

Shoot All

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2026

“Shoot All” is a real story. Some of its events occurred at the Military Training Camp in the summer of 1998 along with other events spanning a long period between 1997 and 2024. The narrative blends thrilling moments of joy, irony, seriousness, and hard times that the characters of the novel have undergone, especially the miserable security circumstances in Syria between 2011 and 2024.

Chapter One

Summer of 1997

High School

The common saying “adversity seldom travels alone” meticulously describes the experiences of high school students during the final examinations of 1997. That year, the exams were exceptionally challenging, and students were confronted with a series of difficult questions that tested not only their memory but also their deep understanding of the entire curriculum.

The examination process was demanding, leaving a little room for error or superficial preparation. Students should have mastered every aspect of their textbooks thoroughly. Unlike some scholastic systems where only selected chapters or themes are emphasized, the Syrian high school exams demanded comprehensive knowledge while students were expected to be well-versed in every topic, concept, and detail covered throughout the school year.

This exhaustive approach meant that success was reserved for those who had memorized and internalized their lessons from cover to cover. Further, the grading system in place did not factor in marks obtained from the previous semester. This added an extra layer of pressure, as students had to perform exceptionally well in the final exams alone to pass and advance.

There was no safety net or partial credit for earlier achievements; the final exams were the ultimate determinant of their academic fate. Therefore, students had to exert relentless efforts and maintain unwavering focus during the preparation period to secure passing grades.

The difficulty of the exam questions themselves compounded the challenge. The Ministry of Education had designed the exams to be challenging, with many questions crafted to test critical thinking rather than rote memorization.

These questions required students to carefully analyze and reflect before providing answers. Hasty or superficial responses were unlikely to yield

correct results, as the examiners deliberately included indirect or non-straightforward items to gauge a deeper comprehension of the material.

During one of the study sessions ahead of their high school exams, Yusif and Emad were reviewing some lessons together. Yusif was struggling to understand a concept from their philosophy course.

“What does Thomas Aquinas mean by his definition of the soul?” Yusif asked.

“That definition is pretty complex”, Emad replied. “I couldn’t fully grasp it either”.

“I’ve spent a long time trying to figure it out, but I still don’t get it”, said Yusif. “It’s really difficult”. Anyway, Aquinas defines the soul as “the first actuality of a natural body which has life potentially”. He copied Aristotle in that definition.

“Yusif”, Emad responded, “Don’t waste your time on things that are too complicated to understand”.

“I’ll find a way”, Yusif said confidently. “You know what? I’m going to memorize the definition word for word, even if I don’t understand it”.

Emad shook his head “That’s not easy. You’ll probably forget it unless you understand it first”.

“I swear, I’ll never forget it, God willing”, Yusif replied.

“Alright, it’s up to you”, said Emad.

Yusif went on to memorize the definition exactly as it was. Over the years, Emad would occasionally ask Yusif about the very definition, and Yusif always recited it perfectly.

However, the unwavering dedication to mastering the educational material – through a blend of rote memorization, critical analysis, and the skill of reading between the lines – proved to be highly effective. These efforts led to success in high school and laid a strong foundation for a seamless transition into university life.

Students adopted a hybrid approach to learning, combining time-tested techniques of repetition and memorization with contemporary methods

that emphasize critical thinking, interpretation, and problem-solving. This balanced strategy enabled them to retain essential information while also developing the intellectual flexibility needed to navigate the more complex and independent nature of academic life at the university level.

One evening, after completing exams, some of the students, including Yusif Abdullah, Hamza Al-Fayadh, Emad Al-Mustafa, Falah Al-Saleh, Abdulhameed Ismael, Yasser Al-Saleh, and Ahmad Al-Abdullah – gathered to discuss certain issues about their high school exams.

“You know”, Yusif said, “the more I study, the more I realize – it’s not just about memorizing facts anymore”.

“Exactly”, answered Hamza. “It’s like every line in the textbook could mean something more than it says. You really have to concentrate on every single point”.

“Yeah, especially those indirect questions”, added Emad. “They’re the worst. You can’t just quote the book – you have to read between the lines, infer, connect ideas, etc.”

“I’ve been telling myself that too”, Falah nodded. “It’s more than repetition now. This is about thinking critically – figuring out what the question really wants”.

“The Ministry didn’t make it easy. These exams demanded more than just studying hard. They needed a strategy”, said Ahmad A.

“And reasoning”, added Yasser, “Lots of it. If you can’t connect the dots, you can’t survive”.

“That’s why we’ve all been locked in for months. Spring break turned into full-time study mode”, Abdulhameed remarked.

“No choice, really. Anyone aspires to get into the top universities in Syria has to pass these finals”, Yusif concluded.

The other group of students – Tameem Al-Muslim, Abdulrahman Al-Khalid, Ibraheem Al-Hajj, Ahmad Al-Tarrak, Mudhafar Al-Wahab, Basel Al-Sattam, and Nader Al-Khairi– also met to discuss their exams and the next stages of their academic and personal journeys. During their conversation, they agreed to coordinate with their peers and develop joint plans for applying to and enrolling in universities together.

“The competition’s intense”, Tameem started. “Everyone’s aiming high, and there’s no room for error”.

“I keep reminding myself: this isn’t just about knowing the material – it’s about how you use it. How you approach the question. Therefore, the exams were very difficult”, Abdulrahman answered.

“And stay calm”, whispered Ibraheem. “You mess up one tricky question, and it can cost you a lot”.

“True”, Ahmad T. retaliated. “But you know what? All this pressure made us stronger. I don’t feel the same way anymore”.

“Same here”, said Mudhafar. “I’ve started seeing patterns between topics I never noticed before”.

“Well”, said Basel. “Whatever we did... it worked. We passed. Every single one of us”.

“And not just passed”, Nader commented. “We hit the GPA targets for our majors!”

The following day, both groups of students arranged to meet and continue their discussions, recognizing that the next stage of their journey would require close cooperation, particularly in selecting academic majors and preparing for university life. As all universities are located far from their hometown, they also needed to coordinate on practical matters such as securing accommodation and making living arrangements.

“I still can’t believe it”, said Hamza. “After all that stress, all the long nights... we made it”.

“So, what now?” Emad asked. “Have you guys decided on your majors?”

“Whatever we choose, we earned this”, Yasser remarked. “We didn’t just study – we leveled up. Mentally and academically”.

“The exams were tough, no doubt”, Tameem asserted. “But they pushed us to become better thinkers. That’s something I’ll carry forward, no matter where I end up”.

“I’ve decided to study English Literature at Damascus University”, said Yusif. “I really love diving into languages and humanities”.

“Me too!” Emad replied. “I think it’s such a rich field. I’m joining you there”.

“That’s cool”, Hamza commented, “but I’m going to choose a different route. I’m enrolling in the Faculty of Islamic Studies at Damascus University. I want to focus on religious scholarship and cultural studies”.

“Same here. It feels important to understand our heritage deeply”, Abdulhameed responded. “You know, I left my initial major in Agricultural Engineering to pursue Islamic Jurisprudence. This is my true desire and ambition. I sacrificed a year to make this change”.

“Me too”, said Falah. “Islamic Studies are my favorite”.

“I’m heading to Aleppo University”, said Nader, “to join the Faculty of English Literature. I wanted a change of scenery but with a similar focus”.

“And I’m also at Aleppo”, said Basel, “but I’m choosing Law. I’ve always been interested in legal studies and hope to build a career there”.

“I’ve chosen the Faculty of Law at Damascus”, Ibraheem reacted. “I love legal studies and hope to make a difference”.

“I’m going to Damascus University too, Ahmad A. indicated, but for Arabic Literature. I want to explore and preserve our native language and its literary treasures”.

“That’s inspiring”, said Yasser, “I’m with you on that one”.

“On the science side, I’m taking Mathematics at Damascus University. I’m fascinated by analytical and quantitative work”, said Tameem.

“Me too. Math opens so many doors”, Abdulrahman replied.

“Same here”, said Ahmad T. “It’s a solid foundation”.

“I’m going to study Medicine at Damascus University. It’s a tough path, but becoming a healthcare professional is my dream. It’s challenging but so rewarding”, said Mudhafar.

“It’s amazing to see how broad our group’s interests are, from humanities to sciences and law”, Hamza commented. “Our batch is really shaping up well!”

“This is fantastic”, said Yusif. “We hope to succeed in our great upcoming tasks”.

The students' choice reflects the diversity of interests, and the personal sacrifices made to pursue fields aligned with individual passions and values. Those who succeeded did so through relentless dedication and intellectual rigor, eventually securing places at some of Syria's prestigious universities across a variety of faculties.

Their achievements stood as a testament to the resilience and determination of that generation of students who, despite the challenges, succeeded in their educational pursuits and laid the groundwork for their professional futures.

All these students, except for Mohammad Al-Rahawi who joined later, share a deep-rooted connection not only through their educational pursuits but also by virtue of their common lineage and heritage. They all come from the same town and belong to Al-Qouran clan – a family lineage that has inhabited the area for several centuries.

This town, part of the historic Deir Ezzor Province in eastern Syria, boasts a rich cultural and historical legacy that stretches back over 5,000 years. Historically known as Al-Dalia, the town is strategically positioned on the

right bank of the Euphrates River, equidistant – approximately 50 kilometers – from the city center of Deir Ezzor and the Iraqi border.

This geographic placement has greatly influenced the social and cultural dynamics of the region. It has served as a natural crossroads for trade, travel, and cultural exchange between Syria and Iraq, shaping the lives and traditions of its inhabitants. The Euphrates itself is more than just a waterway – it is a lifeline for the town and its residents, sustaining agriculture, livelihoods, and community life for generations.

Mohammad Al-Rahawi, though not from the Al-Qouran clan, comes from the neighboring Al-Shuwaitt clan. These two clans have long maintained a strong bond of friendship and cooperation. In a region where multiple clans coexist, the relationship between Al-Qouran and Al-Shuwaitt stands out for its warmth and mutual respect. Historically, their interactions have been characterized by both collaboration and a unique brand of friendly rivalry.

This rivalry is expressed through playful teasing and the creation of fictional tales, often exaggerated or humorous stories that the clans use to

jest at one another. These stories, however, are understood by all parties to be purely for entertainment – good-natured joking that strengthens social ties rather than divides. Beneath this surface of amusement lies a genuine respect and solidarity that binds the two clans.

Al-Qouraya is distinguished by its natural beauty and fertile agricultural landscape. It is adorned with numerous trees and lush farmlands that support the cultivation of various crops, with cotton and wheat being among the primary agricultural products.

The town's environment is shaped by its seasonal climate: spring and fall bring refreshing coolness, summer can be quite hot, while winters tend to be cold.

Springtime is particularly remarkable, as the surrounding lands burst into vivid shades of green. The fields come alive with crops, and even the nearby desert and wild areas to the west transform dramatically during this season. These wildlands teem with diverse species of flora, enriching the natural heritage and providing a scenic contrast to the cultivated fields.

The strategic location of Al-Qouraya has historically made it a pivotal junction between north and south. This geographic advantage facilitates easy movement and communication, allowing residents convenient access not only to the nearby Syrian Iraqi border but also to Deir Ezzor city center and beyond.

From Deir Ezzor, routes extend to major Syrian cities including Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus, linking the town to broader national networks of trade, education, and culture.

Residents of Al-Qouraya hold a deep affection for their town and the Euphrates River that flows alongside it. The river is not only a source of irrigation but also a focal point for social and recreational activities, especially during the summer months when cool waters provide relief from the heat.

The natural environment and the communal spirit, the river fosters, are integral to the identity and daily life of the town's people. Many who have left Al-Qouraya for studies, work, or other reasons – whether to other

Syrian cities or abroad, particularly to the Arabian Gulf States – often express a profound nostalgia for their hometown.

They cherish memories of the peaceful landscapes, close-knit community, and the simplicity of life by the Euphrates. Despite their varied journeys, there is a shared longing among them to return to Al-Qouraya, to reconnect with their roots, and to relive the warmth and familiarity of their upbringing.

This sentiment speaks of the strong emotional and cultural ties that the people of Al-Qouraya maintain with their town. It is more than just a place of residence; it is a symbol of identity, tradition, and belonging that shapes their worldview and continues to influence their lives, no matter where they go.

Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in 2011, the town of Al-Qouraya was home to an estimated population of approximately 60,000 residents. This vibrant community thrived on a rich agricultural heritage complemented by modest commercial activities, forming the backbone of its local economy and way of life.

The economy of Al-Qouraya was predominantly agricultural, with the majority of its inhabitants engaged in farming and related activities. The town's fertile lands supported a variety of crops, enabling residents to sustain themselves and contribute to regional markets.

Alongside agriculture, commercial enterprises such as grocery stores and mini markets operated mainly within the town's central market area. These establishments provided essential goods and services, facilitating trade and fostering a sense of community among the residents.

Agriculture in Al-Qouraya was essentially tied to the seasons, with each part of the year bringing its own set of activities and natural transformations. The agricultural calendar dictated the rhythm of life, influencing economic output, social customs and community gatherings.

Winter in Al-Qouraya was characterized by its stark transformation of the landscape and a focus on the cultivation of wheat. During these colder months, the town's usual greenery gave way to muted tones, as fields lay bare and trees shed their leaves. Despite the cold temperatures, which

often discouraged outdoor activities in the evenings, winter held its own unique charm.

Residents found warmth in gathering indoors around stoves, sharing meals and engaging in conversations that ranged from local affairs to broader social issues. This communal aspect of winter life fostered a strong sense of solidarity and resilience within the population, helping them endure the chill and limited daylight hours.

Certain fruit trees, such as apple and orange trees, bear fruit during this season, providing a vital source of nutrition and color amidst the predominantly dormant landscape. These fruits contributed to the town's agricultural output and served as a reminder of the persistent cycles of nature, even in the harshest conditions.

With the arrival of spring, Al-Qouraya undergoes a remarkable transformation. The season heralds a return of vibrant greenery as dormant trees begin to sprout new leaves, and the crops sown in winter start to grow rapidly. This renewal paints the town in shades of lush green, creating an inviting and picturesque environment.

Spring is a season of hope and productivity. Fruit-bearing trees such as grapevines, fig, mulberry, and palm trees begin the process of flowering and setting fruit that will mature in the warmer months ahead. The mild and pleasant weather encourages residents to spend more time outdoors, engaging in leisurely walks, socializing, and attending to agricultural duties.

The pleasant climate of spring energizes both the land and the community, inspiring a collective sense of optimism and vitality. It is a season where the efforts of the previous months begin to show tangible progress, filling the town with anticipation for the bountiful summer to come.

Summer in Al-Qouraya is the peak of agricultural productivity and visual abundance. The town's landscape is adorned with an array of ripe fruit and flourishing crops. Grapes, figs, mulberries, apricots, and greengages are commonly seen throughout the town, marking a period of harvest.

Alongside fruit cultivation, summer is a crucial time for growing a variety of vegetables, including cucumber, tomato, okra, watermelon, zucchini,

eggplant, etc. These crops contribute significantly to the town's economy and reputation as a vital agricultural hub within the region.

The fertile soil and favorable climate conditions during summer months support a diverse and plentiful harvest, ensuring food security and economic stability for Al-Qouraya's residents.

Summer and spring are widely regarded as the most enjoyable seasons by the townspeople. The warmth of the sun and the bounty of God in the land created opportunities for outdoor gatherings, community events, and a vibrant social life. The natural beauty of the town, combined with the tangible results of the year's agricultural labor, foster a deep appreciation for God's bliss through the cycles of life and the land's productivity.

As summer gives way to autumn, Al-Qouraya experiences a gradual transition marked by the shedding of leaves and the preparation for the coming winter. This season symbolizes the cyclical nature of life – an end that was simultaneously a prelude to new beginnings. The once lush and vibrant foliage turns shades of yellow, orange, and brown, creating a landscape of both beauty and quiet reflection.

Farmers complete the harvests, gather the fruit of their labor and prepare their land for the colder months ahead. The cooler weather brings a different pace to daily life, with activities focusing on maintenance, storage of crops, and planning for the next agricultural cycle.

The people of Al-Qouraya view autumn as a crucial phase in the life cycle of their environment and community. The visual reminder of falling leaves and inactive fields underscore the natural progression of seasons and the ongoing connection between humans and nature. Each year, the town's inhabitants witness this cycle unfold with a sense of reverence and acceptance, embracing the diversity and uniqueness of each season.

The summer following the school year of 1997 marked a significant milestone for the students who completed their secondary education in Syria. After a year filled with study, dedication, and perseverance, these young men finally received their high school certificates, a moment of great accomplishment and relief. Yet, this achievement was only the beginning of a new chapter.

For many, it represented the threshold to a future defined by higher education, personal growth, and the pursuit of long-held aspirations.

As the immediate celebrations of success settled, the graduates quickly turned their attention to planning the next stage of their lives: university studies. This step was more than just academic progression; it was a profound leap toward shaping their identities and careers.

For many of the students from Al-Qouraya and the surrounding areas, embarking on higher education was not without challenges. Deir Ezzor, their home governorate, did not have a university at that time. Consequently, all students had to travel to different destinations across Syria to pursue their academic dreams. This reality introduced additional logistical and financial burdens.

Relocation to distant cities required securing accommodation, managing transportation costs, and covering daily living expenses such as food and utilities. For most students, these costs were substantial, creating a significant hurdle for most of their families.

Despite the hardships, none of the students wished to relinquish continuing education. The alternative, ending formal education after high school, was not an option they were willing to accept.

To overcome these difficulties, students relied heavily on the support of their families. At this stage of their lives, they were generally not engaged in employment, meaning their financial needs were met entirely by their families. This dynamic underscored the collective family commitment to education and the belief in its transformative potential.

Among the various academic institutions available, Damascus University stood out as the premier destination for Syrian students aspiring to higher education. Established in the early 20th century, Damascus University holds the distinction of being the oldest and most prestigious university in the country. Its long-standing history, spanning over a century, has cemented its reputation for academic excellence, a broad range of faculties, and a rich cultural legacy.

The university's location in Syria's capital city made it a hub for students from across the nation, including those from more remote regions like

Deir Ezzor. Its extensive facilities, diverse academic programs, and historical influence made it a natural choice for many.

Aleppo University, founded in 1958, was the second major institution of higher education in the country. Situated in Aleppo, Syria's economic and industrial center located in the northwestern region near the Turkish border, this university attracted students interested in benefiting from the city's dynamic environment.

Other notable institutions included Tishreen University in Lattakia and Al-Baath University in Homs, both important centers of learning that served students from different regions of Syria. While fewer students from this particular batch initially attended these universities, they nonetheless represented viable options for many other Syrians seeking specialized fields of study closer to home.

The transition from high school to university demanded more than just academic readiness. Students had to prepare both financially and psychologically for the challenges ahead. Financially, the burden was considerable. Monthly expenses for accommodation, meals,

transportation, and study materials quickly accumulated. Without personal income, students were dependent on family resources, which sometimes placed strain on household budgets.

Psychologically, the shift meant leaving familiar environments and support networks. Students had to adapt to new cities, cultures, and academic expectations while managing homesickness and the pressures of university life. The anticipation of this new phase was both exciting and frightening, requiring resilience and determination.

Families played a significant role in this process, offering emotional encouragement alongside financial support. The collective effort of families and communities underscored the high value placed on education as a pathway to social mobility and personal development.

The dedication of these young people to pursue higher education despite geographic, financial, and emotional obstacles highlighted the transformative power of education. Their choices, to study fields ranging from English literature to Islamic jurisprudence, reflect the diversity of interests and ambitions within Syrian society.

As they prepared to join universities across the country, these students embodied the hope and potential of a new generation, ready to contribute to their communities and nation through knowledge and perseverance. Their experiences served as a testament to the enduring importance of education and the collective effort required to achieve it.

Chapter Two

Joining Universities

Fall – Spring Semesters

1998

Upon successfully obtaining their high school certificates, the students prepared to embark on a significant new chapter in their lives: entering university for the first semester of their academic journey. This transition marked an exciting and transformative period, characterized by anticipation, hope, and the realization of newfound independence.

For many, it was their first experience outside the familiar environment of secondary education, as they now faced the challenges of higher education in Syria. The students were acutely aware that university studies required a heightened level of commitment, discipline, and perseverance compared to their previous experiences. Success at this stage would necessitate exceptional effort and dedication.

Transitioning from high school to university was not merely an academic adjustment; it represented a profound life change. The nature of this stage was markedly different and more complex. One of the most critical decisions the students faced was the selection of their academic majors. This choice was far from trivial, as it bore significant implications for their future careers and personal development.

Yusif, Emad, and Ahmad A. met with each other, sipping tea and reflecting on their next academic stage.

“You know?” Yusif said. “Choosing a major wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be”.

“Tell us about it”, Emad replied.

“It felt like every option came with a warning sign – pick wrong, and you’ll regret it for a long time”, said Yusif.

Ahmad [*nods*] “You are right. It wasn’t just about what I liked. It was about what I was good at”.

“Same here”, said Yusif. “I had to really think about my strengths. I mean, one wrong decision could throw off your entire academic path”.

“And it’s not the kind of mistake you can fix easily. Switching majors later... that’s a mess”, Emad emphasized. “You lose time, energy, and sometimes motivation”.

“Not to mention how it messes with your head”, added Ahmad. “The stress of second-guessing yourself, the anxiety of falling behind... It builds up fast”.

“I felt that pressure hard. It wasn’t just about getting into university – it was about setting the course for the rest of our lives”, said Yusif.

“Moving to a new city was another challenge”, Ahmad commented. “New people, new routines... and suddenly you’re responsible for everything”.

“I thought free education”, said Yusif, “would mean fewer problems. But once you leave home, it’s a different story. Rent, food, transportation – it all adds up”.

“And you can’t just focus on classes when you’re worried about how much your next grocery trip is going to cost”, added Emad.

“Honestly, it felt like the real test started after the final exams”, Ahmad reacted. “This transition hit harder than I expected”.

“But at the end of the day, I think we made the right calls”, said Yusif.

“We took the time, weighed the risks... and we’re still standing”.

“Barely”, said Emad. “But yeah, I agree. It was tough, but necessary”.

“And now, we just have to make it count”, Ahmad concluded.

At that time, Deir Ezzor lacked its own university. As a result, students from this region had to travel considerable distances to enroll in higher education institutions located in other cities. Damascus University, for instance, was approximately 500 kilometers from Deir Ezzor, while Aleppo University was closer but still roughly 380 kilometers away from Al-Qouraya.

Traveling these distances posed another hurdle for students. Coach buses were the primary means of travel, and securing a ticket often required

advance planning. These buses typically departed at night, around 10 p.m., or early in the morning at 8 a.m., either from Al-Qouraya directly or from Deir Ezzor city center, continuing onward to various Syrian cities. The lengthy journeys were a test of endurance and determination, underscoring the students' commitment to their educational aspirations.

As the new academic year approached, typically around early September, the realities of this transition became even more tangible. Two students, Yusif and Emad, exemplified the experience of many in their batch. The two met regularly to discuss and plan their upcoming academic requirements and the logistics of relocating to Damascus.

They discussed certain issues such as the timing of their departure, securing transportation, and identifying suitable accommodation in the capital. Recognizing the importance of prompt action, they resolved to travel to Damascus as soon as possible to allow themselves ample time to settle and prepare for their studies.

Yusif and Emad successfully booked their tickets and embarked on their journey to Damascus. Upon arrival, they found housing in Dummar

neighborhood, a suburban area favored by many university students for its affordability and proximity to various educational institutions.

They shared an apartment close to their fellow students – Abdulhameed, Hamza, Ahmad Al-Jassem, and others – who had similarly rented flats in the nearby area. This network of peers provided practical support and offered emotional encouragement during the initial, often unstable, adjustment period.

The collective experience of these young students illustrated the multifaceted challenges inherent in the transition from secondary education to university life in Syria during that period. It was a time defined not only by academic rigor but also by significant personal growth and resilience.

The students navigated complex decisions about their futures, managed the emotional strain of separation from their families, and adapted to new urban environments – all while striving to meet the demanding expectations of university education.

Dummar was widely regarded as one of the appealing residential areas in northern Damascus, located around fifteen kilometers from the city center. Its geographical setting and climatic conditions contributed significantly to its desirability, particularly among university students who sought comfortable living environments conducive to both study and leisure.

The neighborhood was characterized by a temperate climate that offered relief during the hot Syrian summers and a distinctly cold atmosphere in winter months, creating a unique seasonal contrast that many residents found refreshing.

One of the notable advantages of Dummar was its well-established transportation infrastructure. At that time, efficient and accessible transport services linked Dummar to various colleges across Damascus, facilitating students' daily commutes. This connectivity meant that even though the neighborhood was somewhat removed from the heart of the city, the distance to educational institutions was not an obstacle.

Reliable buses and shuttle minibuses operated throughout the day and night, providing continuous and convenient options for students traveling

between their homes and campuses. This accessibility was a critical factor influencing students' preference for Dummar as their place of residence during their academic years.

An additional and somewhat unique feature of the area was the availability of naturally cold water. Dummar was situated relatively close to the Ein Al-Khadra and Ein Al-Feja springs, two renowned sources of fresh water. The water supplied to the neighborhood's taps was naturally cool, a luxury in the region where refrigeration was not required for obtaining cold water.

This natural refrigeration was particularly appreciated during the summer months, offering residents cold drinking water straight from the tap without the need for additional cooling. It was a small but significant comfort that enhanced daily life in Dummar and contributed to its popularity.

“The strategic location, the good views, and the pleasant weather made students choose Dummar for their stay”, said Abdulhameed. His

observation highlighted the multi-faceted nature of the neighborhood's attractiveness.

The strategic location referred to the ease of transportation and the neighborhood's proximity to key parts of the city and its natural surroundings, offering both urban convenience and scenic beauty.

“The weather is nice in three seasons”, said Yusif, “but it is very cold in winter”.

“Despite the harshness of the winter cold”, said Abdulhameed, “it did not deter the students from making Dummar their home for multiple academic semesters”. This resilience pointed to the broader appeal of the neighborhood's climate – comfortable and temperate for most of the year, with a cold winter season that contrasted sharply with the heat of their hometowns.

“The weather is good because the area is located at a high altitude and surrounded by mountains”, said Ahmad.

This mountainous terrain contributed to cooler temperatures and occasional snowfall, creating a striking natural environment that was uncommon in many other parts of Syria.

For students originating from Deir Ezzor, a city known for its hot desert climate where snow is rarely seen even in winter, the experience of living in Dummar was especially transformative. The contrast in climate, scenery, and environment underscored the diversity of Syria's geography.

The country's cities vary widely, with some located in arid desert zones, others nestled along the Mediterranean coast with lush forests, and still others situated in fertile agricultural plains. This diversity extends beyond climate to include differences in local customs, traditional clothing, and social practices, reflecting the rich cultural tapestry of Syria as a whole.

