cannons to blast through. Finally, the walls of Constantinople, and with them all of Byzantium, came crumbling down. In May 1453, Mehmed entered Constantinople as conqueror, the title by which he's still remembered. He was only twenty-one years old.

The victorious Muslim armies turned Hagia Sophia, Christendom's most monumental church into a mosque. Minarets were added. The axis of the floor was even shifted so that it faced Mecca instead of Jerusalem. It would be as if St. Peter's were realigned so that its altar faced Saudi Arabia. Constantinople, seat of the Christian Roman Empire for more than a millennium, was now the capital of the Islamic Ottoman Empire.

As the Ottomans grew stronger and the eastern Mediterranean more hostile, Europe began to look for new territory and new markets. They turned their attention west, searching for a new world. In 1492, just forty years after the fall of Constantinople, Columbus landed on American shores.

But the Ottoman Empire was mainly agrarian and was steadily undone by technology and debt. The Ottomans never had an industrial revolution. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Europe had developed steam engines, trains, cotton mills, and factories. The Ottomans desperately wanted European technology and exports, and they borrowed heavily to get them. They ended up

leveraging their empire into the poorhouse. By the 1900s, the Ottoman Empire was effectively run by European creditors and foreign embassies based in the upscale neighborhood of Pera, on a hilltop overlooking Hagia Sophia, the long-lost church.

As World War I approached, the empire was clearly dying. In 1908, a mysterious group of men who came to be known as the Young Turks pushed aside the tyrant Sultan Abdul Hamid II, turning him into a figurehead. The Young Turks were nationalists who worried that the European industrial powers were heading for war and that once it was over, the winners would carve up the Ottoman Empire.

They were absolutely right. The Young Turks were desperate to find a European ally. The empire was too big, and too strategic, standing right between Russia, Germany, Britain, and France to stay neutral. The Young Turks reached out to Britain and France, but were rebuffed. Britain didn't think the Ottomans, crippled with foreign debt and lacking a modern army, could offer much help in the war effort. The Young Turks ultimately made what would be the worst decision in the Ottoman Empire's six-century history. In October 1914, they entered the war in alliance with Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German emperor and king of Prussia. In short, they chose the losing side in a war that was to redraw the borders of what was then much of the known world.

After the war, at Sèvres, France, and other conferences, European leaders divided up the Ottoman Empire into the modern Middle East. Ottoman provinces were re-formed and cobbled together into states. The region was carved up with little regard to ethnic, religious, or territorial concerns. The flawed and cavalier treaties of World War I explain to a large degree why the Middle East remains unstable and angry today. Every Muslim schoolchild is taught this arc of history and resents it: Islam's golden era of the Arab caliphate, the Crusades, the Mongol devastation, the rise of the Ottomans, World War I, the carving up of the Middle East by Europe, and the poverty, weakness, and wars in the Muslim world of the last century. This is the basic and sad narrative taught at every mosque, and it has the benefit of being broadly accurate. Osama bin Laden preached this arc of history as well. He obsessed over it. His solution for changing it was to attack the West's greatest power, the United States, the modern crusader, bring it down, and push history's reset button so Islam could rise again.

There is a problem of course with this general historic narrative. It blames every problem Muslims face on the West. Another way of explaining the Middle East's chronic instability for the last century is that the Islamic world, which embraces all Muslims as brothers and sisters, has failed to adjust to the nation-state system that replaced the empires that rose and fell by a dominant civilization until World War I.

Even carefully drawn borders after the First World War would have been problematic in a region that had no concept of nation states or parliaments. But the European victors made a total hash of it. Ethnic minorities were divided and put in different states. The Kurdish people were scattered among five nations. Syria was reduced to a tiny fraction of the powerful Ottoman province it once was, even more insulting since it had once been a capital of the early caliphate. Iraq was cobbled together with different Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds and given almost no access to the sea. A Jewish entity was established by mandate in Palestine (it became the state of Israel in 1948). World War I and the treaties and promises made by Europeans after it left the Middle East hopelessly divided.

The Arab caliphate, which had survived the Crusades only to be destroyed by the Mongols, has been reborn with the Ottomans. Now in the modern era, while Americans landed men on the moon and Western science sequenced the human genome, the house of Islam was in pieces and humiliated, the shrapnel from a giant explosion, the afterthought of victorious European power.

This great decline is the basic grievance in the Middle East. It is why Osama bin Laden went to war with the West. It is why the United States has been able to do little to stop Islamic radicals who see nation-building as an attempt to reinforce a foreign system, trickery under the banner of democracy.

Ironically enough, the United States had almost nothing to do with the age-old conflict between Islam and the West. The founding of Constantinople, the birth of Islam, and the Crusades occurred centuries before North America was even colonized. The United States was only peripherally involved in creating the borders of the Middle East after World War I. This centuries-old conflict was not America's fight, but Washington blundered into it and chose to make stabilizing the Middle East its main foreign policy objective.

After World War II, and especially during the Cold War, the United States became the guardian of Middle East stability. Islamic fundamentalists believe the United States has been policing the Middle East full of divisions that were deliberately put there to keep the region weak, keep Israel secure, and keep pro-American autocracies in place in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and, until 1979, Iran—short, to keep Muslims locked in a nation-state system that thwarted the rightful destiny of Islam. The fundamentalists were convinced that it was Israel and the Jews who really understood the game, using American muscle to keep Islam at bay.

I think of bin Laden as a violent and angry historian, but he left major gaps. In the Muslim world according to bin Laden, the Ottomans hardly count. Islamic fundamentalists look back almost exclusively to the Arab caliphate, particularly its early years. Those who see history as bin Laden did are generally called Salafi Muslims. Those who want to act like bin Laden to change the system through violence are called Salafi jihadis. Al-Qaeda is a Salafi jihadi movement. Salafism is Islam as Allah recited it, and jihadi means “through war,” so it is a militant movement seeking an “originalist” form of Islam and willing to use force to get there. Salafism is often associated with the Wahhabi movement, an equally austere branch of Sunni Islam that arose in the early part of the eighteenth century. Wahhabis dominate Saudi Arabia, the paymaster and invisible hand behind many political machinations in the Middle East.

In Cairo, living among the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi dreamers, and seeing the horrors of what Salafi jihadis did at the Egyptian Museum and in Luxor, I delved deeper into the political side of the Islamic movement. I came in contact with a group called *Tabligh wa Dawa*. *Tabligh* means “inform” and *dawa* means “to call,” so roughly speaking the name of the group is “inform and call.” It's a Salafi group, not violent but strict in its adherence to the words of Mohammed. It conducts Islamic patrols to *inform* Muslims when they are straying from the Prophet's teachings and call them to the righteous path.

I wanted to get to know these people because they have the same mind-set as violent fundamentalists. If someone from al-Qaeda sat down with members of *Tabligh wa Dawa*, they would agree on everything except how to get from A to B. They would agree on the fundamental narration of history: that Islam was perfect and that the caliphate was destroyed by the Mongols, reborn under the Ottomans, destroyed again by the Europeans, and locked into submission by the nation-state structure enforced by America and Israel.

As far as getting from A to B, a leader of *Tabligh wa Dawa* would say, “There's nothing we can do about it, let's just go to the mosque and pray for better days.” Bin Laden would have replied, “No, we're going to knock down buildings, we're going to pull planes out of the sky, and we're going to kill tourists, and we're going to do whatever it takes to bring down the infidels.” Only a tiny portion of Muslims agree with bin Laden's tactics, but many millions understand the words



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