

Reporting from Syria
AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES GLASS

Al-Noor Staff



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espite holding citizenship in both the US and the UK, Charles Glass is more than willing to criticize the governments of these countries in what he sees as extreme failures in their Middle East policy. With years of reporting from the region, he has gained significant expertise about the Middle East and the forces that move it, and he, therefore, feels more than confident to make this assessment. Given that Glass has been on the ground in the Middle East during some of the most dangerous periods of its contemporary history, we, and Western policymakers, can gain valuable insight by giving him the space to describe the region as he sees it today. The interview that follows does just that.

Charles Glass was born in Los Angeles, California in 1951. He earned his bachelor of arts degree in philosophy from the University of Southern California in 1972 and proceeded to graduate studies at the American University of Beirut. He began



his journalistic career there in the ABC News Bureau with Peter Jennings. He was the ABC News Chief for the Middle East from 1983 to 1993.

During this time, Glass conducted what would become his most famous news story, an interview with the hostage crew of TWA flight 847 at Beirut Airport. He broke the news that the hijackers had moved the hostages, which caused the Reagan administration to abort a rescue attempt. In the following year, Glass was held hostage in Lebanon for two months. The experience is recorded in one of his books, *Tribes with Flags*.

He has served under numerous media outlets, including CNN, Harper's magazine, The Independent, the London Review of Books, Newsweek, and the Observer. His freelance pieces have appeared in these and additionally, The Guardian, TIME magazine, The Daily, Rolling Stone, and the London Magazine. He has two books published on World War II, and his other works on the Middle East include *The Tribes Triumphant*, *The Northern Front*, and most recently *Syria Burning*.

At the time of this interview in October 2015, Glass had just returned from reporting in Syria and had published "In the Syrian Deadlands" with the New York Review of Books.

With the emulation effects of the Arab Spring and the momentum that seems to have been building towards civil war, how much influence could the United States have had during these early stages of the civil war in Syria?

Glass: Many people took hope from the successful revolution in Tunisia, but it wasn't violent. The revolution that brought Mubarak down, though it turned into a bit of a fiasco later, was also not violent. You talk to the activists in Damascus, they were begging their comrades not to bring weapons

to the demonstrations, and someone was supplying them with weapons. Somebody helped turn that violent. I say that some Syrians wanted to, but they were a very small minority because they'd already seen what violence did to Iraq and Lebanon. They felt that the regime couldn't deal with general strikes and massive demonstrations and that it would have to give because it didn't have mechanisms for dealing with that. They had mechanisms for dealing with violence. They dealt with the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1982 by destroying half the city of Hama. They knew how to deal with attempted military coups because throughout the 1950s and 60s, they made themselves coup proof. What they didn't know how to deal with, because they had never had it before, was the sort of street demonstrations in Cairo and Tunis, and that's why most of the activists in Damascus, almost all of whom have now been put in prison or have fled the country because there is no place for them and they're not welcome amongst the jihadists, were arguing for something else. They were arguing for democracy and free speech. The jihadists are not arguing for democracy and free speech. They're arguing for another totalitarian system now, but a non-secular one. So I think the Arab Spring did inspire those people originally. The US and those who wanted to get rid of the Syrian regime, even at the risk of violence and destroying the country, helped to turn that uprising into a violent civil war. That's my view, and I could be wrong, but that's how it seems to me.

In Iraq, did you find that there is a willingness to contemplate partition?

Glass: People talk about it, but no one's got a plan and drawing new borders would cause another war. Between the Kurdish regional government and the Baghdad government area there's a thick line called "the disputed territories," which will be left for future

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negotiation if there's going to be a referendum on independence for Kurdistan. The Kurds control most of those areas down, but the Baghdad government does not want them to, and as a result of many of the Kurdish activities – partly taking Kirkuk, partly doing oil deals with international oil companies over the head of Baghdad – Baghdad has now cut the seventeen percent of its oil wealth that it was sending to Kurdistan to pay its civil servants completely. The Kurds now have not been paid since July. And the Peshmergas, who were the strongest force fighting ISIS, have also not been paid since July. Because of this morale is very low in Kurdistan and the once buoyant economy is now suffering greatly. It's not a good time to discuss the formalization of partition because no one's going to be able to cope with it. No one's ready for it now. In the distant future, perhaps.

