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RADIO FREE SYRIA

By Eliza Griswold | December 4, 2014



The overhead light in the blue Mazda 626 wasn't working. Raed Fares, a Syrian activist whose video protests skewer ISIS and President Bashar al-Assad alike, reached up to fiddle with the light bulb before squeezing himself out of the driver's side door. The street was in darkness. In the last few years, the Assad government cut most of the electricity (along with running water and mobile-phone service) to Kafranbel, the town in northwestern Syria where Fares lives. The only light came from an LED strip in his neighbor's front doorway that was hooked up to a car battery. It was 12:45 a.m. on Jan. 29, 2014, and Fares, who often works until 4 a.m., had left the office early. As he fumbled to fit his key into the car's lock, he heard the slap-slap of feet running toward him.

Here they come, he thought.

The feet stopped just in front of his car. The Czech pistol he usually carries was in his house, 15 feet away. In the watery glow of the light behind him, Fares could make out two ISIS soldiers. One, clad in a woolen mask, ammunition vest, windbreaker and unlaced boots, opened fire, spraying the car, the mud wall and Fares with bullets. Fares felt their heat sear through his canvas jacket and jean shirt and into the right side of his chest and shoulder. When he collapsed to the ground, a childhood nightmare returned: three black dogs, chasing him.

"There is no God but God, and Mohammad is his prophet," he said as loudly as he could. He hoped this statement of faith would send him to heaven.

As a pool of his own blood spread around him, Fares lay in the road. He tried to stifle his groans, in fear that his attackers would return. Minutes later, his elder brother, who heard the shots from his home nearby, dragged Fares out of the street and into a car to race to the hospital.

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"Our enemies use private funding to fight everything America and our allies stand for," Hake said. "Why can't we use private assistance to help the good guys ... win?"

“Who shot him?” a friend in the car asked his brother.

Raed struggled to repeat what he had seen.

“Stop talking,” his brother said.

“I’m dying,” he said. Then he slipped from consciousness.



Raed Fares tries a radio donated by Spirit of America, an NGO working with the Syrian opposition. The group is supplying hand-held radios to support Fares’s efforts.
Luca Locatelli for The New York Times

Eight months later, Fares, 42, was in the back seat of a pewter-colored Kia, driving through southern Turkey and chain-smoking Lebanese cigarettes. In all, the would-be assassins fired at Fares 46 times. Twenty-seven bullets struck the wall behind him; 17 hit his car. Only two struck him. They shattered seven bones in his shoulder and ribs and punctured his right lung. From his hospital bed, he continued to orchestrate protests, posting them on Facebook and YouTube. Many used the block-lettered banners for which he’s known, broadcasting messages like: “OBAMA! YOUR ROLE IN SYRIA WILL NEVER BE ACCEPTED AS A MISTAKE LIKE CLINTON’S IN RWANDA, BUT IT WILL BE A PREMEDITATED CRIME.” Others relied on cartoons, like one of a Trojan horse with ISIS inside and “Made in U.S.A.” on its side.

“I still have trouble breathing,” Fares said. “My doctor says my lungs should be no problem because of the size of my nose.” (Fares does have a big nose.) The two Americans in the front seat laughed. One, a 57-year-old named Jim Hake, is the founder and chief executive of Spirit of America, a nongovernmental organization with the explicit mission to support U.S. military and diplomatic efforts. (He relentlessly asks “What do you need?” The first time he asked it of Fares, Fares answered with withering dryness, “A new country.”) The driver, Isaac Eagan, 33, is a U.S. Army veteran who works for Hake. Earlier that week, Fares had slipped over the Turkish-Syrian border to meet Hake and Eagan and collect 500 solar-powered and hand-crank radios that Spirit of America, working with the State Department, was giving to his radio station, Radio Fresh. A prototype, about the size of a man’s fist, was sitting in the Kia’s back seat, festooned with a Radio Fresh sticker. Now they needed to find the truck carrying the 500 radios that Eagan had spent the last couple of months procuring from a manufacturer in China.