Despite the existence of other neighborhoods closer to their respective university faculties, a lot of students chose to reside in Dummar. The preference was driven primarily by the quality of life that the area offered rather than proximity alone.

Among the many students who lived in Dummar, the area quickly became a favored home away from home. Yusif, in particular, developed a strong affection for the neighborhood. He likened his attachment to Dummar to his fondness for Jahra, a governorate in Kuwait where he had lived when first arriving in Kuwait.

For Yusif, this emotional connection was rooted not only in the neighborhood's physical attributes but also in the significance it held as his initial point of settlement in a new city. "People who move to new cities or countries often find themselves attached to the first place they live", said Yusif. Dummar was that foundational space for him in Damascus, just as Jahra has been in Kuwait.

This phenomenon – where the first residential area in a new environment holds a special place in a person's memory and identity – is common among individuals experiencing relocation. The initial sense of belonging, the early friendships formed, and the discovery of a new community create powerful emotional bonds.

For Yusif and his peers, Dummar was more than just a convenient or pleasant neighborhood; it was a symbol of their transition into adulthood and higher education, a place where they laid the groundwork for their future ambitions.

The experience of students like Yusif, Abdulhameed, and Ahmad J. highlights the importance of considering both practical and emotional factors in students' residential choices. Their stories underscored how neighborhood's atmosphere can shape the university experience and leave lasting impressions beyond the years spent in study.

“So... first semester”, said Yusif, “be honest – did anyone actually feel ready for this?”

Emad [*laughs*] “Not even close. The shift from high school to university hit harder than I expected”. High school was broad, kind of like dipping your toes into different fields. But this? It's like being thrown straight into the deep end of your major.

“Exactly”, Ahmad J. replied. “High school gave us variety – math, science, literature, philosophy – all spread out. But now, we’re locked in. Everything is focused, deeper, and honestly... more demanding”.

“Especially for us in the sciences”, said Abdulrahman. “It’s not just formulas anymore – it’s applying theories, solving problems step by step, thinking logically all the time. There’s no room for guessing”.

“And for those of us in literary majors, it’s a different kind of difficulty”, said Yusif. “We’re expected to analyze texts on a whole other level – interpret meanings, find symbolism, argue multiple perspectives. It’s not about right or wrong answers, it’s about how well you think”.

“I remember thinking, I’ll just study hard like I did before”, said Ibraheem. “But this required a whole new mindset. You can’t just memorize and hope for the best – you actually have to understand, analyze, and adapt constantly”.

“This semester ... it’s brutal”, Ahmad J. exclaimed. “New environment, new expectations, new systems... I struggled just trying to figure out how to study effectively”.

“Same here”, said Emad. “I kept falling behind because I was still using my high school study habits – reading everything, trying to retain it all, no strategy. That doesn’t work here”.

“The curriculum doesn’t give you much time to adjust either”, Ibraheem indicated. “The depth, the pace – it demands effective time management and critical thinking from the start”.

“And let’s not ignore how different the learning styles are”, Yusif reacted. “In literature, students have to read between the lines, interpret literary theories, and grasp cultural context”.

“But you, science guys, don’t have it easier!” added Yusif. “You’re working with abstract concepts that make my head spin”.

“True”, Tameem replied, “but we have structured rules to fall back on. You, literature students, are navigating ambiguity half the time”.

“Either way, it’s pressure all around”, said Ahmad J. “And for a lot of students, it’s not just academic stress. Moving away from home, dealing with living expenses... it’s a lot to handle”.

“Even though education is free here, everything else costs money-rent, transport, food. Some days, I spend more time budgeting than studying”, added Emad.

“It’s easy to get overwhelmed, especially if you’re not used to handling everything on your own”, said Falah.

“That’s why so many students either sink or swim in the first year”, said Yusif. “You can’t survive on smarts alone. You need resilience, strategy, and support”.

“Honestly, that first semester felt like a filter”, Ahmad J. responded. “It really showed who was ready for university life and who needed help”.

“And for those who couldn’t adapt... I’ve seen students drop out or fall so far behind that, it’s hard to recover”, Ibraheem noted.

“Which is why building those critical skills – analysis, time management, strategic thinking – isn’t just about passing exams”, added Yusif. “It’s about long-term success”.

“These aren’t just academic tools”, said Emad. “They shape who we’ll be in the job market too”.

“Same. I’ve found a rhythm. Study groups help”, added Yusif, “so does knowing when to take a break”.

“The pressure’s still there, but now we’re moving forward with more confidence”, Falah reacted.

“And maybe that’s the point”, said Ibraheem. “University isn’t just about what we learn in class. It’s about how we learn to handle life”.

During the first semester, students often found themselves overwhelmed by the intensity of university life. However, by the second semester, they had gained valuable insight into the structure of their courses, the nature of the assessments, and the methods best suited to mastering the material.

This growing familiarity translated into improved academic performance and a smoother workflow in balancing their responsibilities. The initial uncertainty gradually gave way to a sense of routine and control, enabling them to execute their tasks more efficiently.

The first semester flew by, culminating in a much-anticipated mid-academic year break. This pause provided students with a vital opportunity to return home, reconnect with family and friends, and recharge after the demands of their early university experience. The winter vacation, typically lasting about a month, was a time for rest and recreation.

It allowed students to refresh their mental and emotional resources in preparation for the challenges of the second semester. During this break, many students also maintained their social connections by meeting regularly and enjoying leisurely walks around their hometowns. These moments of joy and relaxation were essential in maintaining morale and strengthening the bonds of friendship.

The second semester marked a noticeable shift in their academic journey – one characterized by increased confidence, greater awareness of expectations, and enhanced study techniques. This period allowed them to consolidate their knowledge and develop a more effective approach to

managing coursework and examinations, which ultimately made the overall academic experience more manageable.

Following this restorative interlude, students returned to their residences with renewed energy and determination to tackle the academic requirements that lay ahead. Armed with the lessons learned from the previous months, they approached the second semester with a greater sense of purpose and confidence.

Many found that their studies felt somewhat easier compared to the first semester, thanks in large part to their growing familiarity with the university system and their own evolving study habits. The experience they had gained allowed them to anticipate challenges and devise effective strategies for overcoming them, creating a positive feedback loop that enhanced their academic engagement.

One evening, some of the colleagues were sitting together, discussing some academic topics. Suddenly, Ahmad J. asked, “Did you know what happened to our colleague Ali?”

Abdulhameed shook his head. “No, I haven’t heard anything!”

“Ali was sleeping earlier and suddenly woke up smiling”, Ahmad began.

“I asked him what was going on”.

“He said, ‘I had a vivid dream about today’s exam questions. I clearly remember the first main question – it’s very important. It carries 50 marks, while the remaining 50 marks are split between two smaller questions. If students don’t answer that first question well, they won’t pass the exam.’”

Ahmad nodded. “I hoped his dream would come true, and I told him to study and memorize the answer to that question carefully”.

Ali replied, “Definitely. I would also tell my colleagues to study this question and memorize the answer well”.

On the way to the exam, Ali informed everyone about that crucial question, and all his classmates memorized the answer thoroughly.

“To his surprise”, Ahmad said, “when he received his exam paper, that very question was at the top – exactly as in his dream. He was thrilled. But the real shock came when he tried to recall the answer... and he couldn’t. All his colleagues answered well and passed the exam, except for him. Ali failed”.

“Unbelievable”, said Abdulhameed. “How come? I can’t believe that. Anyway, students always come up with odd things just like the midnight meal. It was well past midnight when Falah and Yasser came up with an unusual idea to cook okra stew with bread”, added Abdulhameed.

“Come on, guys, it’s 2 a.m.!” Yusif protested. “No one eats that kind of meal at this hour. People usually have it at midday”.

Hamza shrugged. “It’s a strange idea... but doable!”

“We don’t have time to waste”, said Yasser enthusiastically. “Let’s start now!”

Falah clapped his hands together. “Alright, here we go. I’ll begin prepping the okra”.

Yusif shook his head in disbelief. “This is a crazy idea. But if you’re really doing it, I’ll help”.

With that, Yasser and Falah began preparing the ingredients. The rest of the group joined in – setting up the pots, firing up the cooker, and

organizing the kitchen. The apartment was soon filled with the sound of chopping, sizzling, and the unmistakable aroma of slow-cooked okra.

By 4 a.m., just as the call for the dawn (Fajr) prayer echoed in the distance, the meal was finally ready.

As they admired their late-night culinary achievement, Falah had another idea. “Let’s wake up our neighbor Hussein – he should eat with us”.

“Good idea”, said Yasser, already heading toward Hussein’s room.

He knocked on the door repeatedly. Inside, Hussein stirred awake, confused and alarmed. No one ever knocked at his door at such an hour. Still half-asleep, he opened the door.

Yasser grinned. “Come with us – we just finished cooking okra stew!”

Hussein stared at him in disbelief. “You woke me up at 4 a.m. for okra? What is wrong with you guys?”

Without waiting for a reply, he shut the door and went back to sleep.

The group sat down together, enjoyed their meal, performed the Fajr prayer, and then went to bed.

However, by the end of the second semester, the students had completed their first full academic year – a significant milestone that symbolized their adaptation to university life and their commitment to their educational goals. They also got ready to help their other colleagues who would join soon namely Ghannam Al-Sayer and Saud Al-Hameed.

As the summer vacation approached, there was a general sense of relief and excitement about the upcoming break. Amid the anticipation and joy, a certain concern lingered in the minds of many students: the looming requirement of military training camp.

In Syria, military training was integrated into the university curriculum and represented an obligatory component of higher education. Students were not eligible to graduate or receive their academic certificates without successfully completing a total of seven military training camps distributed throughout their academic tenure.

Each year, except for the fourth year, included two such courses: a two-week course during the winter semester and a three-week course in the summer. The fourth year was slightly different, requiring only a single

two-week winter course. This structure ensured that all students participated in regular military training as part of their academic responsibilities.

These courses served a dual purpose: fulfilling academic requirements and acting as a form of compulsory military service. By mandating participation, the system ensured that university students completed a basic level of military preparation before graduating.

This requirement had significant implications for the students' post-graduation obligations as well. Those who completed all seven courses were entitled to a reduced period of compulsory military service after graduation. Specifically, students who fulfilled their military training camps were required to serve for only two years, in contrast to the two and a half years mandated for young men who did not participate in these courses.

This distinction created a clear incentive for students to comply with the military training requirements. Completing the courses effectively shortened their subsequent military service by six months – a considerable

benefit given the demands and uncertainties associated with conscription. For many students, this reduction was a decisive factor in their willingness to participate in the training, even if the courses themselves were viewed as an additional burden during their academic years.

Despite the compulsory nature of the military training, students approached these courses with a degree of pragmatism and even optimism. While many recognized the training as a necessary obligation –they could not avoid if they wished to graduate – some found positive aspects in the experience.

The courses offered opportunities to meet and interact with peers outside the traditional academic setting, fostering a sense of friendship and shared purpose. For some, it was a chance to gain new skills and experiences that would later prove valuable, both personally and professionally.

The military training also provided students with a different perspective on discipline, teamwork, and responsibility – qualities that complemented their academic development.

These sessions introduced them to aspects of military life, including physical fitness, basic tactical training, and an understanding of the organizational structure and values of the armed forces. Such exposure was seen by some as a formative experience, contributing to their growth as individuals and citizens.

Chapter Three

Summer of 1998

Military Camp – Week One

As the summer season reached its peak, students began earnest preparations for their upcoming training camp – a three-week program requiring complete residency within the camp’s premises. Unlike the winter training program, which allowed students to return home daily after attending activities from 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., the summer camp demanded full immersion.

Once they arrived, students would not be permitted to leave the camp until the program was completed. This significant change meant that thorough logistical and personal preparations were essential.

Students began organizing themselves days in advance to ensure a smooth transition into the camp environment. They compiled personal checklists, gathered essential requirements, and made arrangements for their

extended stay. It was crucial that each participant came fully prepared – physically, and logistically.

A critical aspect of this preparation involved transportation to the camp, which was located over 50 kilometers away from hometown, closer to the city center. Recognizing the importance of timely and reliable transportation, the students agreed to coordinate their departure collectively. Instead of relying on public transport or individual arrangements, they decided it would be more efficient and convenient to hire a private vehicle.

Hamza took the initiative to handle transportation logistics. He proposed reaching out to Durgham, a well-known and respected van driver in the town, who owned a Hyundai van capable of accommodating the students. Hamza's suggestion was met with immediate approval; all the students knew Durgham personally and held him in high regard due to his professionalism, punctuality, and courteous nature.

Without delay, Hamza contacted Durgham and discussed the details of the trip. He then reached out to the students to finalize a departure schedule

that would be convenient for everyone. Understanding the geographical spread of the students' residences across the town, Hamza suggested a pickup plan involving three major gathering points to streamline the collection process. Each group would assemble in a specific area, ensuring that Durgham could pick them up efficiently without unnecessary delays.

The first group was scheduled to gather near the central roundabout, a well-known landmark in the heart of the town and conveniently located near the homes of both Durgham and Yusif. The second group agreed to meet in the northern sector of the town, while the third group planned to assemble in the southern region. Each group consisted of three to four students, who coordinated amongst themselves to ensure they would be ready on time and at the correct location.

This plan was executed flawlessly. On the morning of departure, all students adhered to the agreed-upon schedule with admirable discipline. They demonstrated strong cooperation, ensuring that no one was left behind.

Durgham played an equally vital role in the smooth execution of the plan. True to his reputation, he rose early that morning to prepare for the journey. He checked the vehicle thoroughly, ensured it was clean and road-ready, and arrived promptly at the first pickup location. He maintained excellent communication with Hamza throughout the process, allowing for real-time updates and adjustments if needed.

Once all three groups had been picked up, the van departed for the camp. The journey, spanning more than 50 kilometers, was calm and uneventful. The mood inside the van was a mix of anticipation and quiet resolve. The students knew the coming weeks would be demanding, both physically and mentally, and most of them had mentally prepared for the challenges ahead.

In accordance with camp regulations, all students wore the standard military-style uniform they had been issued during their initial training camp earlier that year. Their appearance was striking; they looked like soldiers in the Syrian army, wearing identical fatigues that symbolized

discipline and unity. However, the uniform also carried deeper, more complex connotations for many of the students.

In Syria, at the time, compulsory military service was a controversial issue. The uniform, while required for the training camp, was a symbol that many citizens viewed with a degree of discomfort or outright aversion. Public sentiment toward the army varied significantly, with many young people harboring negative feelings about joining the military. These sentiments stemmed from a wide array of personal and political reasons, ranging from ideological disagreements to concerns about safety, personal freedom, and the broader implications of military involvement.

Despite these fluctuations, the students remained focused on the purpose of their summer camp. The training bore military-like elements – such as discipline, and structured routines – and it was deemed to be part of formal military service.

The students' journey from Al-Qouraya to the summer camp marked the beginning of a new chapter – one filled with anticipation, anxiety, and a touch of humor. The trip to the camp, situated along the left bank of the

Euphrates River near the Faculty of Agricultural Engineering, took them through a string of towns including Mehkan, Al-Mayadin, Bugrus, Mu Hassan, etc.

Despite the early hour and the weight of the three-week commitment ahead, the atmosphere inside the van was lighthearted and jovial. From the very start of the journey, laughter echoed through the vehicle as the students playfully teased one another, poking fun at their situation with good-natured sarcasm. The sense of companionship among them served as a welcome distraction from the seriousness of the training they were about to begin.

As the van moved through the fertile heart of Deir Ezzor province, the scenery outside added a soothing contrast to the lively chatter within. The expansive agricultural lands stretched on either side of the road, painted in vibrant shades of green. Fields of corn swayed gently in the breeze, while rows of vegetables – tomato, cucumber, and okra – lined the landscape.

Okra, in particular, stood out as one of the region's signature crops, and its presence evoked a sense of local pride. The lush terrain, framed by the meandering Euphrates, provided a serene backdrop for the journey.

Durgham, always cheerful and quick with a joke, couldn't resist adding his voice to the fun. With a playful tone, he turned to the students and joked, "hey guys, enjoy your time at the camp! You're going to have a fantastic experience!"

Nader shot back with mock skepticism, "Are you sure we'll enjoy it?"

"Of course", Durgham replied with a grin. "You're the men! You're the soldiers who'll protect us when the time comes!"

From the back of the van, Nader chimed in, shaking his head, "Yeah, you mean the poor soldiers being dragged into the camp by force".

Ahmad Al-Jassem added with exaggerated sarcasm, "What great soldiers indeed! I have a feeling this dreaded camp will feel like a lifetime. Every single day there is going to feel like a year". [*The entire group burst into laughter, echoing through the van*].

Though their remarks were laced with discontent, it was clear they were using humor as a way to cope with the uncertainty and perceived burdens of the training camp. Their banter was a form of solidarity – an unspoken agreement that if they had to go through this experience, they would at least do it together, and with a bit of humor.

Durgham's catching personality further brightened the journey. Known in the community not only for his reliability but also for his wit, he kept the mood light with stories, jokes, and laughter.

As a member of the same clan and neighborhood as the other students, he had a personal connection with each one of them. This sense of familiarity and trust made him more than just a driver – he was part of their circle, sharing in their experiences and offering his support in his own humorous way.

Trying to lift Ahmad's persistent pessimism, Abdulhameed attempted to offer a bit of encouragement: "Don't worry", Ahmad J., "these three weeks will pass quickly".

Ahmad, unconvinced, shot back, “I don’t think so. We’re talking about three weeks, not three days. Even if it is for three days, still very long”.

“Calm down, Ahmad”, Abdulhameed responded with a patient smile.

“Just try not to overthink it – it’ll be over before you know it”.

Emad joined in with a positive outlook: “Come on, everything will go smoothly. You just need to focus on the positive side of the whole thing”.

Ahmad, clearly unmoved, retorted, “Positive side? There’s nothing positive about these training camps. You know what we’re going to do there? Nothing important – it’s just a waste of time and effort”.

Basel, hoping to bring a bit more perspective, countered, “Come on, Ahmad. If we weren’t going to the camp, what would we be doing this summer? Sitting at home, sweating through the heatwave?”

“You’ve got a point”, Ahmad conceded, still frustrated. “But the truth is, we don’t really have a choice. We have to go and complete the training camp whether we like it or not”.

Abdulhameed offered a more reflective thought: “That’s exactly why it’s better not to dwell on it too much. The best approach is just to get through it. One day, maybe after we finish our degrees, this will become one of those strange, unforgettable memories – something we’ll laugh about in the future”.

Though met with varying degrees of acceptance, this sentiment seemed to settle over the group like a shared understanding. For now, they might resent the obligation, but in time, the experience could take on a different meaning. In retrospect, such formative moments – especially those shared with peers – often evolve into valuable stories of resilience, friendship, and personal growth.

As the van continued its journey, crossing town after town and approaching its destination near the Faculty of Agricultural Engineering, the Euphrates River remained a constant companion, flowing steadily beside them. The road ahead symbolized more than a physical path – it represented a transition from comfort to challenge, from familiar routines

to strict schedules, and from casual summer days to a structured training experience that none of them could fully predict.

Despite their complaints and mock protests, the students' unity, humor, and shared background infused the journey with a sense of purpose. The road to the camp became more than a means of transportation – it was a space for connection, laughter, and mental preparation. And with Durgham's spirited presence and the support of one another, the students crossed the threshold into a new experience, one that would inevitably shape their memories and, perhaps, even their characters.

By the time the group reached the camp, they were physically prepared for the experience ahead. The careful planning and coordination had paid off, allowing the students to arrive on time, well-equipped, and in good spirits. The journey was a testament not only to the importance of organization and cooperation but also to the strength of community bonds that had developed among the group.

What began as a simple logistical challenge became a shared experience that reinforced mutual respect, trust, and collective responsibility –

qualities that would serve the students well in the demanding weeks ahead.

When the van pulled up to the entrance of the summer training camp, a wave of mixed emotions washed over the students – excitement, uncertainty, and mild apprehension. Standing beside the vehicle, Durgham, their friendly and ever-cheerful driver, offered a parting message that lightened the mood. “Okay guys, here we go! Enjoy your training camp. I’ll be back after 21 days”, he said with a grin, waving farewell as the students gathered their bags and prepared to enter.

From that moment on, the students knew the reality they were stepping into there would be no breaks, no visits, and no opportunity to leave the camp for even a few hours. For the next three weeks, they were to remain fully immersed in the program, committed to completing the schedule laid out for them without exception.

Upon arrival, the students were welcomed by the camp staff. This camp’s team was led by Colonel Esmael, Major Hussein, and a number of lieutenants and soldiers who managed daily operations and training.

Wasting no time, the officers began organizing the students into groups and assigning them to their tents. Each group was allocated a military-style canvas tent that would serve as their base for the duration of the training.

Yusif, Hamza, Emad, Falah and several of their close friends were fortunate to be placed in the same tent, making the adjustment easier. The remaining students were distributed to adjacent tents, keeping the group close enough to maintain a sense of unity and shared experience. Though the tents were intended as their primary living spaces, it wasn't long before the students adapted to the reality of the climate.

The late summer heat proved stifling, especially inside the tents, which retained warmth well into the night. As a result, the students quickly made an unofficial decision: while they used the tents to store their belongings during the day, they would sleep outside at night. During the day, they used to rest under the shadow of trees.

The open space between the tents became their nighttime refuge. With mattresses laid directly on the ground, they took advantage of the cool

breeze that arrived in the evening. The sky above was strikingly clear – free from the light pollution of cities and towns – revealing a canvas of stars so vivid and numerous that it felt almost surreal.

Lying beneath this starlit sky, the students often found themselves reflecting, talking, or simply enjoying the silence. In those moments, the physical exhaustion of the day faded into the background, replaced by a quiet appreciation of nature and companionship.

Training activities officially began on the second day, setting in motion a strict and repetitive daily schedule. Students were required to rise by 6:00 a.m., marking the beginning of their morning training sessions. Physical drills, military-style exercises, and discipline-focused routines occupied the early hours. After the sessions concluded, they would have a modest breakfast followed by a one-hour break to rest and recover.

Late morning brought another round of training, which continued until approximately 2:00 p.m. These sessions varied from physical endurance exercises to group coordination drills, often held under the shadow of the big surrounding trees. Despite the challenges, the students pushed

themselves to meet expectations, knowing that time would pass more quickly if they don't overthink about it.

At 2:00 p.m., the schedule allowed for a longer break – three hours of rest, meals, or personal time. Most students used this window to cool off, share conversations, or even take short naps. They sometimes played cards with each other to pass time.

However, by 5:00 p.m., they were expected to resume training for two hours. The evening sessions often included more practical drills or group activities designed to build discipline and cooperation.

After 7:00 p.m., the day's formal activities came to an end. From that point onward, students had the rest of the night free until the next morning's wake-up call. While the days were exhausting and highly structured, the evenings offered a sense of release and freedom. It was during these moments that the students found ways to lift each other's spirits and make the experience more bearable.

Even though many of the sessions were physically exhausting and, at times, monotonous, the students managed to inject humor and warmth

into their daily routine. They passed the time by joking, recounting stories from home, and playfully teasing one another. These informal interactions built a strong sense of friendship that helped offset the more difficult aspects of camp life.

For most of them, the experience was unlike anything they had encountered before. The rigid structure, the physical demands, and the sense of isolation from the outside world were new challenges. Yet, within those constraints, they discovered resilience – both individually and collectively.

The relationships formed during those three weeks, strengthened by shared hardship and laughter, created bonds that many of them would carry long after the camp had ended.

Although they had entered the camp with a sense of reluctance and often voiced frustration at the routine or the heat, the students began to adapt. Over time, the training became less about compliance and more about endurance, adaptation, and brotherhood.

And so, the days moved forward, one after another, marked by drills, discipline, and moments of lighthearted relief under the stars. The camp might not have been a place of comfort or choice, but it became a space of growth, shared struggle, and, perhaps most importantly, lasting memories.

On the third day of the camp, as the sun began to dip behind the horizon, the students gathered for their evening training session. It was around 6:00 p.m., and the group assembled in the designated open area, ready – if not enthusiastically – for another round of military instruction. The session was led by Sergeant Romic, a lenient man known for his respect to others and discipline.

As the session began, Sergeant Romic launched into a detailed explanation of a military tactic. He spoke with conviction, emphasizing the importance of focus, attentiveness, and discipline. His tone was firm, aiming to instill a sense of responsibility in the young trainees.

However, midway through his talk, one of the students raised his hand. His expression was serious enough to suggest an important inquiry.

“I have a question, sir”, said the student.

Romic paused, slightly annoyed by the interruption. “Is it related to the topic we’re discussing today?”

“Not exactly”, the student replied. “It’s more of a suggestion than a question”.

The sergeant arched an eyebrow. “A suggestion? For me?”

“Yes, sir”, the student nodded confidently.

“Alright then”, Romic said, already sounding skeptical. “Let’s hear it”.

The student smiled slyly. “Your name is Romic, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct”, said the sergeant.

“Well then, I suggest that if you ever get married and have a son, you should name him Elect”.

A moment of silence followed. Romic, visibly confused, asked, “Why would I name him that?”

“Because then his name would be Electronic!” the student exclaimed.

For a split second, the entire group went silent. And then, the air filled with uncontrollable laughter. Some students tried to stifle it, while others doubled over in amusement, unable to contain themselves. The unexpected wordplay had landed perfectly, cracking through the otherwise rigid atmosphere of the military training session.

Sergeant Romic, however, did not find the joke nearly as amusing.

“Enough!” he shouted. “Shut up! Shut up, all of you!”

His voice rose above the laughter, cutting through the noise. Slowly, the students settled down, though a few struggled to wipe the grins off their faces. It was clear that while they were trying to regain composure, the humor of the moment lingered.

Attempting to restore order, Sergeant Romic continued the session, but some students still giggled quietly, unable to shake off the earlier joke.

That only served to further frustrate the sergeant.

“Listen carefully”, he warned, his voice firm and eyes scanning the group.

“You are in a military training camp. This is not a comedy club. You’re expected to listen carefully, follow instructions, and behave appropriately.

If you fail to do so, there will be consequences. Don't test the limits of this program".

The tone of his warning brought an end to the laughter. The students, sensing the rising tension, quickly refocused. Despite the humor, they understood the gravity of their environment. They calmed down as the sergeant resumed his lecture, shifting the discussion back to the purpose and value of the training.

Curious but respectful, one of the students, Falah, raised his hand.

"Sergeant, may I ask a question?" he said.

Romic gave a nod. "Go ahead".

"Are these training sessions really that important?"

The sergeant's expression softened slightly, and he answered in a more measured tone. "Yes, absolutely. These sessions are important for several reasons. First, they build physical and mental strength. They teach discipline, structure, and resilience. Second, they provide basic military knowledge – skills that may serve you later in life, especially if you are

called for service. By completing this course, you'll be better prepared, more familiar with military environments, and more capable of handling challenges”.