How much support does Assad maintain in Damascus and greater Syria?

Glass: Sixty-five percent of Syrians are Sunni Arabs. If they had all opposed Assad, he would have been out in twenty-four hours. They didn't. They didn't necessarily love him, but the system was never meant to elevate the Alawis to a ruling class. A few people from their immediate family benefited enormously. If you go to the Alawi areas now, they're the poorest areas in the country. People don't have running water in their houses. They're mostly farmers with two acres. They themselves have not been elevated. The Sunni middle class in Damascus and Aleppo benefited enormously from the Assad regime, so they were intelligent enough to spread the wealth. Those people still feel they would get a better deal from him than the Islamic State because they want their daughters to go to school. They want to have a normal life. It is true that they want to have more freedom. They'd love to read a newspaper that doesn't have Assad's picture on the front page everyday. They'd love the sort of normal things that the rest of the world has, but even without those, they don't want what they see in Raqqa. People flee Raqqa to Damascus when they can, and they tell horror stories about what is going on there. So even if those Sunnis aren't fully supporting Assad, they're not fighting against him and that's enough for him.

When you were in Damascus, did you sense any tension from the Syrian regime in regards to outside actors, such as the Iranian Quds Forces and Hezbollah, being able to dictate course?

Glass: Not from the regime so much as ordinary people. A lot of Sunnis in Damascus and Aleppo resent the Iranian-ization of the country. They see it as Shi'a-ization. There was a time when some of the Iranians tried to convert Sunnis, which was a huge mistake, like the Christian missionaries of came in the 19th century who also tried to convert. It doesn't work, but it created a lot of resentment, and that resentment is increasing. A lot of the Iraqi Shi'a fighters and Hazaras who have come with their families have been put in flats in Damascus. And this has led to some resentment as well; Sunnis feel that they're being displaced. And these Sunnis, who live in Damascus by the way, they haven't deposed the regime. They don't like the regime but they haven't fought against it. In a way, they welcome the Russian intervention as a counterbalance to this Iranian-ization because the Russians don't have any religious agenda. And they think that if the Russians are running things, they're not going to try and drive Sunnis out. So in a way it's helping the regime with its Sunnis who have not opposed it yet.

Do you think that the Iran nuclear deal has had any effect on Syria, on Iraq, or any part of situation in the Middle East?

Glass: Well, so far, no. In theory, there was a prospect for the US to say, 'We and the Iranians have a common enemy, we can coordinate.' Instead, they have coordination with the Iraqi army, which coordinates with Iran. So there's an indirect coordination. IS is a very serious military force, it's not a joke. They fight better than the Iraqi army. They fight better than the Syrian army. To defeat ISIS, all these nations should coordinate but they're not. And that didn't come out of the nuclear deal—they've always said that nuclear negotiations are a separate issue, other things can be discussed or not. But the deal doesn't lead to a good relationship; it just means that that problem is solved, or put aside at least.

What has the Syrian civil war done for not only the political position of Hezbollah in Lebanon, but also its strategic and military ambitions in the region?

Glass: Well, they've lost a lot of men. I know that. It's also made them very unpopular with the other sects in Lebanon. It's helped Amal, another Lebanese Shi'ite party, to come back and achieve a little bit of independence from Hezbollah because many feel that Amal represents more Shiites, although they're corrupt. But Hezbollah is still a powerful force. They're still the kingmakers in Lebanon. They're still preventing a president from being chosen. They've paralyzed the Lebanese state.

How do you assess Putin's intentions to play a role not only in Syria but possibly in Iraq as well? What might the ramifications of that be for the US position, both in Iraq and Syria?

Glass: Well, while I was in Baghdad, there was a Russian military delegation meeting with the Ministry of Defense. They're already coordinating their confrontation with IS. They feel that the American policy in confronting IS has failed. Clearly, it has. They have not supplied, for example, the Peshmergas with any weapons at all. The Peshmergas are down to very few bullets. They have no tanks. They have no heavy artillery. They are completely abandoned on American airstrikes, which are rather difficult to predict. The Americans are doing very little close-air support for the Peshmerga infantry. They're doing some with the popular militias in the South. They seem to be giving more support to the popular missions in the South than they are to the Kurds. I think that shows a slight incoherence in Washington's policy on whether they're really serious about defeating IS. If Washington were serious, they would be doing more like what the Russians are doing: a lot of close air support for the Syrian army, the Iranian forces, the Hezbollah forces, the Iraqi Shiites who've come to Syria to take back the countryside around Aleppo and Hama. This is just in the last two weeks. Russia has become more involved because it is committed to its only client state in the Middle East. If you look at the map of the Middle East, from Morocco and Mauritania all the way to the borders of Iran, every country is an American client

