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Featuring David Adesnik and Joby Warrick

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

**MAY:** Joby Warrick is a serious and distinguished journalist. That doesn't appear to me to be a large cohort these days. A long time *Washington Post* national security reporter, and a Pulitzer Prize winner. His latest book is *Red Line: The Unraveling of Syria, and America's Race to Destroy the Most Dangerous Arsenal in the World*. I found it fascinating, as storytelling and history. He's here with us today. Also joining the conversation, David Adesnik, FDD's Director of Research and Senior Fellow on Syria. I'm Cliff May, and I'm pleased you're here too on *Foreign Policy*.

So, Joby, kudos. It's a marvelous book. I have a few quibbles. That's good, not bad. Our listeners know that a little disagreement is both edifying and entertaining. We'll pick those bones soon. First, as you know, David reviewed your book for the *National Interest*. And it was, I thought, a fine and fair review. And he called attention to your approach, which is almost novelistic. You report what people said and thought. You tell us, as David put it, "An array of uncanny stories, built around formidable protagonists."

And, I got to say, I wonder how you did that. And I wonder, I mean, are you guessing what people thought? Until it occurred to me to read your notes and acknowledgements, where you pretty much explain how you knew, for example, what Mariam Alkhatib was wearing, and where her husband was in Syria, when a canister of nerve gas fell out of the sky into her backyard, eventually killing her. So, start by just talking about how you did such granular reporting, without doing what reporters did when I was a young foreign correspondent, showing up with a pen and a notebook and just asking a lot of questions.

**WARRICK:** Well, thank you, Cliff. And thank you for having me. I really enjoy your podcast. And it's a pleasure to be with you. But, yeah, I think, as a journalist, the way I've evolved is I am just in love with storytelling. I mean, I try to be humble about what I know and don't know, and certainly about my ability to prescribe prescriptions and policy remedies for situations that are above my pay grade. But I do enjoy the storytelling part of it. And, having been a reporter for a long time, I did start, as you did, with the notepad in hand, and trying to corner people and ask tough questions. But, today, the ability to tell stories, and to get into a very granular, very detailed account of a situation, is made so much easier by the many tools we have now.

And in the case, if the readers get to see the story of this woman, who is one of the first people to die of sarin in Syria. And I was able to laser focus on her life, and what she was doing at the time, and what her reaction was, because I have this trove of material from the family. I've got videotaped scenes of her being worked on in medical facilities, and her family members talking about her, and talking about what happened afterward. And even when she was autopsied, which becomes a key part of the story, because her body still contained sarin and it becomes evidence, it's amazing to be able to actually see video of the autopsy. And so you can describe it and make it very real, without unfortunately having been there for some of those moments.

**MAY:** Yeah, no, it was all fascinating. You noticed that too, David, obviously, because you pointed that out. You know what? I want to listen, to get a feel for the kinds of stories in your book. There were so many interesting, as David put, protagonists. Maybe tell us just one. Tell us Ayman's story. Because that's self-contained, and that's fascinating. And that really had me hooked, to the point where I said, "Okay, I'm going to read this whole book. I'm not just going to skim through it, to ask some few questions in the podcast."

**WARRICK:** So, the story of Ayman is a previously unknown story about a spy that the CIA recruited back in the '80s, back when we were just beginning to try to figure out what exactly Syria was up to on the chemical weapons front. They were clearly doing something. What they were doing was very important, because they're next door to Israel. And to



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have a major weapon of mass destruction next door to one of our allies is to stabilize, and for lots of reasons. So we did want to try and understand what was going on there.

And we ended up recruiting this fascinating individual named Ayman. I don't reveal this whole name because of security issues related to his family. But Ayman was a American trained scientist, who ends up going back to Syria, and becomes one of their top chemical weapons experts. He's working in the laboratory where sarin is made. And I had heard, from various sources, about how good our intelligence was, going back to the '80s, about what Syria was doing, and what they had, and where they were making it.

And I kept asking and asking, and finally, I begin to get little bits of the story, about a scientist who was a spy for us, who was on our payroll. That's how that story began to unravel. And as you read, in the reading of it, it gets quite complicated and quite twisted in its own way. But it's a real insight into how the CIA works, and a real extraordinary insight into what Syria was doing.

**MAY:** David, finish the story for him. Because I think people should know how Ayman ended up.

**ADESNIK:** Well, maybe a bit like a Hamlet, where it's not spoiling too much to say everyone winds up dead at the end. It's the process that really makes it fascinating. But Ayman does wind up in front of a firing squad. Because he lives a somewhat lavish lifestyle. He takes advantage of Syria's rather lax polygamy laws, to have a pair of feuding wives, who he has to maintain separately. He also makes money off of more pedestrian forms of corruption, with contracts involving his research institute. But it seems the CIA was doing a good job with his bank account as well.

And then, finally, he thinks he's caught, or he is asked to an interrogation by Assef Shawkat, Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law himself, someone who winds up dead not that long thereafter. And he thinks they know everything. In fact, all they really knew at the time was that he had been arranging some bribes, which is basically par for the course. One of your privileges as a senior government official in Syria is to have a network that gives you a high net worth. But treason goes beyond that. And he decided to spill that he had given it all to the Americans.

They gave him the privilege of letting his family leave the country, and of having what, I guess, is considered a more dignified form of execution in Syria. So a firing squad rather than hanging. And I guess this is before the invasion of Iraq, I believe. It's '02. So his story comes to an end, not long before a very different set of stories begin.

**MAY:** I just got to highlight something here because this is what floored me. And maybe I don't know if it will with all readers. He gets called to this interrogation, and the interrogator says, "You've been betrayed." And yes, you say, you said it right. He thinks, "Oh my God, they know everything I've done. They know I've been working for the Americans for years. They know I've been giving over all this vital information."

