Arabia

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Arabia

A Journey Through the Heart of the Middle East

Levison Wood

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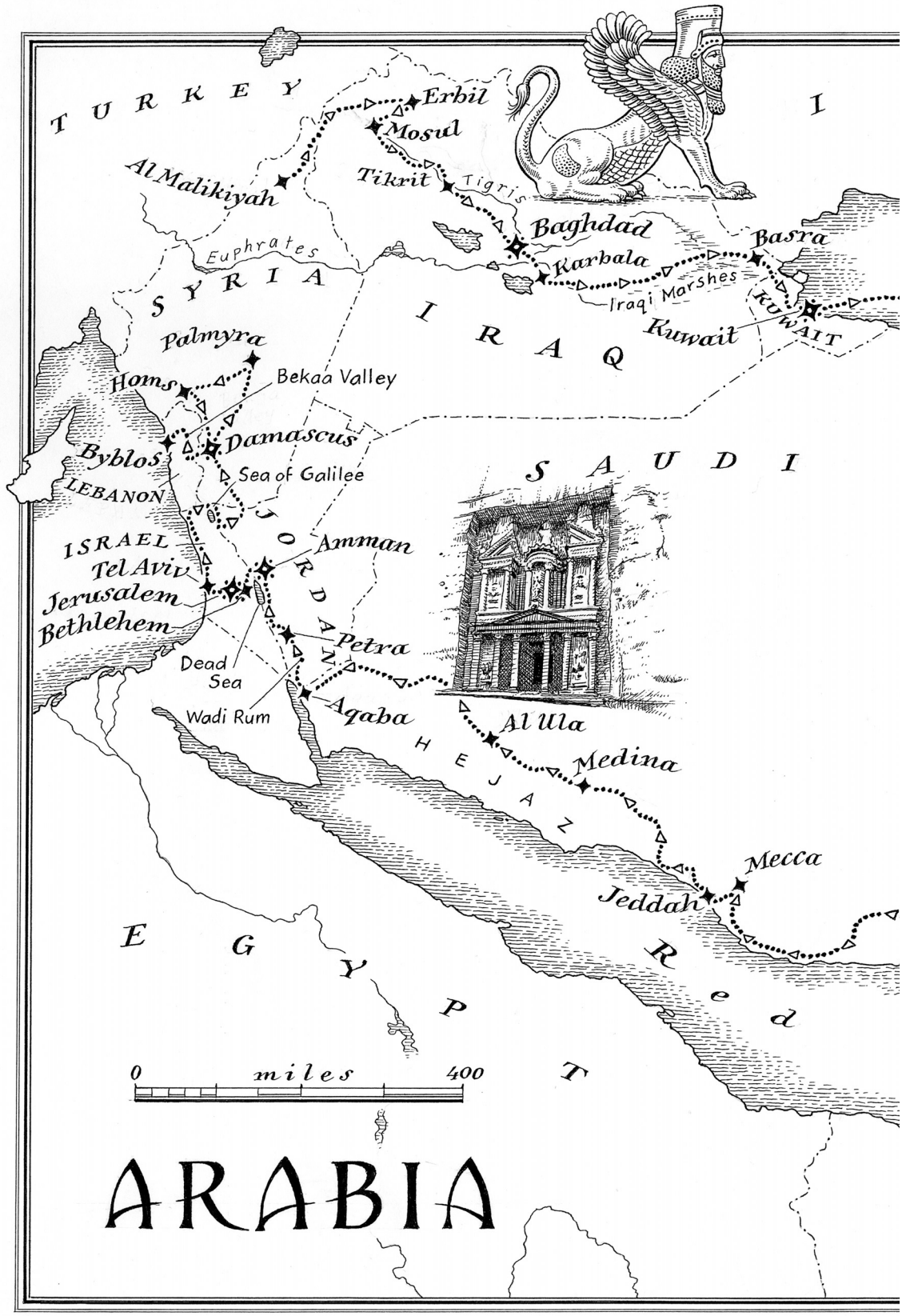

