Our dream of an Assad-free Syria has returned with Aleppo rebel advance

written by Leila Al-Shami | December 4, 2024

Syrians are under no illusions; whatever comes after Assad will be a mess. But for millions of Syrians nothing can be worse than this genocidal fascist regime, writes Leila al-Shami [photo credit: Getty Images]
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Eight years after Aleppo was subjected to a brutal starvation siege, pounded by the Assad regime, Russian and Iranian bombs and thousands of its residents massacred or forcibly displaced, the Free Syria flag flies over the citadel.

The rebel advance and consequent crumbling of regime forces took everyone by surprise, rapidly changing the map of power across northern Syria which had remained largely frozen since 2020 power-sharing agreements between Russia, Turkey and Iran.

In a few days Aleppo and Idlib province came under the control of rebel groups dominated by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS).

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army meanwhile launched an offensive in and around Tel Rifaat, under the control of the Kurdish-led, and US-backed, Syrian Democratic Forces.

Clashes were reported between opposition factions and the regime in the southern province of Daraa, whilst in Druze-dominated Suwayda, popular protests were held in support of Syrians in the north.

Syrians inside the country and abroad, were taken by surprise.

Many celebrated – whilst holding their breath, not daring to hope that this could signal the endgame for the regime.

For years, Assad has raped, tortured, starved, bombed and gassed the populace into submission. He’s been kept in power by foreign support and foreign bombs. But today Russia is bogged down in Ukraine and Iranian military infrastructure in Syria (including its proxy Hezbollah) has been decimated by Israeli strikes.

In recent days, Assad, isolated and no doubt panicking, has been frantically calling upon his Gulf

allies for support.

By contrast, the rebels, seizing on this moment of weakness, look stronger and more unified than ever before, using new drone weaponry and capturing weapons stores from retreating regime forces who have put up little resistance.

Assad's vengeance: When, not if

The rapid liberation of territory has given millions of Syrians hope that they may soon return home, and some already are. Syrians were filled with emotion to see videos circulated of prisoners, including many women, liberated from regime prisons. Over 100,000 remain in Assad's gulag or disappeared.

But Syrians are also fearful. They fear regime reprisals against civilians. The regime and Russia are now bombing hospitals and camps for the displaced in Aleppo and Idlib in retaliation.

Doctors at a hospital in Aleppo appealed for support as they lacked capacity to deal with the influx of injured.

There are reports Iranian-backed Shia militia are entering the country from Iraq to bolster Assad's forces.

Syrians also fear what may come next. There is no longer an organised democratic opposition inside the country – Assad made sure of that. The militias that are reclaiming territory are diverse in their composition but include authoritarian, extremist and in some cases foreign backed groups. They don't represent Syrian's revolutionary aspirations.

The rebels which advanced out of Idlib united under Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS).

HTS is an authoritarian Islamist militia, dominant in northern Syria. It has its roots in Al Qaeda but has significantly moderated in recent years and is a Syrian nationalist, not foreign jihadist, organisation.

It is the de facto local administration in Idlib running institutions, services and humanitarian assistance through the Syrian Salvation Government.

There have been constant wide-spread popular protests against the militia and its leader Mohammed al-Johani for their abuses and authoritarian rule.

Those who wield arms do not represent the aspirations of the majority. Regardless, supporters of the regime repeatedly slander all opposition to Assad as 'terrorists' using cut and paste War on Terror, Islamophobic and Zionist narratives to dehumanise them, reduce their diverse struggle to its most authoritarian components and legitimise regime violence against them.

Minority groups in particular are fearful, despite attempts by the alliance to reassure them; issuing statements ensuring the protection of minorities and calling for unity amongst all Syrians.

HTS has even set up a hotline for citizens in Aleppo and Idlib, so they can report any abuses or security incidents.

So far, religious minorities have been unmolested and Christians in Aleppo as well as religious leaders such as Bishop Ephrem Maalouli have issued statements that they are currently safe and

prayers continue in churches.

Syrian Kurds, meanwhile, fear the advances of Turkish-backed forces and threats to their hard-won autonomy, especially given concerns over an anticipated American withdrawal leaving them vulnerable and isolated. Already, disturbing videos have circulated showing abuses against Kurdish-led forces.

Turkish-backed groups are unpopular amongst Syrians in general due to corruption, abuses and constant infighting. The Turkish state, once seen as an ally of the revolution, is now viewed with disdain due to its efforts to normalise with Assad and the surge of xenophobic attacks on Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Once again dominant ‘left’ narratives seek to deny Syrians any agency and view all events through a never-changing geo-political lens. Conspiracies circulate of foreign machinations behind recent events.

But foreign states are not interested in the overthrow of the regime, much less in Syrian self-determination.

The US, despite its anti-regime rhetoric, has only given partial support to rebels, enough to pressure Assad to the negotiating table not change the balance of power. US military intervention focused on defeating ISIS, not the regime.

Israel has a useful partner in a regime which, despite its anti-Israel rhetoric, only ever used its weapons to crush domestic opposition (and in many cases Palestinian resistance) rather than liberate Syrian territory from Israeli occupation.

Turkey’s interests focus on crushing Kurdish autonomy and returning refugees. Undoubtably, all of these states will now scramble to influence the course of events, ensuring their interests are protected and any outcome works in their favour.

Syrians are under no illusions; whatever comes after Assad will be a mess. The whole region is engulfed in flames.

But for millions of Syrians nothing can be worse than this genocidal fascist regime which has murdered hundreds of thousands, completely destroyed the country, handed it over to foreign powers, devastated the economy, caused half the population to flee their homes, and which now runs the country as a drugs cartel exporting the amphetamine Captagon.

Should the regime fall, millions of Syrians will be able to return home, allowing civil activism to resume once more. If Assad falls, there is a chance to hope, and hope has been in short supply amongst Syrians.