state except one, Syria. So there's no way that Putin was going to dump his only ally in the region, lose all credibility in the region, give up his only naval base outside the old Soviet Union, just to please the United States. Because he's committed to Assad, and Assad was losing two months ago – Assad had lost all of Idlib province, he'd lost Palmyra, things were getting very bad in Daraa again, and the countryside around Homs was narrowing around the city. If Putin didn't do what he's doing now, he could have lost him, and he doesn't want to lose him. Moving into Iraq, if he can have good relations with Iraq and pick up on this anti-American sentiment amongst Iraqis, he could conceivably have two client states, Iraq and Syria. Both are impressive and corrupt, but so are all of America's client states, so the Middle East is used to it.

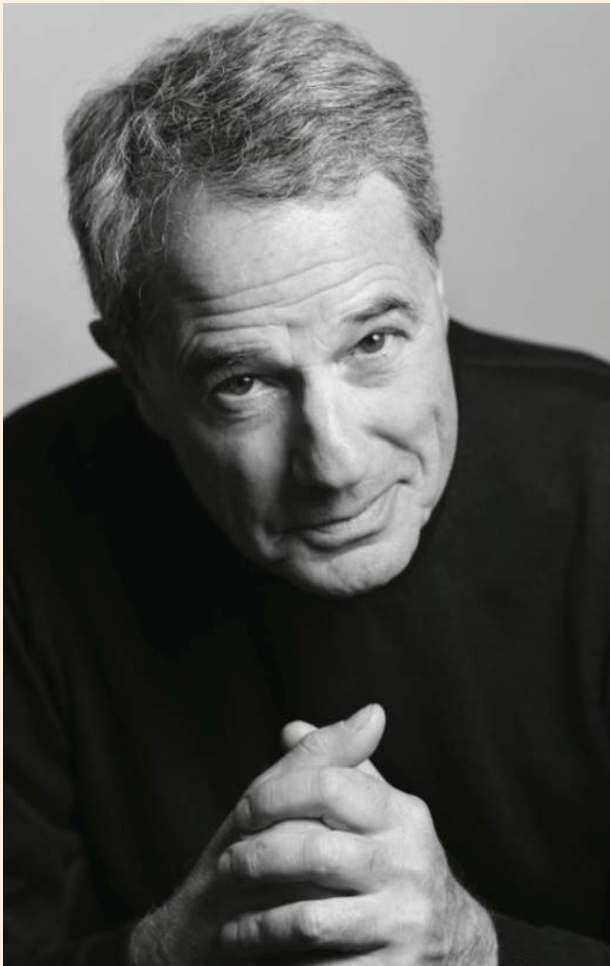
Can you speak more to the current role of Turkey in the Syrian civil war?

Glass: The Turks have kept the border open for IS and Jabhat al-Nusra. The Turks still permit weapons and men to come in and wounded fighters to come out. They have done nothing to close it while saying they're fighting a war against ISIS with the United States. But they're not. In fact, they haven't done anything against ISIS. They've been enabling ISIS. And one of the many reasons is that they fear Kurdish nationalism, and they don't want to see a Kurdish autonomous zone in Syria like the Kurdish autonomous zone in Iraq. That would be a second example of a successful autonomous Kurdish area, which is what they don't want in Turkey. Look, the reason they killed all the Armenians was that they were afraid of an Armenian partition in 1915 in the six provinces where there were lots of Armenians. And Turkey has good historical reasons to fear partition. Because minorities on the fringes of the country, with European connivance and help, seized their independence in the 19th century, they have a strong sense that they don't want to lose any more of their country. I understand that.

Can you speak about the reported human rights abuses by Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria?

