

Syria's Amal: A time of hope and uncertainty in a time of a liberated Syria (A First-Person Syrian American Perspective, By: Leena Zahra)

I will never forget December 8th, 2024. It was late in the evening, but I sat transfixed to the television. I watched with absolute disbelief and joy as I saw Syria liberated in real time. As I watched these stunning events unfold, I held my 3-month-old daughter, Amelia, in my lap. The name Amelia closely resembles the word "Amal," which means hope in Arabic. Hope was fitting for this moment.

People like me and my family were overcome with emotion as we watched families reunited after internal displacement and forced separation. My husband, who has been in the US since 2014, checked in on loved ones still inside Syria to confirm what we were seeing on the news, including seeing statues and posters of the Assad regime toppled. After years spent striving for recognition of our humanity and liberation, it felt like waking up from a stalemate nightmare.

For over 54 years, the tyrannical and brutally oppressive Assad regime ruled Syria. The regime was responsible for inflicting unimaginable devastation, as well as hundreds and thousands of inhumane deaths, torture, and disappearances. The regime was also responsible for [exiling millions](#). My parents had given up the idea that they would ever see their homeland free, and my family had not returned to visit since 2009, before the war. Now I could imagine gathering with my parents in the land of their birth and showing my daughter Hama and Damascus, where her father and mother have roots.

Over the past few months, Syrians have experienced a wave of emotions. Within joy and celebration, there is pain that is intertwined in our bodies and history. We are mourning lost time with loved ones, anniversaries, celebrations, burial ceremonies, and grieving homes that held generations of memories and families. Our exultation is tempered by the memory of those missing and disappeared, and we strive to ensure that the martyrs who sacrificed so much are not forgotten. Our faith was tested, but also kept so many of us moving forward.

We recognize that the future is unpredictable. The reality is that over half of the population (around 14 million) have been displaced at least once, with over 5 million having fled to neighboring countries. Almost 17 million people, 79% of the population, are currently and still in urgent need of [humanitarian assistance](#), and 70% of Syrians live in poverty. Most people are still without basic needs like electricity. The economy is on the brink of collapsing, and security and safety need to be reinstated. Healthcare and education institutions need to be re-established. Over 2.5 million children are not in school and entire generations have not had access to education. Generations of children who grew up during displacement do not know their homeland. There are questions still to be answered on how institutions, homes and communities will be rebuilt, what governance will look like, and what repatriation could look like for millions of Syrians hoping to return. When generations were wired to be so fearful of the State, how can we trust again, how will we be certain history won't repeat itself? When we

felt abandoned by the world, our self-perception, beliefs, and values repeatedly tested, how can we trust that our best interest and collective voices will be kept in mind?

Knowing all of this, others have asked how can we justify hope? It is not being naïve to challenges, unique and collective grievances. We know they exist and that the road ahead is long, and it will take time. We know we must not turn a blind eye to the open wounds and pain that still exists. We recognize that the Syrian people have a history of trauma inheritance. We do not diminish the [generational trauma of authoritarianism](#) that has altered Syrian [DNA](#), and accept that this may take generations to heal. Withholding information about disappeared and detained family members was a psychological tool commonly used by the regime, and we acknowledge the presence of ambiguous loss for many.

But now there are possibilities. To have opportunities for change and reform is something that Syrians had wished for decades. Ideas of justice and accountability may now be attainable. A Syria for Syrians, a Syria for all Syrians, a Syria built by Syrians, a Syria united. Syrians have lived under brutality where you lived in constant fear, paranoia, and anxiety. A time where Syrians believed the walls had ears, words and thoughts were policed by the intelligence services, and generations silenced, hope was not possible. The Assad regime wanted division, confusion, and fatigue, and how can one have hope within chaos?

Even with an unclear roadmap for Syria, new beginnings and unification are on the [horizon](#). In recent history, the Syrian experience has been one of duality. Every Syrian you meet has a [story of sadness](#), but also of joy. We are openly mobilizing and organizing gatherings to celebrate inside and outside Syria. We are exploring possibilities of being reunited with family while recognizing travel restrictions. Civil defense volunteer heroes like the White Helmets are working through the rubble. We are witnessing prison releases of those who long ago disappeared. For the first time in Syria, people in public squares are openly hanging photos of loved ones they are searching for, pictures and flyers shared across social media trying to identify family members [forcibly disappeared and detained](#). For the first time in decades, people are assembling, and people are freely and openly speaking.

Individuals in the diaspora who had to start over, children who received education outside of Syria, are eager to come back and help rebuild from the rubble. We Syrians, inside and outside of Syria, know we are more than our circumstances, our pain and shared suffering. Hope and perseverance have kept us going and it will be how we build a new tomorrow. This is also a part of our DNA. There is a renewed reminder of loss, but we can now explore possibilities of self-determination toward rebuilding and healing.

Syrians have already lost so much. We can't afford to lose our hope: Hope of return, reconciliation, reunions and relief. [Hope is the fuel](#) that will propel us forward, the bricks that will rebuild Syria stone by stone. Hope will be cemented through memorialization to recognize the difficult history. Two things can exist at once, there is uncertainty due to generational impacts, but we remain steadfast and continue to hold on to our hope and faith.



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Even if you are not Syrian, so many people from around the world can relate to knowing the value of freedom and dignity. As I hold my daughter, whom friends and family now call our “Freedom Baby” born close to the Syrian liberation, I know I’m holding hope so close to my chest and won’t let it go.