Another student, evidently more skeptical, raised his hand and spoke.

“Sir, with all due respect, if we learn something now and forget it shortly after, doesn't that make the training useless?”

Sergeant Romic shook his head. “No, not at all. You might forget specific details, that's true. But you won't forget everything. Some lessons stay with you – not just facts, but habits, attitudes, and ways of thinking. You'll carry those with you whether you realize it now or not”.

There was a pause as the students reflected on his words. While some remained unconvinced, others nodded in agreement. The environment, although strict, had begun to offer more than just rules and routines – it was also revealing personal growth, companionship, and shared experience.

Finally, Romic checked his watch and addressed the group again. “Alright, the session is over. If you have no further questions, you’re free. You can leave”.

The students responded in unison: “Thank you, Sergeant. No questions”.

While Sergeant Romic might not have appreciated the joke at the time, the lesson of the day was twofold: respect the rules but never underestimate the power of a well-timed laugh.

As they dispersed, the tension in the air began to lift once more. The earlier joke still lingered as a shared memory, one that would likely be recounted many times before the training came to an end. Despite the inflexibility of the schedule and the seriousness of the training, the students were finding moments of fun – reminders that even in the most structured environments, humor and humanity had their place.

Chapter Four

Summer of 1998

Military Camp – Week Two

The early morning light sneaked through the branches of towering eucalyptus and cypress trees, casting scattered patterns of shadow across the dusty ground. The four young men – Yusif, Hamza, Falah, and Abdulhameed – sat close together beneath the cool shade, their bodies still slightly aching from the morning’s intense military training session.

The heat of the day was beginning to rise, but the canopy above provided some relief, offering a brief moment of stillness in an otherwise firm and disciplined environment.

Just a few feet away, a soldier stood guard, his posture neither relaxed nor fully alert. He looked oddly out of place, a man somewhere between lucidity and confusion. The students called him Battout, a nickname that had stuck so firmly no one even remembered, or perhaps ever knew, his

real name. In fact, no one questioned it. Even the officers seemed to adopt the name.

Battout stood with his Kalashnikov AK-47 rifle slung over his shoulder. The weapon, dark and worn, was more than just a tool of war – it was a symbol of power, danger, and control.

The students had learned enough about it during their training: the AK-47 came with two firing modes – semi-automatic and fully automatic. Its curved magazine held up to thirty rounds and, in full-auto mode, could empty all of them in just a few seconds. It was a brutal instrument – simple, deadly, and terrifying in the wrong hands. Yusif was beginning to think, it might be exactly what they were facing.

Though Battout had never shown clear signs of violence, there was something unsettling about him. He wasn't exactly insane, but he certainly wasn't well either – somewhere in a liminal mental space that made students instinctively keep their distance.

As they sat talking about the events of the morning and speculating about the rest of the day's schedule, Yusif suddenly leaned forward, his brow furrowed with curiosity and a flicker of concern.

“Do you guys think Battout's rifle is actually loaded?” he asked in a low voice, barely above a whisper. The question immediately caught the attention of the other three.

Falah shrugged. “Why wouldn't it be? He's a guard!”

“But he's Battout”, Yusif countered. “Would they really trust him with live rounds?”

Hamza leaned back against the tree, folding his arms. “Maybe they're just messing with him. Giving him an empty rifle to make him feel important”.

Yusif nodded. “I'm going to find out”.

He talked to Battout quietly, putting on a casual smile as he talked. “Hey, Battout”, he called out.

The soldier turned toward him, blinking rapidly. “What!”

“Is your rifle loaded?” Yusif asked directly.

Battout seemed taken aback by the question but quickly regained his composure. “Of course, it’s loaded. Fully. Leadership gave me cartridges this morning!”

Yusif raised an eyebrow, pretending to be skeptical. “I don’t think so. I think they’re just telling you that. Why would they give you real bullets?”

Battout frowned. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Come on, man”, Yusif said with a laugh. “I’m not trying to insult you, but it just doesn’t make sense. You really think they trust you with live ammo?”

Battout stood a little taller, gripping his rifle. “Yes, they trust me. I told you, it’s full”.

Yusif didn’t back down. “If you’re so sure, prove it. Take out the magazine and show us. Then we’ll believe you”.

The tension thickened for a moment. Battout stared at Yusif, his eyes narrowing slightly, weighing whether or not he was being mocked. The

others held their breath. It was a dangerous game to play, provoking someone like Battout while he held a potentially loaded rifle.

“Why should I show you?” Battout asked defensively.

“To prove you’re right”, Yusif replied calmly. “That’s all. Just show us the magazine and we’ll stop asking”.

Battout hesitated for a few seconds, then, in one swift motion, removed the magazine from the rifle. He held it up with a sort of pride, tilting it so they could all see the gleaming copper-red tips of the bullets packed tightly inside.

“See?” he said. “Full. Just like what I told you”.

A minute of silence followed. The sight of the ammunition stunned the group. No one had actually expected it to be loaded. The reality of thirty bullets, live and lethal, sitting in the hands of a man whose grip on reality was questionable at best, was more than unnerving – it was terrifying.

Falah, trying to lighten the mood, laughed nervously. “Guys, we better watch our mouths from now on. Battout’s not just playing soldier – he’s armed!”

Abdulhameed gave a half-smile but kept his eyes on the magazine. “No kidding. If he ever snaps... we wouldn’t even have time to run”.

Hamza muttered, “It’s a miracle nothing’s happened yet”.

Yusif nodded slowly, his earlier curiosity was replaced by unease. “Yeah... maybe I shouldn’t have asked”.

Battout reinserted the magazine with a loud click and stood there, looking oddly satisfied, as if he had just won a small but meaningful victory. The rifle now rested against his chest again, its threat all too real.

The students exchanged looks but said nothing more. Their earlier teasing had been silenced by the cold truth of what they had just seen.

Life in the camp was structured, but within that structure were unpredictable variables like Battout. Most of the officers were career

military men, serious and experienced, having gone through intensive military training.

However, Syrian military law made a few exceptions for conscription wherein the family that had only one boy, regardless of having girls or not, the boy was exempted. The boys who were suffering from serious health problems were typically exempted as well. But for the rest, including these students, the military camp was their reality for now and compulsory military service later.

Within this setting, personalities like Battout became part of the camp staff. No one knew how he had ended up there, how he had been brought up for duty, or whether anyone truly supervised him. He drifted through the camp like a ghost with a rifle, a mystery wrapped in uniform.

From that day on, none of the students ever asked him about his rifle again.

And though they continued to sit beneath the eucalyptus and cypress trees each morning, the shade didn't feel quite as peaceful anymore.

One afternoon, under the swaying branches of an old oak tree, seven students – Yusif, Hamza, Emad, Abdulhameed, Falah, Ahmad J., Nader, and Basel – sat close together, seeking shelter from the scorching sun. The afternoon break was the longest rest period of the day at the military camp, lasting nearly three hours.

It was meant to give trainees time to rest and recover from the physically demanding training sessions. But for those who lived nearby, it was more than just a break – it was an opportunity.

Some students had families who lived in towns close to the camp. Though it was strictly against the camp's regulations, they had developed a routine: during this lengthy pause in the day's activities, they would sneak out, rush home to eat a decent meal, maybe spend an hour or two with their families, and then sneak back into the camp just before 5:00 p.m. before the start of the evening training.

It was a dangerous game, they played regularly. They had gotten away with it many times.

The trick was timing. The camp wasn't heavily guarded during the breaks, and many of the guards, particularly the more erratic ones like Battout, weren't exactly models of discipline. The students relied on distractions, blind spots, and moments of inattention to slip away. Today, as the clock neared 2:30 p.m., the same restlessness began to build again.

They began to scan their surroundings with practiced caution. They checked the position of the guards, especially looking out for Battout – the unpredictable, half-absent-minded soldier who had become a fixture at the camp. He wasn't all there mentally, everyone understood, but no one could say how far gone he was. Still, he was armed. That alone made him dangerous.

The camp's perimeter was not easy to cross. The outer wall stood two meters high and was topped with three menacing lines of barbed wire. Slipping through it was no small feat. The students had to move like shadows – quiet, deliberate, calculated. One wrong move could draw attention. Worse, it could end in injury.

They began the climb, with some students helping others to hoist themselves up while others stood watching. The process had to be swift and smooth. Then, just as a few students reached the top of the wall, a voice rang out, clear and loud:

“Battout! They’re fleeing!”

The name cracked through the warm air like a whip. Battout turned instantly, his eyes wide and uncertain, panic rising on his face. The students, still on the ground, froze. The ones on the wall held their breath.

“What shall I do?” Battout called out, gripping his rifle.

Hamza, trying to joke or maybe just to test him, replied, “Cock your rifle quickly!” The distinct click-clack sound of the weapon being cocked followed.

Battout asked again, louder, more frantic now, “What shall I do?!”

Yusif, likely intending it as a continuation of the joke, shouted back, “Fire! Shoot all!”

And just like that, everything changed.

Taking Yusif's words literally, Battout turned toward the students and pulled the trigger.

The explosive rattle of automatic gunfire shattered the stillness of the camp. Bullets sprayed indiscriminately – toward the students and trees, toward the students climbing it, toward those who were still under the oak tree.

For a moment, the camp transformed into something chaotic and primal, like a scene from a war zone. Screams and shouts erupted. Students scattered in every direction, ducking, falling.

Some students near the wall leapt to escape the hail of bullets. Those at the top lost their balance and fell – some landing hard inside the camp, others dropping outside the walls, where thorny brush and uneven terrain awaited them. A few were injured. Some scraped and bruised. Others were just lucky.

Despite the chaos, a strange rhythm took over. Within moments of the gunfire ceasing, most of the students had returned to their places. The panic decreased as quickly as it had flared. Calmness returned before the

officers – whose offices were about 200 meters away, tucked near the left edge of the camp – arrived at the scene.

Battout, meanwhile, had stopped firing. He stood still, the rifle now in his hands, breathing hard, his eyes darting around as if waking from a fever dream. The silence that followed was thick with disbelief.

But it didn't last long.

When the camp leadership finally arrived, they came in fury. Word of gunfire had spread fast, and the sight of armed chaos in their jurisdiction was an unforgivable embarrassment.

A shooting incident inside a military camp, carried out by one of their own guards, could escalate into a scandal if it reached higher authorities. If the story got out, questions would be asked. And no one wanted to answer those questions.

The officers wasted no time. An emergency meeting was called, and all students and staff were gathered. A hasty investigation began on the spot. Tensions were high. Everyone understood that what had just happened could have ended in tragedy.

Battout was immediately detained. What followed was brutal. The officers – infuriated, humiliated, and desperate to shift blame – took out their anger on Battout. The same man who only hours earlier had been a bumbling, almost comical figure in the background was now at the center of a storm. They beat him mercilessly. In front of the students. In front of the guards. No trial. No questions. Only rage.

“How dare you fire at the students?!”

“What the hell were you thinking? Are you mad?!”

“Who gave you the right to shoot?!”

Battout had no answers. His voice, when it wasn't crying out in pain, was drowned out by the fists and boots raining down on him. He pleaded for mercy, begged them to stop, but no one did. He was pushed, kicked, slapped, struck with rifle butts. There was no defense, no explanation, only punishment.

It was a grim reflection of how the Syrian military often handled such internal crises: deflect blame onto the weakest link. That was the

unspoken law. No matter what happened, the leadership must have come out clean. Appearances had to be preserved. Discipline maintained. Reputation untarnished. If someone had to take the fall, it would always have been the lowest-ranking or the most vulnerable.

After minutes of beatings and humiliation, he was dragged away. No explanation was given. No charges were formally announced. The investigation results were never shared. It was clear that the leadership had decided to bury the incident altogether.

The leadership's plan was simple: contain the incident, isolate it within the boundaries of the camp, and make sure no word of it ever leaked at least for the next few days.

It was easier to control the narrative that way. Students weren't allowed to leave the camp anyway, which gave the officers a temporary advantage. All they had to do was to keep everyone quiet until the training program ended.

As part of the investigatory process, Battout was subjected to severe physical torture and verbal abuse. Officers and fellow soldiers accused

him of deliberately attempting to harm or kill students, despite the absence of any verified motive or explanation at that early stage.

This pattern was not an isolated phenomenon. Within the Syrian military, there has historically existed an unofficial doctrine of shielding leadership from blame, particularly during incidents of internal misconduct.

When serious violations occurred, the default response often involved locating a single, weaker individual to bear full responsibility. This allowed those in command to maintain an image of infallibility and order, even if the reality was far messier. In essence, institutional self-preservation took precedence over transparency and justice.

As the internal inquiry continued, Battout was subjected to repeated rounds of physical punishment, despite the lack of any publicly disclosed findings from the investigation. Notably, no formal charges were announced. Rather, the leadership shifted its focus toward containment. The goal was now to ensure the incident remained confined within the camp walls.

What was evident, however, was that the leadership had succeeded in reframing the narrative. The shooting incident, along with its chaotic and violent aftermath, was now considered resolved – not by explanation, but by deliberate omission.

This case underscores a broader pattern within strong, hierarchical institutions where accountability is often sacrificed for control and image management. Instead of transparent investigation, such systems frequently rely on force, suppression, and scapegoating to navigate crises. Individuals like Battout – whether guilty or not – become pawns in a larger strategy to insulate command structures from scrutiny.

The incident and its aftermath provide a sobering window into the methods employed by some military institutions to deal with internal disorder. While the immediate crisis might have been contained, the deeper issues – lack of transparency, abuse of power, and absence of accountability – remained unresolved.

In the afternoon, the students gathered again beneath the old oak trees. The same group – Yusif, Falah, Hamza, Ahmad J., Abdulhameed, Emad,

Nader, and Basel – sat in silence, each of them reflecting on what had happened. The crack of gunfire still echoed faintly in their minds, and the image of Battout standing there, his finger on the trigger, was impossible to forget.

Falah broke the silence.

“Yusif” he said, turning toward him with a stunned expression, “Why did you tell Battout to shoot us?”

Yusif ran a hand over his face, visibly shaken. “I... I didn’t mean it like that. I couldn’t believe he’d actually do it. I mean, come on! Who would take that seriously?”

Falah looked at him skeptically. “Seriously? You know who Battout is! You’ve seen how unstable he is. And you told him to fire?”

“I know him”, Yusif replied, defensive but remorseful. “But tell me – if I told him to shoot himself, would he do it? Of course not! I didn’t think he’d take it literally”.

The group fell quiet again. The truth was no one had expected it. Not really. But it had happened.

The incident had been like a volcanic eruption – sudden, violent, and completely unexpected. Bullets had flown wildly through the air, the sound of automatic fire ringing out like explosions. Students had fled in every direction, unsure if they were being targeted or if it was all just a horrible mistake. Panic ruled the moment. And now, the aftershock was settling in.

Yusif's voice was quieter when he spoke again. "You know... I've been thinking about it from a different angle. We're supposed to be training to become soldiers – or at least prepared young men, right? But look at our reaction. Was it reasonable? Shouldn't we have responded better?"

Ahmad snorted. "What training? It was useless. As soon as that rifle went off, most of the students ran like kids in a thunderstorm".

Hamza chimed in. "Not all of us. Some of us stayed down, like we were taught – flat on the ground, waiting it out. That's what a trained soldier does".

“Yeah”, Ahmad said, shrugging. “But most of them? Gone”.

Falah leaned forward, rubbing his hands together nervously. “To be honest, my gut told me something like that might happen. I didn’t expect it, but I had a bad feeling the moment I saw his hands twitch. We were in a real mess. But thank God no one was killed. Just some little injuries... it could’ve been far worse”.

Emad stared at the ground, shaking his head slowly. “I’m still in shock. I can’t believe it really happened. Who does that? You ask someone to shoot, and he actually does? That man’s insane. Completely gone. We expect not to see him again, mark my words”.

Abdulhameed, who had been quiet until now, raised his eyes. “No, Emad. He’s not evil – he’s just a poor young man. He didn’t even realize what he was doing. And I know most of us were anxious to see what would happen to him... but deep down, I think we all felt guilty. I know I did”.

Basel nodded in agreement. “Exactly. He’s not a monster. He’s someone who should never have been put in that position to begin with. The real

question is – how did the leadership give him a loaded rifle? That’s the real disaster here”.

Nader added, “They don’t care. That’s the bottom line. The leadership didn’t bother to check his mental state. They didn’t ask questions, didn’t look for signs. Just handed him a weapon and called it duty”.

Hamza looked around at the group with frustration. “We all thought he was faking it. Playing dumb to avoid work. That’s how it seemed for many days. He knew what was going on, or so we thought. But now we see the truth – he was unfit for this from the beginning”.

The group fell into another heavy silence. The problem wasn’t just about Battout – it was about the system that allowed him to hold a loaded AK-47 and stand guard over hundreds of students.

After the incident, the leadership had reacted quickly – but not in the way anyone expected. They rushed to the scene, not to investigate with transparency, but to control the damage. They lashed out in rage, dragging Battout away, beating and torturing him. Their form of “investigation”

was less about understanding the incident and more about finding a scapegoat.

They never asked the students what happened. No testimonies were collected, no proper results announced. The officers weren't interested in the truth – they were interested in preserving their own image. That was the priority.

Torture was their response. Control, intimidation, silence.

Battout was removed from public sight, presumably being punished, while the leadership issued no formal statements. Shortly, life at the camp resumed as if nothing had happened. Training continued. Schedules remained intact. But beneath the surface, nothing was the same.

Everyone remembered. Everyone carried the weight of that moment – the sound of the gunfire, the disbelief, the scramble for safety. The students' trust in the camp's leadership, already fragile, was now completely shattered.

As for Battout, he disappeared completely for three days. No one saw or heard from him. Theories spread among the students – some said he was being imprisoned, others believed he had been taken away from students.

But on the fourth day, to everyone's shock, he returned.

There were no visible signs of the beatings he had endured. No bruises, no limping, no bandages. It was as though nothing had happened. But something had changed. Battout seemed firmer now, more alert.

His behavior was no longer wandering or absentminded. He moved with purpose, held his rifle more firmly, and surveyed his surroundings with the gaze of someone who had been through something – and returned harder.

He was back on guard duty.

And once again, he was armed.

The students looked at him with a mix of fear, disbelief, and pity. No one dared to joke with him anymore. No one shouted his name. No one tested him.

The shadow of those gunshots remained in the air long after the echoes had faded.

Battout returned to a new position carrying his Kalashnikov AK-47 rifle, projecting a renewed sense of strength and authority. His posture was firmer, his voice more commanding, and his presence more assertive. It was as if the entire episode had been erased – or at least forcefully buried. Those who had witnessed his earlier suffering were left with an unspoken understanding: this incident was not to be discussed again.

The re-emergence of Battout in such a composed and fortified state raised several questions. Had he been rehabilitated, coerced into silence, or simply reintegrated under orders? It remained unclear whether his silence was voluntary or imposed.

After his new appearance, Battout looked stronger. His expression was harder. His eyes were sharper. He stood upright, scanning his surroundings with a new sense of authority. It was as if he had been rebuilt – remade by the very system that had failed him.

The students couldn't understand it. How could someone like him, after all what had happened, be allowed to resume his dangerous tasks? Had he been punished at all? Or had the leadership simply decided to restore the illusion of control by putting him back in uniform?

One thing was certain: the camp leadership wasn't interested in change or accountability. Their only concern was weathering the storm – keeping the scandal contained and the illusion intact.

For now, the surface was calm again. But just beneath it, the cracks were growing.

Chapter Five

Summer of 1998

Military Camp – Week Three

It was a morning like any other at the camp, but then something unexpected happened – Battout reappeared. His sudden return brought a surge of emotion among the students. For many, it was like seeing a long-lost hero stepping back into the light. Battout, the once-familiar figure who had gone through a terrifying ordeal and endured unimaginable torture, now stood once again within their view. His presence stirred a mixture of admiration and deep sympathy.

Almost immediately after his return, the camp leadership made a swift decision: Battout was reassigned. Instead of returning to his former position beside the students, he was transferred away – deliberately placed at a distance.

The leadership designated him as a guard at the main gate of the camp, a role that kept him isolated and interrupted him from interacting continuously with the students. The order was clear – Battout must have been isolated away from students. This, according to the leadership, was their way of resolving a problem that had nearly spiraled into a deadly incident. They believed this arrangement would keep both students and staff safer.

The memory of the incident – an event that had nearly cost many lives – was still fresh. And yet, despite his reassignment, some students still found moments to quietly approach Battout for a brief chat. He never said much, but his quiet demeanor and piercing eyes told a thousand untold stories.

He was different now. Students could see how he carried himself, in the way he clutched his rifle. It was as though the weapon had become more than just a tool – it had become part of him. When he walked past the students, they noticed how carefully and affectionately he held the rifle.

No one dared to ask whether the rifle was loaded! They didn't want to know. In fact, since Battout had been placed away from their daily routine, students gradually felt more at ease. There was no pressing reason to worry about him anymore, at least not visibly. His presence had faded from the center of camp life to the margin, and with that shift, a kind of fragile peace settled over the students.

However, Battout's reappearance was almost heroic. The moment the students saw him again; they broke into applause. Some clapped their hands enthusiastically, others shouted with excitement, "Hats off to Battout!" A wave of admiration swept through the camp. For many, it felt like the return of a legend.

They greeted him not with pity, but with praise.

"Don't worry, time heals all wounds", one student said, trying to reassure him after everything that had happened.

The students saw him not as a victim, but as a survivor. A fighter. To them, Battout was the camp's hero, the symbol of resilience. He had returned not only alive but fully restored, dressed in uniform and once again

carrying his rifle. It was a powerful image: the man who had been tortured was now back in military form.

Surprisingly, Battout didn't show the typical signs of trauma. If anything, he spoke with more confidence than ever. He carried himself with an air of certainty, as if nothing had shaken him – not even the torture he had endured.

Whether this confidence came from genuine courage or from the overwhelming praise of the students was unclear. Perhaps he had managed to suppress the pain. Or perhaps the students' admiration made him feel invincible. Either way, there was a fire in his voice, and something determined in his eyes. He seemed ready – almost eager – for whatever would come next.

Students admired him openly and incited him to be stronger.

“Battout, you're the man!” one said, laughing with admiration. “You're a man of action, no doubt about that”.

“Honestly, your actions speak louder than your words”, another added, with a half-joking tone.

Some even teased him playfully: “You deserve to be the leader of the camp, Battout! You’ve got what it takes. You’re a natural leader”.

These moments of lighthearted respect often occurred when the students caught glimpses of him during the day. His new role placed him at the camp’s main gate, and although they didn’t see him as often as before, the students would wave, joke, or exchange a few words with him in passing.

But things were different now. Before the incident, Battout had been much closer to the students. He was a familiar presence among them – part of their daily lives. That connection was broken the moment leadership made their decision. Fearing a repeat of the initial, dangerous incident, they deliberately created distance between Battout and the rest of the camp.

The leadership had reassigned him, placing him at the far end of the camp near the gate – a position meant to isolate him. They didn’t want another unexpected episode, and this, they believed, was the safest course of action. By moving him away, they hoped to prevent any future instability.

Since then, the students only encountered Battout occasionally. They no longer had extended conversations or saw him during training. In the quiet

moments after drills or over whispered conversations in their tents, they often spoke about Battout. How was he? Had he really changed after what happened?

They understood how deeply traumatic events could alter someone's personality, sometimes permanently. They wondered whether Battout was still the same man they had known – or if something inside him had been permanently reshaped. And so, they watched. They paid close attention to every brief encounter, every word, every glance he gave.

The truth was, they didn't see him often enough to draw real conclusions. He was no longer a regular part of their lives. Observing someone from a distance, even someone you once knew well, can feel like watching a stranger.

There were fewer opportunities to talk, fewer moments to observe his mood or reactions. He had become somewhat of a mystery – still admired, still respected, but no longer fully understood.

Some students did think he had changed – just slightly. His speech was more measured, his mannerisms a bit more rigid. He smiled less. Others

believed he hadn't changed at all, at least not in ways that could be seen.

But one thing they all agreed on: Battout remained unpredictable.

Even if his behavior was mostly calm, there was always the sense that something could shift at any moment.

It wasn't fear that they felt – at least not openly – but rather a kind of wary respect. They couldn't forget what had happened before. The first incident had been shocking enough to leave a mark on everyone. And so, while they admired Battout and continued to honor him in their own way, they never forgot the underlying tension.

That was part of what made him so fascinating – his resilience, his mystery, and the sense that beneath the surface, something powerful was still stirring.

Battout had become a symbol – of survival, of strength, and of uncertainty.

And even though the leadership had moved him away, and even though his daily contact with the students had diminished, his presence still lingered in the camp.

He was part of the camp's story now, a central character in a chapter they wouldn't forget. They might not have known exactly who he was anymore, or what he was thinking – but they remembered who he had been. They respected what he had endured. And for many, that was enough to keep his legend alive.

In time, perhaps things would shift again. Maybe the distance would lessen. Maybe Battout would reintegrate into the students' world. Or maybe he would remain on the outskirts – still watching, still guarding the gate, carrying both his rifle and the invisible weight of his past.

For now, he stood apart. Neither fully part of the students' world nor fully removed from it. A guardian, a question that no one could quite answer.

But one thing remained certain: Battout left an impression. One that would last long after the clapping faded, long after the teasing and praise gave way to routine. His story – whatever it would become – was far from over.

Days passed, and calm returned to the camp. It was the kind of quiet that, while not entirely comfortable, allowed the students to breathe again, to

sleep without fear and go about their routines without constantly looking over their shoulders.

The next morning, a small group of students gathered for prayer. Hamza led the group as Imam. The sky was still dark, the camp quiet. One by one, more students joined the group. By the end of the prayer, Hamza looked up and realized that a significant number of students had joined him. It was a peaceful, almost beautiful moment of unity.

Not long after sunrise, Major Hussein summoned the students for an unexpected meeting.

His expression was stiff, his voice reluctant, as if he wished he didn't have to say what he was about to say. He informed the students that praying, particularly in groups, was against military regulations.

This wasn't just a suggestion – it was a rule embedded in the structure of military service and training. The gathering they held for prayer was a violation of those laws.

The students stood in silence, absorbing the weight of the message.

Still, Major Hussein's tone was not harsh. In fact, he seemed uncomfortable enforcing the rule. He didn't rebuke them or threaten punishment. Instead, he offered a quiet compromise. If students wished to pray, they were permitted to do so inside their tents, alone, and discreetly. The point he stressed was not to draw attention or form visible gatherings that might raise questions or lead to conflict with the upper ranks.

His words were a subtle kind of permission – a bending of the rules without breaking them entirely. Though military regulations banned all prayers, either group or single prayers, he was trying to find a middle ground.

