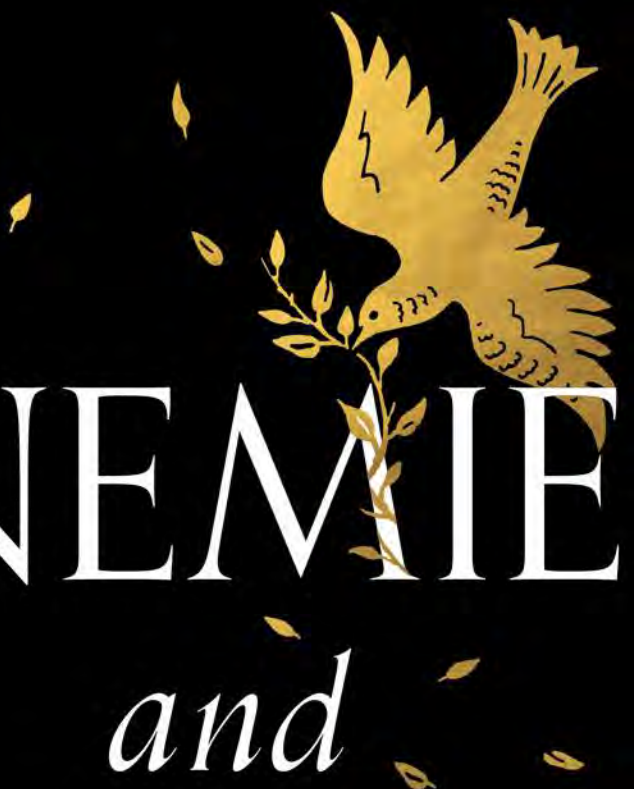


*"Everyone who cares about the future of Israel and the Middle East  
should read this book."* –FORMER VICE PRESIDENT MIKE PENCE

JOEL C. ROSENBERG



ENEMIES  
*and*  
ALLIES

*An Unforgettable Journey inside the Fast-Moving  
& Immensely Turbulent Modern Middle East*

## *Praise for Joel C. Rosenberg*

“Everyone who cares about the future of Israel and the Middle East should read this book. Rosenberg is a shrewd observer of the tectonic changes underway in the region. And his rare and unique access puts you inside the room with some of the most powerful Arab, Israeli, and American leaders shaping the future of war, peace, and religious freedom in our time.”

**MIKE PENCE**, former vice president

“If there’s one book you read about the Middle East this year, this should be it. Few people understand the scope and scale of change in the region better than Joel C. Rosenberg. This guy gets it!”

**MIKE HUCKABEE**, former governor of Arkansas

“*Enemies and Allies* should be required reading in the White House, Congress, and the Knesset. Rosenberg lays out in fascinating and vivid detail why more and more Arab leaders want to make peace with Israel, even as the terror masters in Tehran want to bring about a second Holocaust. And Rosenberg is right—what’s needed now is a new and far more robust strategic alliance between the U.S., Israel, and the Sunni Arab world to defend Western civilization against the perils of the Persian Bomb.”

**DANNY AYALON**, former Israeli ambassador to the United States and deputy foreign minister

“It is unusual for an ordinary Israeli citizen with no position of power—no political or diplomatic or intelligence credentials—to be invited to meet with some of the most consequential leaders in the Arab world. Yet it happened. Not once but over and over again. This is a huge story. Joel C. Rosenberg has spent hour upon hour with Arab kings and crown princes, presidents and prime ministers, even His Royal Highness Mohammed bin Salman, heir to the Saudi throne, and his inner circle. A recent immigrant to Israel and an evangelical, Rosenberg has built trust with these leaders. Befriended them. Listened to them. And was even

granted permission to share these unprecedented conversations with the rest of us. He has worked tirelessly urging them to expand religious freedom for Jews and Christians, visit the Holy City of Jerusalem, and make peace. This is an amazing tale—so amazing that I suspect *Enemies and Allies* is going to be widely read not just in America and in Israel, but throughout the Arab world—probably in Tehran, Moscow, and Ankara, too—as well it should. Rosenberg has written a significant and insightful book about the future of the Middle East.”

**MAJOR GENERAL** Aharon Ze’evi Farkash, IDF, retired, former head of Israeli military intelligence

“Two decades after 9/11, the Middle East is in the midst of some of the most profound changes in modern history. While new and grave threats are rising, so are new opportunities for security, peace, and prosperity for the region. My friend Joel—an evangelical from a Jewish background—develops a spellbinding narrative in *Enemies and Allies* by recounting his many providential encounters with the most prominent leaders in Israel and the Arab Muslim world. The impact of these engagements will continue to shape U.S. policies in the region for years to come. I can think of few intelligence operatives, much less *New York Times* bestselling authors, who have a keener sense of what is happening, what it means, or why it matters than Joel C. Rosenberg. *Enemies and Allies* is proof of that.”

