

## The Syrian Revolution on Its Second Anniversary After Liberation: Where Do We Stand Now?



The Syrian people did not realize that the road of the revolution would be long, and that crossing it would cost thousands of martyrs, detainees, and forcibly disappeared persons, while scattering millions of families. Nor did they imagine that their determination to pursue this dream would carry such a staggering price. Yet they pressed on with unbreakable resolve, trying to reclaim a part of what had been taken from them: freedom, the lifting of injustice, and the right to live with dignity.

Fifteen years after one of the most pivotal moments in modern Syrian history, the anniversary of the revolution's first spark returns to remind Syrians of their steadfastness in the face of despair and tyranny, and of a hope that did not die despite the brutality of the years.

This anniversary is no longer merely a recollection of how the story began. It has become a day on which Syrians across the country celebrate the recovery of their freedom and deliverance from the Assad regime, following the course of events that ended with its overthrow in the battle dubbed "Deterring Aggression," launched on November 27, 2024.

This report speaks with a number of prominent Syrian revolution activists about where the revolution stands today on the 15th anniversary of its outbreak its second anniversary after liberation in an effort to assess, through their eyes, the

post-liberation phase and their aspirations for the country's future.

After 15 years, have the revolution's demands been achieved?

For decades, Syria lived under authoritarian rule and an iron security grip. That era began with the Arab Socialist Baath Party's seizure of power in the 1963 coup, then deepened with Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970. He established a security and military regime built on the personalization of authority and a vast intelligence network through which the Baath Party penetrated the state and the army, using repression and arbitrary arrests to terrorize citizens and suppress any form of opposition. Bashar al-Assad inherited power after him in 2000, continuing along the same path.

Syrians struggled for decades against the course pursued by Bashar al-Assad's regime. The peak of that struggle came in the context of the Arab Spring, in mid-March 2011, with demands for freedom, dignity, and justice, and an end to long decades of tyranny and corruption.

But the regime met peaceful demonstrations with savage repression, prompting some protesters later to take up arms in self-defense, while hundreds of officers and soldiers defected from the army to stand with the revolution and protect demonstrators.

As the conflict escalated, the Syrian revolution passed through complex phases, multiple turning points, and numerous regional and international interventions. Over the years, as opposition factions lost ground and the wave of normalization with the regime reached its height, many Syrians began to lose hope that the regime could ever fall.

Yet the developments that followed, culminating in the battle of "Deterring Aggression," reshuffled the deck once again, ending with the fall of a regime that for years had seemed impossible to dislodge.

Commenting to Noon Post, researcher and journalist Khaled Abu Salah said that the Syrian revolution was, by its very nature, part of the broader Arab Spring uprisings, and that all of those revolutions were driven by broad principles centered on freedom, dignity, and social justice.

In essence, he said, the core of those revolutions was political not service-based or narrowly demand-driven. At the heart of that goal was a transition from a state of lawlessness to a state of law and citizenship, rather than a state of ruler and subjects.

He added that most Syrians who became part of the revolution whose life trajectories, futures, and even aspects of their identity became bound up with it believed deeply in its eventual victory. Later, especially after 2020 and in parallel

with attempts to rehabilitate the regime, its fall began to seem remote, and it appeared that the Assad regime would return to rule and regain acceptance in Arab and international forums.

Those were the darkest moments of despair, particularly as Syrians found themselves trapped in a small pocket in northwestern Syria, along with other pockets in the north, all divided and at odds, with no discernible features of a unifying political project.

By contrast, Russia's war on Ukraine in 2022 seemed to present an opening, or at least the outline of one, as one of the regime's strongest backers became preoccupied elsewhere. It appeared that the international order, along with its alliances and contradictions, might alter the Syrian equation.

Then, with the October 7 flood and the Israeli ferocity that followed, and with the confrontation with the Iranian axis shifting from indirect to direct, the conviction grew that a real opportunity had emerged that might lead to the regime's fall.

But all of that remained analysis laced with wishes and hopes until the battle of "Deterring Aggression," taking advantage of this international political climate and its contradictions, transformed it into a shocking reality for near and far alike, especially with the speed of the regime's collapse and the arrival in Damascus in 11 days among the most beautiful days of a lifetime, unforgettable in every sense.

Abu Salah believes the most important gain achieved by the Syrian revolution was opening a breach in the mute wall of history "what we Syrians call 'eternity.' Before December 8, we were outside history and outside historical agency, trapped in a kind of clinical death in 'eternity' on every political, social, economic, and even human level."