And so, he spills everything. And the interrogator thinks, "I didn't know any of that." I mean, I knew he was taking some bribes from some German companies he was getting chemicals from. He was called in to be slapped on the wrist. And, the next thing you know, he's in front of a firing squad, which, as you say, was better than being hanged, because he had been a national hero.

And I just thought – I don't know if you'd call it empathy or what. I thought, "Oh my God, I can just – " Being executed would be bad, but thinking, "Oh my God, why didn't I keep my mouth shut? Why didn't I wait and see what they knew, before I told them everything?" That would have been worse to me than the execution. Anyhow, I just have to



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point that out. That's what floored me. I put the book down, I walked around the room. I talked to my wife. All right. You see what I'm saying? Right? Never mind.

All right. The other thing that intrigued you a lot, Joby, was what was required, the procedures, the engineering, the devices built to destroy the tons of nerve gas that, later we'll get to that, Assad was willing to finally give up, which was done and shipped. This was a challenging and dangerous undertaking. Maybe you should just explain a little bit. I know we're jumping ahead. We're going to come back. But I just wanted you to talk a little bit about that part of it, the device that was created. You know what I'm talking about.

**WARRICK:** Well, if you can imagine, within the bowels of the Pentagon in 2011, 2012, when they start to see Syria fall apart. And they know very well that within this country is a weapon of mass destruction, which is potentially vulnerable. Doesn't take a lot of imagination to picture a terrorist group, or any number of actors, taking off with a few gallons of sarin and wreaking havoc somewhere.

So, they're beginning to go through the motion, or the exercise, of thinking, "What do we do if we get this stuff? We don't really have a solution. We don't have a team that goes in and takes 1,300 tons of chemical weapons out of the country. We don't even have a way of destroying it." And so, within the Pentagon, there is a small group that looks at things like this, that thinks about chemical weapons and what to do with them, and how to destroy them. And they came up with a machine.

And, in the book, we call it the Margarita Machine, becomes its nickname. It's this big mess of pipes and pumps. And it's colorful. And you might mix your drink with it, but it's actually to destroy sarin. So this thing is made, and it works great, and they stick it in the warehouse. And there it sits for many months. Until suddenly, when Syria makes this deal to give up its stockpile, it's called into action.

And, to skip again, and not to belabor this too much at this point, but the amazing thing is when they're getting the chemicals out of Syria, no country in the world wants them. Nobody wants to suddenly receive all this toxic material. So the only solution that emerges is to put these machines on a boat, which is not the place to have chemical weapons, but it was the last choice.

And this boat literally does rings around the Mediterranean for a month and a half, destroying the chemicals one barrel at a time, until it gets all done. And it gets crazy. Things almost don't work. Things break down. But somehow they manage to get that part of the mission finished.

**MAY:** And there was a realistic chance that this ship would capsize from the weight. And they hadn't calculated that quite right. And, anyway, it was fascinating. All right. Go ahead, David.

**ADESNIK:** I was going to jump and say, one of the things I think Joby stresses about the Margarita Machine is that it's not common for the Pentagon to come up with major leaps forward in technology in a matter of months, right? The biggest programs, in part because they're so big, they take years, even a decade, especially like the F-35 fighter.

This is a case where, thank God, we had a little extra time. But it's basically in six months that Tim Blades and his team put this together. And they've given them some pretty tough demands. They want it to be effectively portable, so it fits – Not portable like an iPad, but it fits into shipping containers of a standard size. And it's pretty rugged. So



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you can pretty much deploy it anywhere in the world. And it wasn't intended to be on a ship, because even that was pushing the limits.

But they've really created this remarkable bit of applied technology in a very short timeframe. And, on a different schedule, or a few delays here and there, it might not have worked out. And it did. And actually, it was also, by Pentagon standards, remarkably cheap. I think it's \$3 million per, for a half dozen of these things, which compared to what we spend on most things, is pennies.

**WARRICK:** I love this part of the story, because it is so counterintuitive for everything we think about with big bureaucracies. But this was the one little agency that could, driven by some people that –

**MAY:** And an agency nobody's ever heard of. I had never heard of this agency, up in Fort Meade or so, I think it was.

**WARRICK:** Off in Edgewood, Maryland.

**MAY:** Edgewood, Maryland.

**WARRICK:** And it's all civilian run. And guys that are troubleshooters on chemical weapons stuff. And they said, "Well, we can do this." And having not done it before, that's probably a bit of a leap, but they did manage to do it. And, for government workers who are listening, I think it is a real example of where, even within complicated bureaucratic institutions, sometimes things can come together and work really well. And that was what happened here.

**MAY:** All right. Moving a bit to policy. Obama didn't want to get involved in Syria. I remember, when we were – At FDD, we were in touch with quite a few people, in what I would call the secular, certainly non-Islamist resistance there. And I remember fairly well, what started as part of the Arab Spring in Syria were simply peaceful protests. And Bashar al-Assad, the dynastic dictator, decided he was going to show them who was boss. He wasn't going to tolerate that, and began to kill and torture.

And, in the end, he killed and tortured thousands and thousands of people. I don't know that most people in America or Europe understand just how cruel he was, that he was beyond anything his father did. And his father did a lot. And there was a belief in the State Department because I can remember people expressing it to me, that, "Well, we don't need to do too much. There's no way Assad's going to survive. He represents the Alawite minority. He doesn't have enough troops on the ground. We don't have to do anything. It's just a matter of time."

And then, you remember, one point in – I don't know if this is in your book. I think it's not. Obama began to talk about the opposition as being former farmers, or teachers, or pharmacists, or that sort of thing, kind of very dismissively. And I recall Oubai Shahbandar, who I knew, who was an advisor and spokesman for the Free Syria Foreign Mission in Washington. He said, "Well, that's not true. First of all, about half of the Free Syrian Army are defectors from the Assad military. And the commander is a former military officer. These guys are good guys and they need help."