Fares was planning to put these radios in hair salons, tea shops, hospitals and other places people gather to listen to what little news there is. Since 2012, when the Free Syrian Army, an armed rebel group, helped liberate Kafranbel from Assad, the town has been essentially cut off and

under constant attack from government forces. Fares reports mostly about surviving day to day. He tells people which streets are closed because of snipers, when to expect airstrikes and how to keep children warm when the windows are blown out. But Fares has another mission too: to tell the world about the horrors of a war he calls “Obama’s Rwanda.” Most Fridays, he films his band of activists holding banners on which he has scrawled caustic and sometimes shocking messages, and he later posts the results on YouTube. Using felt-tip pens, bedsheets and messages of generally less than 140 characters, Fares figured out how to tweet to a world that wasn’t following him.



On the far side of an olive grove, a few hundred feet away, Syria began. At the edge of a field dotted with white tufts of cotton, near a laundry line hung with red peppers drying in the sun, a yellow bulldozer chewed a nine-foot-deep trench into the hillside. The trench was an attempt to secure the notoriously porous 500-mile border between Turkey and Syria, now a spillover zone for Syria’s civil war, where all manner of fighters coexist uneasily: moderate members of the Free Syrian Army, ISIS fighters and other freelance jihadis.

“What do you think of fighters coming from other countries?” asked Hake, who had been poring over news reports about the “jihadi highway.”

“I hate them,” Fares said. “They’re fighting us.”

“What attracts them?” Hake asked. He studied the Kia’s route along a satellite map on his iPhone.

“They’ve watched too many Rambo movies,” Fares said. “They have nothing to do with Islam.”

Hake asked Fares whether he thought Assad or ISIS was worse. That was complicated: Each wanted Fares dead. Although Fares feared the immediate threat of ISIS (the group was still trying to kill him), for him the first enemy of the Syrian people remained Assad. “Whenever we get rid of the regime, it’s going to be easy to get rid of ISIS, Al Qaeda and the Nusra Front,” he said. The jihadis justified their presence by saying to the local people, “We’re here to help you topple the regime.” Once the regime was gone, he said, people would see the foreign fighters for what they were: carpetbaggers.

The Kia hurtled past a line of cypresses that snaked through a dry wadi, a streambed where blue tarps, strung up in the shade, served as shelters for Syrian refugees. A few sheep grazed on the border’s scrubby badland. Hake asked how the jihadis got across the border. Fares, laconic,

leaned forward from the back seat to answer him. "Like Mexicans," he answered. "They find an illegal way."

Eagan leaned his forearms against the steering wheel. They were inked with tattoos: phrases in Arabic and a Celtic cross. He scanned the roadside for the small white truck parked somewhere near Bab al-Hawa, the border crossing commanded by the Free Syrian Army. Most of the border, including this

Most of the border, including this stretch, was in the hands of the Qaeda-linked Nusra Front.

"Nusra controls all of this," Fares said. He pointed to the hillside where Syria began.

"Watch out for snipers."

stretch, was in the hands of the Qaeda-linked Nusra Front. "Nusra controls all of this," Fares said. He pointed to the hillside where Syria began. "Watch out for snipers." He grinned. Three and a half miles out from the official crossing, dusty trucks lined up to enter Syria. Some drivers squatted by the road; they had been waiting for days. Along the highway's edge, what looked like white ant hills were actually drifts of cigarette butts.

"The needs are so great, the line of trucks is getting longer," Fares said. The flatbeds were loaded with cement. "They'll have to rebuild what's being destroyed."

Because Kafranbel has no mobile-phone service, Hake wondered aloud whether Assad had cut broadband access too. No, Fares said, the town never had broadband. Instead, private satellite companies provided access by subscription. The system was patchy and hard to maintain. Hake had an idea for a wide-area network, developed at M.I.T., that he had seen in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Maybe it could work in rural Syria.

Hake, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who made a tidy profit in the early days of the Internet, used his money to help start Spirit of America in 2003. But instead of operating under the principle of neutrality like most NGOs, his organization explicitly takes sides. Hake believes private citizens have a role to play in supporting U.S. policy, and Fares's messages appealed to him. "Our enemies use private funding to fight everything America and our allies stand for," Hake said. "Why can't we use private assistance to help the good guys like Fares win?"

Hake asked Fares again what he needed. Now Fares understood that he meant it. "A siren," he said. Since Kafranbel drove out the Assad government with the help of the Free Syrian Army in 2012, the city had been under near-constant attack by airstrikes and shelling. With two scanners provided by a Free Syrian Army commander, Fares devised a warning system. A Radio Fresh employee stood on a hill and monitored bomber pilots talking to the government's air-traffic-control tower. The employee then relayed that information to the disc jockey, who interrupted the broadcast: "Breaking news. There's a plane coming now." After the strikes, when the pilot said, "I'm on my way back," the D.J. announced, "All clear."