The overthrow of what he called the Assad regime of barbarity is, he said, a gain beyond compare not only for Syrians, but for all peoples and for the human experience itself.

As for the demands for which Syrians rose up, Abu Salah believes the road is still only beginning, and that the journey remains long "especially since the new government, unfortunately, is not moving in the right direction."

For his part, Samir Abdullah, director of the Policy Analysis Department at the Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, said Syrians initially took to the streets demanding freedom, dignity, and reform. But the repression used by the Assad regime against peaceful protests gradually pushed them to raise the roof of their demands until they were calling for the regime's overthrow. As violence intensified, the revolution entered a phase of militarization, amid the regime's

use of all kinds of weapons in an attempt to crush it.

He continued: The revolution passed through several stages. After opposition factions managed to achieve victories and liberate wide areas from regime control, it entered a period of decline that restored the regime's grip over large parts of the country, especially after Iranian and Russian intervention in its favor, and amid waning international support for the opposition particularly after the emergence of extremist groups such as ISIS.

In recent years, many Syrians reached a state of frustration due to the wave of normalization with the regime and attempts to rehabilitate it. But that did not extinguish the belief that a regime responsible for all those crimes could not endure forever, and that justice would one day prevail. Then came the battle of "Deterring Aggression," reviving hope that the dream Syrians had pursued from the very beginning could still be realized.

On the goals of the Syrian revolution, and whether Syrians had achieved what they had fought for, Dr. Samir Abdullah believes the revolution achieved a historic accomplishment in bringing down the regime, considering that the fulfillment of the revolution's primary goal: getting rid of tyranny and security domination.

But he stresses that reaching the larger goal building a state of justice, dignity, and democracy still requires considerable time and effort, given the political, economic, and social challenges Syria continues to face.

Tamer Turkmani, founder of the Syrian Revolution Archive project, told Noon Post that despite all the twists and turns the revolution endured, the Syrian people believed justice had to be achieved and the Baathist Syrian regime had to fall.

Syrians, he said, never relented in pressing for the regime's overthrow despite every hardship. Even in the camps, after their displacement, they were organizing protests and sit-ins condemning the practices of the Assad regime.

He continued: "Freedom of expression in Syrian streets today is visible to everyone. Any citizen can criticize any official. We saw a minister receiving criticism from a Syrian citizen in a hospital, and we saw a Syrian citizen criticizing a minister face-to-face on a television program.

That is one of the gains of the Syrian revolution: to see an official receiving criticism from citizens. We have also seen security checkpoints and how they deal with Syrian citizens without discrimination between one sect and another."

Researcher Dr. Abdel Moneim Zain al-Din, meanwhile, told Noon Post that bringing down the former regime had represented one of the revolution's

foremost goals, as people constantly chanted: “The people want the fall of the regime.”

He added that Syrians had achieved a number of the demands for which they rose up, while other demands remained outstanding. They had also won many gains through the victory of their revolution and the fall of the Assad regime. These included getting rid of what he described as a gang of killers that had practiced repression, criminality, liquidation, extermination, and imprisonment against the Syrian people, and neutralizing all the weapons it had used chemical weapons, missiles, barrel bombs, prisons, and slaughterhouses.

They also included the return of institutions that had been monopolized for the benefit of the Assad clique to the Syrian people, foremost among them the security services and the army. Other achievements, he said, included the return of large numbers of displaced Syrians who had feared the regime’s brutality and arrest.

In addition, Syrians gained freedom and renewed cohesion, visible in their reconnection across the country’s governorates after the former regime had helped impose a reality resembling de facto partition between north, south, and east.

He believes the sacrifices made by the Syrian people “are among the most important reasons we have reached this new state of gains for the Syrian revolution.”

Has the revolution ended, or has it entered a new phase?

The fall of the regime is one sign of the revolution’s victory, but other milestones have yet to be achieved, such as holding all perpetrators accountable for their violations and crimes, uncovering the fate and burial sites of more than 150,000 people who were arrested and killed by the militias of the former regime in detention centers and prisons, and prosecuting everyone implicated in these files, Tamer Turkmani told Noon Post.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights has documented the scale of violations committed by the former regime since 2011. It says that 202,021 civilians were killed, including 23,138 children and 12,036 women. It also documented the killing of 662 medical personnel and 559 media workers. Another 160,123 people remain forcibly disappeared, while 45,032 people were killed under torture.

