



# OUR MAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

*Josh Landis did not set out to become an internationally known commentator on Syria, but family ties and scholarly expertise prevailed.*

## AS A TALL,

redheaded American, it's hard not to notice Joshua Landis in an international airport. Along with the ever-present wire-rim glasses and fair features, he often stands out in a crowd. And he is good with that, even finds humor in it. The director for the Center of Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, Landis has been on the receiving end of more than a few jokes regarding his appearance.

He recalls accompanying his wife to an Alawite shrine during the early years of their marriage in Syria many years ago. It was Friday, the day members of the small religious sect gather to picnic and socialize near the religious monument. Landis arrived with his Syrian family and quickly realized the assembled Alawites had become uniformly silent.

"Here I am, this giant redhead with glowing white skin, walking right into an area that's like Central Park on a weekend," Landis laughs.

Of the several thousand people there, someone broke the silence shouting, 'Condoleezza Rice!' by way of acknowledging the American in their midst. "Everyone bursts into uproarious laugh-



Fans of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* will recognize the site of Landis' 2013 visit to Jordan. Petra, also known as "The Rose City," was founded in 312 B.C. as home to the Arab Nabataeans.



ter. As my family and I walked around to find a place to sit, we all realized what a Martian I must appear to be.”

The laughter is long gone for many Syrians today. The eastern side of the ancient city of Aleppo is in ruins. In late 2016

the world watched as its residents, trapped by incessant fighting between rebels and the Syrian military, waited anxiously to be transported to refugee camps after weeks of bombardment. In February, Syrian government forces used chemical weapons



Joshua Landis and his wife, Manar, stand against a backdrop of Athens, Greece, in summer 2016, during his research on Libyan refugees fleeing their country’s civil war.



in opposition-controlled parts of the city. The United States retaliated with the bombing of a Syrian airbase in April, yet Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, backed by Russia and Iraq, retains control of the country's second largest city. Additional U.S. sanctions are now in place.

On a recent Saturday morning, Landis is a world away from the war-ravaged remains of Aleppo. He is pattering around his Norman kitchen preparing meals for his family and stocking the freezer. Cooking is therapeutic, he says, as he prepares for an-

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other round of out-of-state travel – he makes more than 30 trips a year – to lend his expertise on the Middle East to think tanks and policymakers at home and abroad.

“The Syrian question never goes away,” Landis replies when asked his feelings regarding the war in Aleppo. “It is always contentious. Syria used to be a place of fun, beauty, good food and friendship. Today it is associated with none of those things. It is associated with pain and anger and yelling. Whenever I used to be

asked where I would want to travel in the world, I always said Damascus. It is hard to say that anymore.”

Landis spent more than 14 years living in the Middle East, four of those in Syria, and speaks fluent Arabic and French. An award-winning professor and recipient of three Fulbright scholarships, in 2005 he was a Senior Fulbright Research Fellow in Damascus. His wife, Manar Kachour, is Syrian and most summers the Landis family visited her homeland until the revolution began in 2011. They have not been back since.

“Assad won the war with Russia’s help,” Landis says. “Moving forward, most of the Syrian population will be under his control, but not most of the country. That’s because there are great swaths of Syria that are desert, sparsely populated and have fallen out of government control. For a government, it is extremely weak and has no money. It would be a very difficult task to re-take this territory.”

Landis believes the United States is doing itself a favor by not getting dragged completely into Syria’s civil war.

“Unless we were willing to occupy the country in a major way, like we almost did in Iraq, then there is no way the U.S. would be successful.” Even then, U.S. success would be doubtful. “U.S. led regime-change in the Middle East has not brought success,” he adds.

In 2004 Landis started writing the blog “Syria Comment.” Blogs were just beginning to take off and provided an opportunity to reach like-minded individuals on particular topics. That project changed the trajectory of his life in ways he could not have predicted.

Daily researching, writing and posting propelled Landis into an unexpected realm as the go-to source around the world regarding the Middle East, especially Syria.

