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We Are Not Pawns, We Are the People Who Rose Against the Regime

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This article by Syrian writer Jwana Aziz reflects on the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Jwana examines the conditions that precipitated the 2011 uprising, the years of civil war, and the difficulties that now lay ahead for the Syrian people, while also holding open the possibility for a truly liberated future. Jwana is the daughter of Omar Aziz (Abu Kamel), a Syrian intellectual and anarchist who both theorized and organized local democratic councils in Damascus during the uprising. In 2012 the elder Aziz was arrested by Syrian security forces and in 2013 succumbed to poor conditions in a regime prison.

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the support we deserve. Today, as in the past, discourse seeks to limit Syria's realities and the possibilities for change. We are framed as passive subjects, slandered with conspiracy theories, and labeled as pawns in a larger geopolitical game.

But we are not pawns. We are the people who rose against a regime we knew would kill us.

As I walked away from the prison on the day I saw my father, I stood on Syrian soil, supposed to be free—yet, I felt anything but. The feeling of being watched and monitored and the suffocating presence of fear was all too familiar. The regime's grip was everywhere, in the streets, in the shops, on the roads, and in the eyes of the people. Syria, as a land, felt like one vast prison.

If there is one message I could share with the world, it is this: unless you and your community can determine your way of life, you are living within some form of prison. A carceral system that seeks to control and restrict our potential and imagination. If one of the most brutal dictatorships of the 21st century could crumble in a matter of days, then so too can the capitalist system that dominates and exploits our lives. We must be able to dream of that world, the way my father dreamt of Syria.

What Comes Next?

The vacuum left by the regime is being exploited by nationalist factions like Hay at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an authoritarian organization with an Islamic fundamentalist ideology, and the Syrian National Army (SNA), a proxy for Turkey. Both HTS and SNA are seen as threats to a democratic Syria. And although the US and Israel did not instigate the offensive that brought an end to the regime, Israel opposes Syria’s liberation due to the potential risks it poses for Israeli control of Palestine and regional stability.

It is imperative, at this moment, we reject all forms of Arab nationalism and colonial entities rooted in ethnic cleansing and settler expansion—whether driven by Israel, the US, Turkey, or others. We must protect and ensure that we do not perpetuate the systematic erasure of ethnic groups including Assyrians, Kurds, Nubians, and Armenians.

It is now up to Syrians to dismantle hierarchal structures and rebuild democracy through “power from below.”¹³ My father’s work¹⁴ and that of his comrades demonstrate the ability of working-class self-governance through local councils.¹⁵ They thrived without the state, organizing education, hospitals, and services, all run by the people and rooted in their communities. Syrians are already coming together to restore the infrastructure neglected by the regime. Initiatives to clean and restore public spaces¹⁶ serve as a testament to our resilience and determination. Unfortunately, the world, once again, stands idle, hesitant to offer

¹³ https://www.democracynow.org/2024/12/12/syria_joseph_daher

¹⁴ <https://libcom.org/article/formation-local-councils-live-revolutionary-time> as well as article 13 in this reader.

¹⁵ <https://isj.org.uk/the-ngoisation-of-the-syrian-revolution/>

¹⁶ <https://syriadirect.org/damascus-volunteers-care-for-a-country-that-feels-like-theirs/>

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an eternal place in our hearts alongside countless others who dedicated their lives for our freedom today: Razan Zaytouneh, Samira Khalil, Ghayath Matar, and all the brave men, women, and children who sacrificed for Syria's future.

In a recent inquiry, Fadel Abdulghany, the head of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, uncovers evidence suggesting the regime is complicit in incinerating bodies on an industrial scale. "Where are the bodies?" he asks. As of yesterday, around 50 bags of human remains were discovered in barren land near Damascus, one of many suspected mass graves. Echoing Abdulghany's call, I underscore the urgent need to know where the bodies have been buried, so Syrians can lay their families to rest and begin to etch their future.

Yet amid this darkness, there is joy and determination. Recent videos capture the release of prisoners, among them toddlers,¹⁰ grown men who have lost their memories¹¹ due to horrific conditions, and women who gave birth in captivity to children fathered by men they don't know. Despite the haunting realities, today is a day of hope—families are reuniting, and long-separated loved ones are embracing once again. The dismantling of Sednaya Prison marks a momentous day to remember.

We stand in the wake of its downfall, the statues have been toppled, its portraits shattered, the cronies have scattered, the mukhabarat (secret security) dissipated. A family that hoarded wealth and plundered 90% of its people into poverty now finds its house an open one,¹² where regular people walk in and take as they please—sweet irony, or perhaps a fit retribution. But our celebration will be brief.

¹⁰ <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/boy-released-syrian-prison-assad/>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLLAGfLw894>

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/videos/cwypw11qppo>

tographs,⁵ documenting the deaths of at least 6,786 detainees. These images provided an unflinching glimpse into the brutality of Assad's regime. Today, the veil has been lifted further, confirming even starker realities.

Accounts describe unimaginable atrocities of rape, mutilation, defilement of bodies, starvation, and deprivation of basic needs such as food, water, sleep, and medicine. Torture techniques, some inspired by French colonial and German practices, included the German Chair,⁶ where victims were bent backward until their spines snapped. The Flying Carpet, a wooden board designed to bring knees and chest together, caused unbearable back pain. The Ladder, where detainees were tied and repeatedly pushed off, broke their backs with every fall. And finally, the Iron Press was used to dispose of bodies en masse.