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Fares said, "They always change frequency, but we find them." He needed a siren to reach those not listening to the radio. The one Fares had was puny. "My car horn is louder," he joked. (Eagan has since found five World War II-style air-raid sirens for Kafranbel. Powered by hand-crank, they don't require electricity.)

Kafranbel's biggest problem was schools. An estimated 50 percent of Syria's children are not enrolled; because schools are often targets of attack, no parents want to send their children to them. Refugees or groups like the Nusra Front now squat in the empty buildings. (Kafranbel's population has swelled to 30,000 from 15,000 as Syrians fled to the liberated town for safety.)

“We made this revolution for our children,” Fares said. “Now they’re in the streets. Any armed group can come and make them terrorists.”

There was silence as the Kia ticked over the joins in the highway.

“You must get so tired after so long,” Hake said.

Fares said nothing. He had no joke to make. He, his wife and three teenage boys survived by fighting in their separate ways. While Fares directed protests on Facebook and worked with fellow citizens to rebuild his town, his wife, Montaha, struggled to feed their family, because food now costs five times its pre-revolution price. “My wife struggles with me,” Fares said, trying to make a joke, then turning serious. “She does everything for every one of us. She lives the worst life of all. I am so sad for her, but I can do nothing to make the situation better.” Fares’s two older sons joined the media wing of the Free Syrian Army; their job was to document the battles the group was waging against ISIS and Assad. “I’ve tried to send my sons to the U.S., but they don’t have passports,” he said. Because the Assad government controls all official documents, those who oppose it become stateless. Their only option is to join the 3.5 million Syrians who have left the country as refugees.

Eagan spotted a gas station painted purple and turned in. “There’s the truck,” he said. The three men piled out of the Kia and stood in the gravel lot. “This smells like my summer jobs,” Hake said to Fares, who wasn’t listening. “Grease. I used to work with tractors.” On his iPhone, Hake dropped a pin on his world map. The border across which 200,000 people had fled ISIS five months earlier was a half-mile away.

Eagan had papers for Fares to sign. One read, in English and Arabic, “I have not provided and will not provide support or resources to any individual or organization that advocates, sponsors, engages in or has committed an act of terrorism.” The radios cost \$25 apiece. The price tag wasn’t why the State Department wanted Spirit of America involved. The organization could do a project more quickly and on a smaller scale than the government could. “If this works, we’ll know that pushing radios out into Syrian communities can actually broaden the reach of independent media,” said Rick Barton, who created the program as assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization. Hake, who uses business metaphors to define almost everything, described the effort as “outsourcing risk” for the United States government. As he put it, “Fares is an entrepreneur whose competitors are trying to kill him.”

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Fares was 7 when he and his family watched from their window as government forces assassinated a man in the street below. This was when Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current president, massacred thousands in an effort to quell an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood that began in the 1970s. After Assad brutally crushed the Islamists, the town of Kafranbel, a hub of the rebellion, was effectively blacklisted. Unless you were an Assad apparatchik, there were few ways to succeed. Some young men turned to drugs, among them, Fares’s older brother. Fares was 12 when he found his brother high on diazepam, his finger on the trigger of a Kalashnikov that the family kept for protection. Fares watched his brother balance the muzzle against his cheek and commit suicide.

Five years later, Fares also started taking diazepam, then snorting and finally injecting heroin. (Eventually, he quit cold turkey.) To please his father, he enrolled in medical school, although he preferred writing poetry (and later took up the oud), but soon dropped out and eventually moved to Lebanon to work for a refrigeration company. In 2009, after he returned to Syria to sell real

estate, he was caught forging a document trying to help a man cut through red tape and get his land back from the government. During the two months he spent in prison, he was disturbed by the torture to which political prisoners — although not common criminals like him — were subjected.



Near the border crossing to Syria outside Antakya, Turkey. Trucks trying to pass through can wait days to reach the checkpoint. Luca Locatelli for The New York Times

Once he got out, Fares kept his head down and dreamed of a time when the corruption of the Assad government would no longer drive daily life. Then came the Arab Spring. After a Tunisian fruit seller set himself on fire in December 2010, Fares watched gleefully as one corrupt leader after another fell from power. With friends, he decided to protest against Assad. On a Friday in April 2011, one of them raised the chant in a mosque: “God, Syria, freedom!” The hair on Fares’s neck stood on end. The 150 security officers standing around them did little but watch and take names.