And not helping them meant that they were going to be destroyed, but it also opened the door for the Islamist and Jihadist opposition. Because they were going to fight, and they were going to have back up support. And so, the possibility of having Assad replaced by – I would say, from what I know, we were doing Skype calls with these guys, who were certainly sympathetic to the U.S., and didn't want to see an Islamist regime. That possibility was lost, partly because



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Obama didn't want to be involved, didn't want to see another war. And, of course, at that point, he was talking with the Iranians, and the Iranians had equities. In other words, they wanted Assad to survive.

I throw this all out for your comments, both of you. But I think it was a really terrible mistake and failure of the part of the Obama administration, not to have taken that opportunity both to change things in a good way in Syria, but also to begin to undermine the empire that Tehran was then and is still to this day, trying to build in the Middle East, going from Tehran at least all the way to the Mediterranean and beyond. Joby, you might want to start. And then David, you might have some thoughts on this.

**WARRICK:** A number of really great points you've raised. And one of them is that there was a sense that with the administration at the time, in those early days, they didn't have to get involved in a military way. And one reason was because they really believed that Assad was going to go. They publicly had pronounced that Assad had to go. And the consensus across the region and looking at the intelligence agencies in Israel and other places at the time, pretty convinced that Assad's days were numbered. Mubarak had fallen. It was just inevitable.

And so, let's let this thing ride out. Let's put out some positive messages. But in a way, the positive messages became part of the problem because, I think Bill Burns points his out in his recent memoir, is that with Syria, we over promised and under delivered again and again for the opposition, suggesting that when we say Assad must go, it sounds like a platitude to us, to them it meant that America's got our back, America's going to make this guy leave.

And Robert Ford, the Ambassador at the time, is continuing to tell these groups behind the scenes, don't count on it. The Calvary's not coming. The Americans don't have an appetite for getting involved in a military way, but those expectations were very real. And they were certainly real surrounding the red line threat, is this idea that if chemical weapons are used, we're going to come in and we're going to do something about it.

So, you do see these incredible expectations build up and an administration that, for a number of reasons, really had no interest in getting involved in Syria, even with a light footprint. They just didn't want it. And they resisted it as long as they possibly could, which was essentially the whole time.

**MAY:** David, you want to give perspective? I've got questions that occurred to me but go ahead.

**ADESNIK:** Yeah. Well, definitely one thing is I think in some ways from memoirs we know, I think from Bob Gates, that there was an earlier proposal, I think from Petraeus and Secretary of State Clinton, that they did want involvement earlier. I believe that was 2012. And then I think it's in the book that finally, Obama does authorize some military assistance after the red line gets crossed, but still far short of what many were hoping for.

I think a number of works on Syria have made the point that the expectations really were very high, as Joby said, that the opposition really thought Assad must go is a commitment. For those who want fewer commitments in the world, they think Obama never even should've said Assad should go, but then what happens, America doesn't do anything. And that's a point where people on both sides seem to agree in hindsight, that it accelerated the Islamist takeover the opposition, because that was the moment when it was clear that the more nationalist or moderate opposition, the terms are disputed, they have no one coming to help them. And moreover, the Gulf States that are willing to invest in it were more invested in the more reasonable parts of the opposition when they thought there was more of a chance of the U.S. taking a role. But whether the Saudis, Qataris and others, they didn't mind putting money behind more radical people once America was out of the picture.



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**MAY:** Yeah. And I guess this is where I would – look, everything is clear in your book to an attentive reader, and all the history is there and it's all accurate. I think you're overly generous. When Obama says Assad must go, I think at one point you call that a "hopeful declaration." You and I and David can make hopeful declarations. The President of the U.S. doesn't make a hopeful declaration. If the President of the United States says Assad must go, that means Assad must go and he's going to do something about it. I think it's irresponsible for a President to say something like that and not put anything – And then he also says, it's 2012, that he's going to red line no more murdering of innocent civilians with chemical weapons in flagrant violation of basic international law.

That's what we're talking about here, basic violations of international law. And as you describe it, perhaps the worst war crime of this century so far. It's still a young century. And that red line is crossed, and Obama decides in the end, no, I changed my mind. I'm not going to – I'm going to ask Congress. And again, this is where you're generous, and it's kind of you. I don't think he can be let off the hook for this because the polling didn't show much support for it in the U.S. and Congress didn't want to do it. Because leadership, it seems to me, is you make the case that this has to be done, that this has to be punished, deterred. That we, the U.S., our allies, the international community, the UN, whatever it is, cannot let such a crime stand and go unpunished and undeterred.

We're going to absolutely do something. If it had been Churchill, he wouldn't have said, oh, of the polling doesn't look good. If it had been FDR, I don't think he would have said the polling doesn't look good. He would have gotten out there and made the case. If it had been Reagan, and Reagan said – Reagan didn't say, "Hopefully, Mr. Gorbachev, you'll tear down this wall one of these days, maybe. And we'd be very pleased to see that happen." No, he meant it, and he was going to put some serious pressure on.

And so, I think that was a serious, serious failure of the Obama administration, to say those two things and then have no backup as if it's just a guy pontificating. He's not the Pope. He has divisions. I'll let you both bounce off that any way you want to. Go ahead, Joby, you start.

**WARRICK:** Yeah. And absolutely, I think this is not the glorious moment that the folks in the administration like to look back to. In my efforts to tell the story, I want to lay out what the internal debate was like. And I think I succeed in doing that, to the degree that these were excruciating moments within the White House, with the National Security Council. And I think if they had to do over, they would have done these things differently.