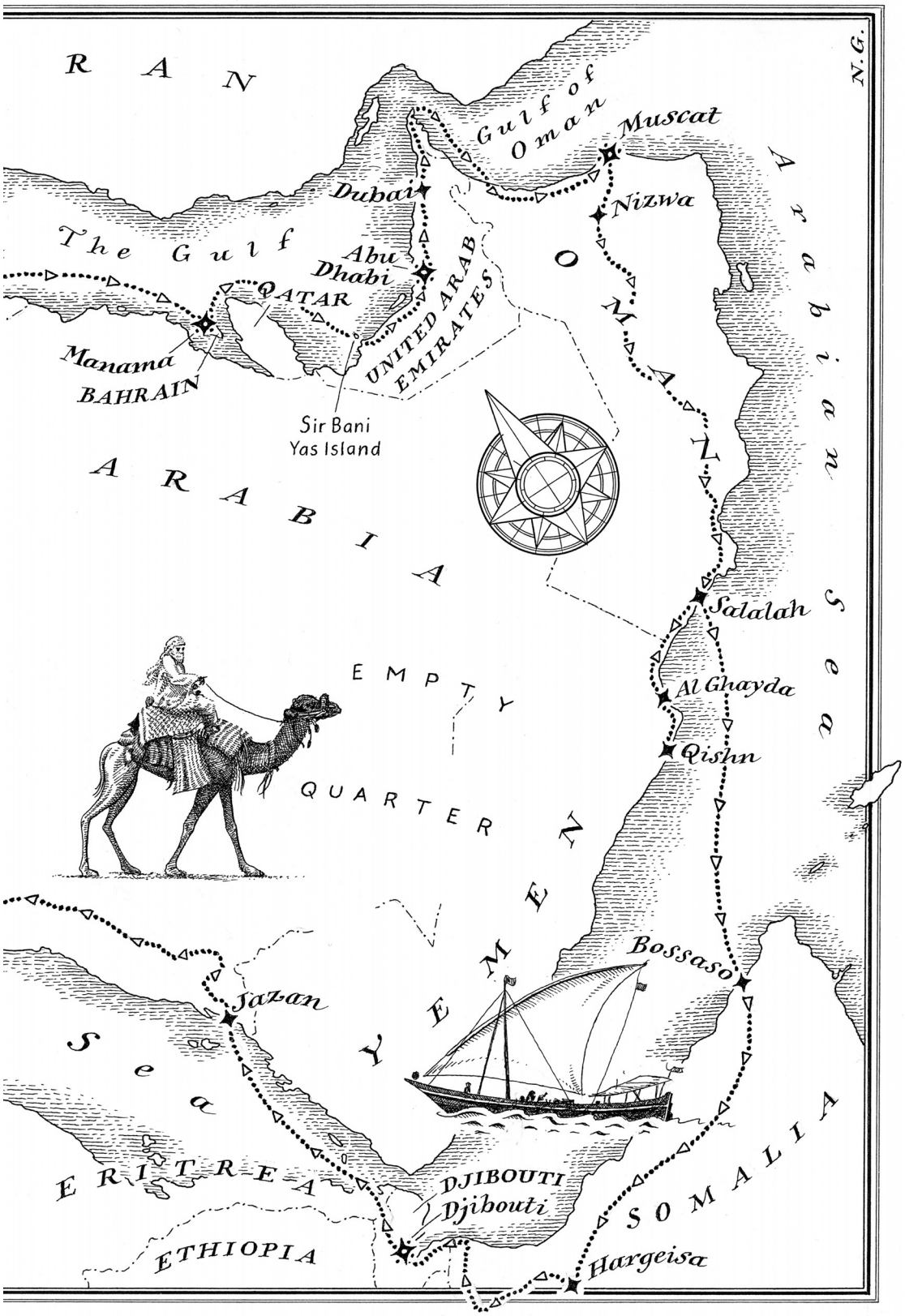
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Contents

For me, exploration was a personal venture. I did not go to the Arabian desert to collect plants nor to make a map; such things were incidental . . . I went there to find peace in the hardship of desert travel and the company of desert peoples . . . To others my journey would have little importance. It would produce nothing except a rather inaccurate map which no one was ever likely to use. It was a personal experience, and the reward had been a drink of clean, nearly tasteless water. I was content with that.

Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*

Introduction

The so-called Arab Spring of 2011 had brought about a hope of change in a troubled region. Dictatorships had been toppled and, in some places, democracy flourished. Social media had evoked a new-found love of freedom of expression and for the first time in decades, there appeared to be a shift in the collective consciousness of what it meant to be an Arab. The stereotypes no longer applied, and the young rose up to show the bearded and gold-clad autocrats who really mattered.

But, just a few years later, the dream lay in tatters. Where there had been dictators, there were now terrorists or foreign armies. Wars were still raging at either end of the peninsula in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, raising an infinite number of questions.