The mullah shouted: “Catch them! Arrest them!”

A man in the crowd shouted back, “Catch the mullah by his beard!”

Within months, the protests in Kafranbel swelled to 6,000 from a few dozen. Each week, Fares filmed the protests on his Nokia phone and sent them to a friend in Saudi Arabia, who forwarded them to Arab TV stations. The Assad government claimed these masses of people weren’t actually in Syria, so Fares began using banners that named Kafranbel, his little town that no one had heard of. His videos went viral, and the regime retaliated.

On July 4, 2011, Assad’s forces surrounded the town, then they invaded, looting stores and burning homes. During the yearlong occupation that followed, Fares and his friends continued to protest using YouTube and social media. Because it was impossible to gather for more than 30 seconds, they deployed a kind of flash mob, and Fares, the director, tried to make the short films funny.

He once wrapped his friends in shrouds and had them stumble out of graves to show that even the dead wanted Assad to step down. Another time, he procured human hair from the town’s beautician to make wigs and beards to transform his actors-protesters into cave men, whom Assad gassed as the international community looked on impassively. (The grunting solved the problem of translation.) While Fares was filming, a family of four on a motorcycle rode past.

Dumbstruck by the hirsute and half-naked actors, they nearly crashed. The video, titled “Kafranbel: The Syrian Revolution in Three Minutes,” has more than 100,000 views on YouTube.

“From the beginning, I’ve used humor,” Fares said. “We wanted to be special. There were thousands of people demonstrating, and we were, like, 50 people in a field, and we wanted to be on Al Jazeera.” Fares decided to write in English “to try to get the whole world to pay attention.” With his own Syrian-American “spies” in the United States, he wrote messages that he hoped Americans would listen to. On Dec. 16, 2011, he first voiced his frustration with U.S. inaction: “Obama’s procrastination kills us. We miss Bush’s audacity. The world is better with America’s Republicans.” (A former ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, sent a picture of this banner to the White House.) The banner that elicited the greatest international response, with 17,000 Facebook shares over two nights, was the message of compassion he offered the families of the Boston Marathon victims: “Boston bombings represent a sorrowful scene of what happens every day in Syria. Do accept our condolences.” The families in Boston responded: “Friends in Syria — we too hope for the safety of your families and for peace.”

During the fall of 2012, after Kafranbel was liberated, Fares sneaked over the Turkish border to attend a media workshop in Turkey, where he met the United States government official who was identifying activists who might receive American support. Fares’s station became one of nine Syrian radio and two TV stations financed by the U.S. State Department. (So far, \$25 million has been disbursed.) On the surface, this funding is reminiscent of Cold War strategies: using Potemkin media to broadcast America’s messaging inside a hostile regime. But the programming is 100 percent Syrian. “It’s not traditional psy-ops where the U.S. controls the radio,” Barton, the State Department official, said. “It’s about finding local people who are truly capable.”

The 11 activists whom the United States finances, including Fares, aren’t strictly journalists. They fill an unusual role in the conflict: Via social media, they informally monitor more than \$2 billion of aid in a country to which the United States government has little direct access. They report which projects are working and which aren’t. As dangerous as Syria is for journalists — 72 have been killed since 1992, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists — it can be even more so for activists. To mitigate those risks, the United States provides training in austere media environments. “We try to make the best, latest little gizmos for their laptops available to them, but we do worry about them,” a senior U.S. official said. (Those supplies include software for secure communications.) Recently the official met all of the Syrian activists in person to thank them and to urge caution. “You guys are tremendously important in monitoring this aid,” he said. “Don’t think you have to tell us what we want to hear. . . . None of you is Superman. Please be careful.”

Not long after Fares began receiving recording, editing and broadcast equipment from the United States, the Free Syrian Army helped the residents of Kafranbel retake their town in a four-day battle that began on Aug. 6, 2012. When it was clear that Assad’s forces were fleeing, Fares ran to the mosque and shouted over the speakers, “People of Kafranbel, you are free!” Since then, amid airstrikes, the citizens of Kafranbel have tried to rebuild civil society on their own; Fares is one of their leaders. It has been more difficult than he imagined. “We’ve had seven different local councils, but we did nothing, just made promises,” he said. So Fares started an organization, the Union of Revolutionary Bureaus, which employs 365 people and is paid for by a number of NGOs. In addition to Radio Fresh and a media center, the bureau runs a women’s center, three day care centers and human rights training for lawyers and has nearly completed a project to once again provide running water for the town and three villages.