**DAVID SHEDD**, former acting director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency

“I’ve known Joel Rosenberg for more than twenty years. I’ve traveled with him on the historic delegations he has led to meet with the top leaders in the Arab world. And I can tell you this is a man who truly gets what’s happening in the Middle East and cares deeply about advancing the cause of peace and human rights for Jews and Christians and for Muslims. His new work, *Enemies and Allies*, is the most important book about Israel, Iran, and the Arab world in years, and I can’t recommend it highly enough.”

**J. KENNETH BLACKWELL**, former U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Human Rights Commission, former Ohio secretary of state, and member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the board of advisors of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA)

“Rosenberg nails it! *Enemies and Allies* is timely and terrifying. The definitive, must-read book for every patriot who cares about the future of freedom. Based on his exclusive and extensive conversations with senior U.S., Israeli, and Arab leaders and intelligence officials, Rosenberg reveals what the mainstream media won’t tell you: why the single greatest threat in the Middle East to the national security of the American people, Israel, and our Arab allies is the apocalyptic, genocidal regime in Iran. But Rosenberg goes further, explaining how exponentially more dangerous Tehran becomes as it builds alliances with the dictators of Russia, Turkey, North Korea, and China. And why the clock is ticking for the free world to act to strengthen our allies and neutralize our enemies before it’s too late.”

**RICK SANTORUM**, former senator and member of the Senate Armed Services Committee

“*Enemies and Allies* is a highly engaging journey through the pitfalls and possibilities of the modern Middle East in which Israel is emerging as a true asset for security and stability, not seen as the source of all trouble. Joel offers readers his front-row seat to history through personal conversations with all the key personalities shaping the future of the region, from Netanyahu to Trump to MBS. A must-read for anyone who wants to understand the genesis of the Abraham Accords and their aftermath.”

**VICTORIA COATES**, former U.S. deputy national security advisor for Middle Eastern and North African affairs at the National Security Council

“This informed account of Mideast travail by a qualified front-row witness will cheer the peacemakers and frustrate the appeasers and apologists. There is no denying that Joel Rosenberg’s chronicle of his journey through these pivotal historic events puts critical pieces of the puzzle credibly on the table. That he finishes with an optimistic outlook is encouraging and testimony to his deep faith.”

**PORTER GOSS**, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency


“In *Enemies and Allies*, my friend Joel C. Rosenberg takes you where few people get to go—inside meetings with powerful Arab and Israeli leaders who are literally reshaping the future of the Middle East. I’ve been at

his side as he has asked these leaders hard questions, pressed for peace, championed religious freedom, and done so with deep conviction and genuine respect. This is a fascinating book that will take you behind the scenes during a whirlwind of unlikely yet momentous events that are raising critical questions that must be answered soon: Who exactly are our enemies? Who are our allies? And where does all this fast-moving change go from here?"

**JOHNNIE MOORE**, commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and author of *Defying ISIS: Preserving Christianity in the Place of its Birth and in Your Own Backyard*

ENEMIES *and* ALLIES





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JOEL C. ROSENBERG



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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-5381-5

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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## *Preface*

It has long been said, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

Nobody says that about the Middle East.

What happens there—for better or worse—affects the entire world. Ever-fluctuating oil prices affect how much it costs to fill up the family car with gas. Ever-shifting stock market valuations affect the future of our retirement savings. Ever-evolving airport security procedures affect the time and hassle it takes just to board an airplane. Ever-increasing defense and homeland security budgets affect the taxes we are required to pay just to keep ourselves safe. Never-ending wars and rumors of war affect so many of us who have to send our sons and daughters to the military to confront our enemies and defend our allies.

We could wish it were not so. Yet such matters are not in our hands. Time and again, the eyes of the world are drawn back to the Middle East and North Africa, the epicenter of the momentous events that are shaking our world and shaping our future.

Two decades after the horrific terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, which shifted our focus to the Middle East yet again, the region is undergoing sweeping, historic, tectonic transformations. We ignore them at our peril.