Had the initial optimism from the revolutions brought about any change at all? What did the conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Islam mean for the prospects of peace in the region. Did Saudi Arabia, backed by the West, hold the key to stability in this notorious land, and was Iran really to blame for the volatility in places like Lebanon and Yemen? How is it that seventy years after the creation of a Jewish state in Israel, there is still daily conflict?

More broadly, in times of technological advancement, how has development and rapid change arrived in a place with so much history and tradition. Many people suspect that it was oil that caused the American invasion of Iraq, but with fluctuating economies and a new desire to move away from fossil fuels – what does this mean for the future of the Gulf? And indeed, what on

earth does being a Bedouin nomad mean in the modern era?

I was interested in discovering more about these and many other topics, and I hope my travels might offer at least some insight to those curious about Arabia and the Arabs, even if they can't provide any definitive answers.

This is a journey through a land steeped in history. It is also mired in controversy, jealousy and tarnished by seemingly endless war. This book, however, doesn't intend to present a comprehensive geo-political narrative, nor does it pretend to cover the vast legacy of this complex and often misunderstood area. Instead, it attempts to showcase a region usually misrepresented.

This account is aimed at those who want to learn a little about Arabian culture in the modern day, and to read my musings on these questions by hearing from the people themselves. I travelled through thirteen countries over the autumn and winter of 2017–18, meeting men and women (although sadly far fewer of the latter than I would have liked), who told me their stories. I have, of course, tried to be objective when it comes to political allegiances, and yet it is impossible to cover every viewpoint, and every group and organisations' agenda.

There are plenty of volumes that will go into great detail about the history of Islam, or the Middle East's current affairs, and there are yet more tales of voyages and adventures that will describe the Arabia of yesteryear. But only so much can fit within the pages of this book and anyway, travel is a very personal matter, and what follows is simply my snapshot of one moment in time.

I'd hope that people reading this will take the title of this book with a pinch of salt. Don't get hung up by the appropriation of the name Arabia. I have no doubt that there may be some who point an accusatory finger at the apparent peddling of outdated orientalist notions. What right has a white man – a non-Muslim, and more meddlesome still, an Englishman – to prance across the desert in an age of such sensitivity, amid conflicts and strife; let alone to have the nerve to call this land by its ancient name?

I knew from the outset that any journey in the Middle East would be contentious, and simply by undertaking to cross such a loaded region, it would garner criticism. It is exactly for that reason that I thought I *should* travel across these borders, because despite its controversy, there is nowhere else quite like it.

The truth is – there is no Arabia.

Arabia is an imagined construct and always has been: any attempt to define this land will always be met with censure. The Arabs themselves could never agree on what constituted Arabia, so what chance does anyone else have?

These days, when referring to the Arabian Peninsula, geographers include the Gulf States of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, as well as Yemen and, of course, the largest country – Saudi Arabia. Some would say that Jordan is within the peninsula, others would not. But what about Iraq, Syria and the Holy Lands? Jerusalem, Damascus, Jericho and Baghdad all sit at the heart of the Arabian legacy, so it seems impossible to ignore them in a journey around the most enigmatic place on earth. In the spirit of the Bedouin of old, I have defied these borders and gone on to cross them in spite of their existence.

Until recently, the entire Arabian Peninsula was very much at the mercy of nature, and by that, I mean the desert – a landscape so hostile to man that only the hardiest nomads could survive in it. Since history began, Arabia has offered no comfortable welcome to the stranger, or much beyond austerity to its own people, and yet, from this barren land has emerged the root of all civilisation and the commandments of God Himself, giving rise to three great religions and a culture that has spread across the continents.

The legacy of those original desert dwellers must never be underestimated. Once upon a time, on the south-western coast, in what is now Yemen, there ruled a king named Yarab, descendant of Noah, whose name will forever be remembered for saving all humanity (and the animals, too), when the great flood came to punish man for his sins. Yarab's offspring, mythology aside,

were the original Semites, and his seed soon spread far and wide – over the Red Sea to Africa, and north to mingle with the Sumerians of the Iraqi Marshes.

They left us with an alphabet and the written word, and yet as a people, they vanished into multiplicity. Mobile, elusive and disparate, these nomads became the Babylonians, the Assyrians and the Chaldeans; they were the mercantile Phoenicians, the monotheistic Hebrews, the beautiful Ethiopians and the industrious Arameans; then and now, they were the Bedu, the Arabs – the survivors.