All of these activities have made him a target for ISIS. On Dec. 28, 2013, when ISIS tried to seize Kafranbel, they destroyed everything inside his media center, including transmitters and Fares’s oud. (The fighters knew Fares was in the United States trying to raise awareness about the war.) “The funny thing is, those idiots took the generator first,” Fares said. He laughed at the image of ISIS thugs scrambling around to rob and destroy in the dark. But the messages they sent Fares weren’t amusing: He would be beheaded when he returned from America.

Fares decided it was time to protest ISIS. He directed his team to draw his now-famous “Aliens” poster, in which Syria is an alien and the monster exploding out of its chest is named ISIS. (He

knew the risks: For the first time, he asked his protesters to cover their faces.) The same day, the Free Syrian Army drove the militants out of town. “They were planning to take the city, and I was the first target,” Fares said.

ISIS sends Fares regular death threats on Facebook: “We will find you and kill you even if you are already with God.” Ask Fares what will happen to the revolution if ISIS or Assad returns to kill him, and he says simply, “I have sons.”

“I haven’t started using the radio how I want to yet,” Fares told Hake as we drove past the main roundabout in the border town of Reyhanli, where a suicide bomber struck last year. At Radio Fresh, winning an audience with prize giveaways and trivia quizzes was only the first step. Because there are no phones in Kafranbel, Fares devised a system to communicate with listeners: He nailed 21 metal boxes on posts around the countryside into which listeners could drop quiz-show answers, song requests and suggestions. Sometimes people slipped in death threats. Now he wanted to develop a new radio program to remind people that the revolution began as a peaceful one, a noble fight for freedom. But what freedom meant, that required determining what kind of government might take the regime’s place.

One of Fares’s closest friends, Lt. Col. Fares al-Bayyoush, a moderate commander of nearly 1,000 members of the Free Syrian Army, is among the community leaders helping to rebuild infrastructure in Kafranbel. Bayyoush is based in Reyhanli. Fares wanted Hake and Eagan to meet the commander but warned that he could be annoying. “I have to tell him, ‘Please don’t try to make me laugh, I don’t find you funny,’” Fares said. He directed the Americans toward the city’s center, where he pointed out a yellow building on a quiet street next to the Eyfel Tower perfume shop. At the end of a hall in the second-floor flat that served as the political office, past a bedroom where young men in fatigues lounged in front of a TV, two commanders sat on couches. Fares knew and trusted both of them, which he couldn’t say of every Free Syrian Army member. The group is deeply fractured, in part because individual donors back individual brigades. This helps explain the challenges for the United States in identifying whom to support among the rebel commanders. “I’m Syrian, and I don’t know who to trust in the F.S.A. beyond these two commanders,” Fares said. Recently he reported one commander to Bayyoush for selling his weapons to ISIS. He also rallied fellow Syrians to support the rebels: One drawing featured Free Syrian Army leaders in a mock movie poster from the Tom Cruise film, “The Last Samurai.” He made introductions.

Bayyoush, wearing a gray suit and with a MacBook Air open on his lap, rose to shake Hake’s hand. He had a joke: “An F.S.A. commander and government commander meet in heaven,” he began. Startled to see each other, they peer down to see who is in hell: “All the Syrian people we put there.” Bayyoush laughed. Fares looked on blankly. Next to Bayyoush sat his boss, Col. Hasan Hamada, who defected in 2012 from the Assad regime via fighter plane to Jordan. Over the past year and a half, Hamada and Bayyoush have been among the recipients of nearly \$100 million of U.S. aid, mostly in the form of food, medical supplies and trucks funneled along shifting supply routes. He has also received covert support, including light weaponry.

Bayyoush has been shot three times in battles with ISIS and government forces. “He’s only been shot once,” he said, pointing at Fares and laughing. Bayyoush and Hamada sent troops to participate in the U.S. government’s covert-training program in Jordan, which began in 2013. “I can’t fight anymore,” he said. “I can’t even open a water bottle.”