At the time, they're looking at a number of problems. So when the big attacks happens in the 2013, the really terrible and that we all know about, there are a number of things that are slowing down decision-making. I think Obama legitimately wanted to strike in those first days. And there was a real outrage when those images of dead children and women were coming out of Syria.

There was this problem of WMD intelligence. If you're going to make a case for military intervention in the Middle East, you've got to make sure that you can make your case. This was definitely Assad. This was definitely sarin it looked pretty obvious in the beginning, but let's present our facts to the public. And so they tried to do that fairly quickly.

There was this strange problem with this international inspection force was on the ground in Syria at the time. And the optic of, for Obama, of launching a military strike when you still have UN fact finders trying to establish cause and effect was complicated. And so that slowed things down.



And then, as this happens, you start to get allies with cold feet, the British decide we don't have any part of this. They're supposed to be part of this strike. And then the Parliament voted it down. The Germans are urging cautions, so all these notes of caution are coming.

And so, Obama takes a decision which some people criticized as being cowardly. I think the administration and their internal debates thought, well, it's a no brainer. We'll go to Congress, we'll get Congress to back us. And of course, that effort falls apart. And then you're looking at administration that's really painted itself in corner. It doesn't have a way forward except to be perceived as bucking Congress and doing it on their own, which arguably they could have done, but they decided not to do.

And so, my intent here was to just to paint a picture of just how difficult and how convoluted and how insane this moment becomes with an administration that's looking at a decision that they know will haunt them one way or another. It could be a stumbling point into a conflict that they don't want to be involved in, or it could be, as it turned out, a moment of indecision, which looks bad in hindsight, because the United States did not fulfill its promise, a very firm commitment to do something. And then, they're shirking from that choice.

**MAY:** That's a fair enough. Listen, you're under no obligation in writing this book to be judgmental on something like that, as opposed to telling the story and then providing their perspective on it as well. David, do you want to say anything about that?

**ADESNIK:** Yeah, I want to add one point about why Joby's account is a little more subversive and hard on Obama than you might see at first. And second one, a point about Obama's motivations. So first, as I point out in the review, the way that Obama and some of those around him have tried to recast the red line decision is to say that it was a moment of historic resistance to conventional establishment thinking that goes to war too easily in the Middle East.

And I think there's no way to find that in the story Joby tells. It's a story of first, Obama is absolutely decided he's going to do it. Then he's surprised that Merkel's against it. Then he's even more surprised the British are against it. And then they're thinking, well, we're going to go to Congress, but we're definitely going to get permission and we're going to do this. But then they discover, actually, Congress has cold feet, and it becomes, as Joby says in the end, the polls show there's no support.

So, there is definitely not a portrait here that aligns with Obama's retelling of it in his famous exit interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of a heroic moment of resistance to (inaudible)-like thinking.

Second, on the motivations. If we go a little bit beyond the scope of Syria, and there's only so many pages in a book, but I think we have Libya in 2011 where Obama does go in. He does not get permission. And he even later says he made a hash of it. He did nothing after the regime fell. And he's bruised by that. And critically, at the height of his campaign against Romney for re-election, Benghazi becomes a big issue and he's embarrassed by it. And then he's safe after reelection. At this point, bin Laden's also dead. So I think his calculations for what's worth risking have changed. Getting bin Laden means his flank is secure on national security, and he doesn't want another Benghazi.

And then the Iran factor, in some ways, it's very controversial. I don't think we have any good evidence. Maybe declassification will help. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that there was a letter from Obama to Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, basically suggesting we wouldn't push too hard on Assad or for regime change. And that's probably the closest to a clear indication that I would say that really we tempered our response to Iran aiding and



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abetting mass atrocities for the benefit of a nuclear deal. No one else, of course, would want to say that. But I think it's an interesting thread, and it's going to be something that historians will probably parse over. Can we find a clear indication that trying to get the nuclear deal led us to go easy on Assad.

**MAY:** I'm going to jump ahead for a second, then come back, and you'll see why. So later on, President Trump did bomb, he'd bombed on two occasions. He did not solve this problem. He didn't worry about the polls. He didn't worry about Congress. He just did it. He did it. And Mattis was eager to, his Defense Secretary, was eager to send a message as well. Again, this did not solve the problem. We'll come back to that.

But I mention that for this reason because here's the question I really, really don't understand, and maybe one of you do. And we knew that, and it's very clear in your book, that Assad is dropping these canisters of nerve gas of sarin and later chlorine. And he's dropping them from helicopters and planes. So why not, as a way to both send a message and make it difficult for this to continue – there's a finite number, not a huge number, of helicopters and planes that the Assad regime has control of. You take those out. You destroy them where they're sitting, in the hangers, on the fields. You do that, and at least it would not be possible for quite a while for Assad to be dropping canisters of nerve gas from the sky on civilian men, women, and children. And that would save lives and send a message. Why wasn't that the plan that the Pentagon came up with, and that one of the two Presidents said, "Yeah, do that"?

**WARRICK:** Yeah. That's interesting because neither administration attempted to do that. I think Trump came close to it, especially after there's a 2018 attack that takes place in which John Bolton, is his security advisor at the time, and pushes for a much more aggressive response, including military aircraft, including command and control facilities. That gets shot down or watered down. But I think this is really what Petraeus was arguing for, General Petraeus, as far back as 2012. If you take out the Air Force, it makes it very hard for them to commit these atrocities. They'll still do horrible things. It may not be the end of the regime, but it's certainly going to save some lives from the point of protecting civilians.

And I do think, and this is from my reporting, that the pushback again and again was this is going to be a step down the slippery slope toward a larger conflict. They were so allergic to that possibility that they kept talking themselves out of it. And Pentagon assessments would show, well, you need this number of troops and this many planes, and it will take so long. And there was a fear that something would happen, and it's going to get dragged into larger war.