Glass: It's a mixed picture, both in Rojava and in the Kurdish regional government of Iraq. The Kurds have

taken in Arab refugees from other parts of Iraq and other parts of Syria. And they have also destroyed Arab villages, because those, in the Iraqi part, are villages in the disputed territories, and they are also people that were put there by Saddam, 30 to 40 years ago. The Kurds feel the Arabs have no right to be there and so they're not letting them live there. So there has been ethnic cleansing of that kind, but there are also camps in Kurdish Iraq where Arabs are living because they're afraid to live under IS. In Syria, it's an equally mixed picture, some Arabs are with the Kurds and some are against them. The Kurds were not originally setting out to drive Arabs out. They were glad to have them stay. Also a place like Qamishli was a Christian town before the Kurds were there. But the Christians



Charles Glass. Christian Solidarity International USA.

have now left because they're afraid of ISIS, and the Kurds are going to have some kind of independence—no matter what the outcome of the war, I suspect that Kurdish autonomy will stay. But whether it will be an ethnically cleansed region or not, I don't know.

What are the prospects that, if a political solution were achieved, refugees would be willing to return to their country and its rebuilding effort?

Glass: Well, I would think that most of those in camps - in Jordan and Turkey - will want to come back, or will be forced back, and the ones in Lebanon will probably come back as well. The ones who've gone to Europe and made good lives probably won't come back. They're obviously the most educated and the ones who could make the most contribution, but if they've made lives in Europe, why would they go back? The same thing happened after the Lebanese Civil War. Some of the best people never returned.

Do you think that Syrian refugees who are religious minorities will be able to or will want to return to Syria?

Glass: I can't say. I would hope that a kind of Syria would emerge from this that would allow them to return and would want them to return. There is one example I can think of. There's a village in northern Syria called Kessab, which is an Armenian village. It's the only all-Armenian village in Syria. It's a beautiful place in the mountains and very alpine. In March of last year, Turkey opened the border to Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist organizations coming to occupy Kessab, so the inhabitants fled to Latakia. The Armenian lobby in the United States went full throttle, accusing the jihadists of massacring Armenians, destroying the village, and so forth, which got members of Congress galvanized. There are a lot of Armenian votes in certain key states. The US then put some pressure on the Turks to get them out, and they did. The Turks reopened the border, allowed the Islamists to leave, and the Syrian Army came back. By the way, there was no massacre at Kessab. That was all propaganda, but 80 percent of the people came back and rebuilt their houses, so that shows that it can be done. They are right now living in a very precarious state because they're only a mile

from the Turkish border. The Islamists could in theory come back any day. I think the Turks won't want that problem with the US and the Armenian lobby again, so they might not allow them. There is a willingness among minorities to come back where they were born, where their ancestors were buried, where their churches are, where their schools are, where their communities are. Ideally, they would go back, and, before this war, they weren't leaving in great numbers anyway, but what there will be to go back to in the long run I don't know. If it becomes a Wahhabi state, no one's going to go back. No minorities will go back.

How has reporting become more challenging in the Middle East since you began?

Glass: It's always been a challenge. It's always a challenge to get to know people and understand what's happening and to determine what's worth reporting and what's worth ignoring. I don't think that's changed very much. We make the same mistakes that we always did, and try to recover. You know, it's always been a troubled region. It's been a troubled region throughout history, but particularly in the history since the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of artificial boundaries that were never acceptable to the local populations.

Have changing political conditions in the last two decades, such as the proliferation of terrorism, made reporting more challenging than it was?

Glass: Well, it can be physically more threatening because of the kidnappings, but remember that we had kidnappings in Lebanon in the 80's. I'm a victim of one of them, so I know. But now, if you're kidnapped, your chances of survival are much less than they were when Hezbollah took me. Hezbollah let most of its hostages go, or they escaped, but they did not behead them. Now, the Islamic State beheads people or drowns them or burns them alive or any number of things. So it's more frightening. In Lebanon during the civil war, many journalists were still able to go almost everywhere, even at the risk of kidnappings, and cover the story. Now, it's almost impossible to cover both sides of the war in Syria and Iraq. You can cover the Syrian government side, the Iraqi government

side, the Kurdish side, but it's almost impossible to go there as a Westerner and cover the Islamic State and get their point of view, which one should do to have comprehensive reporting, but not at the risk of ninety-nine percent certainty that you'll have your head cut off. There was a German journalist who spent ten days with the Islamic State, and he did some very good reports - very enlightening. VICE News had a Palestinian cameraman who went there for a month and made a brilliant film called "Islamic State." It's worth seeing and gives a great insight into what they're doing in Raqqa and how they behave and what they think. That's a very important part of the story, but getting that is too much a risk for me to take anymore.