He made it clear that this was not a license to break the rules, but rather a personal leniency. He could have enforced the regulation to the letter, but instead he left a door slightly open.

The students nodded in understanding. They knew he was risking something by even offering this small allowance. The military leadership was strict, and every action taken by the officers was scrutinized. If the higher-ups believed Major Hussein had been too lenient, he could be

accused of encouraging insubordination or undermining military authority.

But Hussein's gesture didn't go unnoticed – it was a quiet show of respect toward the students' beliefs, a recognition of their humanity amidst the rigid structure of the military machine.

The students understood the stakes. They knew that for officers, allowing public prayer – even silently – could be seen as supporting behavior that contradicted military law. So, they accepted the compromise. They would pray in private, in the shadow of their tents, away from the eyes of those who might report them.

Before the evening, the sun was beginning to set, casting long golden shadows through the tall trees that surrounded the training camp on all sides. A soft breeze rustled the leaves, and the entire atmosphere felt unusually calm for a military setting.

It was just after 5:00 p.m., and the students had gathered in an open area for their evening training sessions. This was a time many of them quietly looked forward to – not only for the drills and routines, but for the serenity

of the setting, and the rare peace it brought amid the precisions of military life.

These sessions had become a regular part of the students' routine. Under the guidance of their trainers, they listened intently, absorbing lessons in discipline, survival tactics, and strategic thinking.

The open-air ground where they trained was surrounded by tall, stoic trees that formed a sort of natural boundary – offering a degree of isolation from the rest of the camp and adding to the sense of calm. It was a scenic moment, one that almost made the camp feel less like a place of harsh drills and more like a quiet retreat.

On certain evenings, especially during the end of the week, the camp leadership would invite senior figures – high-ranking officials from the military, intelligence, or government sectors – to deliver special lectures.

These were intended to inspire the students, remind them of the larger cause they were serving, and reinforce the values of duty, hierarchy, and respect for command. The lectures also served to reinforce military culture and obedience.

But that evening didn't go according to plans.

While the students were listening to their trainers, immersed in the session, Battout had been stationed at the main gate of the camp. He'd been given very specific instructions by his superiors: no one was to enter the camp without explicit permission from the officer in charge – no matter who they were.

For most regular guards, these kinds of instructions were understood as routine protocol. But everyone knew that if a high-ranking official, especially a guest of the leadership, showed up, the guard would typically open the gate out of courtesy and notify the leadership afterward.

That was the expected behavior, particularly when dealing with someone wearing the insignia of authority.

But Battout wasn't like other guards.

For him, there was no difference between a government figure, a general, a minister – or a regular soldier. They were all the same. Titles, ranks, and shiny shoulder stripes meant nothing to Battout. Orders were orders. And

in his mind, no badge or vehicle could override a direct instruction from leadership: no entry without permission.

That evening, a guest from the military corps – a brigadier – arrived in a white Peugeot and slowly approached the gate. The man was dressed in full uniform, his decorated shoulders gleaming under the fading sun. He expected, as all men of his rank did, that the gate would open promptly and respectfully.

Battout, however, did not move.

He stepped forward, his posture rigid, his voice calm but firm as he addressed the officer.

“Stop right there”, said Battout.

The brigadier frowned but remained in his car. He probably thought Battout was not serious – or worse, ignorant. He continued to inch the car forward, fully expecting the young soldier to salute him, step aside, and open the gate.

Battout didn't do. He didn't move. And when the car got closer, his voice rose.

“Stop. Don't move anymore”, Battout warned again, placing a firm hand on his AK-47.

Still, the brigadier ignored him.

Battout's hand moved instinctively. He cocked his rifle, the mechanical sound slicing through the evening air. His voice, now loud and commanding, rang out again:

“Stay still! Don't move!”

But the car continued its slow advance.

To the brigadier, it was unthinkable that a low-ranking soldier would dare to speak to him that way – let alone threaten him with a weapon. In his mind, rank was sacred. His authority is unquestionable.

But Battout didn't care. He had been given a direct order, and no number of medals or military bravado was going to make him break it.

As the car reached within just a few meters of the gate, Battout gave one final warning.

It was ignored.

In the next moment, the tension that had been building exploded. Battout's volcano erupted again – this time violently. He switched the rifle to fully automatic and opened fire on the brigadier's car. A deafening rattle of gunfire tore through the camp's evening calm.

Bullets sprayed the front of the white Peugeot, tearing it apart. The car's hood crumpled under the barrage. Metal fragments and shattered glass of the front lights flew into the air, some rising above the treetops that bordered the camp.

Inside the car, the brigadier froze. He didn't open the door. He didn't try to move. He sat there, paralyzed with fear, overwhelmed by a soldier's defiance and the stunning realization that his authority meant nothing in that moment. The rifle – and the man behind it – held more power than all the insignia on his shoulders.

From the training ground, the students heard the gunfire echo through the trees.

“Battout did it again!” tens of students shouted.

Without waiting for orders, students began running toward the gate. By the time they arrived, they were greeted by a scene of chaos. A little smoke rose from the front of the car, pieces of metal scattered across the camp entrance, and the unmistakable smell of gunpowder filled the air.

The damage was severe – bullet holes riddled the car’s front, and the force of the impact had made parts of the engine casing fly through the air like confetti.

Camp leadership, alerted by the commotion, rushed to the scene as well. When they reached the gate, they found the brigadier still inside his car, pale and trembling, with great shock. The man hadn’t been physically injured, but he was visibly shaken – psychologically crushed by what had just happened.

Officers helped him out of the car and escorted him back to the leadership offices, trying to calm him down. It wasn’t easy. The “Battoutic shock”,

as students jokingly called it later, had done more than damaging a car – it had subjugated a powerful man in front of everyone and sent shockwaves in the whole camp.

But the consequences for Battout were inevitable.

This second incident, even more explosive than the first, could not be ignored or brushed aside. Once again, Battout had crossed a line – one that the leadership could not forgive. Orders or not, firing at a senior officer was unthinkable.

In the aftermath, Battout was taken away. What followed was a second round of brutal punishment – far worse than what he had endured the first time. This new journey into torture was more severe, more secretive, and far more damaging. Students heard only whispers about what had happened to him.

And then – nothing.

Battout disappeared.

There was no official announcement, no explanation. He was simply gone. Days passed. But the students never saw him again. He had vanished completely, like a shadow wiped away by daylight.

They asked around, but no one gave answers. Rumors swirled, but no facts emerged. Battout had become a ghost. A memory. A name that still echoed through the camp, spoken in admiration, confusion, and fear.

For the students, Battout's story ended that day at the gate, in a storm of bullets and smoke.

But in their minds, the legend remained – of a man who followed orders with a fierceness that defied rank, who challenged power without hesitation, and who vanished before they could ever truly understand him.

After the dramatic incidents of Battout, the camp gradually returned to a state of uneasy calm. The daily rhythm of military life resumed – training sessions, drills, and scheduled activities continued as if nothing had ever happened.

The leadership was eager to restore order, and the students, in their own way, tried to adapt. Still, a lingering sense of absence remained among them.

Though things on the surface appeared normal, the students couldn't help but think of Battout. He had become more than just a fellow guard. He was a symbol of something greater – a man who had stood his ground, defied authority, and then vanished without a trace.

No one had seen him since the final incident. No explanations were given. Not a word from leadership. It was as if he had been erased.

Yet he lived on in the students' conversations and memories. They often spoke of him during late-night chats, recounting assumptions about what might have happened to him, hoping he was fine, or maybe reassigned to a different position. The silence surrounding his fate only deepened the mystery.

They missed him – not just because of his boldness, but because Battout had embodied something they didn't fully understand until he was gone:

resistance, courage, unpredictability. Life in the military camp had taught them that everyone experienced ups and downs.

But for Battout, the camp seemed to offer only downs. His days were full of suffering, isolation, and punishment, and yet he carried himself with an unshakable spirit. That made him unforgettable.

As the end of the camp approached, a sense of reflection settled over the students. The long days of training were winding down. The final days felt shorter. Even the wind through the trees sounded different – less harsh, more nostalgic.

One afternoon, just before the camp was set to close, Yusif quietly asked a few friends to join him in prayer. It wasn't a public announcement, just a private invitation. At first, only a small number joined to pray in the shadow of trees. They gathered in the open training area. The air was calm, and the light of the sun bathed the field in a warm glow.

Yusif began to lead the prayer. As he did, something unexpected happened – just like during the first group prayer days earlier. More students began to join. One by one, they formed rows behind Yusif.

By the time the prayer ended, a large crowd had gathered.

The sight of dozens of students praying together in the open area, visible from beyond the camp's borders, could not go unnoticed. It was, once again, a clear violation of the rules – a breach of military regulations that prohibited public displays of religious practices.

After prayer, Major Hussein summoned the students for another meeting.

His tone was serious, though not harsh. He had addressed them once before on the same issue, and now he found himself doing it again.

He reminded the students firmly that public prayer was strictly forbidden in the Syrian military. It was not a matter of opinion or personal preference – it was law. Even praying inside tents was technically banned, he explained, though he added that he would not question or report those who did so quietly and privately.

“Don't pray in the open area”, he warned them. “Even if I understand your intentions, this kind of public act could create problems – not just for you, but for me and the entire camp's leadership. I'm not asking you to give up

your prayers. I'm only asking you to protect yourselves, and us, from an unnecessary trouble".

Yusif and the others listened carefully. They didn't argue. They didn't need to. It was clear that Major Hussein was walking a thin line – between enforcing military law and respecting the students' religious convictions.

He wasn't threatening them, and he wasn't turning them in. Instead, he was trying to find a quiet compromise. A small space of understanding within a rigid system.

The students nodded in agreement.

They understood the risks, and they appreciated the Major's approach. He had treated them with dignity, not with disdain. And although they knew his hands were tied by the very laws he was upholding, his willingness to be honest with them had earned their respect.

The next day, the final one at camp arrived. A soft buzz of anticipation filled the air. The journey was over.

Outside the camp gates, a familiar figure stood waiting – Durgham, their driver, ready to take them home. The students gathered their bags, said quiet goodbyes to the trainers and their other colleagues, and looked around one last time at the place that had changed them in so many ways.

Despite the hardships, the fears, and the moments of chaos, they left the camp not with bitterness but with a sense of growth. What they had experienced there went far beyond basic military training. It had been a crash course in human nature, discipline, resilience, and the unpredictability of power.

They had faced moments of excitement, moments of danger, and moments that simply didn't make sense. There had been fear and laughter, pride and pain. There had been rules they were forced to follow and rules they silently questioned.

And at the heart of it all, there had been people like Battout and other individuals who, each in his own way, had reminded them that humanity could still exist within a system that so often tried to strip it away.

As the vehicle pulled away from the camp and the trees faded behind them, the students carried more than just their belongings and the training camp completion. They carried stories, memories, and lessons that would stay with them far beyond the camp's borders.

Some lessons were thrilling. Others had been terrifying. And a few, like Battout himself, remained simply unforgettable.

Chapter Six

Managing the Camp's Crisis

The camp leadership's approach to crisis management reflects the broader systemic failures of the regime itself. From top to bottom, the entire regime was riddled with deep-rooted corruption, extensive bureaucracy, bribery, nepotism, cronyism, political suppression, injustice, and inefficiency.

These elements permeated not only civilian life but also every corner of the government, the military, and public institutions, including the very camp where these events unfolded. The case of Battout is symbolic of this failure.

Battout, a young man who was evidently suffering from some health problems, potentially psychological or mental in nature, should never have been in the military in the first place. According to military law in Syria, several exemptions from compulsory military service are clearly defined.

One such exemption applies to young men who are the sole male ones in their family, regardless of how many daughters the family has. The logic behind this exemption is that the only male boy should be allowed to stay and support the family.

Another exemption applies to those suffering from critical illnesses, including mental or psychological disorders. On paper, Battout should have been qualified for exemption on both humanitarian and legal grounds.

In a functioning system, the existence of these laws would have protected vulnerable individuals like Battout. However, in practice, the application of these laws is deeply compromised by the widespread influence of nepotism and bribery.

Families seeking to exempt their sons from military service must not only provide solid medical documentation but also, in most cases, have personal connections to influential officials or pay bribes to ensure that the exemption is granted. For the average Syrian citizen without wealth or connections, navigating this corrupt system is not easy.

That might be the tragic case for Battout’s family. Lacking the financial means or the political leverage to pull strings, they were unable to secure an exemption for their son. His case became one of many examples of how the poor and powerless are often sacrificed in a system that favors only the privileged ones.

Even if there were attempts to gather medical evidence of Battout’s condition, it is unlikely they were taken seriously in the absence of political influence or monetary persuasion. Thus, Battout was sent to the camp, a place completely unsuited for someone with his condition.

“What really gets me about Battout’s case is the whole uncertainty around his mental state”, said Yusif. One minute he seemed totally fine and the next, it was like something switched off in his head.

“That kind of erratic behavior isn’t just random”, Ghannam – who joined Faculty of Medicine at Damascus University in the following year – responded. “It might be tied to serious psychological issues. But instead

of getting him evaluated by a professional, they just shoved him into the same mold as everyone else”.

“And nobody – no commander, no medic – ever thought to stop and ask”, Mudhafar exclaimed. “Is Battout okay?”

“And that’s not just a failure of the system”, said Yusif. “It’s a failure of everyone around him. Leaders, soldiers, students – we all saw something was off, but we ignored it. Or we didn’t care enough to act”.

“Instead of treating him like someone who needed help, we just... used him. Like a weapon”, said Hamza. “He became a tool, not a person. And the system that should have protected him? It broke him instead”.

“Things got worse when the students started giving him orders directly”, Mohammad affirmed. “I think they were half-joking at first, but he didn’t hesitate. This guy would do anything you told him”.

“They’d call his name, and he’d sprint over like it was life or death”, said Mudhafar. “Cock your rifle, they said – he did it. No questions. Then the worst part... they gave him the order to shoot. And he did”.

“Without thinking. No hesitation. Just... followed the command like a machine. It was terrifying”, Ghannam wondered.

“That kind of blind obedience – it wasn’t discipline. It was a breakdown. He couldn’t differentiate between real orders and manipulative ones. No filter. No judgment”, said Mohammad.

“Exactly. He wasn’t a cold-blooded killer”, Mudhafar affirmed. “He was someone who’d lost the ability to grasp what was happening around him. I honestly believe he acted out of fear and confusion, not malice”.

“It makes you wonder – if someone had just stopped and seen him, really seen him for what he was going through... maybe none of this would have happened”, added Yusif.

Nevertheless, Battout's actions were not entirely outside the framework of his assigned duties. As part of the camp's security personnel, one of his primary responsibilities was to maintain order and ensure that no unauthorized personnel entered or exited the camp.

From this perspective, he was doing what he had been trained to do: respond to potential breaches of security. Unfortunately, his interpretation of the situation, combined with his fragile mental state and the manipulative interference of the students, resulted in misuse of his authority.

This raises deeply unsettling questions about the accountability of those involved. Was Battout entirely at fault, or was he merely the final link in a long chain of institutional failures? The students who egged him on – were they deliberately provoking someone they expected to be mentally unstable? And what of the camp leaders who failed to recognize Battout's unsuitability for military service, or the system that pushed him there in the first place?

Each of these players bears a portion of responsibility, but the lion's share falls on the larger regime and the toxic system it upheld. The government's failure to implement its own military laws, its neglect of proper medical evaluations, and its reliance on nepotism and bribery all contributed to the incidents.

In many ways, Battout was less a soldier and more a victim – caught in a cruel web of systemic dysfunction. That travesty could have been avoided if only the rules had been applied with fairness, compassion, and due diligence.

If Battout's condition had been properly assessed, he would have been safely exempted from service and received the medical care he clearly needed. If the camp leadership had paid closer attention to his behavior, they might have intervened before he was placed in a position of responsibility. If the students had exercised basic decency and restraint, the incidents could have been averted.

Ultimately, the events at the camp expose the devastating impact of a corrupt and broken system. They reveal how institutions are meant to protect citizens, when mismanaged, they may destroy lives instead.

Battout's story is not just about one man's breakdown – it is a grim testament to what happens when justice is replaced by favoritism, when health is ignored, and when individuals are abandoned by those charged with their care.

In that sense, the crisis at the camp is not an isolated incident but a concentrated reflection of national decay. The negligence, the corruption, and the total absence of empathy – each of these traits was present in the camp, just as they existed throughout the broader political and social structures of the country.

The real tragedy was not just what happened to Battout, but the fact that so many others like him continued to suffer in silence, unseen and unheard, in a system designed not to serve, but to control.

Mudhafar once reflected on the first incident, saying, “Battout received orders from students, and he couldn't differentiate between the orders that

should be executed and the ones that should be ignored. He wasn't sane enough to distinguish between the two matters".

His words capture the very heart of the tragedy – a young man, clearly struggling with mental instability, was put in a position of extreme responsibility and pressure, with no guidance or protection.

Ghannam echoed a similar sentiment, noting, "The barrier between the two matters confused Battout, leading him to act violently and inappropriately. This confirms that Battout was not mentally sound enough to make a rational decision".

Indeed, what unfolded was more than just a misjudgment. It was a systematic failure to recognize and respond to a young man's psychological crisis, resulting in irreversible consequences.

Yusif went even further, raising a series of troubling questions: "The first incident ended with severe torture. But did Battout truly deserve such punishment? How did the camp leadership allow someone like Battout to carry a rifle loaded with live cartridges? Was this gross negligence or something more? Why couldn't the leadership detect his mental or

psychological problems in time?” These questions were left hanging in the air – unanswered, perhaps deliberately ignored, in a system where accountability rarely trickled upward.

What makes the situation even more baffling is that the students were able to detect that something was off about Battout from the start. They noticed that he wasn't mentally stable, especially not stable enough to be trusted with a loaded weapon.

Recognizing this danger, they devised a subtle test to check whether his rifle was truly loaded. They invented a scenario to trick Battout into removing the magazine and showing them the bullets. This simple, spontaneous strategy – devised by young students – proved that even the untrained eye could see what the leadership failed to see.

If the students could grasp the seriousness of Battout's condition, why couldn't the leadership? That question continues to haunt those who witnessed the incidents. Was the leadership genuinely unaware of Battout's fragile mental state? Or was it simply indifferent?

Hamza, posed the question bitterly: “How could the leadership, with all its experience and authority, fail to recognize Battout’s condition?”

Some students speculated that the leadership had, in fact, noticed the warning signs but chose to ignore them. Others pointed out the contradiction in the regime’s behavior.

In a country where the government claimed to know everything about its citizens – through its network of spies and informants – how could it fail to recognize that Battout was unfit for military service? Was this a genuine failure of intelligence? Or was Battout simply considered expendable in a system that placed little value on the lives of the vulnerable?

And then comes the most painful question of all: Who truly deserved punishment for what happened?

Was it Battout who carried out the attack? Or was it the camp leadership, who armed him with a loaded rifle and gave him responsibilities far beyond his mental capacity? Or perhaps it was the students who saw his instability and manipulated him with their own irresponsible behavior,

ultimately giving the order to shoot? Or does the ultimate blame lie with the regime itself – the very system that drafted Battout into the military?

There is no simple answer. Battout did pull the trigger. But to single him out as the sole culprit is to ignore the broader web of responsibility. He did not act alone. He was surrounded by people – students who played with his mental state, and officers who failed in their duty.

The rifle he held, loaded and ready, should never have been in his hands. That single decision – to issue a weapon to someone with clear signs of psychological or mental instability – was not made by Battout. It was made by those in charge.

In the aftermath of the first incident, Battout alone bore the consequences. He was subjected to severe torture. His body became the physical testimony of a system's failure. But while he was punished – harshly and publicly – those who shared in the responsibility walked away untouched.

There was no accountability for the leadership that armed him. No rebuke for the students who gave the order. No questions asked of the system that ignored clear red flags and allowed the situation to escalate.

Battout became the scapegoat – the sacrifice offered to protect the illusion of order and authority. In his suffering, he absorbed not only the guilt for his own actions but also the blame that should have been distributed among many others.

He carried the weight of his own confusion, the leadership's carelessness, the students' indifference, and the regime's cruelty.

He was, in a sense, a defender of all – punished so that others could remain unblemished. His punishment served as a convenient conclusion to an incident that no one wanted to fully investigate.

In the eyes of the system, torturing Battout was easier than confronting the uncomfortable truth: that the military, the camp, the students, and the regime had all failed.

Had justice been served fairly, a thorough investigation would have taken place? Responsibility would have been shared. Battout would have received medical treatment, not punishment.

The leadership would have been held accountable for its negligence. The students would have been reprimanded for their reckless behavior. And

the regime would have been forced to face its own contradiction – how it claims to know everything about its citizens yet couldn't – or wouldn't – recognize the danger it placed in the hands of a deeply troubled young man.

Instead, silence prevailed. Questions remained unanswered. The pain endured by Battout stood in for all the voices that had been silenced – by fear, by power, and by a system that punishes the weak to protect the strong.

“The first incident with Battout wasn't just a mistake on his part”, said Yusif. “It exposed something much bigger – a broken system. One where responsibility gets dodged, where mental health is ignored, and where injustice hides behind the word ‘discipline’”.

“Exactly”, said Mudhafar. “What happened wasn't just about one guy losing control – it was a full-blown failure of conscience and accountability. And we all watched it happen”.

“The leadership tried to act like they were doing something meaningful afterward. They formed so-called ‘investigative committee’, said Hamza,

to look into why Battout shot at the students”. “It sounded official – but it ended up being just for show”.

“Did anyone even hear back from that committee?” asked Yusif. “Any findings? Reports? Nothing. We, the ones actually affected by the shooting, were left in the dark”.

“That’s the thing. Either the committee found nothing – or worse, they found something and buried it to protect the higher-ups. Whatever it was, students were never meant to know”, added Mudhafar.

“And that’s when you realize the real goal wasn’t to solve anything. Keep it quiet. Move on. Pretend nothing ever happened”, said Ahmad A.

“But the worst part?” asked Yusif. “They re-armed Battout. Like – what were they thinking? He had already opened fire on students. Everyone knew he wasn’t stable. And they gave him a loaded rifle again!”

“It felt unreal. Like, is this a joke? Who in their right mind would sign off on that?” asked Mohammad

“It defied every rule of safety, every bit of military logic. But they still handed him the weapon – as if nothing had changed”, said Yusif.

“They didn’t even try to understand what was going on with him mentally. No evaluations, no real concern. Just a quick fix – move him to a new position, and problem solved, right?”, added Mudhafar.

“Yeah, they transferred him from the east side of the camp to the main gate. Like changing locations would magically fix everything”, said Mohammad.

“And the place they moved him to – was even more isolated from supervision. At least on the east side, he was far from the students’ tents. Now? He had direct contact with everyone coming in or out. No checks, no oversight”, said Ahmad A.

“It wasn’t just a bad decision. It was dangerous. They didn’t solve the problem – they just shifted it around and hoped it wouldn’t explode again”, Mohammad reacted.

By relocating him to the gate, the leadership believed they had found a great solution. This new position was physically distant from the students' area, reducing the likelihood of direct contact.

According to them, the problem wasn't Battout himself but the situation – his proximity to potential provocateurs. With that distance, they assumed peace would be restored.

But the move did not calm tensions; it only deepened the confusion. For many students, the relocation of Battout was not viewed as a precautionary or disciplinary measure – it seemed, in fact, like a promotion. His new position at the gate placed him at a more significant, strategic location. Rather than being sidelined or demoted, he appeared to be rewarded, perhaps even honored.

This is a clear contradiction – how could someone be tortured and rewarded at the same time? After all, Battout faced harsh punishment following the first incident, enduring a brutal phase of torture.

If the leadership truly believed he had done something wrong, why was he returned to duty at an even more important position, with the same

rifle? And if they believed he had done something right, then why had they tortured him so severely?

This ambiguous treatment of Battout reflected the chaotic logic of the system itself – a regime that punished and rewarded based not on justice, but convenience. The leadership’s choices weren’t guided by ethics, consistency, or medical understanding, but by fear of accountability.

Predictably, the relocation did not solve the problem. It merely relocated it.

At the gate, the ‘Battoutic volcano’ erupted once again – but this time, the consequences were even more dramatic, and the target was different. No longer in contact with students, Battout now found himself in contact with higher-ranking military personnel. And when his mental instability collided with unchecked authority and a loaded rifle, the result was explosive.

This time, his eruption was directed not at powerless students, but at the very heart of military authority. Battout confronted a Brigadier, a senior military officer, and what unfolded shocked everyone.

When Battout raised his rifle, it was not the mentally unstable person who appeared in that moment – but a man who, for a fleeting second, held more power than the system that had failed him.

The Brigadier froze, paralyzed with fear. The man who embodied the might of the military – uniformed, decorated, commanding – was suddenly rendered silent and motionless before Battout.

The rifle gave Battout a voice, a presence, and a power that no one could ignore. For those few moments, the hierarchy inverted. Authority belonged not to rank, but to whoever held the gun.

And the silence was deafening. The Brigadier didn't dare open his car door. He didn't shout commands or demand respect. He simply sat there, breathless and powerless, under the aim of a soldier who had long been dismissed as unstable.

It was a moment that symbolized a much larger truth about the regime itself: power in Syria does not lie in justice, law, or intellect – it lies in the barrel of a gun.

This disturbing episode was a direct result of the camp leadership's previous decisions. They had armed Battout. They had moved him to a more prominent position. They had chosen to ignore his mental condition. And now, faced with the consequences of their own choices, they were once again unprepared.

Eventually, the leadership snapped back into action. They disarmed Battout, bringing an end to his brief and terrifying show of strength. The Brigadier was 'rescued' from what could have been a far more tragic outcome.

But by then, the damage was already done – not physically, but symbolically. Battout had humiliated the military's top brass exposing their vulnerability and revealing just how fragile the illusion of control really was.

What followed next was another round of torture. Once disarmed, Battout lost his only shield – his rifle. Without it, he was once again reduced to a powerless figure, at the mercy of the same leadership that had enabled him in the first place.

And so began his second journey of pain, one far more brutal than the first, because this time, he had not just embarrassed students – he had humiliated power itself.

In many ways, the tragedy of Battout is a microcosm of the larger dysfunction in Syria. His story reveals how easily power can be misplaced, misunderstood, and abused. A mentally unfit man was handed a deadly weapon not once, but twice.

He was punished and promoted in the same breath. His breakdowns were ignored until they became dangerous crises. And when the system could no longer contain him, it turned on him with renewed violence.

The irony is cruel: when Battout had a weapon, he was feared, obeyed, and respected – even by the highest-ranking officers. But when he was disarmed, he was beaten, tortured, and discarded.

This reflects the core truth of the regime: power is not earned through integrity, competence, or rank – but by the force you can exert.