Before Islam and the advent of nations, the old Arab tribes simply broke the region down into north and south – Al Sham (Syria) and AlYaman (Yemen) – which was all well and good in the days before borders got in the way. The fact is that Arabia did not exist, because the Arabs did not exist. In those earlier times, the Arabs were simply a loose collection of disparate tribes that were always on the move and cared little for such definitions. Frontiers and identity existed only in the imagination of the beholder.

Forced by the environment to form family clans based around this wadi or that oasis, a sort of micro-nationalism emerged along the invisible ridges of the sands. There were the Hashemites and the Qurashi; the Abd Shams and the Nadir; the Hilal, Talil, Khalid and the Hajjar. This loose affiliation of blood gangs once roamed the valleys in search of plunder and pasture. Some were Jews, some were Christian and many more were animists, at once at ease and in constant battle with the forces of nature. And then in AD 571, something happened that changed the face of Arabia forever – the Prophet Muhammad was born, and with him a new religion emerged.

The old tribes had fought one another for women, frankincense and camels for generations, but now they had another reason to fight – Islam and identity – and it's a fight that continues to this day. And yet, in spite of so much bloodshed, these desert dwellers could also live in peace as a result of an unwritten code of hospitality that emerged, perhaps because of this

collective geographical struggle. Even mortal enemies were welcomed as guests as soon as they had crossed the threshold of the tent, and generosity became synonymous with the new religion. In the context of the desert, it was the only way to ensure survival. Hospitality and war went hand in hand.

For me, this was a journey of discovery through a forbidden, mysterious land. I travelled at the mercy of Arabian hospitality – sometimes on foot, at other times by camel, mule, donkey and battle tank. It was the culmination of fifteen years' work and a lifelong fascination with the history of the Middle East. I have followed in the footsteps of some of the great explorers such as T.E. Lawrence, Richard Burton, Ibn Battutah, Wilfred Thesiger and a whole host of other giants that shaped the course of history in the region, but I have necessarily tried to keep my historical meanderings on a tight leash.

This book is a story of my own wanderings set against a backdrop of interesting times. I have tried to challenge the prevailing winds where possible and contest stereotypes, hopefully smashing a few myths along the way.

I

The Edge of Arabia

Of the gladdest moments in human life, methinks, is the departure upon a distant journey into unknown lands. Shaking off with one mighty effort the fetters of Habit, the leaden weight of Routine, the cloak of many Cares and the slavery of Civilisation, man feels once more happy.

Richard Francis Burton

Rojava, Syria:
September 2017

In the distance was the border, a little over two miles away. The hills were brown, sunburnt after a long summer, and the grass was withered and dry. A solitary shepherd braved the midday glare, slowly shuffling behind his flock across the dusty plain. No-man's-land lay to the north across the fields, which were pockmarked by abandoned and half-built concrete houses. On the far side were the mountains of Turkey, and the Turks lined the northern edge of Arabia.

Al-Malikiyah sprawled across the plain. It was like many provincial towns in the Middle East: charmless and dusty. It resembled a building site, and the greys of the breeze-block mansions blended seamlessly with the piles of rubble, left over from forgotten projects. Minarets vied for the skyline with the spires of churches, seemingly compatible, and high walls with

creaky gates hid families from their neighbours. It was a Sunday and the streets were quiet, but as I walked through the suburban maze, the sounds of an alien world grew closer.

The call to prayer echoed across the main street, as some children scuttled from an alleyway to kick a football into the waste ground. Women carrying heavy bags of shopping waddled across the road. Most were unveiled, revealing jet-black or peroxide-blonde hair; many had bright red lipstick and piercing eyes.

Al-Malikiyah seemed to be very sleepy and life appeared to be going on as normal. But it didn't calm my nerves. This was Syria, in the middle of the deadliest war of the twenty-first century. Al-Malikiyah was a stone's throw away from Turkey, and for the local Kurds, these were the enemy – known for shelling the border villages frequently with impunity.

Just a few months before, the outskirts of the town had been bombarded with artillery shells from the Turkish army's mountain bases. Al-Malikiyah hadn't seen any close-quarter fighting on its streets yet, but it was full of families fleeing from the conflict only a few miles away.

Raqqa, at this time still occupied by ISIS, was a mere hundred and sixty miles to the south-west, and the front line was only fifty miles down the road. Equally bad as ISIS was the Nusra Front, an Islamist terror group that was busy roaming the countryside plundering the towns and murdering anyone who got in their way. A cluster of other rebel groups held positions all over central and eastern Syria, fighting both President Bashar al-Assad and each other, and even here in Rojava, the Kurds themselves were struggling to fight a battle on both fronts with almost no international support.