These figures reflect the magnitude of the crimes confronting transitional justice and underscore the immense challenge of holding those responsible accountable and addressing the impact of these abuses on Syrian society.

Turkmani said: “The revolution ended in terms of the demand to bring down the regime, but the demands related to prosecuting criminals and achieving justice and equality have not ended.”

Dr. Zain al-Din, meanwhile, believes that if a revolution is defined as the full pursuit of change, then the first phase achieved by the Syrian revolution was the fall of the repressive and corrupt regime. But its mission is not yet over. The great task that remains, no less important, is to build a state of justice, dignity, and freedom, and to entrench institutions, citizenship, and equality, as Syrians envisioned and called for in their revolution. In that sense, the revolution can be considered ongoing, but with different tools and means, until its larger goals are fully achieved.

Researcher and journalist Khaled Abu Salah likewise believes that the fall of the regime is a victory for the Syrian revolution and the sacrifices of its people, but at the same time it is a necessary yet insufficient condition.

Revolutions do not triumph merely by defeating their adversary, he said, but when their project itself prevails. Bringing down the regime is a central aim in pursuit of a greater end: building a system fundamentally different from the one before it, grounded in the aims and principles on which the revolution was founded.

“The question of whether a revolution has ended is not simple or easy. It is not something determined by an individual decision or even, at times, a collective one. In the movement of history and in political philosophy, revolutions do not end simply because the old regime has fallen.”

He continued: Some thinkers address this clearly. Hannah Arendt saw the true success of a revolution as the establishment of a durable constitutional political space that guarantees freedom, not merely the toppling of a regime. Alexis de Tocqueville, who analyzed the French Revolution, saw one of the greatest challenges to revolutionary success in the capacity to build stable institutions after the old regime fell.

The irony, Abu Salah noted, is that this did not happen immediately after the French Revolution, even though it adopted a constitution in 1791; the revolution’s birth pains continued for years afterward.

Even in the most moderate views, no revolution can be considered complete before its principles and goals are transformed into legal texts within the permanent constitution that will govern the new state born of the revolution’s spirit. A revolution is a founding moment for a new constitutional order.

And in some historical experiences, even that has not been enough, because the

revolution often continues after the constitution in the form of political and social struggle over the realization of its principles.

In Syria's current condition after the fall of the Assad regime, the revolution has certainly not ended. It is still living through its earliest challenges: freeing itself from the legacy of the former regime and founding a political order worthy of it and of the sacrifices of its people, as one of the great revolutions of contemporary history.

Transitional justice: stalled and opaque

Recalling this anniversary raises pressing questions about the course of transitional justice in Syria, and the need for the current authorities and the international community to ensure genuine accountability for crimes committed, to uncover the fate of the forcibly disappeared, and to deliver justice for victims and their families.

Here, Dr. Samir Abdullah says the current stage requires Syrians to unite around the principles from which the revolution sprang, and to work to entrench transitional justice and build a political system based on law and equal citizenship one that prevents the return of tyranny in any form.

The success of the transitional period, he said, also requires recognition that building the state is no less difficult than bringing down the regime, and that preserving social cohesion and preventing division are essential conditions for achieving stability.

True peace cannot be achieved without fair accountability for those implicated in crimes, nor without reforming state institutions on foundations that ensure transparency, participation, and respect for rights.

Dr. Abdel Moneim Zain al-Din explained to Noon Post that the file of transitional justice that is, holding criminals accountable and exacting just punishment requires greater efforts, as it has yet to take shape as a genuine achievement that satisfies the Syrian people and the families of victims.

For his part, Motasim al-Kilani, an expert in international criminal law and human rights, believes the transitional justice file should have been at the top of the transition's priorities. The scale of violations committed during the war years killing, torture, enforced disappearance, mass displacement, and the use of chemical weapons, crimes classified as fully constituted war crimes and crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute makes transitional justice a basic condition for rebuilding trust between society and the state, and an indispensable pillar of any serious attempt to establish civil peace and refound the social contract.

Yet the reality so far reveals a stalled and opaque path that has not yet become a clearly defined national project. Although the National Transitional Justice Commission was announced as the body responsible for leading this file, its performance to date has failed to convince victims and the families of the missing that transitional justice has truly begun.

