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A victory or the beginning of a new nightmare?

The fall of Assad represents the end of one era, but not the beginning of peace

The fall of Bashar al-Assad is a moment we dreamed of but never truly believed we'd see. A friend captured the overwhelming emotions perfectly in a Facebook post: 'We [Syrians] are all liars; we swore we do not miss Syria and will never cry for it, but here we are: all caught up in tears, uncontrollably.' Those words mirrored my own disbelief. By Sunday morning, after hours of monitoring the developments overnight, I woke to over 200 messages. Assad had fallen. It wasn't a dream, it was real. And yet, as the news sank in, my exhilaration gave way to unease.

The fall of Assad is undeniably a turning point in Syria's modern history. A dictatorship that ruled with an iron grip for 54 years crumbled in a matter of days. This alone is epic. For decades, Assad's regime projected an illusion of invincibility — an unshakeable power structure that withstood years of protests, uprisings and external pressures. His downfall shatters that image, exposing the fragility of even the most entrenched autocracies. It also brings renewed hope for addressing some of Syria's most painful wounds, such as the plight of political prisoners and the fate of the forcibly disappeared. For the first time in years, there is a real chance for families to find closure, to know what happened to loved ones lost to Assad's prisons.

But the triumph is not untainted. As the hours unfolded on Saturday and Sunday, the complexity of the situation became clear. Assad's removal was not the work of secular, democratic forces striving for a just Syria, but involves some radical factions like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Many friends hesitated to congratulate me, unsure whether this was a victory or the beginning of a new nightmare. My personal turmoil deepened as I tried to reconcile the joy of Assad's fall with the fear of what might come next. My sister was stranded between Syria and Lebanon, caught in the chaos, while my elderly father sat alone — in Damascus, a city already unravelling. The power vacuum left behind by Assad's regime wasn't just theoretical — it was a tangible, frightening reality.

For Syrians like me, who have spent years dreaming of this day, the reality is bittersweet.

This vulnerability extends beyond the personal. Syria is now a battleground for competing regional agendas. Israel, fearing advanced weaponry might fall into rebel hands, has intensified airstrikes on multiple locations and advanced in the south, targeting strategic sites it ignored during Assad's reign — a troubling reminder of how much Assad's so-called enemy benefited from his stability. Meanwhile, Turkey-backed factions have seized key areas like Manbij, advancing Ankara's goals in northern Syria. The fragmented opposition, despite its renewed relevance, risks succumbing to infighting eventually, leaving the country vulnerable to exploitation by external powers.

For Syrians like me, who have spent years dreaming of this day, the reality is bittersweet. Syria is now 'free' of Assad, but not yet liberated. The fall of Assad represents the end of one era, but not the beginning of peace. Instead, it marks a new phase of uncertainty. Can the different factions, fractured and burdened with competing agendas, rise to the challenge of governance? Can the international community – who seems to deal with Syria under a black and white paradigm – move beyond superficial gestures and commit to addressing the country's humanitarian and political crises? Or will Syria remain a theatre for power struggles, its people caught in the crossfire?

The question now is whether this historic moment can become a foundation for rebuilding a shattered nation — or if it will dissolve into yet another chapter of despair, recalling the 'freeing' of Afghanistan and Iraq models. For those of us who have carried this struggle in exile, the hope is tempered by the knowledge that liberation is only the first step in a long, uncertain journey.

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When I heard that the Islamic opposition forces (HTS) had retaken Aleppo on 29 November, I never imagined they would reach Damascus just one week later. On Saturday, 7 December, news broke that Assad's troops had been expelled from Sweida — a city of great symbolism, home to a Druze minority and a large number of internally displaced people. The news was overwhelming. As Syrians, we immediately began reaching out to verify the reports, and my family, who lived just a few kilometers from Damascus, informed me that the 'revolutionaries' had arrived in town. Everything seemed calm... but was it just the calm before the

storm? Or was it a peaceful takeover? A mix of fear, recalling the infighting of 2012 and the years that followed, and happiness, knowing that the cruel regime and its injustice had fallen, filled the air.

By Sunday morning, Damascus was free of the dictator, and Syrians began greeting each other with 'Sabah al Hurria' (A Morning of Freedom). We followed the videos circulating on Facebook, feeling as though we were witnessing a dream long hoped for by Syrians over the course of more than 13 years of revolution.

The withdrawal of Assad's forces was both surprising and almost unbelievable. Images of the regime's symbolic figures being toppled and the dismantling of their personality cult were moving, evoking memories of Iraq in 2003, and the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011 and 2012. People poured into the streets, celebrating 'freedom', singing revolutionary songs and shouting 'The Syrian people are one.' It was a historic moment — emotional and, more importantly, a moment of justice.

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The most touching images came from the release of political prisoners from some of the world's most brutal and violent prisons. Sednaya Prison, with 30 000 inmates packed onto a single floor (it has 3 floors), stands as one of the darkest symbols of the regime's cruelty. Seeing women with children – some as young as 3 years old, who may have never seen the sunlight – was a step toward victory for justice. The next step must be holding accountable those responsible for these crimes against humanity.

Ironically, it was the Islamic forces that liberated Syria from Assad's dictatorship. However, these forces embody a vision of freedom that contrasts sharply with the rights of women, youth and dissenting voices. While they are disciplined and well-organised in their military operations, their concept of freedom and justice often diverges significantly from what many Syrians, especially women, desire. Given these differences, we are watching the unfolding events with great caution.

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wasted no time: Benjamin Netanyahu annulled the 1974 ceasefire, and the Israeli military entered the demilitarised zone near the Golan Heights, which has been in place since then, even advancing as far as the city of Quneitra. Amid the celebrations and joy, growing concerns about the potential for yet another war cast a shadow over the future.

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