This was where my journey began. I'd convinced a Syrian Kurdish official to let me in across the border without a visa, on the

promise that I'd head straight for Iraq and not hang around. Quite why he'd agreed to let me go wandering about is anyone's guess, but I supposed that they thought a foreign writer might shine the spotlight on their cause. Either way, I had to be out within thirty-six hours or face arrest. It was already afternoon and the Iraqi border lay some twenty-odd miles to the east across an open plain, all in sight of the Turkish bomber jets and watchtowers, and so I thought it best to find somewhere to spend the night.

So far, I'd had no problems, though. I could blend in pretty well most places in the Middle East. I'd opted to wear a pair of old jeans, a dusty Belstaff jacket and some plain old desert boots, so I felt as though I could pass for a Kurd or an Arab.

'*Salam*,' a voice said from across the road. I looked up and saw a police checkpoint with two men in uniform, stood leaning against a compound wall covered with murals drawn by school children.

'Salam,' I replied. I noticed the flags hoisted above the wall. They weren't Syrian national flags. A combination of red, yellow and green signified the lands of Rojava; another was in yellow with a red star in the centre, surrounded by the letters YPG. These were the flags of the Kurdish militia, responsible for protecting the interests of the Kurds in Syria. Above them both was another one, this time green, with the socialist star surrounded by a yellow sun. This was the insignia of the Kurdistan Workers' Party – the PKK – a designated terrorist organisation to some, but for the Kurds, these were the saviours and freedom fighters of a lost nation.

'Who are you?' said one of the men, stubbing out a cigarette against the wall. He ambled over, casually swinging his AK-47 rifle by its wooden handle.

So much for blending in, I thought.

'I'm looking for a hotel,' I told him, as if it was the most normal thing in the world, while handing him my passport and an official-looking media pass I'd had printed off the internet.

He shrugged lazily, assuming I had permission to be here, and pointed down the street. 'Ask for Yasim. He usually has rooms.'

I walked down the main road of the town, relieved, passing bakeries and butchers' shops. The bells of the church tolled and I walked by a couple of girls with long flowing hair. They were Assyrian Christians and they giggled at me. I realised that my backpack gave me away as an outsider. Nobody carried backpacks here. I passed a little kiosk selling second-hand mobile phones and sim cards and it reminded me that I should probably buy one, in case I got into trouble and needed to make a call. A young man barely out of his teens was loitering around outside, inspecting the colourful phone cases.

'Is that an iPhone 7 Plus?' he said in passable English.

'It is,' I replied, somewhat surprised.

'What do you need? A Samsung?'

'No, thanks, I just need a Syrian sim card and some credit.'

The boy said something in Arabic to the man behind the kiosk, acting as my translator. The man shuffled under the counter for a plastic card with the sim, which he broke loose and handed to me in exchange for some Syrian pounds with President Assad's head on them. I took out my UK sim card and replaced it with the Syrian one. After a few seconds, I received a message from the provider: *Ministry of Tourism welcomes you in Syria, please call 137 for information and complaints.*

I'm not sure how many tourists Syria had received in the last seven years since the conflict began, but at least the people were optimistic.

'What's your name?' I asked the lad.

'Bassam,' he replied. 'I'm from Raqqa. But even though I'm an Arab, I knew I had to escape when Daesh came. I was studying computer science at the university, but they destroyed it. So I came here and now I'm looking for work.'

'Why Al-Malikiyah?' I asked, surprised that he'd chosen to come to a predominantly Kurdish and Christian town.

'It's tolerant here,' he said with a smile. 'Everyone is welcome. There's Kurds, Assyrian Christians, Armenians and Arabs, all living together in peace. Look at the churches and mosques side by side. We're all friends here and it's peaceful for now. Daesh are far away and I don't think they'll win now the government is taking back control. The only people we have to worry about are the Turks over there.'

He motioned to the north, flicking his head in the direction of the mountains. 'They bombed this town in April. But it's still better than Raqqa. My house has been destroyed there and most of my family are gone.'

He led me down the street, past some children wearing white robes. Not Arabic ones, though – these were karate uniforms.

'They love karate here,' Bassam said, imitating a martial-arts stance and chopping through the air with a vocal swoosh.

'Like I say, the Kurds are very nice. They're stuck in this little corner of Syria and they're really the only ones fighting Daesh properly. Nobody gives them any help and even the Americans who promise them the world have deserted them now. You're not American, are you?' Bassam looked at me apologetically.