Battout was not simply a man with psychological issues. He became a symbol of systemic collapse, of a regime that ignores its own rules and

brutalizes those it fails to understand. His journey – from victim, to threat, to victim again – exposes the inherent contradictions of a government that claims to uphold order yet manufactures chaos through its every decision.

His second punishment, like the first, served no purpose other than to mask the leadership's own failure. Battout had only done what the system had trained him to do: follow orders, hold a rifle, and maintain control. He did that too effectively.

What remains is a chilling legacy: a young man broken not by war, but by those who claimed to lead him. A man who, in two violent acts, revealed a truth that no committee dared write down in its report: that in Syria, silence is enforced not through wisdom or justice, but by whoever dares to carry the gun.

Tameem once described the tragic fate of Battout in stark, haunting terms: “Battout was severely tortured following the second incident. In both accidents, he sacrificed for everyone – the students, the camp leadership, and the injustice of the regime that forced him into military service, even though he was legally eligible for exemption”.

His words captured the heart of the injustice surrounding Battout's experience: a man trapped in a corrupt, indifferent system, bearing the weight of collective failure and cruelty.

From the beginning, Battout's life was shaped by his poverty and by a regime that punished the powerless and protected the privileged. According to Syrian military law, Battout should have been pardoned from compulsory service due to his health issues. Yet, in a country where laws are applied selectively, Battout's rights were completely ignored.

“In corrupt countries, said Abdulrahman, the implementation of laws is never consistent. Laws are rigidly enforced on the poor, while the rich and well-connected enjoy endless exemptions”.

Battout's story was a perfect reflection of this system. He was denied the exemption that many others with better connections or more wealth easily secured. Instead of receiving care or protection, he was thrown into a military camp and armed, despite signs of some health problems that should have disqualified him from service entirely.

Mohammad added another painful layer to Battout's story: "Because he was poor, Battout had to join the armed forces. He was expected to understand everything and perform his duties precisely as the leadership wanted. But when he couldn't comprehend the complexities of military discipline or the true nature of his role, he was blamed. His limited understanding led him to carry out orders without question – even when those orders came from students".

Battout was not trained to question authority. Nor was he mentally prepared to handle the responsibilities given to him. After the first incident – when he had opened fire after being ordered by students – it was already obvious that he was unfit for service. And yet, no meaningful action was taken.

The leadership at the camp chose not to re-evaluate Battout's role or remove him from dangerous duties. They didn't investigate his mental state thoroughly, nor did they seek a long-term solution. Instead, they doubled down on their mistakes, re-arming him and placing him at the

main gate, a location of even greater importance than where the first incident occurred.

Their reasoning was clear, even though short-sighted. They believed moving him away from students would eliminate the risk. But as became evident, proximity wasn't the core issue – Battout's condition was.

After the second incident, the leadership once again resorted to violence rather than reflection. Battout was subjected to another round of torture, this time even more brutal than before. No one paused to ask: How could this have happened again?

No one from the leadership took responsibility for re-arming him or for their refusal to reassess the situation correctly after the first warning sign. Instead, they reverted to the regime's typical policy of blame and brutality – always directed at the weakest party involved.

The truth is that the leadership should have recognized Battout's condition after the first shooting. There were clear red flags. He acted not out of malice, but confusion and mental instability.

His behavior should have prompted an immediate reassessment of his role in the camp. But instead, the system – built on a foundation of carelessness and irresponsibility – chose to ignore the warning signs.

Their decisions were not unique. They mirrored the broader governmental policy, which consistently failed to deal with real problems, opting instead to blame the poor and vulnerable for systemic failures. The regime's structure was never designed to protect individuals like Battout. It was built to exploit them.

Thus, the second incident was not an unpredictable surprise – it was an inevitable outcome of deliberate neglect. And while Battout did attack a Brigadier, arguably one of the most serious offenses a soldier could commit, the deeper blame lay with those who enabled him, ignored his condition, and armed him after already witnessing his instability.

Despite the severity of his second mistake, Battout did not deserve the torture that followed. And certainly, the leadership had no right to shift all the blame onto him while avoiding any accountability themselves.

But this is exactly what happened. Instead of admitting their missteps – arming a mentally unfit soldier, ignoring medical assessments, failing to respond after the first incident – they chose the easy path: scapegoating.

Battout, by now clearly suffering from psychological conditions that impaired his judgment, was punished as if he had complete control over his actions. Yet, his mental state rendered him incapable of learning from the first incident. He didn't possess the psychological stability to process trauma, reflect on events, and change behavior.

Indeed, both Battout and the leadership were caught in a vicious cycle of repetition without reflection. Battout, tragically, committed another fatal error. And the leadership, perhaps more culpable, made a decision even more disastrous than before by re-arming a man they had previously tortured for his earlier actions.

This mutual failure to learn led to catastrophe. And then, suddenly, Battout vanished.

After the second incident and the renewed round of punishment, he disappeared, and no one seemed to know what had happened to him.

Students were left in the dark. Rumors circulated, but no official information was shared.

It was as if the regime had quietly erased him – disposed of the problem instead of dealing with its root causes.

Battout's disappearance was not just a disappearance of a man – it was a symbolic erasure of responsibility. His absence allowed the leadership to move forward without facing consequences, and without having to acknowledge the brutal consequences of their negligence.

Battout was not merely a tragic figure – he became the scapegoat for an entire system's dysfunction. Everyone – students, officers, leaders, and military authority – had used him in one way or another. They used him to assert control, to deflect blame, and to preserve their image. And once he could no longer serve that purpose, they cast-off him.

His suffering, and his eventual erasure, reflected the fate of countless others under the regime: the poor, the mentally ill, the voiceless. In Syria, those who can't defend themselves are not protected – they are punished.

Battout's life, and the way it ended in silence and ambiguity, was the natural result of a system designed not for justice or care, but for control and convenience.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy is not that Battout made mistakes – but that his mistakes were orchestrated, enabled, and then used against him. He was a man failed at every level: by law, by leadership, and by a society that saw his suffering not as a call for help, but as a nuisance to be silenced.

Battout's story is not just his own. It is the story of what happens when institutions are corrupt, when laws are selectively applied, and when the vulnerable are used as shields for the powerful.

He was tortured, silenced, and then disappeared – but his story endures as a warning, a reflection of a system where the weakest always pays the price for the mistakes of the strongest.

Chapter Seven

Academic Track to Graduation

1999 – 2002

After the turbulence of the summer camp, students returned to their respective universities, ready to embark on a new chapter in their academic journey. The chaos and stress of the camp had left a mark on everyone, but it also taught them valuable lessons about endurance, teamwork, the power of shared struggle, and some experiences that would never ever be forgotten.

With a new academic year ahead, they were determined to turn over a new leaf, focusing on their goals and channeling their energy into building a brighter, more stable future.

Unlike the challenging and often disorderly days of the summer camp, the university semesters ran more smoothly. The students enrolled in a variety

of courses and training programs as per the majors that they had already chosen.

The transition from camp to campus was like moving from stormy seas to calmer waters. They had a more systematic life, clearer objectives, and a renewed focus.

Despite the smoother rhythm, the students didn't forget the hard-earned lessons of the camp. Rather, they used those lessons as fuel. They worked diligently, studied consistently, and left behind the anxiety and unpredictability that had plagued their summer.

Though the memories lingered, they were now motivators rather than burdens – reminders of how far they had come and what they were capable of overcoming.

One afternoon, as the semester was drawing to a close, a group of them gathered in the common study area. The conversation turned reflective, as it often did after long study sessions.

Mohammad, with a proud smile, broke the silence. “Our efforts paid off, didn't they? One semester after another, we kept moving forward”.

He looked around the room at his friends. “It wasn’t an easy road, but we made it. I think what helped us most was the cooperation – sharing advice, resources, and study materials. It made even the toughest tasks more manageable”.

Yasser nodded in agreement. “Absolutely. Cooperation was the key. It turned the mountain of challenges into something we could actually climb. I don’t think I could have done as well as I did without the help you all provided. Sharing notes, assisting each other – it wasn’t just helpful, it was essential”.

Ibraheem, leaning back in his chair with a quiet confidence, chuckled. “You’re both right... well, partially”.

[*Everyone turned toward him, curious*]. “I know working together helped many of us”, he continued. “But I preferred to go through alone. I focused deeply, pushed myself, and worked harder than I ever had. I wanted to prove something to myself. My goal was to achieve high scores to become one day a judge ‘ a member of the judge’s club’. That’s my dream”.

[*Yusif gave Ibraheem a pat on the back*]. “You totally deserve that, Ibraheem. Your dedication has been inspiring. Keep pushing like that, and I have no doubt you’ll make it. Just don’t forget us when you’re in the courtroom!” He grinned.

“Actually, if you do become a judge, you owe me a gravel”, added Yusif.

“I will provide you with one to knock on the desk when giving verdicts!”

Ibraheem [*laughed, nodding*]. “Okay then, I will be waiting for your gravel!”

Hamza, who had been quietly flipping through a notebook, chimed in with a grin. “Just make sure you knock softly. I really don’t like loud noises”.

Ibraheem winked. “That depends on the situation. When justice calls, even the knock must be firm!” [*The room erupted with laughter*]. The stress of academics faded away, replaced by the comfort of friendship and shared dreams.

Although each student had his own path, specialization, and learning style, one thing they all came to appreciate was the power of mutual support – especially when living and studying away from home.

They had formed an informal network of academic support. When Ahmad, who was majoring in Arabic literature, struggled with English courses, he turned to Yusif, a student of English literature, for help. Yusif would patiently explain grammar rules, assist with vocabulary, and review assignments with him.

In turn, when Yusif or Emad needed help to understand the Arabic syntax or classical poetry, Ahmad, along with Mohammad and Yasser, stepped in. They would spend hours reviewing texts, translating difficult phrases, and preparing for exams together.

This dynamic extended to all students, regardless of their major. Whether it was law, science, or literature, there was always someone willing to lend a hand. This spirit of collaboration allowed them to tackle difficult courses more effectively than they could have alone.

And the support didn't stop at academics.

Since they were all far from home, they decided to live in the same neighborhood – some even in the same apartment. This not only helped reduce living costs but also fostered a sense of community.

They shared responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, and budgeting, which created a rhythm to their days and brought a sense of stability. They would often walk to class together, discussing lectures, quizzes, or simply the ups and downs of student life.

Their cohabitation further strengthened their cooperation. If one student had a late-night project or exam preparation, others would contribute – either by offering support or simply making sure the environment was quiet and convenient for study.

They were more than just roommates or classmates; they had become a tightly knit group that worked like a well-oiled machine. It wasn't always smooth – there were occasional disagreements, of course – but the mutual respect and shared goals always brought them back together.

Through their dedication, collaboration, and resilience, the students managed not only to keep up with the demands of university life but to excel. Each exam passed, each course completed, each challenge overcome added a brick to the foundation they were building for their future careers.

More importantly, their friendships and shared experiences taught them lessons no textbook could. They learned how to lean on each other, how to support those in need, and how to lead when required. They understood the value of empathy and teamwork in a way that would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

As the final exams approached and graduation drew nearer, a quiet sense of pride settled among them. The laughter and casual banter that once filled their evenings were now laced with a deeper understanding – of who they were, what they had achieved, and where they were going.

Each of them carried a different dream: Ibraheem, with his goal of becoming a respected judge; Yusif, with his passion for languages and literature; Ahmad and Mohammad, who saw themselves one day shaping the minds of future generations as educators; and the rest, each with his own ambition, quietly growing stronger with every step forward.

And though they would soon part ways, heading into the world to carve their own paths, one truth remained: the chaotic summer camp that once seemed like a trial had become the foundation of something far greater. It

strengthened friendships, inspired growth, and reminded them that with effort, cooperation, and a bit of laughter, even the roughest beginnings can lead to the brightest futures.

The academic year 2002 marked a turning point in the lives of the group who had spent years studying, supporting each other, and growing into adulthood. It was not just another academic year – it was a year that held a unique significance, etched forever in their memories. It was the year they graduated from college.

For each of them, graduation was a milestone that brought with it a mixture of emotions: pride, relief, nostalgia, and a touch of apprehension about the unknown road ahead. They had completed one of the most defining stages of their lives, the journey through higher education, and in doing so, they stepped onto the threshold of a new world: the professional stage.

Whether they planned to enter the workforce immediately, pursue further education, or balance both paths at once, one thing was certain: the world had changed for them, and so had their responsibilities.

Graduation brought with it a deep sense of satisfaction. Years of sleepless nights, stressful exams, group projects, and demanding professors had finally borne fruit. For some, it was the realization of childhood dreams. For others, it was a necessary step toward even greater ambitions.

Yet, they all recognized that this achievement, as sweet and fulfilling as it was, was only the beginning of something far more complex.

Tameem, always thoughtful and pragmatic, shared his reflections during one of their final gatherings before everyone began to go their separate ways. “The end of our studies”, he said, “means a new beginning. We can’t afford to be lazy anymore. If we want to maintain our success, we need to be serious, take initiative, and seek job opportunities that align with our majors – whether here in Syria or abroad. In fact, if we manage to secure jobs overseas, it might be even better. Right now, it seems that good opportunities are easier to find outside the country”.

His words struck a chord with everyone. The reality was clear: while graduation had given them a new credential, it didn’t guarantee a smooth path forward, especially not in the socio-political climate they were living

in. Syria, at the time, was a place where merit often took a back seat to connections, cronyism, and nepotism. For young people with dreams and degrees, the struggle was far from over.

Ahmad A. leaned back in his chair, a nostalgic smile crossing his face. “You know”, he said, “academic life was bittersweet. It had moments of joy, laughter, friendship, and small victories. But it also had moments of hardship, nights of intense study, stress before exams. Yet, when we graduated, all of it became a beautiful memory. We’ll carry those memories with us for the rest of our lives. The struggle made it meaningful. I liked it, because it challenged us. We grew stronger because of it”.

Abdulrahman nodded, a hint of melancholy in his eyes. “It’s strange”, he said. “Now that it’s over, I find myself missing even the little things, even the silly incidents we used to call ‘Battoutic moments’ back then. Those were fantastic days. But now, life is different. We’re adults now. We need to be responsible and search for the right jobs. That’s not an easy task.

This new stage ahead of us won't be simple. It's going to be filled with trials and challenges we haven't faced before".

They all sat in silence for a moment, each lost in thought. The sense of transition was noticeable. Life was moving forward, whether they were ready or not.

Tameem broke the silence. "Still", he said, "those hard moments we went through, when they ended in success, they became some of the most valuable memories we have. That feeling of achieving something after so much effort, that's what stays with us. It's unforgettable. We remember the exhaustion, yes, but we also remember the triumph. Completing a bachelor's degree in Syria, as you know, is not a small feat".

Ahmad A. agreed. "Graduation is a great achievement, no doubt. But it also opens the door to the next challenge, finding the right job, building a career, and, for some of us, even continuing our education. That's where we really have to prove ourselves".

While each of them had different dreams, some aiming to continue to postgraduate studies, others hoping to dive straight into the workforce,

and a few hoping to find a balance between the two, they all knew that the next chapter would test them in ways university never could.

However, there was another truth they couldn't ignore, no matter how motivated they were. They were living in a country where hard work and excellence were not always rewarded. Syria at the time was deeply entangled in a web of injustice and inequality. Nepotism, favoritism, and social connections often mattered more than academic achievement or talent.

In such an environment, the idea that one could simply succeed by being the best or by working the hardest seemed painfully naive. The system did not always recognize merit. In fact, for many of them, it seemed that excellence only mattered when it was accompanied by the right last name, political connection, or family background.

This realization was bitter for students who had spent years pouring themselves into their education. They had hoped that their degrees would open doors, but those doors often remained closed to those without

influence. For some, this created frustration and disillusionment. For others, it became a challenge to overcome.

They began to seek opportunities in neighboring countries and further abroad. They learned new languages, adapted their resumes, and contacted friends and relatives overseas. While local opportunities were often limited or reserved for the well-connected, international prospects – though competitive – were more merit-based. The global job market, in many ways, offered the fairness that their homeland lacked.

At the same time, a few of them stayed behind, determined to change things from within. They believed in building a better future for the next generation of students, even if the system didn't make it easy. They started teaching or working in other fields.

Despite the challenges, they remained proud of their achievements. The friendships they formed, the lessons they learned, and the values they carried with them became their armor in a world that often felt unfair and unpredictable.

For this group of friends, 2002 was more than just a year of graduation. It was a symbol of growth, of struggle, of unity. They had entered university as students, full of questions and uncertainties. They left as adults, still uncertain, but with experience, resilience, and a sense of identity shaped by the road they had walked together.

In the years following their graduation, Syrian university students found themselves confronting a reality harsher than the academic challenges they had once believed were the greatest obstacles they would face.

For many of them, completing their studies had once symbolized hope, a gateway to a better life, professional achievement, and the opportunity to contribute to their country. But what waited for them after graduation was something else entirely: a system mired in corruption, inequality, and stagnation.

Ahmad T. put it bluntly during a candid conversation with his friends: “Challenges were everywhere”, he said. “And things only got worse. The rapid spread of corruption made everything more complicated. It was as

if corruption had invaded every corner of Syria, as if the regime itself wasn't just tolerating it, but using it as a tool to maintain control”.

It wasn't a theory; it was their lived reality. Opportunities weren't just scarce; they were strategically kept out of reach. Those with family ties, influence, or the right political connections secured the best positions in both the public and private sector.

The rest or the ordinary people, hard-working, and educated citizens, were left scrambling for whatever remained. Often, that meant being forced into underpaid roles or entirely excluded from the job market.

Abdulrahman, echoing the frustration shared by many in their circle, responded with determination in equal measure. “This is exactly why we have to start looking beyond our borders”, he said. “The local job market doesn't meet our ambitions or match our qualifications. We can't wait around for things to change we have to be proactive and seek better opportunities abroad”.

“Promotions, hiring, even the allocation of internships or training programs, all were often handled not on the basis of merit, but on the

strength of one's connections", added Mohammad. "Job announcements were frequently just formalities; the positions had already been promised long before applications opened".

For graduates without powerful family names or connections, the doors remained firmly shut. There was no upward mobility, no room to grow based on effort or achievement. It was a rigged game.

In this climate, being educated and capable wasn't enough. It almost felt like a liability, because ambition, when trapped in a society with no outlet, only led to frustration and hopelessness.

These young men, like thousands of others, began to look elsewhere, not because they didn't love their country, but because their country had stopped offering them a future.

Faced with these systemic challenges, their options were few. And so, like many Syrian graduates of their generation, they turned their eyes abroad. There, beyond the grip of corruption and nepotism, lay a glimmer of hope, a chance to start again, to grow, to work in an environment where qualifications, experience, and professionalism were respected.

The Gulf countries, in particular, emerged as the most attractive destination.

There were many reasons for this. Firstly, the Gulf states like Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE offered a high demand for skilled labor, particularly in education, engineering, medicine, and IT. These economies were growing, modernizing, and in need of young professionals.

Secondly, they weren't geographically far. Relocating to the Gulf didn't mean being cut off from home forever. Travel between Syria and the Gulf was relatively easy and affordable. Family ties could still be maintained, and the idea of returning one day remained a possibility.

Culturally, too, the Gulf states felt familiar. They shared language, religion, and many traditions with Syria. This made integration easier. Unlike Western countries where cultural adaptation could be a significant barrier, life in the Gulf felt less foreign, more like an extension of the Arab world which they had always known.

Still, leaving was not an easy choice. It was never the dream to flee home in search of dignity. These graduates had entered university full of hope

to one day contribute to their homeland, to build something meaningful within its borders. But the system left them with no real choice. In Syria, they were invisible. Abroad, at least they had a chance to be seen.

Instead of giving their energy to develop Syria's economy, education system, or infrastructure, they found themselves drafting CVs, applying for work visas, and preparing for a new life far from the families and communities that had shaped them. It was a sacrifice – but a necessary one.

What made it more painful was knowing that it didn't have to be this way. Syria had no shortage of bright minds, of capable and passionate young people. But the environment made it nearly impossible for them to thrive. The few who succeeded locally were very lucky. For the rest, the choice was stark: accept marginalization at home or build a future abroad.

For many, the Gulf became more than a job market; it became a symbol of fairness and potential. There, they could prove themselves based on their abilities. They could grow professionally, support their families, and gain the financial and social stability denied to them in their homeland.

Thousands of Syrians, especially from the educated middle class, made the move. Teachers, engineers, doctors, technicians, and business graduates, all looking for a fair shot. Many would later find success, start families, and even send remittances back home to support relatives still trapped in a broken system.

But even as they moved forward, they carried with them a quiet sadness, a lingering grief for the life they had once dreamed of living inside Syria.

They hadn't turned their backs on their country. Their country had simply stopped giving them a place in its future.

While many of their peers were focused on job applications and making plans to leave Syria, two students – Ghannam and Mudhafar, both studying medicine at Damascus University – were navigating a different course. Rather than looking outward just yet, they chose to stay and continue their studies. Medicine in Syria, as in most countries, demanded longer time and endurance than other fields. Their academic journey was far from over.

Ghannam and Mudhafar were in the middle of a demanding six-year program just to obtain their basic medical degrees. Upon completion, they would still need to invest at least two more years to specialize in a specific area of medicine. It was a long, intense path filled with sleepless nights, grueling clinical rotations, and relentless exams. Yet, both were determined.

Despite their workload, the two remained connected to their wider circle of friends, who had completed their degrees and were now beginning the next phase of their lives.

One evening, after a casual get-together to celebrate recent graduations, Ghannam turned to his friends with a warm but slightly weary smile. “Listen guys”, he said. “You’ve just completed your bachelor’s studies, and that’s a huge accomplishment. But for us, it’s far from over, we still have a long way to go”.

He paused and added sincerely, “We wish you the best of luck and every success in whatever paths you choose”.

Mudhafar nodded in agreement. “Yes, it’s a long journey, but one day it will come to an end. A few more years, and we’ll join you in ‘the club of graduates’”. He chuckled. “Until then, we’ll keep working, and we truly wish you all the best in the world”.

Their words were met with supportive smiles and good-natured jokes, but beneath the lightheartedness was a shared understanding: each of them was doing what they had to do to secure their futures in a country where uncertainty had become the norm.

For the rest of the group – Yusif, Emad, Hamza, and Abdulhameed – graduation had ignited a different kind of urgency. With their degrees in hand, they were now racing against time to find work outside Syria. It wasn’t just about career growth or higher salaries. It was about survival, evading a corrupt bureaucratic system, avoiding stagnation, and most importantly, getting rid of compulsory military service.

Military conscription loomed like a dark cloud over every young Syrian man. The regime had instituted a policy requiring all males to join the military at the age of 18, or immediately after university graduation for

students. For many, this wasn't just an interruption in their lives, it was a direct threat to their future and professional lives.

Corruption, limited job prospects, and the possibility of being drafted into an uncertain and dangerous military service left young graduates with few viable options. The best, and sometimes only, way out was to go abroad.

If a young man left the country and obtained an overseas work permit, the Syrian government offered an exemption from military service – for a price. By paying a ‘military service exemption fee’ of USD 5,000, they could officially avoid conscription. For those who could manage to earn this money, it became their ticket to freedom.

For Yusif and his friends, the path forward was increasingly clear. With few opportunities at home and the threat of military service looming, they began to consider their next steps seriously. When they found that local job prospects failed to meet their aspirations, they saw only one real option to leave Syria behind.

Several of the group had relatives – in Kuwait and other Gulf states – who had already established themselves, and those countries were known for

their relatively high demand for educated expatriates, especially in sectors like education, and administration.

Yusif and Emad were the first to make the leap. With the help of relatives and determination, they managed to secure good job opportunities and relocated to Kuwait. For them, it was a significant step forward, not only did they escape military service, but they also gained professional footholds that could support their long-term plans.

Back in Syria, Hamza and Abdulhameed were not far behind. Inspired by their friends' success and motivated by the same pressures, they began to prepare for their own departures. But for Abdulhameed, there was a small delay, he had just begun a master's program in Syria, and he was committed to completing it before moving abroad. The program would take two years, and he decided it was worth investing the time now for better opportunities later.

Hamza, on the other hand, wasted no time. He followed in Yusif and Emad's footsteps and began the process of securing the paperwork and connections needed to travel to Kuwait. His goal, like theirs, was to find

stability, build a future, and avoid the pitfalls that had become all too common in Syria.

Meanwhile, Ghannam and Mudhafar continued their medical studies, fully aware of what was happening around them especially the rest of the journey that they should have completed.

What happened to this group of friends was not unique, it was a reflection of a broader generational story. Across Syria, young men and women were making similar choices every day.

The tragedy was that these weren't students looking to run away from responsibility. On the contrary, they were among the country's educated, driven, and full of potential young men. What they lacked was a system that recognized and rewarded that potential. And so, one by one, they left, not because they wanted to abandon their homeland, but because they felt abandoned by it.

As Yusif, Emad, Hamza, and soon Abdulhameed settled into new roles in Kuwait, they remained in contact with their other colleagues. They stayed connected not only by friendship but by the shared memory of what they'd

gone through together, and by the unshakable hope that, one day, the country, Syria, they dreamed of might become a reality.

Until then, they would chase opportunity wherever it existed, carrying their skills, dreams, and loyalty with them, even far from home.

Chapter Eight

Business Life

2003 – 2007

After completing their studies, Yusif, Emad, and Hamza embarked on a new chapter of their lives by relocating to Kuwait. Although they had limited professional experience in Syria, they managed to secure good jobs at various institutions in Kuwait. This marked the beginning of their professional careers, and despite facing initial challenges, they quickly adapted to the demands of the workplace.

While they had worked in Syria, their employment history there was brief and not extensive enough to be considered significant by Kuwaiti standards. As a result, one of their main challenges was compensating for this lack of experience in a competitive professional environment.

To address this gap, the three young men committed themselves to working harder and putting in extra effort to keep pace with their more

experienced colleagues. They understood that success in a new environment would require determination, dedication, and resilience. Fortunately, all three were active, motivated, and adaptable individuals, traits that proved essential in overcoming obstacles and thriving in their new roles.

They approached their responsibilities with enthusiasm and an eagerness to learn. Rather than being discouraged by their inexperience, they viewed every task as a learning opportunity. Over time, they began to build their skills, gain confidence, and demonstrate their capabilities. Their commitment to professional growth and flexibility helped them meet the expectations of their employers and integrate smoothly into the Kuwaiti workplace culture.

Emad reflected on their experience by saying, “Life in Kuwait was fantastic, and we didn’t feel major changes compared to our life in Syria”.

This sentiment was echoed by Hamza, who emphasized the cultural similarities between Kuwait and some parts of Syria. “There’s a big similarity between the two environments, especially Kuwait and the

eastern region of Syria. The clan-based lifestyles in eastern Syria are quite similar to those of the Gulf region”, he explained. “These cultural parallels played a key role in making the transition easier for us”.