I think what we've seen since 2017, with Turks in the north, is they've essentially managed to do this in their own way, essentially creating a no fly zone in the north, taking out a Syrian military aircraft at will when there's an engagement, without getting involved in a larger campaign. So that argues the other way, that it is possible or could have been possible to have some split the middle of military involvement that would not have involved a larger commitment of force.

**MAY:** Of course, you know that – Which raises this question. When Putin decided he was going to come in and support Assad, another thing that Obama said, we say warn Putin because you're getting yourself in a quagmire, Vladimir, you don't know what you're doing.

And I got to think, I've followed Putin for a lot of years, he chuckled at that. He thought, "You know, Barack, it may be a quagmire for you because you're an amateur. For me, it won't be a quagmire. I know what I'm trying to achieve. I have a strategy to achieve it. And I'm going to. I'm going to support Assad. I'm going to build up a base, a warm water



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port on the Mediterranean. I'm going to frustrate what you want. I know exactly what I'm doing. It's not a quagmire. I've got very large wellies that you don't seem to have."

But again, I just think at the end of the day, what you got to say is that – You call this the unraveling of Syria and it was, and America's race to destroy the most dangerous arsenal in the world. In the end, America destroyed some of that arsenal. Not all. The prohibition on chemical weapons was not enforced. Assad has done all he did with impunity. The Russians have achieved a lot, in terms of what they wanted to do. It's a victory for the Islamic Republic of Iran as well. And this gets to the deal that was made that we had delayed coming to, the deal that when Obama decided he wasn't going to use force looking for a way out, the Russians offered him one. He said, "Yeah, we'll get Assad to declare, and you can destroy all of his chemical weapons. How about that?" And you've heard Kerry and Obama and Samantha Power, I heard her at my daughter's graduation at the University of Pennsylvania, giving a whole speech about this historic deal and how she has succeeded in Obama has said to her, "I know you can handle this." And she's wondering if I could, and she did. And the truth of course is not that because he didn't, we know, I think, and we know from your book, that Assad did not stop using chemical weapons. He used chlorine, and later he used sarin, which either meant he still had it, or he was still producing it.

We know that not until 2018 did the laboratory where Ayman, who you just talked about before, that he had set up near Damascus, that that was never declared, that was functioning until Trump bombed it. And so, he's gotten this deal, which is being portrayed by so many as this historic wonderful triumph of American diplomacy was anything but, I would argue it was very much like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. It was a false claim that a problem had been solved when it hadn't been at all, in this case the can hadn't even been kicked very far down the road. The cans were still falling out of helicopters into civilian neighborhoods in various rebel held cities. Anyway, I think it was a bad deal at the end of the day and I think the Russians were laughing at us.

**WARRICK:** So, in my book, I've got to split this up a little bit, that you can accept or acknowledge the fact that, that something pretty amazing did take place in terms of removing what was removed. That there was there never before in war time had anyone attempted to dismantle the entire weapons program, a weapon of mass destruction. And if the CIA estimates that 90 to 95% was removed, it's great that it's out. And that getting it out was pretty complicated and very hard. And we're all much better that that is gone.

What didn't happen. And this is the other part, is the accountability piece, is because Assad never once had to acknowledge that he attacked his own people. He's never been held personally responsible for what he did, and that really erodes the taboo. That means that it's easier for a Putin to use a chemical weapon, to attack political opponents inside and outside Russia, for Kim Jong-Un to do the same at an airport in Malaysia. It is that erosion and that lack of accountability, that's what sticks with us today. So, yes celebrate the fact that we managed to get out what we did and the logistics of that were quite complicated, but also mark the fact that we did not succeed in really enforcing that taboo as we should have.

**MAY:** And it's a failure also, it's a failure of the UN. And by the way, you described what the UN did in Syria, and it was incredibly brave and difficult to do, but it should not be lost on a reader and a reader will not be missed this, that the UN was there to make sure what we knew already knew, which was the chemical weapons were used, but it was not allowed to affix blame in any way. But I mean, I understand that, although the blame becomes pretty obvious, the rebels didn't have helicopters to just drop these canisters. But nonetheless, it's a failure of the organization for the prohibition of chemical weapons, which got a Nobel Peace Prize for this, I think, a failure of the Europeans, we just didn't want to be bothered with it.



And of course, pointed out too, that since then Russia has used, and again, you point this out too, that Russia has used chemical weapons on a more targeted basis against dissidents or those they consider to be traders both at home and abroad. What all this says is that the prohibition, of the civilizing prohibition, that even in the worst of wars, we don't use chemical weapons has been violated with impunity and doesn't really hold. And the U.S. is not going to do it, but the bad guys will as much as they want because there's no price to be paid.

**WARRICK:** The additional point is that it's combination of this brazenness and using the weapons combined with a really sophisticated disinformation campaign, maybe not sophisticated as much as just persistent, because you see that beginning to develop in Syria with chemical weapons attacks. The Russians come out and say, "No, they didn't. This was with the rebels. It wasn't Assad at all." And that becomes the MO from there on out. When Alexei Navalny is attacked with a nerve agent, it wasn't us, it was the Germans, it was someone else. And you see this really well organized, just incredibly powerful disinformation campaign that accompanies the bad behavior. And so you can't even penetrate this within great populations of segments of population, because you're, in my own experience, my Twitter account fills up with, with messages from people who really believe that Assad's been the good guy in this and it was the rebels all along. And so it's really, I think a lot of this has come out of this conflict and we're still dealing with it.