“I had no clue when I started the blog how it would transform my life,” he says. “At the time I was a historian and wrote articles that maybe 25 people would read. The audience was miniscule. People knew nothing about Syria then. ‘Syria Comment’ became a clearinghouse, a one-stop shop for news in the region. It made me ‘the Syria guy’ and I worked extremely hard at it for 10 years. It has provided an exciting life of travel and constant dialogue with really smart people.”

While he still curates content for the blog, Landis does not write as prolifically for it today.

“After the first few years of the civil war in Syria, publishing the blog was not productive or fun anymore,” he says. “I was exhausted and my family, which also includes two chil-



dren, wanted me to direct my attention to other things.”

Those other things include a variety of duties within the College of International Studies. Along with Dean Suzette Grillot, Landis travels the world to visit university campuses to scout for study abroad opportunities, visit donors and raise funds for the growing and influential college. This fall, he will serve as a faculty-in-residence at OU-Arezzo.

“I have had the pleasure to work with Joshua for nearly 20 years, since we both came to OU in the late 1990s,” Grillot says. “I could not be more impressed with all he has contributed to our understanding of the Middle East in general, and of Syria in particular. He has single-handedly raised the profile of the University of Oklahoma and College of International Studies with the sheer volume of media interviews he gladly and professionally provides.”

Landis is featured on more than 250 news programs a year, sometimes giving four interviews a day. In addition, he participates in longer-formatted talk shows in Russia, on Al Jazeera, NPR and CNN, to name a few. He’s also a regular on Grillot’s public radio show, “World Views,” which airs on KGOU, OU’s NPR affiliate. She credits him with being the main draw for her 30-minute program whenever he is featured.

“There is nothing Joshua hasn’t done – he is a top-notch teacher, a respected public intellectual, and one of the most hard-working members of the OU faculty in all respects,” she says. “We are very lucky to have Joshua Landis at OU.”

Looking ahead, Landis sees an Assad-ruled Syria backed by significant military oppression. He predicts America will become embittered towards this regime and maintain economic sanctions.

“At this dramatic point in time, a new presidential administration gives an opportunity for the U.S. to recalibrate its foreign policy towards Syria,” he says. “We made a lot of mistakes. We misread Syrian society and the strength of Assad, as well as Russia’s and Iran’s commitment. We miscalculated and thought if we shoved arms in, a liberal government would



Landis, seen here in 2013 at the Hariri Mosque in downtown Beirut, Lebanon, spent more than 14 years living in the Middle East and became an authority trusted by think tanks, policymakers and journalists across the world.

rise to the top, but what we discovered were Islamists rising to the top.

“Whether in Syria or Libya, we have tried to install regime change, and we are happy to kick out the tent poles of government, but we are not interested in re-establishing any kind of new government,” Landis says. “That is a problem because



Landis (top row, center) and College of International Studies Dean Suzette Grillot (middle row, left) at the Greek amphitheater of Aspendos – the best-preserved theater of antiquity – with OU students who took their co-taught 2016 course, *Journey to Turkey*.

the people who counted on us to get a win also want us to get involved and to fix their countries. It is very difficult to say ‘no’ because so much human tragedy is unfolding.”

What becomes of the people who have fled their war-torn country is another issue. The vast majority of refugees are not rebel fighters but people who are fleeing insecurity, war and danger. Many refugees will make their way back home if there is peace, economic prosperity and the hope of rebuilding their lives.


That said, Landis predicts Syrian refugees may very well become bitter as they live in limbo. Their displacement will require some kind of action on the part of the world so they don’t get stuck in a host country with neither prospects to work nor to go home.

“This is a dilemma for the United States and Western Europe,” he says. “They want to punish Assad. And yet they want the refugees to go home without an economy that will

make their lives better. How do you do both at the same time? They need to bite their lip and lift sanctions against Syria, or give citizenship to Syrian refugees. That is a grim problem but it is a problem that is in front of us today as we contemplate an Assad-led Syria.”

His goal, he says, is to help make America a smarter, better-informed and more agile country to hopefully avoid blunders and unproductive pursuits abroad.

“To me, this is fun, to be knowledgeable about a topic, to help educate America and our governing agencies on Syria while informing the debate,” he adds.

With no real answer to the Syrian question, Landis could remain in demand on this topic for years to come. 

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