Yusif added another perspective, referring to the presence of family connections in Kuwait. “We had many relatives living in Kuwait even before we arrived”, said Yusif. “So, the changes were not overwhelming for us. We adapted quickly because we were entering an environment that, in many ways, already felt familiar”.

This familial support proved invaluable. When the trio arrived in Kuwait, they were warmly welcomed by their relatives, who not only offered moral support but also practical assistance, especially in the early days when they were searching for jobs.

Emad elaborated on this, “Our relatives were waiting for us when we arrived and played an essential role in helping us get settled. They helped us with everything, from navigating the job market to understanding how things work in Kuwait”.

This kind of support system often makes a significant difference for newcomers, particularly in foreign environments where even simple daily tasks can be overwhelming at first.

These factors – cultural similarities, pre-existing family connections, and early support – were helpful in their successful adaptation. Not everyone who moves abroad has the benefit of such favorable conditions. In fact, some young graduates who relocate to foreign countries, especially Western ones, face much more critical challenges.

The stark contrast between Eastern and Western cultures can be shaking. Many struggle to adapt to the different lifestyles, work ethics, and societal norms, which can lead to isolation, frustration, and even failure in their professional or personal lives.

In such cases, adaptation becomes not just a matter of comfort but of survival. Failing to integrate into a new environment during these formative stages of adulthood can have long-lasting consequences, sometimes shaping the course of a person's life in irreversible ways. On the other hand, successful adaptation can pave the way for a fulfilling and

prosperous future. It opens doors to career growth, financial stability, and personal development.

Yusif, Emad, and Hamza's stories are examples of how determination, support, and cultural familiarity can lead to a smooth and successful transition. They took advantage of the opportunities presented to them, worked hard to overcome the challenges they faced, and built the foundation for a strong professional future in Kuwait.

They weren't the only ones who made such a move. Several other young men from their former academic group also relocated to Kuwait and found meaningful employment. Ahmad Al-Abdullah, Tameem, Ahmad Al-Tarrak, Yasser, and Abdulrahman were among those who were recruited by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education later. Like their peers, they were thrilled with the opportunity to work in Kuwait, especially in such a respected and stable sector.

Securing these positions was not a small achievement. Each of them had invested years of effort in their academic careers, studying diligently in their respective fields with the hope that it would one day pay off. Their

journey had not been easy, they had faced financial constraints, academic pressures, and moments of uncertainty. But their perseverance bore fruit when they were offered positions that matched their qualifications and ambitions.

The opportunity to work at the Ministry of Education was especially rewarding. Not only did it offer them financial stability, but it also provided a sense of purpose and contribution. Education is a respected profession, in the world, and being part of a system that shapes future generations was both an honor and a responsibility.

For Ahmad A., Yasser, and the others, this was the kind of opportunity they had envisioned during their university years, a job that aligned with their academic background and offered a room for growth.

Their stories mirror the journey of many young people from Syria and other parts of the region who, driven by aspiration and necessity – leave their home countries in search of better opportunities.

What sets these individuals apart is not just their ambition, but also their ability to persevere through challenges and make the most of the

circumstances they are given. They represent a generation that refuses to be defeated by setbacks and instead turns obstacles into steppingstones toward success.

The successful integration of Yusif, Emad, Hamza, Ahmad A., Tameem, Ahmad T., Yasser, and Abdulrahman into the Kuwaiti workforce – and the similar achievements of their peers – demonstrate that with the right mix of determination, adaptability, and support, young professionals can overcome initial disadvantages such as limited experience.

The presence of family connections, cultural familiarity, and professional opportunities all played a role in smoothing their transition. But ultimately, it was their own hard work and willingness to grow that made the biggest difference. Their journeys are a testament to the power of resilience and the importance of seizing opportunities when they arise.

Following in the footsteps of his friends, Abdulhameed also decided to seek a better future abroad. He traveled to Kuwait, after obtaining his master's degree in 2005, and was fortunate enough to obtain a promising job opportunity, marking a significant step forward in his life. With

Abdulhameed's successful relocation, the circle of friends who had ventured abroad had now all secured stable and convenient employment. This marked the realization of the first part of their collective aspirations, finding respectable, and reliable jobs in a safe and stable country.

However, while most of the friends had chosen to travel abroad for better prospects, a few decided to stay in Syria and build their lives there. Among them were Falah, Ahmad J., Basel, and Nader. They found local employment and settled into different roles within the Syrian job market. Each had their own reasons for staying behind, but Ahmad's was perhaps the most sentimental. He was deeply attached to his hometown and had always struggled with being away from it.

Even during his study in Damascus, Ahmad was homesick. He often longed for the comfort and familiarity of his home environment. His conversations frequently included the phrase "We would travel back soon", a clear indication of his desire to return home at the earliest opportunity.

To him, studying in the capital was more of a duty than a dream, something to be completed quickly so he could return to the place he truly belonged. His heart remained tethered to his hometown, and that emotional connection shaped many of his life decisions.

The other friends who left Syria also continued to remember their hometown and miss the mazing times they spent there. “Even after we settled in Kuwait and started our careers, Syria never really left us”, said Yusif.

“We might’ve been working decent jobs and living comfortably, but nothing could replace home”, added Emad. “I used to miss everything – the people, the smells, the food... even the dust in the air.”

“And the families, the warmth”, Yasser reacted. “No matter how well things were going in Kuwait, I always felt this ache to go back, even just for a little while.”

“That’s why summer vacations became so sacred”, said Tameem. “We’d spend the whole year counting down to those trips back to Syria.”

“Absolutely”, Yusif agreed. “The trip itself was half the joy. That overland route from Kuwait to Al-Qouraya – man, it became our tradition. A real ritual.”

“It was long, sure – what, 2,000 kilometers total? But it never felt like a burden”, Emad explained. “There was something magical about it. Leaving from Jahra, hitting the Kuwait-Saudi border... you could feel the excitement building with every mile.”

“I remember the towns like a checklist – Hafr Al-Batin, Rafha, Arar, then Haditha”, Yusif recalled. “That last one before Jordan always felt like a milestone.”

“By then we’d already driven through most of Saudi, around 1,100 kilometers, right?” Yasser asked. “Then came the Jordan stretch – another 200 or so to the Syrian border.”

“And once we crossed into Syria...”, Yusif said, his voice softening. “That final 600 kilometers to Al-Qouraya felt like a dream. Tiring, sure, but also uplifting. We were finally home.”

“Border delays, checkpoints, traffic – it didn’t matter”, Emad shrugged. “Even if it took us 24 hours straight, we never complained. We were fueled by the anticipation.”

“Those road trips were more than just travel”, Tameem reflected. “They were... a return. A reconnection. Physically, emotionally, mentally – we were going back to where we belong.”

“I still remember the feeling of arriving – seeing the towns, hearing the familiar voices, eating home-cooked meals”, Yasser smiled. “Life slowed down, in the best way possible.”

“And then, just like that, the few weeks would fly by”, Yusif said with a nod. “But we’d return to Kuwait recharged. Not just rested – restored.”

“Exactly”, Emad said quietly. “It was like those summers gave us the strength to face another year of work, deadlines, and distance.”

“And even now, when I think back on those trips...”, said Tameem, “it’s not just nostalgia. It’s pride. That we never let go of where we came from.”

“Syria wasn’t just a place – it was part of us”, Yasser concluded. “Still is.”

During 2005 and 2007, while many of his friends were building careers abroad, Ibraheem was navigating his path in Syria. In 2005, he joined the

Higher Judicial Institute, a prestigious institution in Syria established to train law graduates and prepare them for judicial roles.

Gaining admission to the institute was a competitive process, and completing the program was not an easy phase. Yet, Ibraheem took on the challenge with the same dedication and perseverance that had defined his academic and personal journey.

For two years, he immersed himself in rigorous legal training, studying laws, ethics, judicial practices, and case analysis. It was an intense and demanding program that required deep focus. But Ibraheem was up to the task. By 2007, he had successfully graduated from the institute, armed with the credentials and knowledge to serve in Syria's judiciary.

Shortly after completing his studies, Ibraheem was appointed as a judge – a role that carried immense responsibility and honor. His appointment was not just a personal triumph, but also a source of pride for his friends and community.

Becoming a judge had been Ibraheem's long-standing dream, and seeing it come to fruition was a moment of collective celebration. For those who

knew him, it was no surprise. His calm demeanor, analytical mind, and sense of justice had long hinted at his suitability for such a role.

At the time of Ibraheem's graduation and appointment, Yusif was still living and working in Kuwait. The two friends, despite being in different countries, maintained their bond. An amusing and heartfelt memory from that period involves a gravel that Yusif had promised to hand over to Ibraheem as part of a long-standing joke.

To this day, Ibraheem still owes Yusif that gravel, a light-hearted reminder of their enduring friendship and the shared stories that continue to connect them despite the distance.

In reflecting on these intertwined lives, it becomes clear how each friend navigated the transitional phase between education and professional life differently. Some sought opportunities abroad, escaping military conscription and embracing the financial security of foreign employment. Others stayed behind, driven by emotional bonds or personal dreams, choosing to serve and contribute from within their homeland.

These young men – Yusif, Abdulhameed, Emad, Hamza, Ahmad, Ibraheem, Yasser, and others – represent a generation that faced immense challenges but never lost sight of their aspirations. They carved out their futures through a combination of effort, luck, and loyalty to one another. Whether on long road trips home, in courtrooms, classrooms, or offices, they remained bound by shared experiences and unshakable friendships that continue to shape their lives up to date.

However, life in Kuwait is characterized by its fast pace and constant demands. For the group of friends who had once enjoyed a tightly knit and social lifestyle back in Syria, adapting to the busy and often isolating routine in Kuwait was a significant shift.

In Syria, they had lived in the same town and shared daily experiences. Even during their university years in Damascus, they often lived in the same apartment or at least in nearby flats, which made it easy to spend time together, study, or simply gather for meals and conversations.

That closeness was an essential part of their youth, but things changed when they moved to Kuwait. There, life took on a different rhythm, one

governed by work responsibilities, long commutes, and geographic distance.

They settled in different parts of the country based on their job locations. With full-time jobs occupying the majority of their days, and with evening hours often spent on personal commitments or rest, they found it increasingly difficult to maintain the same level of social interaction they once enjoyed.

This shift in lifestyle naturally had an impact on their friendships. The once-daily interactions turned into occasional phone calls or messages. Their social circles shrank as the realities of adult life – work pressure, personal goals, and physical distance – took precedence.

Only a few of them, typically those who lived near each other or shared common interests, were able to maintain regular contact. For the rest, communication had decreased but never ended. Sometimes, when a group of them discuss a certain issue in Kuwait other ones might participate on WhatsApp from other countries like Qatar.

Anyway, such a transformation wasn't entirely surprising. In a country like Kuwait, where work and economic stability are highly valued, social life, in turn, is affected. The country's fast-paced professional culture leaves little time for leisure or spontaneous gatherings.

Nevertheless, the friends didn't let this reality fully take over their bonds. They made efforts – whenever possible – to defy the constraints of busy schedules and find time for one another.

Social occasions played a big role in keeping their connections alive. Weddings, in particular, became important events where they could reunite. Since they were related either by blood or by long-standing friendship, a wedding celebration often meant an open invitation to all.

These events, filled with joy and tradition, provided a valuable opportunity to reconnect, share stories, and relive memories, even if only for a few hours.

At these gatherings, conversations naturally turned to the past. They reminisced about their university days, a period they all remembered with fondness despite its challenges. Studying in Damascus had not been easy

– many late nights, hard exams, and financial pressures marked that phase of their lives. But those difficulties had brought them closer together.

Now, looking back, they realized that those years, filled with both struggle and laughter, were among the best times of their lives.

It's a common human sentiment: the hardships of the past often become cherished memories in the present. The long nights of studying, the shared meals of simple food, the discussions about the future – all those experiences had bonded them deeply.

Without those trials, they might not have achieved the success they enjoy now. That contrast – the sweetness of the present built on the bitterness of the past – was a recurring theme in their conversations.

Aside from weddings and formal gatherings, some of the friends also found another way to maintain their bonds: through sports. A number of them shared a passion for volleyball and football, and these hobbies became a means of regular interaction.

Whenever their schedules allowed, they would gather to play, reliving not just the energy of youth but the companionship that had always defined their friendships.

Yusif, Abdulrahman, Ahmad T., Ahmad A., Yasser, and Emad were among the most active in organizing and participating in these games. Depending on their availability, they would either meet weekly or monthly. The frequency wasn't as important as the quality of time they spent together. Playing sports allows them to relax, stay healthy, and most importantly, stay connected.

These games weren't just about physical activity – they were moments of shared joy. Laughter, friendly competition, and informal chats made these sessions more than just exercise.

Despite their jobs and responsibilities, these moments reminded them that friendship could still thrive in a demanding environment, as long as there was a genuine desire to keep it alive.

Even when they couldn't meet in person, many of them tried to stay in touch through calls or messages, especially during holidays or significant

life events. Eid holidays, for example, were another opportunity for reconnecting, even if just through greetings and voice messages. Though digital communication couldn't replace face-to-face interaction, it served as a bridge – maintaining the bond until the next real meeting.

Their story reflects a broader reality experienced by many expatriates and professionals: the transition from a closely-knit community to a fragmented but still valued network of friendships.

As responsibilities increase and life becomes more compartmentalized, maintaining social connections requires conscious effort. Yet, the bond between true friends doesn't disappear – it adapts. It learns to survive within new routines, to express itself in shorter moments, and to thrive even through infrequent contact.

Ultimately, their friendships endured. The years of shared experiences, the support during difficult times, and the joy of collective achievements had built a foundation too strong to be weakened by distance or busy schedules.

Whether meeting at a wedding, playing volleyball, or simply exchanging a call during a quiet evening, they found ways to stay part of each other's lives.

Life in Kuwait may have been busy, but it hadn't erased the warmth and loyalty that tied them together. These friendships, though stretched by time and space, remained resilient.

During this period of transition and growth, the group of friends began to follow different paths according to their academic and professional goals. While some had already completed their bachelor's degrees, especially those enrolled in four-year programs and had moved on to begin their careers, others were still deeply immersed in their academic pursuits.

This was particularly true for those studying medicine, as the medical programs in Syria typically required a minimum of six years of study, excluding the years needed for specialization. For these students, graduation was only the beginning of another demanding journey toward professional qualifications.

Despite the varying timelines, a shared spirit of ambition and perseverance kept the group united in their goals. Many of them were determined not only to complete their undergraduate degrees but to go further – to pursue postgraduate studies, gain specialized expertise, and carve out meaningful careers.

Among them was Mohammad, who had chosen the path of higher education in Arabic literature. After completing his bachelor's degree, Mohammad aimed to pursue a master's program at Damascus University. However, unlike some of his peers who transitioned smoothly into postgraduate studies, Mohammad's journey was filled with obstacles – many of which were rooted in the systemic injustices of Syria's former regime.

He did not begin his master's program immediately after graduation, as would have been expected for a student of his caliber. Instead, he faced a series of deliberate barriers imposed by the state. These were not academic shortcomings or bureaucratic errors, but politically motivated hurdles designed to restrict access to education for certain individuals.

For reasons that were never formally explained, some branches of the Syrian intelligence apparatus sought to delay or deny him the right to pursue further education.

Despite being one of the top students in his field – known for his deep understanding of classical Arabic grammar and especially his strength in syntax – his academic excellence was disregarded. In a just system, his talent and dedication would have been recognized and rewarded. But under the former regime, merit was too often overshadowed by arbitrary interference and discrimination.

Still, Mohammad remained resilient. He did not allow the unjust actions of the system to extinguish his academic passion. After long months of persistence and patience, he was finally accepted into the master's program in Arabic literature.

His efforts culminated in 2007 when he obtained his master's degree from Damascus University – a moment of great personal triumph and a quiet but powerful act of resistance against a regime that tried to suppress his potential.

Mohammad's academic journey, though difficult, was also marked by moments of brilliance that inspired those around him. His command of syntax and Arabic grammar earned him not only high marks but deep respect from both his peers and his professors. One such memorable moment occurred during a seminar he delivered as part of his bachelor's studies.

One morning, Yasser invited Yusif and others to attend the seminar that would be delivered by Mohammad. Unfortunately, Yusif had a lecture at the same time and had to decline the invitation.

When Yasser returned later that afternoon, he couldn't stop talking about how impressive the seminar had been. He described how, during the lecture, Mohammad confidently discussed a complex syntactical issue and referenced the famous medieval grammarian, Ibn Hisham.

While explaining his viewpoint, Mohammad boldly stated, "Ibn Hisham sees it this way, but I see it differently". [*the auditorium erupted in laughter – out of admiration*]. It was remarkable to hear a fresh student respectfully challenges one of the greatest giants of Arabic grammar. His

ability to critically analyze traditional thought with confidence and originality left a lasting impression on the audience.

In the meantime, other members of the group were also making significant strides in their academic and professional lives.

Ghannam and Mudhafar successfully completed their six-year bachelor programs. Their graduation marked an important milestone, the culmination of years of hard study, long nights, and immense personal sacrifice. Though they celebrated this achievement with pride, they were also aware that the next phase, specialization, would demand further dedication.

This new stage was different. Unlike the undergraduate years, which often felt like a continuous race without pause, specialization allowed them to work and study simultaneously. They could now earn an income, gain hands-on experience, and develop deeper expertise in their chosen medical fields.

This blend of practical work and academic study made the journey more fulfilling, even if the demands remained high. It was a transition from

student life to professional development – one they welcomed with maturity and readiness.

What distinguished this group of friends, regardless of the individual paths they followed, was their awareness and preparation for each phase of their lives. They did not approach education or career planning haphazardly. Instead, they were deliberate and disciplined, understanding the unique demands of each stage and equipping themselves accordingly.

Whether it was the intense workload of a medical program, the political challenges of pursuing a master's degree, or the time management required to balance work and postgraduate studies, they successfully faced their challenges.

Their collective success was not accidental. It was the product of years of hard work, and a shared culture of excellence. Some among them went even further, not stopping at master's degrees but beginning preparations for doctoral programs – the peak of academic achievements.

These individuals sought not just to excel within the systems they were part of but to contribute meaningfully to their fields through research, teaching, and leadership.

Their PhD's aspirations were not just about personal advancement, but about giving back – to their communities, to their academic institutions, and to future generations. In many ways, their pursuit of higher education represented a quiet form of resistance against roughness, stagnation, and the political forces that had tried to hold them back.

Looking back, it's clear that the early foundations of their academic and professional journeys were laid not just in classrooms, but in their friendships, values, and shared goals. They supported each other through challenges, celebrated one another's successes, and remained committed to growth – both as individuals and as a community.

The challenges they faced were real – whether bureaucratic, political, or academic – but none of them gave in to despair or defeat. On the contrary, they turned every setback into motivation. The result was a generation of

young professionals and scholars who not only achieved their personal goals but inspired others through their journeys.

What united them all – whether they were educators, researchers, or doctors – was the belief in the power of education to transform lives. And through their stories, they proved that with enough dedication, perseverance, and mutual support, even the most difficult paths could lead to success.

Chapter Nine

The Calm Before the Storm

2008 – 2010

As time passed and their professional lives unfolded, this period marked a significant turning point for many of the friends. It was a phase characterized by prosperity and progress. Years of accumulated experience finally began to pay off, enabling them to rise in their careers and secure better opportunities.

For those who chose to move to Kuwait, the rewards were even more tangible. The job market there proved prolific, offering roles that aligned with their skills, ambitions, and past efforts. Securing good jobs brought not only financial stability but also a renewed sense of confidence and accomplishment.

In parallel with their professional advancements, some friends also turned their focus toward academic growth. Several of them made a daring decision to pursue higher education, enrolling in postgraduate programs or professional courses to enhance their qualifications.

This commitment to learning, even in the midst of work and growing responsibilities, demonstrated their unwavering dedication to self-improvement. It was a testament to their resilience and determination to keep pushing forward in pursuit of their long-held dreams. The ambition that once fueled them as students had not diminished; it had simply evolved to meet the challenges of adulthood.

In Kuwait, the old friends – Abdulhameed, Yasser, Abdulrahman, and Tameem – sat together, catching up after a long time. Cups of tea were on the table, and the mood was nostalgic.

“Can you believe this? We’re all fathers now... working men. Seems like just yesterday we were skipping lectures and arguing about football”, said Abdulhameed. [*Smiling as he looked around*].

“And now we argue about kid’s requirements and rent fees. Life changed fast, didn’t it?” Yasser commented.

“I was lucky enough to bring my family to Kuwait. It’s not perfect, but at least we’re under one roof. Still, juggling work, home, and trying to stay in touch with everyone – it’s a lot”, Tameem reacted.

“Back then, we thought we had it tough with exams and projects. We had no idea what real responsibility looked like”, Abdulhameed reflected.

“But family changes everything. It gives life meaning, even if it adds pressure. You stop thinking just about yourself”, added Yasser.

“And yet... the old friends ... even with all the chaos, here we are. Still in touch. Still sitting together when we can. That means something”, Abdulrahman said quietly.

“It means a lot”, said Tameem. “We’ve all grown – different careers, different cities, but the connection is still there. That foundation we built back in university... it stuck”.

“Sometimes I look at old photos or remember those late-night walks on campus, and it feels like a different life. But those moments shaped us”, Abdulrahman said softly.

“We were boys back then. Now we’re men – with families, responsibilities, and stories of our own. I guess we didn’t just grow older... we grew up”, said Yasser.

This phase of their lives was undoubtedly demanding. Their days were packed with obligations, leaving little time for rest or leisure. The pressures of the business world were relentless. The work environment required adaptability, discipline, and relentless commitment.

Meeting targets and staying ahead of competition became daily challenges. On top of that, they had to remain emotionally and physically present for their families. Many nights were spent planning, helping children with schoolwork, or simply trying to catch their breath after a long day. Life had changed dramatically, and they were constantly striving to find balance.

This transformation brought both growth and strain. Social life, once rich and frequent, began to wane. Their busy schedules made it hard to stay in regular touch with each other and gatherings became less frequent. But while communication may have slowed down, it never stopped entirely.

Even when months passed without a call or message, they always found their way back to each other, whether through messaging or occasional reunion. Their connection was not bound by geography or time; it was rooted in shared history and mutual respect.

They made deliberate efforts to strike a balance between work, family, and friendship. It wasn't easy. There were times when it felt overwhelming, when priorities clashed and sacrifices had to be made. Yet, they persevered.

Their determination to uphold their values, traditions, and the bonds they had built was stronger than the forces pulling them apart. They remained committed to maintaining their integrity, honoring their roots, and staying true to the relationships that had shaped them.

What enabled them to succeed during this period wasn't just professional skill or academic knowledge, it was their willpower. Human beings are capable of extraordinary things when they are driven by purpose.

Whether it was adapting to a new country, advancing their education while working full-time, raising children across borders, or simply finding the strength to continue in the face of exhaustion, they showed what it meant to persevere.

In reflection, this chapter of life was one of both challenges and fulfillment. It was a time when they were tested – personally, professionally, and emotionally – but also a time when they grew into the people they had once aspired to be. Life, as they had come to realize, is a series of changes. Some are welcome, others are difficult, but all are inevitable. What truly matters is how one responds to those changes – whether with resistance or with resilience.

Their journey during this phase wasn't fully smooth, and they often had to make difficult choices. But through it all, they remained connected to their dreams, values, and each other. The friendships that began during

carefree days of youth had evolved, deepened by distance and time rather than diminished. And while life had grown more complex, their shared history provided an anchor, reminding them of who they were and where they came from.

This period, with all its trials and triumphs, was not just a passage of time. It was a profound chapter of growth, responsibility, and transformation. It shaped their identities in ways that university never could and taught them lessons that only life could offer. Though they were now spread across different places, carrying out various roles, their hearts remained tied to those early days.

In 2009, Ghannam earned his master's degree in Pediatrics from Aleppo University. During his studies, he specialized in pediatric medicine, gaining extensive knowledge and clinical experience in diagnosing and treating a wide range of childhood illnesses. His training provided a solid foundation in both general pediatric care and more advanced practices, preparing him for a dedicated career focused on the health and well-being of children.

However, the three years preceding the eruption of the Syrian revolution were marked by an unusual sense of calm that many would later describe as the silence before the storm. During this period, the Syrian people watched events in the broader Arab world with deep interest and growing anticipation. Their attention was particularly fixed on what was unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt, where ordinary citizens had begun to rise against long-standing authoritarian regimes.

These uprisings, which would come to be known as part of the Arab Spring, ignited a sense of cautious hope across the region.

To many Syrians, and indeed to millions across the Arab world, the Arab Spring seemed almost like a dream coming true. After decades of political subjugation, repression, and economic inequality, people were finally standing up to injustice and speaking truth to power.

They were raising their voices against systems that had, for far too long, silenced opposition and concentrated power in the hands of a few. These were voices demanding change, dignity, freedom, and justice.

For those living under deeply entrenched authoritarian rule, particularly in countries plagued by dictatorship, corruption, and systemic injustice, the early successes of the Arab Spring served as a powerful source of inspiration.

“Gesturing toward the TV ... Tunisia... Who would’ve thought? Revolution in the Arab world”! said Ahmad T. “Just like that. It feels just like history is shifting right in front of us”.

“It’s not just about leaders falling”, Hamza replied. “It’s about people realizing they have power. That they can take back control – of their countries, their lives, and their futures”.

“True... but Syria’s different. You know that. Our regime doesn’t flinch. We had seen what happened when people spoke out here”, added Ahmad A.

“You’re talking about Hama, right?” Ahmad T. asked.

“Yeah. That massacre was a message: It means; don’t even think about it”, Ahmad A. said quietly.

“I agree. The fear runs deep. But people are talking. Quietly, maybe – but the seed is there. The Arab Spring lit a fire across the region. It’s not just about one dictator falling. It’s about dismantling something much bigger”, Hamza said thoughtfully.

“Exactly. These regimes aren’t just brutal – they’re built on decades of repression. They’re the aftershocks of colonialism. Foreign powers might’ve left, but they left behind puppets, not real leaders”, Ahmad T. stated firmly.

“It’s like they swapped one master for another. Just put on local clothing and kept the same system going. And they made sure corruption was the glue holding all together”, Ahmad A. remarked.

“Right”, said Hamza. “Let the elites steal, and they’ll stay loyal. Everyone’s compromised, so no one dares challenge the system. If one piece falls, the whole thing might collapse”.

“That’s why these regimes fight so hard to stay in power. It’s not just about one man losing his seat – it’s the whole network unraveling. And they know it”, Ahmad T. explained.

“Still... I don’t know. I want to believe change is possible. But the cost? It could be massive. People will get hurt, killed”, Ahmad A. admitted.

“Maybe. But silence has a cost, too. We’ve already paid it for decades. Maybe it’s time we decide which price is worth paying”, Hamza concluded.