After all this time, the fundamental questions Syrians are still waiting to have answered remain unresolved: Where is the truth? Where is accountability? And when will thousands of families learn the fate of their missing loved ones?

He continued: One of the main obstacles to progress lies in the absence of a clear national vision for transitional justice in Syria. To date, the National Transitional Justice Commission has not announced an integrated strategy defining the process's goals, stages, and mechanisms of implementation.

There is no publicly articulated vision explaining which crimes will be prosecuted, what judicial investigative mechanisms will be adopted, or what clear plan exists for truth-seeking, compensation for victims, or reform of the institutions associated with these violations.

Instead of building a clear legal and institutional track, the process appears to be moving very slowly, with no defined timetable or operational framework to show Syrians how justice will be achieved.

This ambiguity is even clearer in the truth-seeking file, which is one of the central pillars of transitional justice in any historical experience. Syria contains one of the largest enforced disappearance files in the contemporary world, yet no comprehensive national process has begun to open the security archives, investigate mass graves, or create an independent truth commission to hear victims' testimony and document what happened.

In the absence of these basic steps, the truth file remains deferred, while thousands of families continue waiting to learn the fate of their loved ones, al-Kilani added.

The question of judicial accountability is no less important than truth-seeking, since transitional justice is fundamentally grounded in the principle of ending impunity, especially for major crimes such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture, and enforced disappearance.

But to this day, broad national trials for perpetrators of major violations have not begun. Nor is there a clear legal framework for prosecuting these crimes within the Syrian judicial system, or a special court or war crimes chambers that could serve as the launching point for an accountability track. The continuation of this legal vacuum threatens to turn transitional justice into more of a political slogan

than a real judicial process.

### The importance of involving victims

Human Rights Watch has recommended that the Syrian authorities, their international partners, and all states prioritize comprehensive justice by supporting fair and independent justice for victims and survivors of international crimes committed by all alleged perpetrators during the Syrian conflict, regardless of their affiliations, through the inclusion of victims, survivors, civil society, and other experts in the design and implementation of local and international accountability tracks.

Al-Kilani says that the victims themselves remain far from the center of the transitional justice process. In comparative experiences around the world, victims have been the core of any process of truth-seeking and accountability. But in the Syrian case, there is still no clear institutional mechanism to involve them in shaping this process or participating in the decisions associated with it.

This marginalization creates a growing feeling among many victims that transitional justice is being managed from above, rather than emerging from the needs of the society that suffered these violations.

Amid this institutional vacuum, another phenomenon has begun to emerge: the multiplication of tracks related to transitional justice within state institutions. At first, the prevailing assumption was that leadership of this file should rest exclusively with the National Transitional Justice Commission.

That is why many legal experts early in the transition called for avoiding haste in launching other tracks before laying the institutional and legal groundwork necessary for the commission's work.

But over time, it became clear that this assessment was inaccurate, as the body seemed unable to keep pace with the sensitivity of the transitional period and its demands.

Because of this slow pace, “we have recently begun to notice tangible activity by some other executive institutions, foremost among them the Ministries of Justice and Interior, in handling some of the files related to past violations and the investigations associated with them.

While these steps may reflect an attempt to fill the vacuum in the justice file, they also raise a basic legal problem related to the multiplicity of bodies dealing with the issue without the existence of a unifying legal framework to regulate their work,” according to al-Kilani.

He continued: Transitional justice, by its nature, cannot be managed through piecemeal initiatives or separate institutional tracks. It requires a unified legal

framework that clearly defines competencies, ensures coordination between different institutions, and prevents overlapping mandates.

He explained that transitional justice is not merely an administrative file or a passing stage in the path of political transformation. Rather, it is a foundational process for rebuilding the state and society after periods of grave violations.

In Syria's case, where years of conflict have left hundreds of thousands of victims and missing persons and millions of people harmed, transitional justice becomes an indispensable condition for rebuilding trust between society and the state.

Al-Kilani concluded by saying that continued ambiguity and delay in taking the basic steps could lead to a dangerous outcome not only the failure of the transitional justice experience, but the squandering of a historic opportunity to build lasting peace in Syria. Civil peace cannot be built on forgetting or bypassing the past, but on uncovering the truth, holding those responsible accountable, and delivering justice to victims.

