



ARVIND GARG

# An American In Syria

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## Mohammed

I used to teach U.S. history to high-school students in Syria. When I got there in 1999, the Internet, cellphones, and Coca-Cola were all illegal. I spent the first week before my job began taking long walks to familiarize myself with the ancient city of Damascus. A guard named Mohammed stood outside of the school, and he and I would talk about sports, the local tourist attractions, and such. Mohammed laughed at my accent and taught me to count in Arabic: *Wahid, ithnan, thalatha . . .*

The school had been built for the sons and daughters of diplomats, but it was open to children of all nationalities, and about 80 percent of my students would be Syrian. A couple of days before school started, I attended a teachers' meeting. The principal warned us, "This is Syria, not America. There are different rules here. If someone mentions President Assad's name, for good or bad, shut up!" Only the secret police were brave enough even to mention the president's name in public, he told us. They would bug our phones and break into our apartments when we were not there. "You never know who is watching," he said. "Mohammed, the guard outside the gate, is secret police assigned to our school."

*God damn it, I thought. My only friend in the whole Middle East is secret police.*

That afternoon Mohammed tried to strike up our usual conversation: "Kevin, you went for a walk yesterday. Where did you go?"

Hearing sinister undertones in his question, I angrily shot back, "That's right, Mohammed. I did go for a walk yesterday. But you know what? I don't really remember where I went. Do you?"

Mohammed looked somberly at me, slowly nodded his head, and said, "Yes, Kevin, I do. Yesterday you walked to the bazaar, where you spent a lot of time in the bird market. You were hungry, so you bought some *shawarma* at a stand behind the mosque. You thought about going into a museum that you hadn't noticed before, but decided against it. On the way home you got lost, but found your way again when you saw the hospital."

Stunned, I stepped back in silence and walked home.

That night I sat on my couch, trying to work through what had happened. I realized that Mohammed had been telling me that he was secret police, and I should never forget it. We could talk about language, or food, or the World Cup, but whatever I told him, he had to report it. He had given me this warning as a friend.

That's when I understood: there really was a whole different set of rules over there.

## Natalia

When my mother first heard I was going to Damascus, she called Tariz, an old friend of the family who had fled Iraq back when Saddam Hussein was just another colonel in a corrupt regime.

Tariz said, "Ah, Damascus, lovely city. Kevin will be just fine, as long as he does not talk politics or date any of the local women."

*Oh, no, my mother thought. Kevin loves talking politics.*

Syrian women have the long, dark eyelashes of the Bedouins, the sharp features of the Italians, the thick hair of the Greeks, the haunting eyes of the Armenians, the posture and style of the Persians, and a mixture of the skin tones of every civilization since Babylon. And they are old-fashioned — Old Testament old-fashioned.

At first, all I knew was that they were beautiful. I had taught myself to say, in Arabic, "I don't speak Arabic, but I am looking for a friend to teach me." This had worked well for me in Mexico as a strategy for meeting women, but the first woman I tried it on in Syria showed up for our "study session" with real books. Much to my disappointment, Natalia sat me down and started with the alphabet: *Alif, ba, ta . . .*

At twenty-one Natalia was already divorced from an arranged marriage. All she would say about her ex was "He was mean to cats, Kevin. How could my father expect me to love a man who was mean to cats?" Divorced at twenty-one.

One night, after a study session, Natalia and I were sitting in the park when a young man who appeared to know her came up, and they started talking. It sounded to me as if they were arguing, but I couldn't be sure, so I whispered to Natalia that if she needed me to step in I would.

"No, Kevin," she said. "Don't worry. It is OK."

After he'd left, Natalia was so happy, she could barely contain herself. "That is the second man my father has arranged for me to marry since my divorce," she said. "He said I was a whore, a slut, because I am walking around with you, a foreigner, a *far-anji*. He said he was going to go back to tell my father, my mother, my family, my friends, my whole community that I am a whore." She smiled. "Maybe now my father will leave me alone."

Not talking politics in a police state — that was the easy part.

## A Typical Conversation

Syria is home to one of the world's oldest civilizations. Here's a typical conversation I had while living there:

**Syrian:** What are you doing here?

**Me:** Teaching U.S. history.

**Syrian:** What? Are you not done in fifteen minutes?

## The Death Of President Hafez al-Assad, June 2000

CNN covered the news live, setting up its cameras on the relative safety of a fourth-floor hotel balcony. Unable to understand why people would lament the loss of the hand that chokes them, CNN reported, “The weeping women are government sponsored.” The reporters were too far removed from the fear to understand it.