Nonetheless, from his computer in Turkey, he commanded his troops through Skype and WhatsApp. He uses Facebook to issue statements for the Free Syrian Army. While Bayyoush has worked alongside the Nusra Front in the fight against Assad, the Free Syrian Army and Nusra are on opposite sides when it comes to building a civil society. Sitting quietly on a couch, Fares said: “Some want a democracy, others want an Islamic state. The differences between us weaken us.” He urged Bayyoush to tell the story of the latest civil dispute — over cigarette smoking. Recently, the Nusra Front circulated a paper in Kafranbel’s tobacco shops saying that smoking was against Islam. Bayyoush, who, like Fares, smokes with the relish of a man who faces a death more immediate than cancer, published a treatise against the Qaeda-linked group on Facebook, saying

that the Free Syrian Army was the only legitimate authority in Kafranbel. It worked, Bayyoush claimed. I asked how he knew. "I have spies inside Nusra, and they told me," he said. Supposing this was another joke, I laughed. "No," he looked puzzled. "I really have spies."

"Three years ago, America could have saved thousands of lives," Bayyoush went on. To them, what they needed seemed simple in hindsight: antiaircraft missiles, airstrikes against Assad, a no-fly zone. All of these options would have offered potential solutions. Their model for U.S. intervention was Libya, where airstrikes in support of the opposition helped to depose Qaddafi. Later the country descended into civil war. Fares acknowledged that Libya was hardly a success story, yet at least, he said, the United States had intervened to protect the Libyan people. In Syria, Assad was free to systematically imprison and kill the moderate leaders the United States was now looking for. "One by one, they were disappeared," he said.

"Can I speak?" said Hamada, who is with the Fifth Regiment of the Free Syrian Army. "I told the Americans I met in Jordan: 'If you help us, there will be no extremism in Syria at all. If you're too late, there will be a time when neither you nor we will have any control.'" According to a senior retired U.S. military leader, who asked not to be named because he is no longer in the service, the delay in backing the Free Syrian Army led to the death of moderate military leaders. "If we had helped those people earlier, it could've gone differently," he said. "A lot of the good leaders are dead now. They've been caught between rocks and hard places and ground into dust."

The recent strikes against ISIS in Syria frustrated the Free Syrian Army commanders on two counts. First, unlike that of the United States, the F.S.A.'s primary foe was the regime. "The regime has launched chemical attacks and many more massacres than ISIS has," Bayyoush said. Second, they had been warning the United States against the growth of ISIS for more than a year. "A year and a half ago, ISIS started activating cells," Hamada said. "If America had helped us in the beginning, there would be no ISIS." But the growth of ISIS wasn't simply America's fault. The Free Syrian Army bore its own responsibility. "These extremist groups formed because we were weak within the Free Syrian Army," he said.

'From the beginning, I've used humor,' Fares said. 'There were thousands of people demonstrating, and we were, like, 50 people in a field, and we wanted to be on Al Jazeera.'

The question of whether and when to arm the Syrian opposition has emerged as a politically charged debate between President Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton, the former secretary of state. Clinton claims that she pushed for intervention and that Obama refused; Obama denies this. (Early in the Syrian conflict, the White House decided against military intervention, in part for fear that weapons supplied to "reliable" Free Syrian Army commanders might fall into the hands of other militias not vetted by the United States.) Although the private conversation between Obama and Clinton remains contested, Obama's public remarks about the opposition being "former farmers or teachers or pharmacists" didn't improve relations between the United States and their potential allies within the Free Syrian Army. "The opposition can't be dismissed because they're all a bunch of farmers and accountants and bookkeepers," the retired U.S. military official said. "You ought to read what the French generals, including Lafayette, wrote back home about Americans they had to turn into soldiers to beat the redcoats."

At the same time, extremist groups like ISIS were buoyed by money as much by ideology. "If you have money, you can create any group you want," Bayyoush said, "No one can match salaries from \$600 a month. If I could pay that, ISIS fighters would join me."

Many Syrian activists work out of Turkey, using teahouses in the Turkish border town of Gaziantep as offices. Fares comes to town only every few months to poke his head into the headquarters of the NGOs that support him and to check on friends struggling in exile. One evening, Fares held court at Karanfil, a Kurdish teahouse in Gaziantep's old city. In the courtyard, the tiled floors and walls magnified the sound of water running through a small fountain and the clack of backgammon checkers moving against a board.