Some of the changes have been unspeakably brutal:

- In Afghanistan, the seemingly endless war has killed more than 150,000 people since 2001.<sup>1</sup>
- In Iraq, the war that began in 2003—followed by the insurgency and the rise and fall of the Islamic State—has left upwards of 330,000 civilians and combatants dead, cost the American people more than \$2 trillion, and still has not brought peace.<sup>2</sup>
- In Syria and Yemen, ongoing civil wars have left close to a half million dead and millions more homeless and running for their lives.<sup>3</sup>
- The so-called Arab Spring led to the collapse of regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen—and thousands of dead and injured.
- In Gaza, a well-meaning but premature experiment with local elections in 2006 put the Hamas terrorist organization in power. Together with their jihadist allies, they have proceeded to fire more than 12,000 rockets and mortars at civilian population centers in southern Israel, drawing round after round of retaliatory attacks by the Israel Defense Forces, leading to death and injury and untold trauma on both sides of the border.<sup>4</sup>

Other changes are fostering hope for newfound peace, security, and prosperity:

- The Abraham Accords—historic peace, normalization, trade, and tourism agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Republic of the Sudan, and the Kingdom of Morocco—were successfully brokered by the U.S.
- More Arab and Muslim nations are showing interest in making peace with Israel and building strategic alliances together. Even the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
- Arab states are no longer leveraging the price of oil against the U.S. and Israel. Instead, they are doing so against the tyrants in Tehran.
- Deeper strategic alliances are being forged between the U.S. and Israel and between the U.S. and the Arab world.
- At the same time, numerous Arab nations have embarked upon unprecedented domestic reform programs designed to create more

economic freedom and opportunity for their people—most notably the Vision 2030 initiative in Saudi Arabia.

Today, political, financial, business, and faith leaders—indeed, people of all kinds, from tourists to day traders, from military officials to our intelligence communities, from human rights activists to leaders of global ministries—are watching events in the Middle East with a mixture of apprehension and awe. They are also asking critical questions:

- Where is the Middle East heading—toward catastrophic new wars or a captivating new era of peace and prosperity?
- Who exactly are our enemies today, and who are our allies?
- What are the most serious threats in the region, and what are the most exciting opportunities?
- Is there a new “gold rush” coming as CEOs, entrepreneurs, and investors surge into a new Middle East—one focused not on war and terror but on technology, trade, and tourism?
- What does the future hold for the security of Israel—amid all this change, will the Jewish State be safer or more in danger?
- How will the rapidly changing dynamics in the Arab and Muslim world affect the future of religious minorities, including the millions of Christians who live in the region?
- And who are the major agents of change in the region—for good or for evil? Who should we be watching, what are their aims, and how far will they go to achieve their ambitions?

Over the past two decades, I have crisscrossed the Middle East and North Africa as an author, a columnist, a documentary filmmaker, and a follower of Jesus Christ from a Jewish background. I traveled from Morocco in the west to Afghanistan in the east. Lived in Egypt. Explored Jordan. Taught the Bible in Turkey. Helped build a Christian radio station in Iraq. Sold our home in the Washington, D.C., area and moved to Israel with my family in the middle of a rocket war. Became a dual U.S.-Israeli citizen. Bought an apartment in Jerusalem. Sent two of my sons to the Israeli army.

Along the way, I have had the rare fortune to meet with kings and

crown princes, presidents and prime ministers, spy chiefs and diplomats—spending hours in conversation behind closed doors. At their request, I have brought delegations of evangelical Christian leaders to meet with them—often the first Christian delegations in history to meet with the leaders of these Arab Muslim countries. We have not gone seeking headlines or photo ops but to pursue long-term friendships and to listen, learn, and pray. We have also used these opportunities to encourage our hosts to take even bigger steps to advance peace, religious freedom, and human rights—in their nations and throughout the region.

At the same time, I have also been honored to meet with pastors and priests, imams and rabbis, generals and ex-jihadists, wise men and warlords, business owners and factory workers, billionaires and the poorest of the poor. Together, we've enjoyed countless cups of coffee and tea. We've talked for hours—for days—sometimes deep into the night. I have asked them pointed, direct questions, and they have given me candid, heartfelt answers.

*What do you want?*

*Whom do you fear?*

*Who are your enemies?*

*Who are your allies?*

*What are your dreams for your children and grandchildren?*

*What are the obstacles in your way?*

*What do you think of Jews?*

*What do you think of Jesus and those who follow him?*

*Can there ever be peace between Israel and the Arab Muslim world?*

*How can I pray for you?*

*May I take a moment and pray for you right now?*

Over the course of several decades, I have seen the answers begin to change. Attitudes are shifting. Not just on the street but also in the palaces—in the corridors of power that few outsiders ever see.

Fascinated by the speed and scale and scope of change, and wanting more people to hear these compelling stories, I launched two new websites—All Israel News ([allisrael.com](http://allisrael.com)) and All Arab News ([allarab.news](http://allarab.news)) on September 1, 2020. With a team of Israeli, Palestinian, and Lebanese reporters, editors, videographers, and web designers, we are tracking and explaining what is happening and why it matters. From our

first days in operation, we were able to break exclusive stories and publish original interviews with some of the most influential newsmakers in the region. Our stories have been cited by Israeli, Arab, American, and other reporters around the world. They have also been retweeted by government officials, journalists, religious leaders, and everyday citizens who are exasperated by the extreme bias in too much of the media today and are hungry for credible, fair, balanced, and unique reporting and analysis about Israel and the Arab Muslim world.