The Syrian people, like others across the Arab world, had long lived under such a system. They had seen how state resources were siphoned off for the benefit of the few, how opposition was criminalized, and how the aspirations of ordinary citizens were dismissed.

The events in Tunisia, therefore, were not just political developments, they were moments of awakening. They were reminders that people had power, and that they did not have to accept the status quo forever.

Initially, the response in Syria was one of cautious optimism. People watched the protests in other Arab capitals with a mixture of admiration and apprehension. They celebrated the bravery of those who stood up to tyranny, but they also feared what such actions could trigger at home. The regime's history made it clear that any attempt to replicate those movements in Syria would not be met with tolerance.

Still, as the dominos began to fall in North Africa, hope continued to grow. The success of popular movements in toppling seemingly unshakable regimes demonstrated that change was not only possible, but perhaps inevitable. It was not long before the initial hesitation began to give way to action. The Syrian people, inspired by the courage and achievements of their fellow Arabs, began to take the first steps toward their own uprising.

Prayers for the success of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt soon transformed into conversations, then into gatherings, and finally into protests. What began as a ripple of opposition gradually swelled into a wave of popular mobilization. The Syrian people, after decades of silence

and fear, made the fateful decision to raise their voices and demand change.

They were aware of the risks. They knew the price that could be paid. But they also understood that silence and submission would only perpetuate the suffering. The Arab Spring had awakened something in them, a conviction that dignity, justice, and freedom were not privileges granted by rulers, but rights inherent to all people.

And so, the calm of those three years, the reflective pause during which Syrians observed the unfolding of a regional revolution, came to an end. What followed would be a turbulent and painful chapter in Syria's history, marked by struggle, resilience, and profound loss. Yet the decision to rise was not made lightly. It was born of years of accumulated frustration, informed by historical awareness, and inspired by the courage of others.

In many ways, the Syrian people's decision to join the wave of the Arab Spring was the culmination of a long, complex journey – a journey that stretched back through decades of repression and even further, into the shadows of colonialism. Their uprising was not merely a political act; it

was a statement of identity, of agency, and of a refusal to accept a future dictated by fear and injustice.

The years before the uprising, for most people, were marked by relative peace. Life continued in its steady rhythm, as normal as it could be under the circumstances. However, for Yusif, peace was a distant concept. His life was shadowed by constant scrutiny and harassment from the Syrian intelligence apparatus. While others continued their lives freely, Yusif was trapped in a cycle of suspicion and interrogation that grew more intense and invasive.

The problem began subtly but quickly escalated. Every time Yusif traveled back to Syria, he found himself compelled to visit multiple intelligence departments. It was not a casual visit. It was part of mandatory interrogations that left him anxious and exhausted during every visit to Syria from 2007 till the last visit via the regime's territory in 2010.

The Military Intelligence Department and the Political Intelligence Department became unwilling hosts to his repeated appearances.

Meanwhile, the State Security Department preferred to bring the pressure to his doorstep, making frequent visits to his home.

Each visit, whether it was at the interrogation rooms of the intelligence agencies or the uncomfortable intrusion at his home, carried an additional burden – bribery. It was an unspoken rule, a dark undercurrent beneath the surface of the interrogations. Yusif had to pay for interrogators of the intelligence services to avoid prolonged questioning or even arbitrary requests for more visits under the pretext of completing interrogation. The system was designed not just to intimidate but to exploit.

By late 2007, the situation worsened dramatically. Several Syrian intelligence agencies began officially listing Yusif as an individual who must have visited those agencies with every visit to the country. He must have presented himself for interrogation after every trip abroad. The freedom to travel, which for many was a routine aspect of life, became a source of dread and resentment for him.

Yusif's visits to the intelligence departments were exhausting. Every interrogation was a repetitive ordeal with the same stupid questions, as if

they were following a pre-set script. The officers would bombard him with the same monotonous questions over and over again: “When did you travel? Why did you travel? Whom did you meet? Did you meet anyone from the Muslim Brotherhood Group? Did you call anyone while abroad? Did you stay in the same country, or move to other countries during your travel?”

The questions felt absurd, pointless exercises in futility, but Yusif had no choice but to answer them each time with the same consistent story.

The intelligence officers were less interested in genuine information and more focused on exerting control and extracting bribes. If Yusif failed to pay the demanded sums, the consequences were immediate and unpleasant. They would prolong visits and demand returning multiple times, claiming that the interrogation was “incomplete”.

This endless cycle was a method of coercion and harassment, designed to wear him down and blackmail him to get money.

On one occasion, following a particularly exhausting interrogation session, Yusif was directed to the office of Abu Rami, the Head of the Interrogation Division, apparently to “complete” his questioning.

While he was waiting, one of the interrogators complained bitterly to his boss – Abu Rami: “We got nothing from this transaction, a transaction of a poor citizen, so we didn’t approve it”. Abu Rami responded coldly and without hesitation: “Nothing would be approved without payment”.

Yusif knew this all too well. Without paying, he would be trapped in an endless loop of summons and delays.

The transactions must have been sent for a formal approval process within the intelligence apparatus. When someone submitted a transaction or a request to travel the approval was essential. The approval would have been given if the required bribes were paid, otherwise it would never have been approved.

The person who had submitted that particular transaction was old and poor, and the interrogators decided not to approve it initially. To resolve the impasse, Yusif paid Abu Rami 500 Syrian pounds, \$10, and

immediately the approval was granted. After that, the person was allowed to leave Syria safely.

Such transactions and approvals were not just bureaucratic formalities. In reality, they were a form of blackmail. Without the department's approval any person, whose name was on the lists of one of those departments, could be effectively trapped inside the country, unable to travel or leave.

Approval signaled that the person had complied with the interrogation process and that the interrogators had taken their 'measures' which mostly involved the tedious questioning and ensuring bribes were paid.

The atmosphere inside these departments was heavy with intimidation and strange contradictions. One day during an interrogation session, interrogators questioned a lady who was wearing a hijab. "Why are you wearing the hijab?" they asked. The poor lady, frightened and answered, "I wear my hijab as part of tradition, not religion". To Yusuf's surprise, the interrogators nodded approvingly and moved on – seemingly satisfied with the answer.

He never quite understood why they admired that response. Perhaps they distrusted religion itself, or maybe they feared its influence because they were deeply corrupt individuals. The answer seemed to align better with their secular, suspicious outlook, allowing them to continue their work without unnecessary complication.

On another occasion, Yusif's friend Abu Al-Qa'qa visited the Military Security Department. However, after each interrogation session, Yusif reluctantly paid the required bribes and was told he would not have to return for further questioning during that visit to Syria. During that session, Abu Al-Qa'qa refused to pay. He openly declared that he had no money to give.

The interrogators, unsurprisingly, told him bluntly that "things couldn't work like that" – he would be forced to come back repeatedly until the payment was made. Abu Al-Qa'qa argued that he had no money and knew no one nearby to lend him money. After waiting for around an hour in frustration, one of the interrogators finally offered a peculiar deal: "Listen", said the interrogator, "we will let you leave and won't summon

you again in this trip if you just bring us a kilo of sugar”. The sugar supply was apparently running low in their office.

Abu Al-Qa’qa accepted the offer. At that time, a kilo of sugar cost around 25 Syrian pounds, around half a dollar, a fraction of what Yusif usually paid. He bought the sugar, handed it over, and was allowed to leave without further harassment.

The absurdity of the situation struck Yusif deeply. He was paying bribes in amounts that were significant when compared to what Abu Al-Qa’qa paid. He got off with a kilo of sugar – an unexpected form of ‘discount’ in the corrupt system.

The ongoing extortion, harassment, and endless interrogations wore heavily on Yusif. The constant visits to intelligence departments, and the burden of bribery impacted him psychologically. Gradually, he began cancelling most of his travel plans to Syria. The freedom to move between countries – a basic right for many – became a source of frustration for him.

The last time Yusif traveled to Syria through territories controlled by the Syrian regime was in 2010. After that, the harassment became too overwhelming to bear. He chose to stay away, unwilling to submit repeatedly to the indignities of interrogation, and bribery.

Yusif's experience reflects the harsh realities faced by many Syrians living under a regime that wielded power through fear and corruption. What should have been a peaceful period for the average citizen was instead a time of constant anxiety for him. The security apparatus was a suffocating presence, turning simple acts like visiting family or traveling home into dangerous, costly ordeals.

In 2010, Yusif embarked on what he hoped would be a routine journey back to Syria, accompanied by his family. The trip was meant to be a joyful reunion – a chance to see his aging parents and reconnect with relatives he hadn't seen in a long time. However, Yusif had no way of knowing that this visit would plunge him once again into the familiar torment inflicted by the Syrian intelligence apparatus.

At the time, Yusif's eldest son, Abdullah, was barely a month old – just thirty days into his fragile life. Traveling with a newborn was always a challenge, but Yusif was determined to make the trip as comfortable and smooth as possible for his family. He chose to travel by car, anticipating a long drive but expecting nothing more than the usual fatigue. The journey itself went well, with no major delays along the way.

Upon arrival, Yusif dutifully began the routine visits. These included mandatory visits to intelligence departments – an ordeal Yusif had grown weary of, but he could not avoid. After completing his scheduled visit to the Military Intelligence Department, a close friend who had connections with Political Intelligence Department told him what seemed like wonderful news.

“You don't need to worry about the visit of Political Intelligence Department this time”, the friend said reassuringly.

This assurance lifted a great weight off Yusif's shoulders. After all, his trip was intended for family, not for navigating the endless maze of

intelligence offices. The thought of avoiding one hateful interrogation was like a breath of fresh air.

For nearly four weeks, Yusif and his family enjoyed their time in Syria, visiting relatives, catching up with old friends. The constant shadow of the intelligence services seemed temporarily lifted.

But as his departure date neared, reality came crashing back. On the day he was set to return to Kuwait, Yusif packed the family car and drove toward the Syrian Jordanian border – around seven-hour drive from his hometown. Upon reaching the border crossing, however, Yusif met with an unwelcome surprise. Border officials informed him bluntly that he was not permitted to leave the country. The reason? He had not visited the Political Intelligence Department, a mandatory step that the border officers insisted he must have completed before crossing.

This news struck Yusif like a thunderclap. The entire trip, which had been planned meticulously, now seemed to unravel in an instant. He was not only prevented from leaving the country for naïve reasons but also faced with the prospect of making a long and exhausting journey back to

completing a naïve and unnecessary procedure. Worse, Yusif had pressing commitments waiting for him in Kuwait – work, responsibilities, a life that could not simply pause indefinitely.

Desperation set in. Yusif began making frantic phone calls to anyone he could think of like friends, acquaintances, even the person who had assured him he didn't need to visit the Political Intelligence Department. None could help. The hours dragged on, the sun blazed down mercilessly, and the small infant Abdullah grew increasingly sick from the heat while waiting for a long time. The baby had a fever, and he started vomiting. It was a very miserable situation.

Six torturous hours passed with no resolution. Yusif was exhausted, physically strained because of the relentless heat, and overwhelmed by frustration. The prospect of driving back the seven-hour route in his car, only to endure the same humiliating interrogation and likely bribe demands, was unbearable. More than anything, he was filled with a deep, bitter resentment for the country that had turned a family visit into a nightmare.

Finally, the border officials remained adamant: if Yusif wanted to leave, he had to go back and visit the Political Intelligence Department to answer their stupid questions. The sheer absurdity of it made Yusif's anger boil over. He hated the situation, hated the system, and at that moment, he even hated Syria itself. The country of his birth had become a place of frustration, oppression and fear, and he felt powerless against it.

With a heavy heart, Yusif left his car behind at the crossing and, with his family, boarded a bus to return to Deir Ezzor. The next day, he completed the dreaded interrogation at the Political Intelligence Department. During the session, an officer sneered at him, saying, "You should have never forgotten an important issue like that. Next time, try to remember everything".

Under his breath, Yusif muttered a silent prayer, "I pray to Allah I never have to see or meet any of you again".

This prayer was more than a mere wish. It was a prayer from the depths of a man trapped in a system that felt like a cancer eating away at the heart of the Syrian Republic. Yusif longed for a miracle – either divine

intervention to eradicate the corrupt regime or the strength to never return to Syria again.

The bitter experience forced him to seriously consider abandoning future visits altogether. The country he once loved had become synonymous with suffering and despair. Consequently, Yusif decided not to visit Syrian once again.

Yet, amidst this dark chapter, there was a glimmer of hope and personal triumph for Yusif. Despite the oppressive environment back home, his life in Kuwait was progressing positively. He had recently taken a bold step in his professional development by enrolling in a master's degree program at Madras University, India.

This opportunity came through the facilitation of the Indian Embassy in Kuwait, which primarily offered the program to Indian nationals. However, thanks to the support of a close friend, Yusif was able to join the course as well.

This academic achievement was significant. Completing his master's degree in 2010 was not only a personal milestone but also a symbol of

hope – a reminder that despite the turmoil in Syria, Yusif could still advance his career and build a better future. The experience opened doors to new opportunities and laid the foundation for further professional growth.

Meanwhile, back in Syria, news of academic success brought joy to Yusif's circle of friends. Mohammad, their university colleague, had also reached a major milestone that year by completing his PhD in Arabic literature at Damascus University. His achievement was a cause for celebration among their group, a bright moment amidst the darkness engulfing their country.

Mohammad's success was symbolic of the aspirations shared by many young Syrians – a desire to contribute meaningfully to their culture, society, and nation. For a brief moment, such achievements brought a sense of pride and unity to Yusif and his friends, a reminder that progress was still possible even in hard times.

Yusif's journey to Syria in 2010, marked by hardship and disillusionment, stands in sharp contrast to these professional successes. It encapsulates

the duality of life for many Syrians in that period – caught between a repressive homeland and the pursuit of dreams abroad. While his experience with the intelligence departments underscored the oppressive realities back home, his academic and professional progress highlighted the resilience and ambition that refused to be extinguished.

This juxtaposition also illustrates the complex relationship many expatriates held with their homeland. The desire to maintain connections with family and culture was often fraught with pain and frustration. The oppressive political environment not only restricted physical movement but also weighed heavily on the spirit.

Yusif's experience was not unique. It was reflective of a broader reality where the state security apparatus wielded immense power over the lives of ordinary citizens. Their control extended beyond borders and regulations, permeating the everyday lives of people and shaping their decisions. Travel, a simple right for most, became a complicated, sometimes perilous process requiring careful navigation of a corrupt and brutal system.

Chapter Ten

Breezes of Arab Spring

2011

In 2011, a remarkable awakening took place among the Syrian people – a movement fueled by immense hope and lofty ambitions aimed at reclaiming their country’s dignity and freedom. For decades, Syrians had endured profound injustice, relentless oppression, and the denial of even their most basic rights.

These years of hardship under the oppressive rule of the Syrian regime had taken a severe toll on the nation’s spirit and wellbeing. Yet, despite these challenges, a collective yearning for change emerged, as Syrians began to envision a future where their country would no longer be shackled by tyranny.

Across the globe, many who understood the depth of Syria’s suffering empathized deeply with its people. The world saw Syrians as a resilient and generous people who, despite their own hardships, had long extended kindness and support to others in need.

During regional crises and humanitarian disasters, Syrian families were known for opening their homes, often offering shelter to displaced and distressed neighbors when official aid was insufficient. Unlike many who provided temporary refuge in public shelters or schools, countless Syrian households welcomed vulnerable families directly into their personal spaces.

This hospitality and generosity made the suffering endured by Syrians all the more tragic and undeserved. It was clear that people capable of such compassion and solidarity deserved respect, support, and most importantly, a future free from oppression.

The turning point came in early 2011 when Syrians began openly expressing their dissatisfaction with the inhuman and brutal practices of the ruling regime. The initial protests were modest but significant – they were demonstrations demanding only one thing: freedom.

The demonstrators did not immediately call for the downfall of the regime; rather, they sought fundamental rights, dignity, and justice. This cautious approach reflected a desire for peaceful reform rather than

outright revolution. Freedom, in this context, meant the removal of restrictions on speech, assembly, and political participation – a chance for Syrians to live with dignity in their own homeland.

“That modest demand for freedom back then – it was met with such harsh resistance”, said Yusif. “The regime saw the very idea of freedom as a threat to its survival”.

“Exactly”, said Emad. “For authoritarian rulers, freedom isn’t just political. It’s existential danger. It means accountability, transparency, and equality before the law”.

“And that’s the real problem for them”, added Ahmad A. “Freedom means justice, which leads to the end of corruption, favoritism, and the monopoly of power by a few”.

“Right”, said Tameem. “Freedom means the country belongs to everyone, not just the ruling elite and their cronies who hijacked the state for their own gain”.

“So, from their point of view, freedom equals death – death of their control and impunity”, Yusif remarked.

“This clarifies the brutal crackdown on peaceful demonstrators”, Emad reacted. “Dialogue was replaced by brutality, and any chance for reform was crushed”.

“What started as simple calls for basic rights quickly escalated”, Ahmad noted. “People soon demanded the removal of the regime altogether”.

“Syrians realized there was no chance for a just or peaceful future as long as that regime stayed in power. The violence showed coexistence was impossible”, Tameem affirmed.

“The people’s courage grew alongside their demands”, said Yusif. “They weren’t just asking for freedom anymore – they wanted to overthrow the entire oppressive system”.

“And they weren’t blind to the bigger picture. The regime wasn’t acting alone – it had backing from powerful countries, either openly or behind the scenes”, added Emad.

“Many influential nations stayed silent, even as massacres and human rights abuses happened. They called the revolution immature or said the regime was the only way to keep order”, Ahmad A. observed.

“But that silence?” Tameem asked. “It was indirect support. It gave the regime a green light to continue killing, violence, and repression”.

“It was a tragic reality – freedom crushed not just by the regime, but by the world turning a blind eye”, Yusif concluded.

This indirect backing encouraged the regime to escalate its use of force, including the deployment of chemical weapons and other banned weapons against civilians. It created an environment in which mass killings, torture, and destruction became commonplace.

The international community’s reluctance to intervene effectively, through increasing pressure on the regime, sent a dangerous message: that the regime’s actions, no matter how brutal, would go unpunished. This tacit acceptance further deepened the suffering of the Syrian people and

prolonged the conflict, as the regime felt empowered to crush people with impunity.

Yet despite these overwhelming challenges, the internal repression and the external complicity, the spirit of the Syrian people remained unbroken.

They continued to resist, driven by a deep desire for justice and freedom.

The protests grew in size and intensity, spreading across cities and towns, involving people from all walks of life – young and old, men and women, urban and rural. This was a movement not merely of political change but of profound social transformation. Syrians wished to have a country where power was no longer concentrated in the hands of a few but shared among all citizens through democratic institutions that guarantee rights and protect freedoms.

The events of 2011 marked a crucial chapter in Syria's history – a collective awakening of a people long suppressed but never defeated.

Their initial calls for freedom expanded into a full-fledged demand for regime change as they recognized the impossibility of reform under tyranny.

From the very first day of the Syrian revolution, as peaceful demonstrations began to spread across the country, the regime immediately shifted into a crisis mode. The leadership quickly recognized the threat posed by the wave of popular unrest – the Arab Spring, which had already swept through neighboring countries, inspiring calls for freedom and justice.

In Syria, however, the regime’s response was not to engage with the people’s demands but to contain, undermine, and ultimately crush the growing movement. From the outset, the regime meticulously devised a strategy aimed at either suppressing the protests or corrupting their spirit to spoil the hope and momentum they had ignited.

“One of the regime’s key tactics was sending undercover agents disguised as regular demonstrators”, said Abdulrahman. “They had multiple secret missions on the ground”.

“These agents had a sinister role”, Yasser explained. “They infiltrated peaceful protests to serve the regime’s brutal agenda”.

“One of their main jobs was to identify and document protesters – secretly recording names to create lists for future arrests, torture, or worse”, added Ahmad T.

“That was a deliberate strategy to spread fear. People knew that joining demonstrations could bring terrible consequences”, said Saud.

“It didn’t stop there”, Abdulrahman continued. “These agents also tried to disrupt and delegitimize the protests”.

“Exactly”, said Yasser. “They’d provoke violence – sometimes even shooting at demonstrators – to create chaos, then accuse the protesters of attacking innocent civilians”.

“Those false accusations twisted the narrative, painting revolutionaries as violent criminals, which the regime used to justify harsher crackdowns”, Ahmad T. pointed out.

“The propaganda machine ran wild with these lies”, added Saud, “trying to break both local and international support for the move of people”.

“By stirring confusion and chaos in peaceful assemblies, the regime aimed to split the opposition and label the protests as dangerous security threats”, Abdulrahman commented.

“At the center of it”, said Yasser, “all were the intelligence services – given full authority and unconditional orders to suppress demonstrations by any means necessary”.

“These security forces operated with total impunity, carrying out arrests, brutal interrogations, and torture without hesitation”, added Ahmad T.

“The death toll skyrocketed as the regime’s forces opened fire on crowds and crushed any opposition”, Saud bitterly commented.

“It was a systematic, merciless crackdown designed to silence every voice calling for change”, Abdulrahman concluded.

The regime’s dehumanizing view of the demonstrators was stark: protesters were not seen as citizens exercising their rights but as a diseased organ in the body of the nation that had to be amputated to preserve the health of the whole. This brutal metaphor justified a campaign of violence

with the chilling slogans – shoot all, kill all, Assad or burn the country – sanctioning mass murder to maintain the regime’s grip on power.

The various intelligence departments were notorious and well-known for their cruelty and inhuman practices including torture, kidnapping, and arbitrary detention. These departments did not limit their targets to demonstrators alone; they arrested too many innocent civilians who had no involvement in protests or political activities and sent them to jails.

These arrests were not random or accidental but rather calculated tactics to terrorize communities and deter further participation in the revolution.

The regime understood that the fear of disappearance, imprisonment, or death was a powerful tool to keep the population subdued.

Though often labeled ‘arbitrary arrests’, these actions were far from careless. They served multiple sinister purposes.

First, they were meant to terrorize the wider community – sending a clear message that anyone could be taken at any time for any reason. This created an atmosphere of paranoia and silence, discouraging people from joining protests or speaking out against the regime.

Second, the arrests were used as blackmail. Detainees' families were often coerced into paying ransoms for their release, adding financial extortion to the regime's brutal tactics. These ransom payments became a grim reality for many families desperate to free their loved ones from the regime's clutches.

The regime's repression went even further when it targeted entire towns and communities that showed signs of defiance. When angered by resistance from a particular town, the security services would indiscriminately arrest anyone from that town passing through check points, regardless of their actual involvement.

This collective punishment was designed to crush the spirit of resistance by punishing entire communities and forcing them into submission. Young men in particular became frequent victims of these arbitrary measures.

Families searching for their missing sons often found no explanation or formal charges behind their detention. The regime's security apparatus

operated outside any legal framework, acting with complete disregard for human rights and the rule of law.

Injustice, arbitrary arrests, kidnappings, and the systematic killing of peaceful demonstrators became the regime's preferred methods to extinguish the revolution. The leadership believed that relentless brutality would ultimately break the will of the Syrian people and put an end to the uprising.

They were convinced that fear and repression would triumph over the protesters' calls for freedom and justice. This belief fueled an escalating cycle of violence, as the regime refused to compromise or engage in dialogue, relying instead on terror to maintain its authority.

This brutal crackdown had unintended consequences. As peaceful protests were met with bullets and imprisonment, many Syrians began to feel that nonviolent resistance was no longer sufficient to achieve their goals or protect themselves and their communities.

The regime's uncompromising violence pushed groups of the population toward armed resistance. This shift marked a turning point in the conflict,

leading to the emergence of organized armed groups dedicated to defending the revolution and opposing the regime's forces.

Among these groups the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that became one of the most prominent opposition entities later. Established by defectors from the Syrian military, the FSA sought to protect civilians from regime attacks and challenge the government's control.

The formation of such armed groups transformed the nature of the conflict from a peaceful protest to a full-scale armed confrontation. The country soon became fragmented into multiple zones of control, with government forces holding certain areas while opposition and other armed groups established their presence elsewhere.

This fracturing of the country created a complex and volatile battlefield. Military confrontations erupted in cities, towns, and villages, often leading to prolonged sieges, destruction of infrastructure, and massive displacement of civilians.

“The regime stepped up its military campaigns – heavy weaponries, air strikes, and sieges aimed at crushing opposition-held areas”, said Abdulrahman.

“Meanwhile, the opposition was struggling to organize”, Yasser explained. “Internal divisions and external pressures made unification incredibly difficult”.

“The conflict escalated so much, complicating the international response”, added Yusif. “What started as a popular movement for reform turned into a full-blown war with multiple actors and competing interests”.

“The regime’s early attempts to crush the protests with fear and violence didn’t work”, Ahmad T. noted. “Instead, it sparked a prolonged and devastating conflict that continued to impact millions of Syrians”.

“And those undercover agents deployed among demonstrators in the early days? That wasn’t just sinister, it was deadly”, said Saud.

“Right”, Abdulrahman continued, “their presence led to countless arrests, and torture in addition to deaths of many who were brave enough to speak out”.

“The fear of infiltration created intense paranoia. Participating in protests became extraordinarily dangerous because the regime had built an extensive network of spies over decades”, Yasser remarked.

“It wasn’t just a few agents – they had thousands of informants carefully compartmentalized to protect secrecy. Often, even the agents didn’t know who else was in the network”, said Yusif.

“That made it difficult for demonstrators to spot or avoid spies”, Ahmad T. explained. “Some protesters started covering their faces just to protect themselves”.

“The agents weren’t just there to gather info” said Saud, “they spread fear and misinformation. They whispered that the regime knew everything – every name, every meeting time and place”.

“That invisible threat was terrifying” added Abdulrahman. “What was supposed to be peaceful gatherings felt like walking into a trap”.

“The regime used every tactic it could to stifle the movement”, Yasser remarked, “not just brute force, but psychological warfare, too”.

“It was a systematic effort to crush hope and silence voices demanding change”, Yusif concluded.

This constant psychological warfare aimed to push people toward silence, fostering a belief that resistance was futile and that arrest or death was inevitable. The regime’s agents exaggerated the extent of the regime’s iron fist, making tales of brutal crackdowns and the idea that the regime was capable to identify all demonstrators and arresting them. Such rumors were designed to isolate demonstrators, sow mistrust, and ultimately weaken the movement from within.

In the earliest phases of the revolution, participation in demonstrations was a matter of life and death. The brutal regime made it clear that anyone who dared to protest could be killed or arrested at any moment.

Even those who simply supported the protests faced danger. Moreover, the regime did not limit its intimidation tactics to protesters alone; it frequently targeted the families of demonstrators to exert pressure and coerce individuals into abandoning the cause.

