IN THE LION’S DEN

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF WASHINGTON’S BATTLE WITH SYRIA

ANDREW TABLER

“Riveting . . . a compelling insider’s account of life under the Assad regime.”
—Steven Heydemann, United States Institute of Peace
IN THE LION’S DEN
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Tabler, Andrew.
In the lion's den : an eyewitness account of Washington's battle with Syria /
Andrew Tabler. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-56976-843-3 (pbk.)
1. United States—Foreign relations—Syria. 2. Syria—Foreign relations—
United States. 3. Bush, George W. (George Walker), 1946- 4. Assad, Bashar,
1965- 5. Tabler, Andrew. I. Title.
E183.8.S95T33 2011
327.7305691—dc23
2011024015

Cover and interior design: Jonathan Hahn
Cover photo: Phil Smith
Map design: Chris Erichsen

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First edition
Published by Lawrence Hill Books
An imprint of Chicago Review Press, Incorporated
814 North Franklin Street
Chicago, Illinois 60610
ISBN 978-1-56976-843-3
Printed in the United States of America
5 4 3 2 1
For my parents, Clarence and Lucille; my brother, Bill; and my grandmother Helen, whose unconditional love made my long journeys possible.
You have retired to your island, with, as you think, all the data about us and our lives. No doubt you are bringing us to judgment on paper in the manner of writers. I wish I could see the result. It must fall far short of truth: I mean such truths as I could tell you about us all—even perhaps about yourself.

—Lawrence Durrell, *Balthazar*
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I would not have been able to tell this story without the help of friends and institutions that encouraged me to write about my experiences in Syria and Lebanon. A good portion of this book was essentially written while I was a fellow with the Institute of Current World Affairs (ICWA). My fellowship, which began only days before the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated, allowed me to travel and write for over two years as I “followed my nose”—in the ICWA tradition—around Syria and Lebanon. Special thanks go to Joseph Battat, a former ICWA fellow in China who noticed me while on a mission for the World Bank in Syria and encouraged me to apply to the institute. ICWA executive director Steven Butler, as well as his predecessor, Peter Martin, helped me learn to put myself back into my writing after years of writing and editing dry news. Completing that process was Victoria Rowan, the New York–based writing coach and editor. Through my work with Victoria, I learned a lot about storytelling and how to manage myself through the writing process. I also learned how dilemmas not only define characters but American and Syrian presidents as well.

I could not have endured my sojourn in Syria and Lebanon without the friendship of Michael Karam and Nicholas Blanford, two outstanding Beirut-based writers whose kindness helped me deal with
the stress of living in Syria. During our weekly gatherings in Beirut, Mike and Nick, together with friends Norbert Schiller, Anissa Rifai, and Mona Alama, helped me put my experiences in perspective. As did Lee Smith, a good friend and great writer who then called Beirut home. Last but not least, I would like to thank Andrew Lee Butters, my flatmate in Beirut, who helped keep me mentally and physically fit, and Katherine Zoepf, my flatmate in Damascus, who treated me with good food and even better stories.

A number of Syrians made a lasting impact on my stay in Damascus. Special thanks go out to Kinda Kanbar, businessman Abdul Ghani Attar, Abdul Kader Husrieh of Ernst & Young Syria, Ibrahim Hamidi of Al Hayat newspaper, and Ayman Abdel Nour of all4Syria, as well as to Francesca De Chatel, a wonderful writer and editor who ultimately succeeded me as editor in chief of Syria Today. Because of the Syrian regime’s current crackdown, I would like to collectively thank all those at Syria Today for all you taught me and allowed me to teach you. I would also like to recognize the diplomats of the US embassy in Damascus who spent considerable time helping me understand Syria and US-Syria policy, including Daniel Rubinstein, Mary Brett Rogers-Springs, Chris Stevens, Steven O’Dowd, Brian O’Rourke, Todd Holmstrom, Andrew Abell, Maria Olson, Katherine Van De Vate, Pamela Mills, and Tim and Tracy Pounds.

After I left Syria, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy provided me with a platform in Washington to write about the country. Special thanks go to Robert Satloff, Patrick Clawson, David Makovsky, David Schenker, Simon Henderson, Matt Levitt, Dina Guirguis, Michael Jacobson, Michael Singh, Mike Eisenstadt, Steve Borko, and Larisa Baste, whose input on my work has helped me expand from journalism into policy research. Thanks also go to Kathy Gockel and the Stanley Foundation, who first helped get my ideas into Washington policy circles, and Foreign Policy’s David Kenner.