Yet even two websites cannot adequately explain the scope of the changes we are witnessing. Daily news coverage of specific events is pointillism. What is needed is context.

That is why I wrote this book. It is the product of my journeys. In these pages, I will take you inside royal courts and capitals and introduce you to the most powerful figures in the region. Love them or hate them, these are the players driving the change. These are the leaders to keep your eye on. I've spoken with many of them at length, and I will share my observations and assessments. Most important, however, I will let you hear them in their own words through never-before-published transcripts of our conversations.

Here are some of the leaders you will meet:

- **Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman:** Universally known by his initials, MBS, he is the richest, most mysterious, and most controversial Muslim leader on the face of the planet. Only in his thirties, he is positioned to assume the throne and lead his nation for the next half century. Is he the bold reformer that he and his admirers claim? Is he truly advancing the most audacious economic, social, and geopolitical changes in the history of the kingdom in order to make it a magnet for trade, investment, and tourism? Or is he, as his critics contend, a “reckless and dangerous” rogue, an “impetuous and dangerous young royal,” a “wrecking ball,” a “toxic” figure who must be removed from the line of succession?<sup>5</sup>

In November 2017, a thirty-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency and expert on the Saudi kingdom wrote a 272-page

book without meeting or interviewing MBS.<sup>6</sup> In the spring of 2020, a *New York Times* reporter published a 384-page biography of MBS without meeting or interviewing him.<sup>7</sup> In September 2020, two *Wall Street Journal* reporters published a 368-page biography of MBS, also without meeting or talking to him.<sup>8</sup>

I had the opportunity to meet with MBS twice. I have spoken with him at length and on the record. The first time was in his palace in Riyadh, the capital of the kingdom, where our meeting lasted for two hours. The second time was in Jeddah, the kingdom's summer capital, where we met for another two hours. I also spent many more hours with his most senior advisors. In the first book of its kind, then, I will take you inside those conversations. You will hear the crown prince answer direct and difficult questions in his own words.

- **Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi:** His admirers hail him as a hero who is saving the world's largest Arab country from radical Islamists hell-bent on transforming Egypt into a Sunni version of the Shia terrorist regime in Iran. Supporters praise him for advancing a moderate and tolerant vision of Islam, working hard to revitalize the once-moribund Egyptian economy, working closely with Israel to fight terrorism and promote regional peace, and working consistently to protect the largest Christian population in the Middle East from being butchered by the radicals. He also commissioned the construction of the largest church in the history of the region and presented it as a gift to his nation's Christians on their Christmas Eve. His critics, however, denounce him as a modern-day "Pharaoh" and a cruel dictator who has made Egypt more dangerous than at any time in recent history. Who is right? And what does the future hold? Events in Egypt are moving so quickly that few books have yet tackled the topic. One was published in 2018 by a *New York Times* reporter who did not meet or interview President Sisi.<sup>9</sup> I have had the opportunity to meet President Sisi on five separate occasions, and I'll take you inside the palace and let you hear him make his case in his own words.
- **United Arab Emirates Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed:** Widely known by his initials, MBZ is one of the most

private yet influential leaders in the Arab world. He almost never gives interviews or speeches, preferring to work quietly behind the scenes. Few know that he was born in an evangelical medical missionary hospital. Few know how he and his family—notably his father—built the UAE into one of the most advanced and tolerant nations in the Arab world. Fewer still know how he and his colleagues came to stun the world by signing the first peace treaty with Israel in more than a quarter of a century. Yet, having met with MBZ for hours and having built friendships with members of his inner circle, I will introduce you to MBZ and explain his importance in the new Middle East.

- **Jordanian King Abdullah II:** He is a monarch. A Muslim. And a moderate. He is a direct descendant of the prophet Muhammad. With an English mother. And he governs half of the Holy Land. He has been in power longer than any other leader in the Arab world. He is a faithful friend and ally of the United States. A trusted peace partner with Israel. Even so, few really know who he is, what he believes, or how he sees the future of the region. After five meetings with this remarkable man, I will take you inside his palace and his kingdom and let you meet him for yourself.
- **Former president Donald J. Trump:** How was it possible that a presidential candidate with no prior political or foreign policy experience—a man who called for a complete ban on all Muslims entering the United States (a position I publicly denounced during the 2016 campaign)—went on to become the most pro-Israel, pro-Arab president in American history, crushing the Islamic State, withdrawing from the dangerous Iran nuclear deal, forging deep alliances with the Sunni Arab world, and brokering not one but four astonishing Arab-Israeli peace deals, more than any American president in history? His strategy to advance peace and security in the Middle East was routinely mocked and dismissed every step of the way. Why, then, is it working? And how did it come about that a once “Never Trumper” like me was invited to meet with the president, vice president, secretary of state, and members of the White House’s Mideast policy team and even attend the historic

Abraham Accords signing ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House? I'll take you behind the scenes and tell you the inside story.