The challenges of rebuilding and hopes for the future

As Syrians begin to sense tangible change in their daily lives, the immense challenges facing the country come into sharper view in its complex journey from liberation to the building of a new and stable state. Despite the difficulty of the road, the enormous sacrifices made by Syrians make hope in the construction of a free and just homeland possible provided there is political will and the country's interest is placed above all else.

A revolution that began with demands for freedom and dignity cannot truly end except with the establishment of a state that respects the individual, safeguards rights, and fulfills what Syrians dreamed of through long years of patience and sacrifice.

Dr. Zain al-Din says Syrians are now called upon to summon the goals for which they rose up and to work to embody them in state institutions and in society's daily reality. He also stresses the need to purge institutions of the corruption left behind by the former regime, alongside activating a broad and meaningful role for those who carried the torch of the revolution and believed in it and its aims, so that they themselves may help implement those aims.

He points out that the fall of the Assad regime led to noticeable political and social transformations in the country, and ushered in a phase of political opening toward countries that had been closed off under the former regime, whether in the Arab region or among Western states.

Economic and social shifts have also emerged, among them the lifting of sanctions and the beginning of a new trajectory in the work of state institutions,

including the army, security services, and other institutions.

He believes the country still faces major challenges, chief among them the unresolved file of detainees and the forcibly disappeared, as well as the difficulty of return for many refugees in light of the widespread destruction of their homes and the absence of suitable conditions for their return.

Despite the transformations the country has witnessed since the fall of the regime, the return of displaced people and refugees still faces major obstacles in a landscape shaped by years of war. Large swaths of Syria remain mired in destruction.

Many villages and towns still suffer from demolished homes and near-absent infrastructure, alongside the spread of mines and war remnants and the high cost of reconstruction, making the return of many families exceedingly difficult.

At the same time, Dr. Abdel Moneim believes there are matters in which Syrians succeeded shoulder to shoulder with the state, including defeating projects of partition and secession, restoring Syria to its true and natural place, lifting sanctions, restarting the wheel of life, and rebuilding institutions on sound foundations such as the security services and the army.

Yet, he says, other institutions still require major effort, reform, and purification, such as the judiciary, education, and others.

As for Tamer Turkmani, he said: Not everything we demanded has been achieved yet, and many problems still need solutions, especially the continued presence of remnants of the former regime within state institutions. The state must hold those involved in corruption accountable, as well as everyone who played a role in corruption and bribery files.

Khaled Abu Salah, meanwhile, said Syrians remain far from achieving the state they dreamed of. “There is still a long road of patience, perseverance, and struggle to wrest the model of the state we want, in accordance with the revolution’s aspirations and its envisioned state.”

To preserve the gains of the revolution, Syrians must bury fear and kill illusion, he said. Nothing can return them to the moment before liberation, or to the moment before March 18, 2011.

“We must beware of turning into a degraded copy of the former regime, justifying the unjustifiable, arguing and aligning ourselves with the same logic and methods. Freedom, criticism, pluralism, and differences of opinion are political givens in any normal state—let alone in a country like Syria, where the revolution arose in the first place against the idea of the single individual, the single party, and the single opinion.”

He believes the most urgent challenge is preventing any return to the past and the reproduction of tyranny and corruption. That begins with politics itself, by affirming what should be an elementary truth so basic that those who say it today are nearly treated as heretics: that the people are the source of all authority and the source of legitimacy.

The relationship between ruler and ruled is not a favor granted from above, but a contract between principal and agent. The principal is the people; the agent is whoever sits in office in the people's name, whatever his name or title. Anything else is a soft prelude to the return of tyranny, even if adorned with the most beautiful slogans.

All of us live beneath one roof called citizenship, in one country called Syria, where every person should be able to say what they want, without fear of authority or of other citizens trying to silence them.

You must not surrender your right as the principal, the master, and the owner of this house, only to become once again a subordinate and a number in the register of power. If we surrender the word today, we will wake tomorrow to an image that resembles yesterday more than it resembles our dream of a new Syria one in which the ruler is an agent of the people, an employee in their service, their servant, not their master.

Abu Salah believes the track the current government is pursuing will not lead Syrians to the destination they have dreamed of. If stubbornness on this path continues, he warns, it will bring the country to new explosive moments, amid scarce resources, the spread of weapons and violence, the absence of law, the loss of justice, the entrenchment of impunity, the collapse of trust, and the tearing apart of the social fabric.

He concluded: What Syria needs most is to rebuild trust in the course of the transitional period, and that requires a bold and honest review one not based on distraction or buying time.