**MAY:** David, go ahead.

**ADESNIK:** The first thing I was just going to add is to the extent I think that the OPCW and the JIM, which was sort of a joint OPCW UN mission, had a lot of limitations, the Russian veto is a big factor there. And for a different range of UN organizations, some have been much more complicit with Assad. Sadly, the World Health Organization is one of the most in terms of vaccine issues, in terms of currently with COVID really failing to challenge a coverup. But I think in that case, those organizations really were hemmed in a lot by the Russian veto because they had to respond to the mandate they were given.

One question I actually had reading the book and it's really the kind of fine print thing is, obviously we start with the story of Ayman and no one, I guess, in the public had known before about this. He's obviously given us a really remarkable inside look down to specific facilities. And what I was trying to figure out is precisely when did the U.S. know that Assad was keeping back a reserve, or keeping facilities? Because I know from previous reporting, I think I mentioned this in the review, I guess it was around 2015, that there was a big expose, but it seemed to me that actually from, I guess, the very first, from the moment we started the deal and Assad made his first declaration, we would have known that he was keeping things back. And is that something that emerges very clearly, or is it a murkier issue?

**WARRICK:** It's murky to the extent that the Syrians said some very convoluted accounting for some of the things that they did and what happens to some of their material and do get into some of this in the book. The CIA has a pretty good sense of what Assad has, and when the first declarations come in from the Syrians, kind of a list of all of their facilities and the quantities, the CIA is able to push back and say, "Oh, no no, we think you have more than that." And they had to amend and adjust and they kept reporting more until it got to the point where the agency felt it had gotten as much of a story, a complete account for the Syrians as they were going to get. Understanding that they were probably going to be squirreling some things away in ways that were hidden.

What got really hard later on was that the Syrians through these long processes and negotiations with the OPCW kept saying that "Oh, we had this, but we destroyed it. We had X amount of mustard, but we didn't ever build artillery shells for it." Which really made no sense. And so they would present their evidence, or sometimes no evidence, but a case that the stuff had been destroyed, but they could never back up those stories. So a lot of it ended up being sort of



in the fog. The Syrians would claim that because they're at war, they couldn't that the record keeping was incomplete and they had lost track of things. And so that really made it a murky picture. The one thing is for sure, is that all the questions remain unanswered, every single issue the OPCW raised with the series, it's about how much did you really have? How much have you really destroyed? None of those files have ever been closed. So those are open questions. We really don't know where a lot of this stuff went ultimately.

**MAY:** Ayman's laboratory, they're the CERS, C-E-R-S, which we say. Since the CIA absolutely knew what was there, because they had a spy, since that spy had already been executed why didn't the USA, among this list of declarations you're leaving out a very important military laboratory that we know was involved in chemical weapons research near Damascus. So you better put it on the list. And also we're sorry to see you're lying to us.

**WARRICK:** It was extraordinary that the laboratory facilities were given a pass, in the first round. These were not production, they were not stockpile bunkers, but they were important. And when you've been doing your original research there, they certainly should have been on the list. And later on, you see the OPCW gets access to some of these places. They began taking their forensic samples and they come away finding things that the Syrians had never admitted to, including variations of VX that the Syrians never copped up to making. And whole other types of chemical weapons that had never been disclosed in any report. And so the labs become an extremely important cause of concern for the OPCW, and the United States. And it's not really surprising to me that in 2018, Trump decided to target, CERS specifically, to target the lab for that round of military strikes. And that one facility does not exist anymore.

**MAY:** Okay, there is –

**ADESNIK:** I have one thing.

**MAY:** Go ahead.

**ADESNIK:** I was just saying, one thing to add there is, of course, if the Syrians keep stonewalling or giving false information, if you've already made it absolutely clear that you won't enforce your red line, at some point they know they don't have to give in. Clearly they gave in, as Joby documents in the book, bits and pieces, but at some level they aren't being pushed. And then on the other side, there's probably some level where the administration doesn't want to push too far and have it become public that this was a 90% deal and not a 100% deal, right? So Kerry went out there very publicly and said, we got 100% of the weapons.

**MAY:** It's not true.

**ADESNIK:** Other statements said as much without saying, giving the number 100, but if you push too far and don't get answers, you can both have it out there that you didn't get them all. And you're not willing to use force to deal with the problem. So it kicks it down the road.

**MAY:** Right. Joby, I've got one other quibble with you. Just, it's one sentence, but let me raise it. You say at one point that the chemical weapons were Syria's main strategic deterrent against arch rival Israel. And my problem with that is first of all, Syria didn't need a strategic deterrent against Israel. Israel needs strategic deterrents against Syria because Syria is dedicated to wiping Israel off the map. Israel is now – Syria attacked Israel in '67 and '73, certainly in '73 if the Israelis who wanted to take Damascus, they could have done so. They were outnumbered in terms of tanks in the Golan Heights, usually, but they prevailed.



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But I don't see how chemical weapons are a deterrent against Israel doing what? Israel has never wanted to go to war with Syria, and I think it's odd to call Israel Syria's arch rival. They're not rivals for anything. Israel is not competing with Syria in any way. Israel is trying as best it can through the Abraham Accords, it is doing better to make peace with all of its neighbors. It doesn't, you can argue, I think it's actually also wrong to say that Iran and Saudi Arabia are rivals. That's another discussion, but people say it all the time. And I see why they say it, but I don't see Syria and Israel as rivals.

**WARRICK:** I think a lot of this is from Syria's own optic, that they know they're next door to a country that's much more powerful than they are. They're not rivals so much as enemies, I suppose, there's bitter feelings among not just the leadership, but many Syrian people who very clearly remember the last time they had a tango with Israel and it didn't work out very well for them. And so you have this next door neighbor with a nuclear stockpile. Well, what's our answer to that? And almost for their own internal consumption or to make themselves feel better about themselves perhaps, is where we've got this counterbalance, we've got chemical weapons on warheads, and we can send these into Israeli cities as retaliation. And it's really not much of a matchup, but it's the best they had.