- **President Joe Biden:** After the most expensive, contentious, and controversial presidential election in American history, everything in Washington changed yet again. Though he had served in Washington for half a century as senator and vice president, most Americans—and certainly most Israelis, Arabs, and others in the Middle East—were asking: Who is Joe Biden? What is his track record in the Middle East? How will he deal with our enemies and our allies? Is he determined to follow unwaveringly the policies of President Barack Obama? Or have Biden and his team learned critical lessons from the flaws and failures of the Iran nuclear deal? Are they absorbing and properly analyzing how rapidly the Middle East is changing and the implications of those changes? With such high stakes, I interviewed American and foreign officials who have worked closely with Biden for years and have known him well, and I will take you inside his world and let you hear his views in his own words.

Buckle up.

In my experience, a journey into the epicenter can be a bumpy ride. Certainly today, the change underway in the region is coming fast and furious—and it is far from over. But I trust you will find, as I have, that it is worth the trip. Nearly 600 million people live in the Middle East and North Africa. My hope is that when you have finished this book, you will have a better appreciation for the immense challenges they face and how your future and your fortunes are uniquely and inextricably connected to theirs. I also hope you will join me in heeding the words of Psalm 122:6—praying faithfully and fervently for “the peace of Jerusalem” and for all who live in the nations around her. Never have such prayers been more needed, for our enemies as well as our allies.

*Joel C. Rosenberg*

Jerusalem, Israel

March 1, 2021

*Part One*

# THE THREATS





# WHAT ARE THE MOST SERIOUS THREATS WE FACE TODAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

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*My conversations with Mike Pompeo,  
former CIA director and secretary of state*

I first met Mike Pompeo in June 2016, when he was serving his third term as a congressman from Kansas. One of his staff members had contacted me and asked if I would like to meet her boss the next time I was in Washington, D.C. She said Pompeo had been reading my books and was interested in my views on the dramatic changes underway in the Middle East.

As it happened, I had just arrived in the U.S. from my home in Israel to speak at a series of conferences and events. I readily accepted the invitation and we set the meeting for Friday, June 10.

Pompeo struck me as a down-to-earth, no-nonsense straight shooter who had seen his share of difficult times, and he intrigued me for several reasons. He was a U.S. Army vet who served on the House Intelligence Committee. He was also a devout Christian who had once taught fifth-grade Sunday school and whose faith shaped his worldview.

Pompeo was also one of the more outspoken members of Congress in opposition to the nuclear deal that President Barack Obama had negotiated with Iran, calling it “a historic mistake” and “a surrender.”<sup>1</sup> Particularly

impressive to me was that Pompeo and Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas had discovered and exposed the stunning fact that the Obama team had allowed Iran to negotiate secret side deals with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) without revealing the existence or the substance of these deals to Congress or the American people.<sup>2</sup>

When we met for coffee in his Capitol Hill office, we did not spend much time discussing our personal lives. Mostly we focused on Iran and the campaign of genocide being waged by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).<sup>3</sup>

I brought Pompeo two of my most recent novels as gifts—*The Third Target*, published in January 2015, and *The First Hostage*, published in December 2015. They were the first two installments of a trilogy I was writing about ISIS, portraying the group not simply as a terrorist threat but as a genocidal threat fueled by the group's apocalyptic eschatology, a subject too few in Washington were focused on at the time.

In *The Third Target*, ISIS jihadists capture a cache of chemical weapons in Syria and begin a series of attacks throughout the region. Feverishly seeking to expand the territorial reach of their Islamic kingdom known as a caliphate, they also try to assassinate the king of Jordan, blow up his palace, take over his kingdom, and fly their black flags over Amman.

During our conversation, I explained to Congressman Pompeo that while I was researching and writing the book in 2013 and early 2014, President Obama was publicly dismissing ISIS as a “jayvee team” that posed no serious threat to the U.S. or our allies.<sup>4</sup>

However, as early as the summer of 2014—still months before my novel was released—it was becoming apparent that genocidal conditions were emerging, and the jihadists were willing to annihilate all who stood in their way as they tried to establish their Islamic State. As I was then saying publicly, this was as dark a time as any I had ever seen in the modern Middle East. ISIS had captured half of Iraq and was forcing Christians there to convert or die. More than 170,000 people had been murdered in Syria, and millions of Syrians had fled their homes to escape the violence.<sup>5</sup>

By the time *The Third Target* was released, the ghastly atrocities committed by ISIS were worsening exponentially. I used my book tour—including an address to the National Religious Broadcasters convention—to

explain and speak out against the apocalyptic theology driving the leaders of ISIS, calling on the Obama administration to formally declare the actions of ISIS as genocide and urging the White House to take far more decisive military action to end the slaughter of Christians, Yazidis, and Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

Obama didn't get it.