My biggest appreciation goes to those who took the time to read and comment on the book’s draft. They include Andrew Abell, Syria
desk officer, US Department of State; Itamar Rabinovich, former Israeli Ambassador to the United States and former representative in peace talks with Syria; and Levant experts Amr al-Azm, Jon Alterman, Nicholas Blanford, Steven Heydemann, and David Schenker. I would also like to thank my friends in government who have shared their thoughts with me about the Levant, including the State Department’s Ruth Citrin and Matt Irwin and the National Security Council’s director for Lebanon and Syria, Hagar Hajjar. Thanks also go to Susan Betz and Kelly Wilson of Lawrence Hill Books, who edited the manuscript, and Mary Kravenas and Meaghan Miller, who aided me in the book’s promotion. Last but not least, I thank my fantastic research assistant, Andrew Engel, and my intern, Maya Gebeily. Together their comments and hard work made this a much better book.
I only planned to work in Damascus for a few months and engage an Arab country I didn’t know. Instead, I stayed seven years and got an unexpected front-row seat to a fight.

This book is a firsthand account of the confrontation between the administration of US president George W. Bush and the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The Bush administration called its Syria policy “isolation,” while the Assad regime portrayed it as an American plot to overthrow Syria’s leadership and remake the Middle East in America’s image.

No attempt will be made in this book to argue either way, as details of decision makers’ plans and intentions have yet to emerge. (Britain’s former prime minister Tony Blair writes in his book, A Journey: My Political Life, that Bush and former vice president Dick Cheney had machinations to remake the Middle East, using “hard power” to take down the regimes in Iraq, Iran, and Syria. While certain members of the Bush administration may have advocated using military force against Syria, I have been unable to find any formal US government plans to bring down the Assad regime.) Nevertheless, much of this story is part of the United States’ invasion and occupation of Iraq—America’s largest-ever military adventure in the Middle East.
INTRODUCTION

I saw the conflict between Washington and Damascus—which I generally refer to as a “cold war”—from an unusual and privileged vantage point. I lived and worked in Damascus between 2001 and 2008, served as a media adviser for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) under the patronage of President Assad’s wife, Asma, and had the honor to cofound Syria’s first—and still best—English-language magazine, *Syria Today*. By virtue of my work, I had a rare journalist multiple-entry visa that allowed me to travel back and forth to Lebanon—often on a weekly basis—to cover the dramatic events leading up to and following the February 2005 murder of the late Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri by car bomb in Beirut. I was able to travel freely in and out of Syria and speak my mind without the threat of being banned from the country—at least until the very end of my stay.

This book is also a personal account of an American’s engagement with the regime of the “Lion of Damascus”—“Assad” being Arabic for “lion.” While I wouldn’t compare my experience to that of the Bible’s Daniel, my sojourn in Syria was a series of crises and dilemmas that sculpted my view of engagement and confrontation with what are commonly referred to in America as “rogue regimes.” My personal and professional experiences in Syria were so intertwined I didn’t know how else to write a book that wasn’t a hybrid of memoir and foreign policy analysis. Following my departure from Syria in the autumn of 2008, the regime began its harshest crackdown on dissidents and journalists during Bashar al Assad’s reign. With an eye toward protecting my friends and associates in Syria, in this book I have changed nearly all their names and some details of their identities.

I went to Syria in 2001 with an open mind about a country and a regime that the United States and the West had struggled to change the behavior of for decades. (This long process even gave birth to “Syriana”—the term for the idea that a big power can remake nation-states in its own image. The term was made internationally famous when it was adopted as the title for the 2005 box-office thriller of the same name.) The regime’s long alliance with the Soviet Union; its sup-
port for Hezbollah, Hamas, and other groups on the US list of terrorist organizations; its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD); and its horrible human rights record had led some US administrations and their allies over the years to attempt to change the Assad regime’s behavior via confrontation or sanctions. Other administrations had attempted to engage Syria diplomatically, most notably centered on Arab-Israeli and Syrian-Israeli peace talks, based on the idea that America could gain more with rewards than punishments. Neither approach solved the problems. Underlying each policy was the idea that the Assad regime only cared about politics. As Damascus’s oil revenues declined and Assad opened his country to the outside world, I watched firsthand as economics became a bigger and bigger part of the Assad regime’s calculations for survival.

Multilateral pressure shepherded by the Bush administration brought about some of the greatest changes in Syrian policies in decades. Damascus withdrew its troops from Lebanon, implemented long-delayed economic reforms, and eased—at least for a time—restrictions on the Syrian opposition. A major impetus for these changes is the fact that Syria, like all globalizing rogue regimes, increasingly needs the international community more than the international community needs Syria.

Other changes in Syrian policy were not to Washington’s liking, however. Damascus deepened its alliance with Iran, turned a blind eye to jihadi fighters entering Iraq, and stepped up a nuclear program now under investigation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). While Washington and its allies’ responses to the latter two policies ultimately curbed their impact, the Bush administration proved far less skillful in countering Assad’s moves in Syria and Lebanon—historically a key battleground between Iran and the United States.

Engaging regimes like Assad’s might seem an easy solution to America’s problems in the Middle East, including dealing with Iran’s nuclear program or fostering Arab-Israeli peace. But engaging the