How is the media, particularly from the West, influencing Western governments' policies in Syria?

Glass: I think it's the other way around. I think that most of the media have followed Western policy, and have regurgitated the American, British, French, Saudi narrative of what is happening in Syria. That narrative is that there was a brutal dictator. The people rose up, fought against them. He suppressed them, they got stronger, and the war is going back and forth. And now there are some elements in the opposition that look a little disagreeable, but the overall priority is to get rid of this brutal dictator. But if you back up a little bit and look across the Middle East, all the countries have brutal dictators. Why this one? Why was it so important to get rid of this one? Well, the reasons are obvious. He had a strategic alliance with Iran. He's close to the Russians. For those reasons, he had to go. The Saudis were much more brutal than Assad. They tortured far more people, beheaded people, crucified people, but nobody is talking about getting rid of the government. There is not even a civil society movement in Saudi Arabia that is able to contemplate staging a demonstration against them. So, we have to understand that from the very beginning, the Western narrative was false, and that the media followed the government on this. Assad was a problem because he was close to Iran and he supported Hezbollah, which gave Israel a hell of a beating in 2006 and which drove Israel out of south Lebanon in 2000. They were too big for themselves, and the way of diminishing them was to cut their bridge to Iran through Syria. It has

nothing to do with democracy or belief in democracy.

In terms of covering the refugee crisis that has stemmed from this conflict, how have the European and Middle Eastern government responses differed? And what are the discrepancies, if any, in the media coverage for these responses?

Glass: Well what's fascinating is that the countries that are doing the least to take in these people are the ones who did the most to displace them. The Saudis have not taken in a single Syrian refugee. The British are talking about taking in 10,000 over so many years. The French won't take in any. The Americans won't take in any. The Germans who had nothing to do with this policy are going to take in 300,000. There's something very strange here. The Saudis armed this revolution, which allowed the war to take place, but they won't help the people. They're not even giving money to the refugees in the camps. The Kuwaitis were, but again, they weren't involved. This is really brutal hypocrisy and realpolitik, and I don't see this reflected in much of the mainstream reporting. The focus on the refugee crisis should be on Lebanon, which has taken in one and a half million, and Turkey, which has taken in the same number, or Jordan, which has taken in over one million. That's where the needs are, and many people are leaving those camps because the UN can't get enough donations to feed them. And again, that's disgraceful. Saudi Arabia has plenty of money they could give to these people, but they don't. And we have another refugee crisis that has been in place since 1948, the Palestinian refugee crisis, about which no one does anything.

Where do you think the average American should turn to get reliable news about the Middle East?

Glass: Some of the best reporting I've seen has been in *The Independent* by Patrick Cockburn. Patrick's reporting has been really good, and he wrote an excellent book about ISIS. I would turn to him. There have been some very good reports on Vice News, some very excellent reports on the strategic balance in the region by *The Intercept*. There was some really great reporting from Syria and Iraq from Anthony Shadid in *The New York Times* when he was alive. His loss

will be very greatly felt. I'm sad for him but also for his readers that they don't have the benefit of his eye.

Taking a step back, what are the most critical trends you've witnessed while covering the Middle East? What are your biggest takeaways for how the region is developing?

Glass: The failure of Arab nationalism and socialism to achieve any of their goals and the ideological vacuum that left for political Islam to fill—I think that's been the major development of the last forty years in the region. There is the continuing struggle of the Palestinians for independence, which doesn't seem to be going anywhere since its beginnings. With the ghettoization of the Middle East into sectarian enclaves, many of these enclaves have disappeared, since the late nineteenth century, but this has certainly been accelerated in my lifetime. I think in Iran there are only ninety thousand Zoroastrians left. So few Christians left in Palestine because they were driven out by the Israelis, partly because it's easier for them to get visas and their lives are intolerable and also not encouraged to stay by the Islamists. Many Yazidis are now facing extinction. This loss of a cultural mosaic for a region that was wonderful because of that mosaic, because of these differences and the different types of people you could encounter very short distances from each other and who benefitted from the mix of their cultures and outlooks and the tolerance that they once had for their beliefs—that's all being lost.

Where do you see the region going in the future?

Glass: Down.