And that's one reason that I can still argue that forcing Syria, a country that never even acknowledged having this arsenal, to admit to it and then allow people from other countries to come in and kick open the cupboards and look around was quite a lot for the Syrians to swallow. It never would have happened if there had not been this excruciating moment when the Russians really did believe an attack was coming, and went to Assad and said, "Look, if you want to stick around, or if you want us to be around, you need to admit to these things and get rid of them." And so while it was not a complete destruction by any means, it was a tough pill for the Syrians to swallow, I argue.

**MAY:** Right. Yeah. It's worth pointing out here and just discussing for a moment or two, Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian head of the Quds force. Because he was, and it comes through clearly in your book, he was clearly engaged in involved masterminding, I guess he was the mastermind behind many of the crimes committed in Syria. And again, he was the only one at the end of the day, I guess, who has been held to account and perhaps not for those crimes so much as for his other transgressions, not least the deaths of hundreds of Americans in Iraq for which he was responsible. But maybe just, I'm going long, but talk a little bit, either one of you, Joby start on it, on Qassem Soleimani's role because he was, I think of him as evil, but really, but brilliant. What he was able to do strategically there, very few other terrorist generals would be able to accomplish, do you think, is that going too far?

**WARRICK:** No, absolutely right. I think Assad would not have survived and as we said earlier, there was expectations that he wouldn't survive, but he had two important allies. Unlike the Libyans, unlike the Egyptians, everyone else involved in these uprisings, Assad had the back of Iran and Russia. And both of those countries were extremely committed to his survival. With Iranians coming in with their most important strategic thinker, making sure that the Assad regime survived and bringing in Hezbollah, bringing and eventually Iranian troops on the ground, unbelievable amounts of money, treasure, oil, everything else, to make sure this guy survived. So they had this investment that they intended to make sure was (inaudible) stood. And the Russians, Soleimani becomes part of going to Moscow in 2015, when the CIA trained forces are starting to have an effect and cities are starting to fall to the rebels, going to Moscow and telling Putin and his generals, "You need to really get some more skin in the game. You need to get your air force down here and help us out." And that becomes a turning point in this whole conflict, because from 2015 on there's no question, the war is over. This side is going to prevail because Russia has committed militarily in a way that no other Western countries, certainly, was able to do and that becomes decisive. I think it's –

**MAY:** Most of the Russian committeemen is air power, right? The Russians, as far as we know, as far as, you know, haven't lost a lot of troops in Syria. They've lost some, I'm sure.



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**WARRICK:** I'm impressed by the extent to which the Russians learned from us in this kind of conflict. This is a new kind of involvement for them, but in a way, they patterned it after our own efforts in 2014, 2015 in Iraq and Syria. A very light footprint. The use of air power and special operators, intelligence and Russia simply essentially replicates that. And so they don't have a lot of casualties, but they're able to have a force multiplier. They're able to get a lot done on the ground because they have just the right mix of resources to help the Syrians prevail.

**ADESNIK:** Yeah. I think there's actually a perfect opportunity, Cliff, to go back to your point, which I wanted to expand on before, about how Putin didn't listen when Obama said this is going to be your quagmire because he knew better. So, in a way, Soleimani is was the one to figure that out first, because what he has done is, he's not bringing IRGC, Iranian Revolutionary Guards in to do most of the fighting. They do some, they do a little dying.

First, he brings Hezbollah, Lebanese Hezbollah in and they're going to take very heavy casualties. And then he starts improvising further. He brings in Iraqi Shiites and he brings in Afghan Shiites. Many of them are actually illegal or undocumented migrants in Iran itself with precarious status, who through the promise of whether regularized status or other things, or just they're desperate for money. So for several hundred dollars a month, they'll go and risk their life in Syria. So, Soleimani puts together a force that's effective enough, albeit low end, to start getting his work done for him.

And Putin effectively can piggyback on this. He has Soleimani's force of Iranians and these other Shiite groups. And I think Joby is very right. There's an important parallel here. The U.S. applied that same lesson in fighting the Islamic state. It comes from the frustrations in Iraq and Afghanistan of having a 100-150,000 troops. And the old saying at the Pentagon is we have to fight by, with, and through our allies.

And Soleimani gets this right. Putin gets this right and then we get this right. And that's why in Syria right now, even after several years, there's been only, thankfully, a handful of killed in action among American troops while amazingly the Kurds and the Arabs who have fought with us have taken, by their account, over 11,000 fatalities and 28,000 wounded.

So, in a way, this is a key strategic development for us. And in a way, Soleimani was there first. Of course, his addition beyond that is the atrocities, the deliberate terrorizing of the population. I remember the Obama administration sanctioned him personally for human rights violations he committed in Syria on Assad's behalf. So that part of it is not part of the analogy, but in terms of the underlying tactical logic of putting together a force of partners to do the main fighting so your troops don't is a key innovation that he brought to Syria,

**MAY:** Two topics I just want to touch on before we bring this to an end. One is I think we just need to mention, what's become of Syria. I mean, its been 11 years of war and counting at. Least a half million dead. Probably half the country displaced either at home or abroad. Homeless refugees have been flooding Europe, a generation of children left uneducated probably ripe for radicalization by Islamists Who can say with some justification, "You see the nations of the West, they don't care about you."

I don't think people understand, and I know, David, you certainly concentrated on this and written about this. And there are other people who are trying. Understand the extent and the depth of the horror, the tragedy, the atrocities that have taken place in Syria and are still taking place and just the unbelievable damage that's been done in this case. I'm not trying to blame the Obama administration or the Trump administration, which failed as well for this, but really the West, the international community, the UN Responsibility to Protect all, all of that just blows away with the wind. Am I wrong about any of that, Joby?