But Mike Pompeo did. I had heard the congressman sound the warning bells against ISIS, and I was grateful to now have the opportunity to discuss it with him.

In September 2015, for example, Pompeo had cosponsored a congressional resolution, "expressing the sense of Congress that those who commit or support atrocities against Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities, including Yezidis, Turkmen, Sabea-Mandean, Kaka'e, and Kurds, and who target them specifically for ethnic or religious reasons, are committing, and are hereby declared to be committing, 'war crimes,' 'crimes against humanity,' and 'genocide.'"<sup>7</sup>

When President Obama failed to take decisive action, Pompeo wrote to Secretary of State John Kerry, urging the administration to do more to protect Christians and other religious minorities.

"Since launching its caliphate, ISIS has executed, enslaved, abducted, displaced, and forcibly converted thousands of Christians," Pompeo wrote. "In areas that ISIS controls, Christians face three stark choices: pay the ruinous *jizya* tax, convert to Islam, or be murdered. Worse still, even Christians who pay this tax are eventually stripped of their property and killed."<sup>8</sup>

Still, Obama and his team vacillated.<sup>9</sup>

Representative Jeff Fortenberry of Nebraska (the resolution's lead author), Pompeo, and their colleagues in the House decided it was time to turn up the heat. On March 14, 2016, they brought their resolution to the House floor, where it passed unanimously, 393 to 0. Democrats abandoned the president en masse and joined their Republican colleagues in demanding action from the administration.

Finally, on March 17, Secretary Kerry held a news conference in which he acknowledged that ISIS "is genocidal by self-proclamation, by ideology, and by actions in what it says, what it believes, and what it does."<sup>10</sup> Now, of course, the question was, How serious would the administration be about crushing ISIS and stopping the genocide once and for all?<sup>11</sup>

Tragically, Obama still refused to order decisive military action.

As Pompeo and I discussed the situation, I said, “Congressman, one of the central themes in my novels is this: *To misunderstand the nature and threat of evil is to risk being blindsided by it.*”

“Americans were blindsided by the Imperial Japanese on December 7, 1941. Neither we nor our leaders truly understood the evil intentions or capabilities of the Japanese military until they hit us at Pearl Harbor.

“Americans were blindsided again on September 11, 2001. *The 9/11 Commission Report* makes it clear that the success of the attacks by al Qaeda weren’t so much the failure of intelligence—looking back, all the signs were there—but a failure of imagination. Our leaders simply couldn’t imagine that anyone would hijack jet planes and turn them into ballistic missiles by flying them into buildings. Now we have leaders who have been blindsided again. Everything in ISIS doctrine and theology tells us this is a group determined to use genocide to bring about the End of Days, establish their caliphate, and welcome the coming of the so-called savior, the Mahdi. But Obama, Biden, Kerry, and their team can’t or won’t see it.”

Pompeo replied that the only hope to confront and crush such evil was to elect a serious, experienced Republican commander in chief who was prepared to handle himself on the world stage from day one in office. I agreed, but at that moment it seemed impossible. Donald Trump, with no previous political experience, had already been declared the presumptive winner of the Republican nomination, awaiting only confirmation at the national convention in July.

Neither Pompeo nor I had backed Trump during the primaries. Indeed, we had both been sharply critical of him and had supported other Republican contenders. At that time, I considered myself a Never Trumper.

“I’m curious,” Pompeo said as our conversation drew to a close, “how did you get the idea of writing novels about ISIS when they weren’t even a household word?”

I explained that the idea had come from talking to two former directors of the Central Intelligence Agency—James Woolsey, a Democrat who had served under President Bill Clinton, and Porter Goss, a Republican who had served under President George W. Bush. Both had become friends of mine, and when I’d asked them what kept them up at night—who the new

“bad guys” were in the Middle East that I ought to be writing about—each had, in separate conversations, told me that al Qaeda in Iraq was morphing into something particularly dangerous.

That had intrigued me, so I did some research and ended up writing the books, based on their advice.

Little could I have imagined as I gave those two novels to Mike Pompeo—sitting in his office in the Cannon House Office Building on that Friday in June 2016—that I was talking to the next director of the CIA, a future secretary of state, and a man who would play a critical role in helping President Trump withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, create a strategy of “maximum pressure” against the regime in Tehran, destroy the Islamic State, crush the caliphate, liberate its enslaved victims, revitalize our tattered alliances with Israel and the Sunni Arab states, and broker the most significant Arab-Israeli peace treaties in more than a quarter of a century.