At one cloth-covered table, Fares greeted his friend Wassim Mukdad, a 29-year-old Syrian doctor wearing Tevas and board shorts, his long hair pulled back in a ponytail and fastened with a yellow baby clip. Fares wanted to hear how he was faring in Turkey, but the real point of the meeting was to listen to Mukdad play the oud. Fares played, too, but not, he said, “like Wassim.” (After ISIS destroyed Fares’s oud during the attack on the radio station, Syrian-American friends bought him a new one.)

Mukdad picked up the oud and began to sing: “How do you like to die citizens? By sniper or by bomb?”

Fares laughed. This is the *comedia sauda* — in Arabic, the black comedy — that he loves. The two friends compared tactics to outwit interrogators. “I was tortured just like every other person in every other story,” Mukdad said. In prison, the other prisoners taught him to survive: Make up a complicated story with lots of erroneous details and stick to it no matter what. The second you change, they’ll keep you inside forever.

Mukdad and his Kurdish girlfriend, Berivan Ahmad, 24, lived among 150,000 people in the besieged refugee camp of Yarmouk, on the edge of Damascus, where the Free Syrian Army had battled government forces. Hundreds of people starved to death around them. “One kilo of rice cost \$70,” he said. As one of nine doctors, he shared a plate of rice with four people each day. In Yarmouk, he watched ISIS mushroom from eight men to more than 250 fighters as army defectors and others joined the well-funded jihadis in exchange for money and food. About a year ago, ISIS arrested Mukdad because he was Ismaili, a branch of Shia. While waiting for them to carry out his sentence of beheading, he had an idea. Without arguing over who was a true believer and who wasn’t, he simply repeated, “There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his prophet” — the statement of faith that declared him a Muslim. The low-level ISIS fighters, confounded, weren’t sure that they could kill this believer. When staff members — doctors, nurses and even laundry women — at the hospital inside the camp threatened to strike if he wasn’t released, ISIS complied.

“They saved me,” he said.

After ISIS released him, Mukdad decided to give a concert in the camp, singing: “I’m not an infidel. Starvation is the infidel. I’m not an infidel. War is the infidel.”

Days after the concert, his patients came to him and said, “Doctor, flee.”

As he finished talking, Fares said, “You need to record these songs.”

“I’ve called radio stations here, but they’re not interested,” Mukdad said.

“Come to Syria and record it in my studio.”

Mukdad shook his head. “It says Shia on my ID card,” he said. “It’s no joke. Too many people want me dead.”

By the time Fares slumped in a beige chair in his Turkish hotel room and logged onto his Facebook page, it was 1 a.m. Within seconds, a list of chats from fellow activists, dumb jokes and interview requests appeared.

Many Syrian activists have several online identities: Having a pro-Assad page and a pro-ISIS page is a way to stay safe. If you’re stopped at a checkpoint, for example, you can prove your allegiance by showing the right ID. Fares’s email address is a fake American name, but he didn’t choose it for security. “I was naughty,” he said. “I did it to meet girls.” Fares learned English before the revolution began by posing online as a man from Indiana. His Skype avatar is a flaming skull. (Beneath the image on Skype, a tagline reads, “I have a dream.”)

Over the past four years, Fares has met many journalists who have come through Syria, including James Foley, the American freelance journalist captured and beheaded by ISIS. After Foley was murdered, Fares dedicated a banner to him. It read: “James Foley’s will to expose Assad and ISIS pushed him to sacrifice his blood to enlighten Obama’s vague vision. Humanity is proud of James.”

Among the photos in his Facebook archive, three snapshots stand out. They belong to three medical students who were among 21 boys from Kafranbel studying at the University of Aleppo until earlier this year. “The regime arrested all 21 in January because they were from our town,” Fares said. The three in the school photos were tortured to death. On April 23, he told me, their mutilated bodies were sent back to their families with a warning: “If you publish photos of these bodies on Facebook, we will kill the other 18.”

Fares’s banners often try to link people all over the world in similarly impossible situations. One was addressed to the family of Trayvon Martin: “Martin family! The Syrians are the best who know what it’s like to lose loved ones by immune criminals.” Another, written in Arabic and marked XXX, includes a drawing of what looks like a sperm. “This one is about the impotence of the coalition,” Fares said. “It’s for adults.” Still another, on the occasion of Robin Williams’s death, quoted the actor playing the genie in the film “Aladdin”: “To be free. Such a thing would be greater than all the magic and all the treasures in all the world. RIP Robin Williams.”

“I always wanted to go to America,” Fares said. “Now I have a two-year visa, and I want to stay in Syria.”