For a year I had lived amid the incessant propaganda: Assad’s face plastered on every building. Assad hanging from every taxicab’s rearview mirror. Assad at the start of every evening’s news. Assad, we were told, was always guarding us against civil war, the Israelis, the Iraqis, the Turks, the West, the Americans, the enemy, the threat.

I am not Syrian, not Muslim, not Arab, yet I felt defenseless when Assad was suddenly gone. Damascus was filled with people who had spent thirty years under his oppressive protection. The weeping women’s tears were real.

Immediately after Assad died, the streets were silent. (The streets are never silent in Damascus.) Unnerved, I sat in my apartment, only blocks from CNN’s fourth-floor luxury box. The last five miles to the palace were lined with men in tanks, smoking cigarettes and waiting for the revolution, which never came. But at the time, facing approaching anarchy, I thought, *What will we do without our leader?*

## Ramsee

I wanted to go to the Golan Heights, a disputed territory between Israel and Syria, but I kept getting turned back by pesky security forces. Then it finally dawned on me: I was a teacher; I’d organize a field trip!

After much letter writing and banging my head against bureaucratic walls, I got the Israelis, the Syrians, the United Nations, and the U.S. Embassy to agree to let us go. (I don’t know if you have ever tried to get the Israelis and the Arabs to agree on anything, but let me assure you, it isn’t easy.)

The UN made the students and me wear blue helmets, briefed us, then put us in an armor-plated vehicle and drove us through a minefield. Our destination was an observation tower where the children could look out across the rocky terrain people were willing to die over.

Our UN handler, Sergeant Polisinski, told us, “You cannot take any pictures facing east” — where the Israelis stood guard in their watchtowers. “The Israelis agreed to let you come here on the condition that you not take any pictures in their direction.”

Not wanting to cause an international incident, I threat-

ened the students with after-school detention for a month if they even *thought about* taking pictures to the east. In detention, I said, they would have to listen to *all* my theories about James K. Polk, Zachary Taylor, and the Panama Canal.

Everything went just fine until I noticed Ramsee, a good kid but a little goofy, pressing down on his binoculars with his index finger. I walked closer and saw he had a camera screwed to the end of the binoculars, James Bond-style, and was snapping away: *click, click, click*.

“Ramsee, what are you doing?”

Ramsee looked at me, obviously torn, and said, “I am so sorry, Mr. P., but my father, he told me to take the pictures.”

When Ramsee’s father, head of one branch of the secret police or another, came to pick him up that day, I said to him, “I had to take Ramsee’s ‘binoculars’ away from him today.”

Disappointed, the father shook his head. “Yes, Mr. Paterson,” he said. “I am afraid my son, he is not so clever.”

## Syrian Taxi Ride

**Me:** Take me to the Meridan Hotel.

**Taxi driver:** Inshallah [God willing].

**Me:** It’s only across town.

## Smoking During Ramadan

The first time I quit smoking was during Ramadan. As part of the month-long holiday, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset each day. Nothing can part the lips during that time, including cigarettes. On my daily lunch break, it was my habit to buy some falafel from a street vendor, drink a contraband Coca-Cola (bought from the same vendor, just a little more surreptitiously), and smoke a cigarette. On the first day of Ramadan, however, the vendor’s stand was closed.

I wondered about my lunchtime smoke. When I’d asked my Syrian friends about it, they’d said, “Don’t worry, Kevin. You are obviously not Muslim. No one will care.” Wanting to believe them, I lit a cigarette. I was sitting back, enjoying it, when I saw a man in full traditional garb striding down the hill toward me with a harsh look on his face. *Why is he so angry?* I thought. *Am I sitting wrong? Am I showing him the bottom of my shoe?* (A grievous insult in Muslim society.) When he finally reached me, this pious Muslim cursed me with the worst of all Arabic cuss words, which loosely translates as “You cunt.” It is not easy to get a Muslim to curse you on the first day of Ramadan. It’s like having a Catholic priest say from the altar on Christmas: “You two-bit little fuck.”

*Well, I thought, I guess I am quitting smoking for Ramadan.*

*(end of excerpt)*