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Looking into the abyss:

A journey through Damascus after Assad's fall

With Assad's government toppled, Syria teeters between fragile hopes for peace and the looming threat and chaos of militant rule. The Cradle's correspondent crosses an open border into a city alive with jubilation but, in many areas, still plagued by war, fear, and an uncertain future.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

“The border is open. You can go to Syria!”

This is what my taxi driver friend Ali texted me.

“Do you need a visa? Are there checkpoints?” I asked.

“There is nothing, just go!” came his quick reply.

It felt surreal. Was this really the best time to go to Syria?

Just three days earlier, Bashar al-Assad's government had fallen to militants from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), led by the notorious former Al-Qaeda leader Abu Mohammad al-

Julani. At the same time, Israel was carrying out the largest bombing campaign in its history – over 350 massive strikes to dismantle Syria’s military infrastructure entirely.

Despite fears of what might lie ahead, I found myself in Ali’s car early the next morning, heading from Beirut to the Syrian border. After clearing Lebanese control, I switched taxis – my new driver, Omar, greeted me with a smile.

“The terrorist is gone,” Omar said with satisfaction, referring to Assad as I loaded my bag into the car.

Omar, a graying man in his late forties with a short beard, shared his story as we drove. In 2013, he was detained while attending a protest in Damascus’s Midan district. A substantial bribe secured his release after a year in prison.

He had not only participated in demonstrations but also worked with the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) and helped form a local armed group that later joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

No passport control

Another passenger in the car, Abd al-Qader, beamed with excitement as we drove through the no man’s land between the two borders.

Abd al-Qader was returning to Syria after 13 years. He says he fled to Lebanon after the start of the war in 2011, afraid he would be detained by Syrian intelligence – the notorious and feared ‘Mukhabarat’ – for supporting the opposition.

The CIA and allied intelligence agencies had sparked the protests in Syria in March of 2011 while also flooding the country with Al-Qaeda militants from Iraq and Lebanon to attack Syrian police and security forces, blaming the deaths on Assad.

As we drove across the border, the old building where the Syrian authorities would stamp your passport was burned, empty, and had been looted. “Now you don’t have to pay bribes to cross the border,” Abd al-Qader said.

Now, the border was totally open; there was no passport check, just a few teenagers in mismatched civilian and military clothes who waved us through, AK-47s slung casually over their shoulders.

As we kept driving down the winding highway to Damascus, a camouflage truck with several masked men standing in the bed with mounted machine guns drove up and parked on the side of the road.

Omar said they were “revolutionaries” and that we had nothing to worry about. “They speak directly on the phone to Joe Biden, don’t worry,” he joked. “You can take selfies with them in Damascus!”



The old building where the Syrian authorities stamped passports visibly vandalized and burned.

Israeli bombing and Julani's arrival

As we entered the outskirts of the capital, the air was filled with a terrible smell. I soon saw smoke billowing from buildings on the right side of the road.

We were passing Al-Mezzeh military airport, which Israel had struck a few days ago as part of a massive bombing campaign it launched almost as soon as Julani entered Damascus.

Israel said it had dropped some 450 bombs on Syria's military infrastructure, weapons depots, naval port, and missile defense systems over the past few days.

It reminded me of Beirut, where I had spent the past two months. I witnessed first-hand how Israel's mass bombing campaign of Lebanon had turned large sections of the southern suburbs of the capital into an apocalyptic wasteland.

I noticed that same acrid scent I had smelled in Beirut, which made me wonder what kind of radiation and chemicals from the Israeli bombs will continue to poison future generations of Lebanese and Syrians, reminiscent of Iraq, where generations still suffer from the intoxicating aftermath of US bombings.

Yet Omar shrugged off the destruction. He said Syria would now have good relations with every neighboring country, including Israel, and that Syria no longer needed an army.

Over the next two nights in a row, I was awoken by the loud boom of Israel's bombing of military sites on Mount Qasioun, which overlooks Damascus from the north. In addition to the bombing campaign, Israel immediately occupied additional Syrian land in the Golan Heights after Julani took control of the country.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is now bragging that he is the first leader in decades to expand Israel's territory, while religious Jews in Israel are demanding to establish settlements and make large swathes of Syria, including Damascus, part of 'Greater Israel.'

Torture, prisons, and ghosts of the war

Driving into Damascus, we passed the Palestine Branch of Syrian Security on the left side of the highway. Omar said that is where he was held. The Palestine Branch had five stories and had been burned by the HTS militants. He said there were prisons in the underground floors of the building where people were tortured.

As we exited the highway and entered the city, we saw another intelligence building with high, imposing walls. "Many detainees were held there," Omar said.

The specter of Syria's prisons still looms over its people. While western media sensationalized prisons like Sednaya with tales of bone-crushing machines, the truth of brutal detentions is undeniable. Sharif, a Kurdish man I later met, told me about his brother, Qassem, a bus driver accused of transporting militants. Detained in 2014, Qassem was tortured to death within five months. Sharif asked bitterly:

"Why torture someone like that? If he did something wrong, put him in prison, sure. But to torture and kill him? He is a human being. God created him. Why do that? Many people in Syria have stories like my brother's. Of people taken without questions or answers."

Anti-Alawite reprisals

As we continued the drive into Damascus, we passed the government passport office. The building was charred from being torched, and smoke was still rising from it. Around twenty or thirty people were gathered around, watching as a crane lifted a burnt-out car out of the way.

We then passed Abbasiyyeen Square, a famous roundabout in the city with a fountain and grassy area in its center. A modest crowd was in the square, including some women and children, giving the impression life was continuing as normal.

Some people were holding the country's old colonial flag embraced by the Syrian opposition in 2011, now the flag of post-Assad Syria. A few HTS men wearing green camouflage tactical clothing and assault rifles stood watch. Rumors swirled about a general being publicly executed there—but they were false.