Life truly is stranger than fiction.

## THE WAR AGAINST AL QAEDA

After Mike Pompeo became secretary of state, he and I connected every few months to talk about trend lines in the Middle East. Usually we talked by phone or corresponded through a back channel. Occasionally we met in person, whether in his seventh-floor office at the State Department, at the White House, at the opening session of the U.N. General Assembly in Manhattan, at a conference in Des Moines, or in Cairo at the opening of the largest cathedral ever built in the Middle East.

Over time, my respect for Pompeo deepened. When I began working on this book, I asked if he would give me his take on the status of the Middle East. He graciously agreed. It was the first on-the-record interview we’d ever had.

“I would love to understand where you were on 9/11,” I began. “How did the horrific events of that day impact you and lead you as CIA director—and, of course, as secretary of state?”

“I was in Wichita, Kansas, in the central offices of Thayer Aerospace [a company he founded]. I got a call from my wife, Susan, who said, ‘Flip on the TV.’ I did and I remember being, like most Americans, horrified,

angered—and recognizing that there had been this enormous assault on the American people by Islamic jihadists, Islamic terrorists, and knowing that it would have an enormous impact on the lives of every American for years to come. That anger, that raw emotion we felt that day is something I still feel when I think about what happened in New York. And it drove the work I did when I was director of the CIA, to ensure that we were continuing to prosecute all those jihadists who intended to put harm on the United States of America.”<sup>12</sup>

I asked Pompeo how he assessed the war against al Qaeda.

“They still exist and are still intent on conducting jihad,” he replied. “But we have not only taken senior leader after senior leader off the battlefield, we have created conditions where the network is not as capable and not as powerful today as it was a number of years ago.”

True enough.

On September 14, 2019, it was confirmed that Hamza bin Laden, the thirty-year-old son of Osama bin Laden, had been killed in a U.S. operation.<sup>13</sup>

On February 6, 2020, news broke that Qassim al-Rimi, the founder of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, had been killed in a U.S. operation in Yemen.<sup>14</sup>

On June 3, 2020, Abdelmalek Droukdal, emir of al Qaeda’s North African affiliate, was killed by French forces in Mali.<sup>15</sup>

On June 14, 2020, Khalid al Aruri, leader of al Qaeda in Syria, was killed by a U.S. drone strike.<sup>16</sup>

On August 7, 2020, Abu Mohammed al-Masri, the second-highest ranking operative in al Qaeda, was killed in Tehran.<sup>17</sup>

Some 27,614 members of al Qaeda in Syria have been killed on the battlefield.<sup>18</sup>

U.S. intelligence now believes that as a result of the relentless work of American and NATO forces, there are now fewer than a couple hundred al Qaeda terrorists left in Afghanistan, a country that was once the organization’s home base of operations.<sup>19</sup>

“They have fewer resources available,” Pompeo continued, “and we have built out a global system [of counterterrorism]. Some of this preceded the Trump administration, but we certainly continued the pace to build out

an information network and intelligence network [to] find al Qaeda [members] in the Arabian Peninsula or al Qaeda members in Iran or al Qaeda members that remain in Afghanistan or in Southeast Asia. The network is good. We have absolutely decreased risks to the homeland here in the United States and to threats from al Qaeda in other parts of the world.”

Intelligence experts such as David Shedd, former acting director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) during the Obama administration, backed up Pompeo’s assessment. In an interview for this book, Shedd told me he had been working at the White House on the National Security Council staff on 9/11, “that fateful day,” and it became instantly “clear to me that America was at a turning point,” that we were facing “a different type of adversary than what we had known throughout the Cold War.”<sup>20</sup>

“The U.S. was not unfamiliar [with] or immune from international terrorism over the two decades before 2001,” Shedd told me, but he conceded that this new enemy—Islamist extremism—“was poorly understood” in Washington and throughout the U.S. And for some reason, he said, the suicide bombing attack by Hezbollah—a Shia Islamist group—against the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in April 1983 (which killed sixty-three people, including seventeen Americans) and Hezbollah’s bombing of the U.S. Marines barracks in October 1983 (which killed 241 U.S. military personnel) had not proved to be a sufficient wake-up call. Nor had the attacks by al Qaeda—a Sunni Islamist group—against American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 (which killed 224 people and injured more than 4,500 others). Nor, apparently, had al Qaeda’s attack against the USS *Cole* warship in October 2000 (which killed seventeen U.S. sailors and injured thirty-nine more).

“It took the large-scale attacks of September 2001,” he said, to create a “great awakening” and “shift dramatically the course of America’s security posture.”

Today, Shedd told me, “the U.S. not only understands extremist Islamic-led terrorism much better, but it has also built up the intelligence and security capabilities and capacity to counter the terrorism threats at scale.”