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**WARRICK:** I think you're absolutely right. We have Syria fatigue, even though we haven't been involved militarily in a significant way. We've certainly had a role, but in terms of large commitments of troops. People in this country, don't want to think about Syria. It's too depressing to think about. This is a crisis that has brought so many global problems to us.

And not least of which is the resurgence of this group we call the Islamic state, which was able to use Syria as a magnet for tens of thousands of foreign fighters to come into this country to get trained, to get radicalized. Many of them went back home. Some of them are still in Syria. We have a failed state. We have whole parts of Syria that have not been rebuilt. There's no plan for rebuilding them. So you have generations of children growing up in desperation and they're ripe for radicalization.

And then just the refugee crisis. I mean, I travel to Jordan frequently when we were able to and at one point something like a fifth of Jordan's population was Syrian refugees. A country that really can't properly provide water and electricity to its own citizens. And so the scale of the problem and the ripple effect and how it's affected so many parts of the region and our own countries just can't be understated. It's a truly international crisis.

**MAY:** David, your thoughts on this?

**ADESNIK:** Yeah. It has been a major failure in a way. The UN Security Council is permanently hamstrung because Russia will protect Syria from, really, any sort of consequences and China will back them up. And of course, there's no will either in the U.S. or elsewhere to use force. So a lot of what I've been trying to do is focus on a couple of measures that I hope can bring some alleviation of suffering without, obviously, resorting to those things.

So, one that is slightly more controversial is, of course, sanctions. The Caesar sanctions that have strong support in the U.S. and there's an ongoing debate. I'll argue that sanctions take resources away from Assad, reduce his ability to commit atrocities. And others say, no Syrian civilians should have to pay any more of a price.

But then the second prong that I'm pursuing is one where I hope you can have humanitarians and human rights activists, and all others who are opposed to Assad unite. And that is reforming the UN aid process. That tens of billions have gone in aid. The U.S. has given 12 billion, not all of it to areas under Assad's control, but Assad has so thoroughly co-opted the UN aid agencies that he can basically send aid to his preferred people that they may not even need it. And deprive it.

So, the worst was when he deprived besieged civilians. Basically he committed a war crime. The UN abetted that war crime by having its trucks drive through areas of starvation on their way to deliver the food elsewhere. And I'm trying to push to have the new administration take a role in this at the UN and say, "Let's do better. Let's put real safe guards on this aid. So it doesn't happen." And I think COVID is an interesting example.

So, we've had the horror of COVID in our own country. Imagine doing it in a war torn country with a devastated system where the government is actively concealing everything that's happening. And you have no idea how many people are sick or dying, or where. Healthcare is doled out on a politicized basis. Or if you can bribe the right people to get a canister of oxygen or a bed in a hospital.

The U.S. has pledged four billion dollars to send vaccines to poor countries. And what I'm pursuing is one of them is Syria, and actually North Korea, as well. Are we going to make sure that those vaccines don't become something Assad



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or his people can sell on the black market to raise money for themselves? We're going to make sure they aren't only given out to Ba'ath party members and not people in other areas? And I think this is something important to pursue.

As much as we can be so frustrated and fatigued, there are still huge challenges where if we don't take important policy steps, there will be even worse suffering in Syria. And if we take the right ones, we really can prevent some terrible things from happening, even without putting a single pair of boots on the ground. So, that's where my policy work is oriented.

**MAY:** Very important, I guess, on with this, Joby, in terms of policies or lessons you think the current administration, Jake Sullivan, Antony Blinken, maybe they're in their car listening to this, you never know. They should all read your book first of all. Absolutely should read your book. But what are the other lessons that they should draw from the failures of both the Trump and the Obama administration in Syria and perhaps in the broader middle East?

**WARRICK:** I'll just mention one for myself. And I absolutely agree with everything David has said in terms of the problem with delivering aid and making sure that the material gets to the right people. But the problem with accountability, it might seem inconsequential, but it's really not. There are efforts underway now, and courts in Europe, also at the OPCW has a fact-finding body now that is naming names. It's identifying culprits in a way that these international organizations rarely do.

One has to continue to press the point that there has to be accountability. And if the Assad family can eventually be held to account in some kind of judicial process then I think that that gives hope, but it also enforces the norms that we should be enforcing as a world community. And without that kind of accountability, then I think that so much of this suffering just looks without any kind of justice with any kind of hope for these people of seeing something set right. So I do hope, and I think they are, I do hope that they're paying attention to this accountability part of it.

**MAY:** I'm just curious to know, and you may not. After this huge project that you've completed, I know you got to spend time talking about the book. Do you know what your next project is? Are you going to continue to follow Syria over the months and years ahead? What do you have planned?

**WARRICK:** One of the things I'm looking at is really relates to the breakdown in these norms, because there is some very concerning research that's underway on chemical and biological weapons by some of our adversaries, shall we say. And I'm trying to shine a bit of light on that. Beyond that, I always allow myself to have a little time to just, maybe just being a normal reporter and not thinking about the big projects. There's so much going on with Iran, with North Korea. There's going to be a time of testing, I think, for the new administration. So, I want to try to be on top of that as well.

**MAY:** Well, again, I'm glad you'll be doing both. I, again, I have nothing but admiration for your reportorial skills and for the history you've gotten down on paper. I think you've done a fantastic job. And really, I want to thank you for being with us today and talking with us about this.

Thank you, too, David. I think it was great to have you on in this conversation. And Syria's not going away as a problem anytime in the next few months, years, maybe generations at this point. So we'll continue to follow it. Again, thank you again. And thanks to all of you out there listening here on *Foreign Policy*.