'No,' I replied.

'Good,' he said, shaking his head. 'The whole place is a mess. And everybody knows that it's the Americans who started it.'

'Do people really think that? What about the revolution, about the Arab Spring and the uprising against Assad?' I asked, wanting

to try to understand something of the background to this infernal civil war from those who had witnessed it first-hand.

'Pfft,' he snorted. 'Think it? They know it. The revolution was a joke. This whole war is just a game between the big countries. Iran, Israel, America, Russia and Saudi Arabia. They just come and screw around with things until they get what they want.'

'And what do they want?' I asked.

Bassam laughed. 'How long have you been on this journey for?'

'This is my first day,' I told him.

'Then I suppose you'll find out,' he said.

With that he walked off and disappeared down an alleyway in the market. The sun was setting and I figured that I'd better find a place to stay before it got dark. Even though normality seemed to prevail in this little oasis of calm, I kept reminding myself that this was a country at war, and nothing should be taken for granted.

I found the hotel a few blocks away. As the policeman had directed, it was on a side street near to a church. I knocked on the iron gates of the three-storey building and sent a cat bounding down the road. A young man in a tight red T-shirt opened the door to the gate and welcomed me inside the courtyard. He looked like a body-builder. I noticed a tattoo on his rippling biceps only half covered by a sleeve. It was the face of Jesus and some hands praying, surrounded by a rosary.

'I'm Yasim.' He smiled, flashing some gold teeth. His grip was iron-like.

'Where are you from?' he asked.

'England,' I told him.

'I love London. I'm Swedish,' he said, giving me a thumbs-up.

'Swedish?'

'Yes, well I have a Swedish passport now at least. I'm a refugee.'

'Oh,' I said, somewhat taken aback. With his enormous barrel chest and the glint in his eye, he didn't really fit my stereotype of a refugee.

'What are you doing back here?' I asked.

'Here, in Malikiyah?' he said. 'I'm working, of course. This hotel is the family business. I come here every summer and work, so my dad can go on holiday. Then I go to Sweden for a few months and work there. Maybe I'll move to London soon. Who knows.'

I guess that even refugees need to have summer jobs and holidays.

Yasim showed me through the reception into the garden, where a huge swimming pool dominated the neat manicured lawns. It was empty of water.

'No tourists anymore.' Yasim shrugged. 'Only wedding parties.' He pointed to the far side of the lawn, where some seats had been arranged and bouquets of flowers decorated the veranda. Big speakers and a DJ booth had been set up.

'Sorry about the noise later, it'll probably get quite loud. The wedding starts at seven.'

He walked me up to the room, which was basic but clean, and had a view out across the street towards the church. The sun was almost touching the mountains now and the sky was a fiery red. A chorus of prayer erupted across the skyline as the muezzin sang on prerecorded tapes from the city's minarets.

'Kebab for dinner, okay,' said Yasim. 'Do you want beer or whisky with that?' As he spoke, the first wedding guests began to arrive. Men in flared trousers and shiny suits, with slicked black hair and pointy shoes, sauntered through the garden with women in high heels wearing miniskirts and leopard-print jackets. The

music kicked in, blaring Arabic pop songs and pumping techno music.

It looked like my first night in Syria was going to set the bar high.

I slept fitfully that night. The racket from the wedding party went on until the early hours, supplemented by sporadic bursts of gunfire that were indistinguishable from the fireworks. At one a.m., there was a bang on the door. It was a Kurdish soldier asking to see my passport. Word had spread there was a foreigner in town and the militia were concerned. He made sure to remind me that tomorrow I should make an early start to leave Syria and get on my way to Iraq.

I left early, after a breakfast of bread and cheese, waved off by Yasim, who was sporting red eyes that gave him away as a wedding crasher. I walked through the deserted streets at seven a.m. and the company was a few feral dogs and a couple of old men sitting at some tables of a chai shop, smoking and drinking tea and reading the morning news.

'Salam.' They waved.

'Salam.' I waved back, and walked east, out of town.

As the buildings grew smaller and the plain opened up in front of me, I took one last glance to my left towards the Turkish border. Large boulders dotted the seemingly endless ploughed fields that were dusty and brown from a long summer, remnants of a volcanic past.

This was the very edge of Arabia, the start of a five-thousand-mile journey, and I was jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. Ahead, twenty miles away, was the flowing waters of the Tigris River, and on its far bank was Iraq.