Still, “the U.S. and its allies cannot rest on the laurels of the past two decades, claiming that Islamic extremism under any banner has been defeated,” Shedd said. But there is no question that “al Qaeda was

weakened significantly with the 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden at his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.” He added that “America’s intelligence and security apparatus has been effective in disrupting the communication lines among the remaining senior echelon members of al Qaeda” and that “perhaps no better example exists than the fact that al Qaeda’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has not been able to plan, plot, and communicate effectively while in hiding or on the run.”

Even critics of the Trump administration concurred with Pompeo and Shedd’s assessment. For example, thirty-year CIA veteran Bruce Riedel, a member of the Brookings Institution, agreed that “the al Qaeda organization that carried out [the 9/11 attacks] is a shell of its previous self. The global campaign against Osama bin Laden’s creation has achieved notable success. The ideas that inspired bin Laden and his followers have lost some, but not all, of their attractiveness. There is no place for complacency, but the threat is different.”<sup>21</sup>

Ben Rhodes, who served as deputy national security advisor to President Obama and was a fierce critic of Trump, also agreed. “Yes, we have a continued need to fight terrorist groups,” he wrote in 2020, “but the greatest threats we face going forward will come not from groups like al Qaeda or ISIS.”<sup>22</sup>

## THE WAR AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE

What about ISIS, the even more brutal successor to al Qaeda? I asked Pompeo.

“We should think about them jointly because they are not as disconnected as is sometimes thought,” he replied. “They [al Qaeda and ISIS] will compete against each other, but when the common enemy raises its head—the ‘Great Satan’ of the United States of America—I can assure you that the two of them would find a pathway to work alongside of each other against us.

“With respect to ISIS, we came in [to office in January 2017] when it was going strong,” Pompeo noted. “Your audiences will remember Americans being beheaded. Americans in cages being set on fire. An enormous caliphate—a piece of real estate the size of the United Kingdom—controlling, operating, taxing, running a government in eastern Syria and western Iraq.”

However, Pompeo explained, from the moment Donald Trump took office, he “gave our intelligence community and military all the tools we needed to destroy the caliphate, and we did that. We took it down in its entirety.”

Pompeo conceded that “ISIS cells remain in multiple parts of the world,” and he emphasized the need for the U.S. and its allies not to lower their guard. “But every place we find them,” he said, “the president has given us the tools and the power and the authority to go after them so we can protect America.”

Again, the public record confirmed Pompeo’s assessment. The Trump strategy of all-out, gloves-off war against the Islamic State worked, whereas the Obama strategy of pinpricks and half measures had not.

During the Obama years, ISIS was completely on offense and intoxicated with victory, eventually gaining control of 40 percent of Iraq and one-third of Syria. By the end of Trump’s first year in office, ISIS was on the ropes. It had lost 95 percent of its territory, including its capital in the Syrian city of Raqqa, as well as Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq.<sup>23</sup>

By March 2019, the caliphate had been completely destroyed. Sixty high-value targets and one hundred other ISIS officials had been killed. In Syria alone, 39,736 ISIS fighters had been killed.<sup>24</sup>

On October 26, 2019, U.S. military forces hunted down and killed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—the caliph, or leader, of the Islamic State—in a daring special forces operation led by Delta Force commandos in northwest Syria.<sup>25</sup>

This was a huge deal. Baghdadi had been ISIS’s most fearsome and strategic leader. Taking over after the death of AQI founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2006, it was Baghdadi who really unleashed the genocide for which the world came to know ISIS.

William McCants, a former Brookings Institution scholar who authored the 2016 book *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, told me it was Baghdadi’s theology—and even more important, his apocalyptic eschatology—that inspired jihadists from all over the world to join ISIS not only to rape, torture, and kill their enemies but to build an Islamic kingdom on earth and wage a campaign of annihilation against Jews, Christians, and even Muslims who didn’t share ISIS’s cultlike views.

By building a caliphate from scratch and slaughtering everyone in their way, McCants explained, ISIS had hoped to usher in the End of Days and the coming of the Islamic savior known as the Mahdi.<sup>26</sup>

The takedown of the caliphate was an extraordinary victory, one that will be studied by military strategists and intelligence operatives for decades. It came about through an alliance of eighty-three nations, but Pompeo was right: It was an American-led victory and one of the enduring legacies of the Trump presidency.

Again, David Shedd concurred.

“The U.S. strategy to ‘find, fix, and finish’ the leadership of these extremists—who are intent on using terrorism to promote their ideology—has been highly effective,” he told me. “I can say with a high degree of confidence that the removal of the leadership of al Qaeda and ISIS as enemy combatants by killing them has proven highly effective in disrupting their operational capabilities.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet, like Mike Pompeo, Shedd was adamant: “The U.S. cannot relent.”