

Letter to My Friend in Damascus. The Recently Announced American Invasion into Your Country

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I am afraid to ask you you're feelings about the recently announced American invasion into [your country](#). In our talks these past months, we've spoken only about hardships: the increasing scarcity of electricity, water and food shortages, an absence of home heating fuel. This in the capital, Damascus, where people can still go to school and to work, where some local buses can navigate through the mud and debris, where drivers can sometimes find petrol for their cars.

When we're able to connect by phone, you talk about people I know: parents unable to pay for their child's surgery, a family with no means of keeping warm in winter.

You could easily leave to live abroad with your children. But you're in charge of a children's home, and you simply can't abandon the staff—those few who remain. Before, donations were adequate and teachers sufficient. Now teachers are leaving to find work and safety abroad, following many hundreds of doctors who've emigrated. You spend more time searching for assistance from the few remaining families offering charity. Syrians have always been especially generous to the homeless (few though they were in the past), and to any charitable effort by any faith. How can able Syrians sustain this deeply embedded principle when they themselves are in need, dependent on their children abroad?

Do you have someone outside who supports you while you provide succor to others inside? I don't know what sustains you, apart from your love of country, something few speak about these days, and hardly anyone outside Syria recognizes.

On international women's day here, I broadcast some interviews from my [audio archive](#), conversations with women in Damascus 6-7 years ago. Each spoke with such pleasure about her work, delighted too that their voices, Syrian voices, might be heard (and felt) in America. I don't know where those patriotic souls are today. None would have chosen to leave, I know that. In 2010 their lives had been full and promising. Yours too. And those of your office staff and everyone at the children's center, and your youngest son, just graduated.

You and I witnessed many favorable changes under the new, young president. Tourists were arriving in larger numbers. Shopping malls were lively and welcoming. Colleges were vibrant centers of learning and hope; new private universities were flourishing. "Why should our bright young people go to Lebanon or Europe to study?" you asked. "We can educate them here, providing more work for our professors, for contractors who build these colleges, and for staff who drive buses and manage college dorms and cafeterias."

Today students who can't find a way to leave, face military service. There are no figures about all the soldiers killed and wounded; it's tens of thousands, for certain. Only a few families can manage to pay for their sons to avoid the draft. "We are losing all our young people," you sigh. This proclamation lies in the shadow of every one of our conversations.

Five years ago, after I returned to New York from Syria, I followed news reports and forwarded you an occasional report from journalists Robert Fisk or Patrick Cockburn which I thought might shed light on events; you asked me what I thought the U.S. administration was planning and what American commentators were saying about Syria. Then we stopped these exchanges. They were useless; they only offered false hope.

In the months preceding the American election your interest and hope returned; a new U.S. administration might somehow bring the war to a close. Then however, you decided that whoever prevailed, Democrats or the Republicans, Syria could hardly expect relief, peace, a settlement:- nothing but worsening conditions and the loss of youths, teachers and doctors.

We haven't spoken about the new U.S. leadership since the election. Nor did I ask you what the reaction was to Israel's bombing of Syria last month, an aggression that garnered little attention here. Was that any more unsettling and ominous than earlier Israeli assaults?

I expect all that Syrians can think about is: "Can it get worse? And, "How can I find some heating fuel, more medicine, a pair of shoes?"

On top of all this comes this major political development:- the unconcealed arrival of American military presence on your soil. Marines and armaments are being airlifted there as I write. According to U.S. generals, their troops are deployed to help Washington's Syrian allies—not the Syrian army- to dislodge and eradicate ISIS from Raqqa. This move comes in the wake of remarkable gains by the Syrian army backed by Russia, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah forces.

While the U.S. troop arrival is optimistically (to the American public) presented as ISIS-motivated, you and I know that it's likely a pretext, the first step for a Syria 'mission creep'. Has Washington ever limited military incursion to the announced goal? Has it left anything behind its wars on Arab soil except destruction and deprivation, chaos and animosity?

Five years ago, following initial uprisings in Syria, I expect many there may have welcomed an American military presence. But in time, you and your compatriots understood America's support for the cruelest, most extreme opposition (rebel) fighters; Washington's endorsement of Saudi and Qatari plans to sow chaos in Syria was very clear from the start. As Syrians comprehended the real US agenda—to destroy and disrupt at any cost—their views changed.

So what now? This most nationalist of Arab states is still somehow intact, against all odds. All those Syrian boys martyred; those barefoot children, those empty colleges, those ghostly shopping malls wait.

I could find no public response here to this week's American surge in Syria, no indication that it's a noteworthy U.S. policy change, no journalist asking for Syrians' reactions. An unsettling silence engulfs the first hours of a new American invasion.

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