

A Visit to a Syria Reborn

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Articles & Testimony

The author's return to a post-Assad Syria revealed grounds for hope—but also sobering reminders of how far the country has to go in shoring up its economy, governance, and internal security.

I noticed the first signs of change as I crossed the border. On my previous visit to Syria, 18 years ago, I had been greeted by grim-faced border guards who affected an air of open menace. Now, in their place, I was welcomed by crisply uniformed young men who approached our car with a relaxed demeanor to perform only the briefest of inspections. No one demanded a bribe. No one brandished a weapon.

My stomach muscles unclenched, my breath relaxed. It was then that I noticed another sight, one so at odds with the Syria I remembered, yet so familiar to my American eyes. There, prominently placed next to a large, manicured lawn and flanked by two perfectly trimmed hedges, stood a large, neatly sculpted sign: “I ♥ Syria.” I stared at the Instagram-ready greeting known to every traveler to any larger American city. I watched visitors casually waiting their turn to pose for photos near the cheery welcome and wondered if they were thinking what I was: Could this possibly be the same country where one of the most brutal dictatorships held power for over half a century?

My one-week visit to Syria allowed me to experience a country at a remarkable inflection point: emerging from the shadow of deposed dictator Bashar al-Assad and engaging the outside world in uncertain, uneven steps, like a traumatized and vulnerable newly released prisoner of war.

I had lived in Syria briefly under the Assad regime in 2008 and I will never forget the fear that hung heavily in the air. Ubiquitous public images of the leader reflected a seamless surveillance state. In a place where absolute authority ruled absolutely, people tried to avoid direct eye contact, looking down, blending in, escaping notice. Now Assad is gone, and so is the need to alter one's behaviors. Syria may not be on anyone's list of free countries, not yet, but the changes I saw were already dramatic enough. A freer Syria felt like a Syria reborn.

It's not just that the images of Assad have disappeared from Syria's streets. They also haven't been replaced by pictures of the new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa. The ex-jihadist whose forces overthrew the Baathist dictator in December 2024 appears to have a strong sense of modern-day public relations. There's clearly an effort at forging a new national identity, but not one built around another all-powerful leader. Today the capital is adorned with hand-painted murals of trademarks of identity, such as the sword of Damascus and the Damascene rose. It was hard not to be moved by the attempts at a makeover. The astonishment and joy I felt as I walked through the streets of this new Damascus, free of the imagery of tyranny, fed my eagerness to learn how Syrians were reacting to the changes. As someone who experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union, I recognized and welcomed the sense of euphoria in post-Assad Syria.

Yet it is impossible to overlook the challenges ahead. Rebuilding Syria after fourteen years of civil war will be far more difficult than updating public imagery. At the first evening's dinner, our conversation quickly turned to the problems: pervasive corruption, a dysfunctional economy, fragile institutions, even widespread confusion about progress such as how to start a business. Though we were sitting outdoors in a restaurant near Damascus's Old City, all of the Syrians in attendance spoke openly and frankly.

No topic seemed off limits. Energy shortages were a constant source of frustration. One man, whom I will call Omar, said his monthly energy bill exceeded \$300—several times the average monthly salary in Syria. (Even though Damascus was averaging less than two hours of power a day a year ago, restoring full-time electricity remains an urgent goal.) **Official unemployment (<https://syriawire.com/data/unemployment>)** stands at roughly 14 percent, though most of the people I met believe the number to be far higher. Since Syria remains a cash-based economy, the weight of financial strain is even more pronounced.

The signs are visible everywhere. Mothers with small children begged on the sidewalks outside my hotel. A guard at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus urged me to keep my removed shoes with me lest they be stolen from the designated cubbies set aside for visitors.

Syrians are realistic. They know there will be no Marshall Plan for their country. The World Bank **estimates (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/10/21/syria-s-post-conflict-reconstruction-costs-estimated-at-216-billion>)** the costs of reconstruction at \$216 billion; others put the figure at twice that. While Damascus remains largely intact, much of the country outside the city's core has not. In Jobar and other suburbs, you didn't have to travel far to see rows of hollowed-out, multi-story buildings shattered by bombs, like empty eye sockets bearing witness to years of pain and destruction. Some of the wreckage was adorned with photos of those murdered by the Assad regime—makeshift memorials built by the survivors in memory of those who won't be part of Syria's rebuilding. There was no effort by any official to hide the pain or control the narrative of suffering. It's as if the entire city has come together to prevent the erasure of what it has been through.

From what I heard, the new government is aware of the problems faced by transitional regimes. The experience of post-2003 Baghdad looms especially large. The new rulers are keen to avoid a destructive dynamic of political polarization, a collapse of services, and violent backlash.

And yet there are no signs of a clear plan for reintegration or reconciliation. It is hard to imagine Syria accomplishing that difficult mission without external assistance. Damascus has pledged inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities, but signs of sectarian violence are already visible. The jury is still out, but minority groups such as Alawites, Christians and the Druze worry that Al-Sharaa is an "Islamist in a suit." They have concerns about a shift toward more conservative Islamic governance and remain skeptical about their long-term safety.

Then there is Russia. I saw no sign that Moscow is readying itself to leave Syria any time soon. While Damascus is in no position to tell Russia to leave entirely, there seems little evidence it will happen regardless. The Kremlin power

that helped Assad murder over half a million of his own citizens has granted him asylum and shields him even now—something the Syrians are unlikely to forget.

Syria, however, remains practical. It cannot easily replace Russian weapons or its diplomatic clout with institutions like the UN. Syrians almost certainly remember how Russia effectively shielded Assad in this forum, perhaps most prominently by routinely blocking cross border humanitarian aid with its veto on the UN Security Council. It is telling that, even though Russian forces bombed al-Sharaa and his rebel forces when they governed Idlib province during the war, he has nonetheless made a deal for a Russian presence in the country post-Assad. One foreign ministry official told me how, immediately after Assad's fall, Russian envoys arrived with a package of new contracts for the Syrians to sign. The Syrian response, at least at first, was to delay—underscoring both Syria's wariness of Russia and Russia's impressive determination to insert itself in Syria's recovery. (Just within the past few days, Moscow and Damascus signed agreements giving Syria more control over Russian military bases in the country—but also ensuring that the Kremlin's forces will retain a presence.)

Iran, which invested far more heavily in Assad's regime, has failed to adapt with similar flexibility. Some of the Syrians I met expressed worries that Russia, China or even ISIS might step up quickly to fill the vacuum if a dilatory West cannot figure out an effective policy toward their country.

The West should seize the moment. Fresh strategies are urgently needed. They could include bolstering the role of Ukrainians as a counterweight to Russia, through deliveries of both weapons and food. Yet I encountered skepticism about Kyiv's ability to compete. As one person from the defense ministry told me: "The Syrian people have sympathy with the Ukrainians, but at the end of the day the government will choose what is good for Syria," implying that breaking ties with Russia isn't likely to be seen as something in Syria's interest. Western policymakers will need to take such realities into account.

I left Syria with measured optimism. Shortly after I left Damascus, a bomb exploded in a crowded café on Al-Nasr Street in central Damascus, killing at least ten and injuring dozens—one of a series of security breaches since the fall of Assad. Analysts suspect that that attack was ISIS-affiliated, but no group officially took responsibility; another attack took place only days later, coinciding with a visit by French President Emmanuel Macron. These events highlight the fragility of the moment—both for Syria and the broader Middle East. There can be no doubt the West has a direct vital interest in Syria's success. The window of opportunity will not stay open for long. The future is still unwritten, waiting to be shaped.

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