Knowing these atrocities persisted for years is heart-wrenching. Syrians today are either still searching for answers about their missing loved ones,⁷ such as Wafa Moustafa, who is still looking for her father,⁸ or mourning the confirmed deaths of their family and friends. This week, Syrians have taken to the streets to grieve the loss of activist Mazen al-Hamada,⁹ whose death was confirmed in a military hospital. Mazen, a symbol of resistance and kindness, has

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/16/syria-stories-behind-photos-killed-detainees>

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/9/assads-human-slaughterhouses-what-to-know-about-syrias-prisons>

⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/syria-rebels-assad-morgues-death-c64f6f4f3e03e7d063dc90f03ccd4c4b>

⁸ <https://gccclub.org/2021/07/14/wafa-mustafa-the-woman-fighting-to-find-her-father-and-all-of-syrias-disappeared/>

⁹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/trending/social-media-users-mourn-syrian-activist-mazen-hamada-tortured-sednaya>

Introduction

As I sit down to write, I think back to the last time I saw my father. Standing before me, behind iron bars, he was frail and thin, yet he smiled at me. I carry that smile in my memory. My mother and I stood on the opposite side, joined by the rest of the families visiting their loved ones. The divide was meant to be made clear. They, the prisoners, have wronged the state and were to bear the consequences for doing so. We, on the other hand, haven't, get to walk out and roam free.

Today, I, and Syrians around the world, find myself in the midst of an avalanche of emotions, riding currents of joy, sorrow, hope, and fear, each one pulling me in a different direction. The fall of the Syrian regime was our collective dream, a longing we had aspired for, and as of December 8, 2024, it was realized.

To effectively understand its descent, it's important to first understand how he rose to power. When Hafez Al-Assad first seized power in Syria in 1970, the dynasty was designed to reign with an iron fist. During the first three decades, Hafez implemented a system built on capitalist cronyism and corruption supported by heavy surveillance and a militarized police state. This combination proved lethal to any dissent expressed against him and his family.

Consolidating Assets

Assad leveraged his position in power to monopolize control over all critical sectors, ensuring the state, under his rule, dominated nearly every aspect of public and private life. This included telecommunications, real estate, education, healthcare, and even marriage institutions. The 1970s saw a dramatic enlargement of the public sector, making the state the principal employer for Syrians. By 2010, an estimated 1.4 million Syrians were on the government

payroll.¹ This strategy blurred the lines between the Assad family and the Syrian state, making them virtually indistinguishable.

Cronyism

Assad's regime ensured loyalty by cultivating a network of elites bound to the family through economic and social incentives. Positions of power were awarded based on allegiance, often favoring members of Assad's own sect, the Alawites, along with close allies. This entrenched system of favoritism secured the loyalty of key figures in the military, political, and business sectors, further solidifying Assad's power. The pervasive nature of their presence was underscored by the countless statues erected in honor of Assad and his cronies, symbolizing their omnipresent dominance over Syria.

Mass Violence, Mass Imprisonment

Perhaps the most potent weapon in Assad's arsenal was the regime's willingness to use unrelenting violence against its own people. This strategy reached its most infamous peak with the Hama massacre of 1982. In response to an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime unleashed a brutal military campaign. Known as "one of the darkest moments in the modern history of the Arab world,"² the regime killed an estimated 10,000 to 40,000 people and destroyed large parts of the city. This event sent a clear message to the rest of us: any challenge to Assad's rule would be met with overwhelming and indiscriminate force.

¹ <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2015/07/the-assad-regimes-hold-on-the-syrian-state?lang=en¢er=middle-east>

² <https://richardpollock.substack.com/p/the-assad-familys-darkest-moment>

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011 under Hafez's son Bashar al-Assad, further escalated this violence to an industrial scale. The regime used carpet bombing, barrel bombs, and chemical attacks to crush opposition-held areas, resulting in the deaths of over half a million people and the displacement of millions. Tens of thousands were arrested, tortured, or disappeared.

Nowhere is the Assad regime's capacity for violence more evident than in its prisons. Among the most infamous are Tadmor (in Palmyra) and Sednaya, known as "The Human Slaughterhouse."³ Sednaya was divided into sections: the "Red Building," a site of systematic torture and execution, and the "White Building," which housed prisoners awaiting their fate.

A 2017 report by Amnesty International, based on testimonies from former guards, revealed that after the Syrian Civil War, the White Building was cleared of its existing prisoners to make room for those detained for participating in protests against Bashar al-Assad's regime. Estimates suggest that about 157,634 Syrians were arrested between March 2011 and August 2024. Among them were 5,274 children and 10,221 women. Beneath the White Building lay an "execution room," where detainees from the Red Building were transported to be hanged. Between 2011 and 2015 alone, an estimated 13,000 people were hanged there.⁴

We have long known about the horrors of these prisons. In August 2013, a military defector codenamed Caesar, who recently revealed himself as Osama Othman, smuggled out 53,275 pho-

³ https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/saydnaya?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴ <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/syria-regime-change-bashar-al-assad-what-happened-at-syrias-saydnaya-bashar-al-assads-human-slaughterhouse-7199792>