While Damascus and other cities remain largely peaceful, videos have appeared on social media allegedly showing former government officials and Alawites being beaten, paraded through the streets, or lynched by mobs or armed militants. Reports are also spreading about Syrian soldiers disappearing in Latakia after surrendering to HTS militants.

The Caesar Sanctions

Before going to my hotel, Omar took me to his favorite shawarma place and treated me to a big plate that included French fries.

As I was just about finished, a small boy approached us selling roses. We were sitting at a table on the sidewalk. He asked if he could take the last French fries from my plate.

I told him. "Of course, you can eat them." But instead, he said, "They are for my mother." He wrapped them up in a napkin and walked away.

I was shocked that he or his mother, or both, would be so poor that he would bother to save a handful of French fries. But in fact, it should not be a shock; Syria is a very poor country. It has been under a punishing US blockade, imposed through what is known as the Caesar Sanctions, for years.

US officials have openly stated they wished to use the sanctions to crush Syria's economy while also occupying Syria's oil fields and major wheat-producing regions to starve the country further.

These officials know that similar US sanctions killed some 500,000 children in Iraq over the course of a decade in the 1990s without hurting Saddam Hussein himself. But they imposed the sanctions on Syria anyway, to punish Syria's civilians until they oust Assad from power.

The members of the Syrian "opposition" living in Washington, DC, who advocated for imposing the sanctions, know this too.

They know the elites of a sanctioned country still have all the luxuries they need and that such measures only hurt regular people and make them go hungry. Many people in Damascus have been discussing details that have been discovered this week about Assad's luxurious life, including his classic car collection.

The fact that many Syrians are happy that the old government is gone is perhaps one sign that the murderous US sanctions were, in the end, successful.

"We just want to eat and live in peace," one man in Damascus told me when I asked what he thought about Assad's ouster.



Syrians in Damascus queuing for bread – an aftermath of the Caesar Sanctions imposed on the country.

Sunnis take power

Some of the Syrians who are happy about the change are religious Sunnis, who have now taken power in Damascus, the capital of the old Umayyad Empire.

The first night in Damascus, I went to the Umayyad Mosque. Formerly a church and still home to the alleged head of John the Baptist (or Prophet Yahya in Islamic tradition), the mosque is considered the fourth most important in Sunni Islam.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, head of the Islamist AKP party, famously vowed back in 2014 that he would pray in the Umayyad Mosque. Prior to the fall of the Assad government, Erdogan also hinted at his role in helping HTS take Damascus. US President-elect Donald Trump also hinted at this, stating that Turkiye had orchestrated the “unfriendly takeover” of Syria with little bloodshed.

Armed militants from HTS, many with their faces fully masked, were present at the mosque. Some lounged inside on the carpet, and others took pictures at the entrance with a few late-night visitors.

I felt nervous around the masked militants, not knowing how they would react to a foreigner, so I left after a few minutes. As I turned the corner to exit the mosque, three more armed HTS men with AK-47s walked in my direction.

These men were not masked, and I could see they had Asian features. They were Uyghur from the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which had helped Julani and HTS conquer Idlib in 2015. The Uyghur fighters took over the homes of Christians they expelled after the invasion, and now were walking the streets of Damascus.

In the morning, I went back to the Umayyad Mosque for the first Friday prayers since the change of government. Despite the rumors circulating online, Erdogan was not there.

However, there was a huge crowd, the mosque was totally full, and the outside courtyard was packed as well.

Drones were overhead filming the crowd, and as they flew close, people would break out in chants of “Allahu Akbar” or “The people want the execution of Bashar.” The crowd was mixed, with women, children, men, and adolescents.

There were some armed HTS men providing security in what was a festive atmosphere. I spoke to one young woman who said she was happy because it was the first time in 50 years that a mass gathering filling the entire courtyard was allowed.

She said with a smile that Julani had been there the day before and wondered if he was inside the mosque now.



Syrian civilians and militants celebrating in the Umayyad Mosque's courtyard in Damascus.

The Christians are scared

At the same time, angst grips Syria’s Christians. It is no secret that Christians were murdered and ethnically cleansed by Al-Qaeda groups – including Julani’s Nusra Front – in Iraq and Syria over the past two decades.

In 2013, Nusra militants invaded Maaloula, an ancient Christian town an hour's drive north of Damascus. They destroyed and looted churches and kidnapped nuns from the town whose residents are among the last to speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

Some of the most historic Christian towns in the world, in Iraq’s Ninevah plains, were ethnically cleansed by ISIS in collaboration with Masoud Barzani’s Kurdish Peshmerga forces the same year following the terror group’s capture of Mosul.

Just yesterday, news emerged that an elderly Christian couple was murdered in Wadi al-Nasara, the “Valley of the Christians,” near the Syrian city of Homs.

Initial reports said the couple was murdered as part of a burglary, a possible result of Julani’s emptying of Syria’s prisons, both the political prisoners and the criminals, as his men took over the country.

However, later reports said one of them had been beheaded, a common Al-Qaeda tactic, suggesting other motives of the killers.

Speaking to *The Cradle*, one member of the local Christian congregation in Damascus says:

“If the Christian community in Syria survives, it will be because of a decision of Uncle Sam. We know it is Washington who controls what is happening in Syria. We know it is Washington and Tel Aviv that give orders to Julani. Will President Trump ensure the safety and future of Christians in Syria? We don’t know. We can only pray.”

This is the question on everyone’s mind now. Perhaps the future of Syria is bright, as many Iraqis thought after the US army invaded Iraq and deposed Saddam. Or maybe it is the beginning of another nightmare, as Iraqis tragically learned over the next fifteen years.

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