By threatening or harming loved ones, the regime sought to create a scary effect that would break the spirit of resistance. For many Syrians, the price of participating in demonstrations was unimaginably high – not only risking their own lives but also the safety of those they cared about.

Because of this, genuine freedom to protest only became possible after regime forces were expelled from certain areas of the country. These liberated zones, often carved out through intense battles, marked the beginning of a new phase in the Syrian conflict.

Once regime forces lost control of parts of the country, opposition groups and local councils emerged to fill the power vacuum. This shift allowed people within those areas to participate more openly in political activities and protests without immediate fear of arrest or execution. However, it

also led to the fragmentation of Syria, with the country divided into multiple territories, each controlled by different armed groups.

For the Syrian regime, the unity of the country became secondary – almost irrelevant – compared to maintaining its grip on power over whatever portions of Syria it could still control. By 2013, the regime’s strategy shifted toward a deliberate division of the nation. Rather than striving to keep Syria intact under its rule, it accepted and even encouraged fragmentation if it meant preserving a foothold in key areas, particularly the capital, Damascus, and other strategically important regions.

This divisive policy reflected the remnants of a colonial mindset embedded in the regime’s leadership. The ex-regime’s priorities lay not in the welfare or unity of Syria but in protecting its own personal interests and those of its foreign backers, who often represented broader geopolitical and colonial agendas.

This approach revealed a harsh truth: the regime cared little for the country’s territorial integrity or the wellbeing of its people. Its singular

focus was to retain the presidency, no matter how hollow that title had become.

Later, the Syrian regime's authority was effectively limited to devastated and war-torn areas – regions marked by destruction, economic collapse, and humanitarian crisis. Yet even this diminished power was fiercely guarded by the regime, which viewed holding onto any part of the country as a victory, regardless of how fractured and broken Syria had become.

This reality exposed the emptiness of the regime's repeated slogans about 'national unity, preserving Syria's integrity, and defending the wider Arab nation'. These phrases had been used as propaganda tools designed to rally support among segments of the population and to project an image of legitimacy and patriotism.

However, beneath this veneer, the regime exploited these slogans cynically, using them to manipulate public opinion and distract from its true intentions. The regime's leadership harnessed these platitudes to mobilize loyalists and to sow division among Syrians by appealing to

sectarian or ethnic identities, thereby fragmenting the opposition and consolidating its own base.

The hollow nature of these slogans became evident as the regime prioritized survival over sovereignty. Its rhetoric about unity was contradicted by its actions – allowing parts of the country to fall into opposition hands and focusing its military resources on holding key urban centers.

The regime's strategy of 'divide and rule' was not only a means of retaining power but also a reflection of its deep-seated cynicism and detachment from the people's aspirations. The leaders were less concerned with the fate of Syria as a nation and more focused on protecting their personal privileges and the interests of a few of their supporters.

In fact, the regime's manipulation of slogans and nationalist rhetoric was a deliberate tactic to maintain a semblance of legitimacy domestically and internationally. By projecting the image of a government defending the country against foreign-backed rebels and terrorists, the regime sought to

justify its brutal actions and win support from allies. It counted on the fact that many Syrians, exhausted by war and chaos, might still be swayed by appeals to stability and national pride, despite the regime's record of repression.

Yet, for many Syrians, the reality on the ground was starkly different from these empty promises. The country was deeply divided – politically, socially, and geographically. Families were torn apart, cities reduced to rubble, and millions displaced. The regime's survival came at the cost of Syria's unity and the hopes of its people for a peaceful, and democratic future.

At the beginning of the revolution, Yusif was having a frank conversation with one of his colleagues at work. The topic was the dire situation unfolding in Syria – a country torn apart by violence, political turmoil, and international plotting.

His colleague, Bu Mohammad, was a man who had initially been anxious about the actions of the Syrian regime. At the beginning of the uprising, Bu Mohammad had openly expressed his dissatisfaction with the harsh

methods employed by the government. However, by 2015, he had made a complete turn, publicly declaring his loyalty to the regime and its leadership.

Yusif, still holding onto his concerns, said quietly, “Bu Mohammad, the Syrian regime needs to reduce the pressure and stop the brutal crackdowns on the people. You know the geopolitical landscape is shifting dramatically every day. Look at what happened in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya – those countries faced upheavals because of their regimes’ harsh responses to popular demands. If Syria continues down this path, it will face the same fate”.

Bu Mohammad listened, his expression unreadable for a moment before responding, “Yusif, I understand your worries but let me tell you something I learned just last week. I was in Damascus, sitting with a group of influential figures. Among them was a minister from the government at that time. The conversation turned to the very topic you’re raising now – someone asked the minister about easing the crackdown and reducing violence against protesters. The minister’s answer was shocking. He said,

‘We conveyed that very message to President Bashar Al-Assad during our last meeting. We reminded him of the critical situations unfolding across the Arab world, and we urged him to lessen the repression. But the president’s response was clear: Do whatever you want – I have a green light to act.’”

The phrase “green light” struck Yusif with a cold realization. Bu Mohammad continued, “This green light meant that security forces were authorized to shoot all, or anyone who might threaten authority – no questions asked”. Bashar Al-Assad had received assurances from his international allies that he would not be held accountable for any atrocities committed. That external support – the tacit approval of powerful countries – was the regime’s greatest strength and the primary reason behind the horrific bloodshed in Syria.

Yusif felt a knot tighten in his stomach. The implications were confusing. Bu Mohammad explained further, “Without this external backing, the regime would never have dared to unleash such brutal violence on its own people. The fear of accountability, especially concerning violations of

human rights and crimes against humanity, would have restrained it. But knowing it had protection, the regime operated with impunity. The regime became bolder, committing crimes that no government should ever tolerate”.

This revelation peeled back the layers of the conflict, exposing the regime’s true dependencies. “What this incident makes clear”, Bu Mohammad said seriously, “is how deeply the regime relied on outside powers to destroy the country and suppress its people. It shows the regime’s inherent weakness – without these foreign allies, it would have fallen swiftly, perhaps within months. The regime could never have survived the popular uprising if left to its own devices”.

Yusif nodded slowly. “So, the regime was not just fighting for survival, but also serving the interests of those external forces that supported it?”

“Exactly”, Bu Mohammad replied. “The regime’s cruelty was not merely about maintaining power domestically. It was aligned with the selfish agendas of those external actors, who saw Syria as a chessboard for their

own geopolitical games. The regime was a pawn, but also a willing partner in advancing those agendas”.

Yusif thought about how Bu Mohammad’s views had evolved over time. At the start of the revolution, Bu Mohammad had openly criticized the regime’s violent suppression and seemed sympathetic to the demonstrators’ demands for change. He had spoken freely, without fear of reprisal, perhaps because the uprising was still in its early, hopeful stages. But by 2015, everything had changed. Bu Mohammad’s tone softened considerably; his criticisms became muted and cautious. Eventually, he publicly declared loyalty to the regime, aligning himself firmly with the government’s narrative.

Bu Mohammad’s story also highlighted the role that geopolitical powers played in prolonging the conflict. By giving Bashar Al-Assad a “green light”, these external players essentially sanctioned the regime’s violent methods. This tacit endorsement motivated the regime to escalate its use of force, knowing that it faced little risk of international accountability. The international community’s silence, or selective engagement, sent a

message that allowed mass killings and human rights violations to continue with impunity.

Yusif and Bu Mohammad's discussion underscored a painful truth: the Syrian conflict was not just a domestic struggle, but a proxy battleground influenced by regional and global interests. The regime's survival depended heavily on foreign patronage, which came at a devastating cost to the Syrian people. The bloodshed and destruction were, in many ways, fueled by such dangerous alliances.

However, despite all those challenges and the hard times, the achievements of friends continued. In the year of 2011, Ghannam embarked on his career as a pediatrician at the Pediatric Emergency Center in Qatar, specifically at the Saad Emergency Unit of Hamad General Hospital.

Since then, he has provided urgent medical care to children, gaining extensive experience in pediatric emergencies. Outside of his professional life, he is an avid football enthusiast and a passionate supporter of FC Barcelona.

Ghannam successfully balanced the demands of his career alongside his personal hobbies, demonstrating a strong commitment to both professional growth and personal fulfillment. Throughout this journey, he continuously honed and expanded his professional skills, thriving in a highly competitive environment that values and recognizes exceptional talent.

This dynamic setting not only challenged him to push his boundaries but also provided ample opportunities for meaningful development and achievement. As a result, Ghannam established himself as a respected and skilled professional, admired for his dedication and ability to excel under pressure.

Chapter Eleven

Crisis Management

Activating Battoutic Mode

2013 – 2014

When the revolution erupted, the regime found itself unprepared and unable to contain the rapidly escalating crisis. Despite the presence of extensive security, intelligence, and military apparatuses designed to maintain control, these forces failed to quell the uprising.

In response, the regime hastily established a series of rules and crisis management plans aimed at regaining control and suppressing opposition. Central to these efforts was the formation of a supreme committee dedicated to managing the crisis.

However, this committee – and indeed the entire administration of the country during this period – was largely overseen and dominated by the intelligence agencies, reflecting the regime’s reliance on secrecy, surveillance, and coercion rather than on genuine governance.

From the very outset, it was clear to young Syrians like Mohammad that the regime's efforts were doomed to fail. "Failure was clearcut and accompanied the regime till the end", he remarked.

Despite some tactical successes – such as temporarily regaining control over certain areas – the regime's overall strategy was flawed and ultimately ineffective. These limited victories came at enormous costs, both human and material.

Yasser raised a critical question: "What was the cost of restoring those areas?" The answer was grim and sobering.

Saud explained that "the price included thousands of deaths and the destruction of the very areas that were supposedly restored". The regime's so-called victories were often fake, achieved only through brutal repression that left communities devastated.

"The regime's fundamental failure to adapt its policies in response to the crisis", Ahmad A. commented. "Rather than reconsidering its approach, the regime doubled down on its long-standing strategy that depended on spreading fear and exploiting sectarian and social divisions".

This divide-and-rule tactic had been a cornerstone of the regime's power for decades, allowing it to manipulate and control a fragmented society. "The regime didn't change its policy", added Ahmad, "which depended on disseminating fear among people, dispersing them, and increasing social rifts in society since that policy enabled it to rule for more than 50 years".

"The regime's leadership believed maintaining this policy would help prolong its influence indefinitely", Mohammad reacted. "They assumed that by continuing to instill fear and foster division, they could outlast the unrest and preserve their grip on power. Unfortunately for them, this belief underestimated the resilience and determination of the Syrian people and the serious demands for change".

However, during the crisis, Bashar Al-Assad switched his mind to the Battoutic mode to suppress the Syrian people. Battout's strategy was to frighten and scatter students by opening fire indiscriminately, causing panic and forcing them to flee in different directions to avoid being shot. This method became a model for the regime's wider strategy of control.

Bashar Al-Assad adopted this approach but on a national scale. He endorsed a policy of random shelling and indiscriminate violence aimed at frightening the Syrian people. This policy harmonized with the longstanding “divide and conquer” strategy that had long underpinned the regime’s rule.

When Bashar Al-Assad “switched his mind to the Battoutic mode”, said Yusif, “this meant a green light for shooting everyone, if this shooting contributes to suppressing revolution”. Shoot all without regard for distinctions or consequences.

The Battoutic mode operates on the principle of “listen and execute” without questioning orders, without discrimination, and without regard for whether the targets are supporters or opponents. In some cases, this meant shooting loyalists if doing so somehow served the regime’s interests – sometimes even as a cynical ploy to blame other parties for the killings.

This ruthless, unthinking execution of violence became the modus operandi for governing the country during the crisis.

Yusif further noted that “Bashar and Battout represent two sides of the same coin”. When Battout opened fire on students, he did not discriminate even against those close to him – he shot everyone, including Yusif himself, who had ordered the shooting.

Similarly, Bashar’s administration was willing to kill not only its opponents but also supporters, whether intentionally or unintentionally, if it served the broader aim of frightening the population and maintaining control. The regime’s violence was indiscriminate and self-destructive in many respects.

Mohammad explained the logic behind this brutal strategy: “Battout believed that shooting everyone – regardless of allegiance – would restore calm and security to the camp. Bashar Al-Assad took this idea and expanded it to the entire country, believing that killing both opponents and some supporters, when necessary, would instill fear and suppress resistance, thereby restoring a semblance of security nationwide”.

What remains unclear is which figure influenced the other more – Battout or Bashar! What is clear is that they were aligned in their methods, effectively following the same violent playbook.

The regime’s failure was not only due to its repressive tactics but also the failure of leadership at multiple levels. Suad said “the leadership of the camp, where Battout operated, also played a role in exacerbating the crisis. Instead of taking effective and reasonable measures to contain the violence, the leadership chose to avoid responsibility and failed to disarm Battout or remove him from the situation”. Had they done so after the first violent incident, subsequent incidents might have been averted? This neglect allowed violence to spiral out of control and set a precedent for similar brutal responses.

Meanwhile, Bashar’s mishandling of the national crisis only deepened the turmoil. Instead of seeking dialogue or political solutions, the regime escalated its repression by arming militias loyal to it, further militarizing the conflict. Rather than engaging with opposition groups or addressing legitimate grievances, Bashar’s regime launched a brutal crackdown that

alienated large segments of the population. This harsh repression provoked further resistance, leading to escalating violence and instability.

The regime's refusal to alter its strategy – continuing to rely on fear, division, and indiscriminate violence – ultimately contributed to its downfall. The approach that had once helped maintain control became the very mechanism that eroded its legitimacy and sparked widespread revolution. The brutal crackdown alienated many destroyed communities and created a cycle of violence that was impossible to contain.

The regime's insistence on maintaining an outdated and brutal policy of repression, rather than seeking meaningful reform or reconciliation, led to the collapse of its control. What began as attempts to suppress protests through terror and division turned into a wider conflict that the regime could no longer manage. The crisis extended beyond its ability to contain, culminating in the fall of the regime itself later.

During this tumultuous period in Syria, a vast number of people were forced to leave their homes, driven away by the brutal and inhuman

practices of the regime, as well as the violent confrontations with various armed groups operating within the country.

The civilians bore the heaviest burden in this conflict – they were the innocent victims who lost nearly everything. Their lives were uprooted, their futures rendered uncertain, and their sense of security shattered.

Faced with relentless violence and destruction, many Syrians had no choice but to flee their hometowns. Some moved internally, seeking refuge in other parts of the country that were relatively safer, while others crossed Syria's borders in search of refuge.

Neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan became the initial destinations for those escaping the worst horrors of war. For many, these countries and other European countries represented the first hope of safety beyond Syria's increasingly fractured and dangerous landscape.

“A lot of Syrians made the dangerous journey to Europe”, said Yusif. “They felt they had no choice – they were escaping what they called a living hell”.

“That hell was created by the regime’s brutality and made worse by all the armed conflicts. It wasn’t just fear – it was total desperation”, Hamza explained.

“People were leaving their homes in areas where life had become impossible”, said Emad. “They gave up everything – their houses, their belongings, even their communities – just to keep their families alive”.

“And the terrifying part? No place ever stayed safe for long”, added Tameem. “One area might calm down for a bit, but that peace never lasted. The war just kept spreading, like a fire jumping from one place to another”.

“That’s why the population kept shifting so dramatically, especially in northern Syria”, said Yasser. “When regime forces were pushed out of the north, that region became a kind of temporary refuge for displaced people”.

“Yeah, people flooded into the north from all over the country. They were running from violence in their own towns, hoping for some kind of safety up there”, said Yusif.

“But the north wasn’t ready for it!” Hamza exclaimed. “Those towns were relatively quiet before, and suddenly they were overflowing with people. The pressure was massive”.

“And it didn’t stop there”, Emad reacted. “A lot of these families had to move again and again. Just when they thought they’d found safety, the violence would catch up with them”.

“That’s what made it so devastating” Tameem remarked. “Not just the trauma of war, but the repeated displacement. It wore people down – physically and psychologically”.

“Even basic things – food, clean water, shelter, medical care – became hard to find”, said Yasser. “Camps had to be set up just to provide temporary help to all the internally displaced people”.

However, the scale of displacement often overwhelmed these camps. They became overcrowded, unable to accommodate everyone in need.

Some people arriving at these camps could not even secure a tent or a spot to rest, forced instead to endure harsh living conditions.

The humanitarian situation was catastrophic. People found themselves with few options and little hope. Leaving their homes meant sacrificing not only their possessions but also their means of livelihood. Many displaced families exhausted their savings just to survive the initial phases of displacement.

With local economies collapsing and job opportunities virtually nonexistent in the areas where they sought refuge, many found themselves unable to earn a living. The material losses were staggering, and the psychological toll was immense.

In this dire situation, families who had members working abroad experienced a comparatively less severe economic impact. These family members could send remittances, providing vital financial support that helped their relatives survive during these dark times. For many, this external assistance was the difference between starvation and survival, between despair and hope.

For the vast majority of Syrians who had no such external support, the situation was devastating. Their lives were effectively frozen. No work, no income, no future. They faced the brutal reality of displacement with dwindling resources and little assistance. The ongoing war stripped them of their homes, their possessions, and their opportunities, leaving them vulnerable and destitute.

Beyond the material hardships, the psychological impacts of displacement and war weighed heavily on the population. The trauma of sudden uprooting, the loss of loved ones, the destruction of communities, and the uncertainty of the future created deep wounds.

Children grew up amid chaos and fear, families were separated, and social fabrics were torn apart. The social and cultural losses were profound, compounding the already unbearable physical hardships.

The protracted nature of the conflict meant that displacement often became a permanent state for many. Returning home was not an option while violence continued or until large-scale reconstruction could occur,

which remained uncertain for years. The idea of stability and normalcy receded farther into the distance with every passing day.

Their suffering reflected the enormous human cost of war and repression, a cost that extended far beyond the battlefield. The migration and displacement crisis created one of the largest humanitarian disasters in recent history, with effects that continued to ripple through Syria and the wider region.

Yasser remarked on the regime's increasingly desperate and reckless behavior as it began losing control over large strips of territory. "As the regime lost a lot of ground, it started behaving madly – destroying everything it could get its hands on".

"This erratic and destructive approach was a hallmark of the regime's final attempts to cling to power, reflecting leadership driven not by strategy but by panic and desperation", said Tameem.

Yusif compared the widespread fear endured by the population to the one that students experienced in the military training camp. "People suffered

from chaos and fear, just like the students when Battout rained them with fire”.

“The regime’s pattern of violence – random, brutal, and indiscriminate – was not new but had intensified and expanded to engulf entire cities and towns”, said Abdulhameed. “The fear witnessed during the camp was now being unleashed on a massive scale across the country”.

“The regime’s descent into madness became glaringly apparent between 2013 and 2014, when it was on the verge of collapse”, said Ahmad A.

“The madness of the regime became very clear because it was about to collapse at that time”.

“Faced with the real possibility of losing total control, the regime resorted to increasingly violent tactics aimed at terrorizing the population into submission”, added Abdulhameed.

Saud described this period as one of the most dangerous. “It was about containing the revolution with shells and explosive barrels poured everywhere, causing immense destruction, a high death toll, and widespread injuries and catastrophes for a huge number of people”.

“The regime’s brutal tactics caused suffering on a scale rarely seen before, turning cities into battlegrounds and civilians into victims of indiscriminate violence”, said Tameem.

Yusif further emphasized the scale of destruction. “Whole cities and towns were swept away by destruction, which made the situation much worse for the people. Many became homeless, with nowhere to go. Entire communities were shattered, homes reduced to rubble, and families displaced without warning or support. The conflict uprooted millions, leaving countless people in desperate search of safety amid ruins”.

Suad painted a bleak picture of a country torn apart. “The country was shattered, suffering indescribable devastation. Even towns that were not yet destroyed but located near regime-controlled areas were anxiously waiting for their turn”.

According to the regime’s “Battoutic” approach, nothing was spared. The regime’s followers rallied behind a brutal slogan: “Either Assad or burning the country”. True to their words, they carried out this scorched-earth policy with brutal efficiency, leaving cities in flames and countless

people dead or displaced. This destructive stance underscored the regime's willingness to sacrifice the country itself rather than relinquish power.

The impact of this destruction was felt in all cities and towns like Al-Qouraya, where the local situation was dire. Many residents lost their jobs, and economic activities were halted. Yet amid the chaos, some tried to adapt and survive.

Basel and Nader, the two colleagues with bachelor's degrees in law and English literature respectively, decided to open a grocery. This was a practical response to the worsening economic conditions and shrinking job opportunities.

As security conditions in the town continued to deteriorate, Basel and Nader eventually had to abandon their business and flee. Their story highlights the harsh realities faced by many Syrians who found themselves forced to give up their small businesses just to survive. Their decision to work as grocers, despite their academic qualifications, was a stark reflection of the collapse of normal life under the weight of conflict.

The situation in Al-Qouraya became increasingly unbearable due to shortages of security, basic food and essential supplies. Inflation soared, and the Syrian pound's value plummeted, worsening the economic crisis. For ordinary citizens, everyday life became a struggle for survival rather than a pursuit of progress or stability.

There were brief moments of hope when the regime's forces were expelled from Al-Qouraya, leading to a short-lived improvement in the town's conditions. But these moments were fleeting. When the regime regained control, the situation quickly deteriorated again, plunging the town back into hardship. This pattern of brief reprieves followed by renewed suffering was repeated in many parts of the country, deepening the population's despair.

The regime's response to losing territory was to unleash a wave of destruction that devastated Syria's cities and towns, inflicted unimaginable suffering on its people, and shattered the country's social and economic fabric. The "Battoutic mode" of indiscriminate violence was emblematic of this approach – an approach that prioritized the

survival of the regime over the wellbeing of its citizens, even if it meant burning the country to the ground.

The stories of places like Al-Qouraya, and people like Basel and Nader, serve as poignant reminders of the human cost behind the headlines – the individuals and families forced to adapt, endure, and survive amid the ruins of their once vibrant communities.

During this turbulent period, Falah was traveling from Al-Qouraya to the city of Deir Ezzor. His journey, like many others, was fraught with uncertainty and danger, but he hoped to reach his destination safely. However, when the bus he was on approached one of the regime's notorious checkpoints near Deir Ezzor, the atmosphere shifted dramatically.

Soldiers at the checkpoint singled him out, ordering him to disembark while allowing the rest of the bus to continue their route. From that moment, Falah vanished without a trace.

No one – his family, friends, or even local activists – could determine what happened to him. His fate remained an agonizing mystery. Was he

imprisoned? Executed? Taken somewhere secret? No one knew. The regime, infamous for its secretive and brutal methods, kept silent. To this day, Falah's whereabouts remain unknown, and his fate remains uncertain.

Sadly, Falah's case was like many others. Across Syria, countless young men have disappeared in similar circumstances – stopped at checkpoints, taken away by security forces, and never heard from again. These young people were often innocent civilians, not known to the regime as threats or criminals, yet they vanished into an abyss of state repression. Families of the disappeared young men faced a cruel reality: the silence of the regime was absolute and impenetrable.

What made these disappearances even more bewildering was the apparent randomness of the arrests. These young men were not even on any wanted lists; they had committed no acts to justify detention. Their arrests seemed arbitrary, purposeless from a legal standpoint, but intentional and strategic in practice.

The regime used this tactic as a means of spreading fear and maintaining control through terror, demonstrating that anyone could be taken at any time, for any reason – or no reason at all.

Relatives, desperate for answers, sought help from various sources, including influential figures rumored to have connections within the regime's inner circles. But their efforts were met with frustration and despair.

The regime's security apparatus was designed to withhold such knowledge completely, making it nearly impossible for anyone outside a small, secretive group of operatives to obtain reliable information about detainees.

One of the most insidious methods the regime employed to obscure the fate of detainees was the deliberate non-registration of names. Official records were often incomplete or falsified. Instead of registering detainees' real names, security forces assigned them numbers – numerical codes that stripped individuals of identity. For example, a young man might be reduced to '120' or '247' in the regime's files.

This practice was no accident; it was a calculated effort to erase any trace of the person's existence within the system.

This turned the search for missing people into a nearly impossible mission. Without a real name, families could not even begin to track their loved ones through official channels. Even within the regime's own security apparatus, only a handful of operatives knew which number corresponded to which detainee. These individuals were the gatekeepers of this grim secret.

If someone attempted to investigate a particular case, knowing the detainee's real name was meaningless. First, one would have to determine precisely where the person had been detained – a daunting task given the multiplicity of security branches and detention centers. Then, coordination with the specific unit responsible for the arrest was necessary.

If a senior figure within the regime intervened on behalf of a detainee, it was only through that intervention that the corresponding number might be revealed, and the case followed up.

Therefore, the number assigned to detainees became a kind of pin code, the only key to tracking or even acknowledging their existence. This system was not a new development; it was part of the regime's longstanding methods of repression, a practice used long before the revolution erupted.

It allowed the regime to hide anyone it wished without accountability or transparency, effectively erasing them from official records and public knowledge.

The implications of this practice were scary. Many detainees were never seen again. Some were believed to have been executed in secret, their deaths unrecorded and their bodies never returned to families.

Others were rumored to have been transferred abroad for even more sinister purposes. Various reports have implicated the Syrian regime in human trafficking and organ trade, a horrifying allegation that underscores the extent to which the regime would go to consolidate power and generate illicit revenue.

The regime's crimes did not stop there. It was involved in a broad spectrum of illicit and nefarious activities, including drug trafficking, which flooded not only Syria but also neighboring countries. Narcotics became another tool in the regime's arsenal, fueling corruption, funding military campaigns, and deepening the suffering of ordinary Syrians caught in the crossfire.

The regime's willingness to engage in such dark and corrupt practices revealed a brutal calculus: no act was forbidden if it served the ultimate goal of maintaining power. Preserving the presidency, safeguarding the regime's survival, and suppressing any opposition justified any price, no matter how horrific the consequences for the country or its people.

This bitter reality left deep scars on Syrian society. The widespread disappearances, the veil of secrecy, and the regime's ruthless policies contributed to a climate of fear and hopelessness. Families lived in constant anguish, unsure if their loved ones were alive or dead. Communities were fractured by suspicion and grief.

Rebuilding Syria in the aftermath of such devastation requires tremendous effort, resilience, and courage. The collective trauma inflicted by years of war, repression, and injustice cannot be erased overnight. It will take generations to heal the wounds left by enforced disappearances and unaccountable brutality.

Yet, history has shown that even in the darkest times, societies can emerge stronger if they learn from their suffering. The lessons of this period – about the value of justice, transparency, and human rights – must become foundational pillars in the rebuilding process. Without acknowledging and addressing the past, sustainable recovery and reconciliation will remain elusive.

The case of Falah and countless others like him serves as a haunting reminder of the human cost of authoritarianism and conflict. Their stories are not just about loss; they are a call to action. It is a struggle to ensure that no one is forgotten, and that no life is erased by the machinery of repression. Only by confronting these painful realities can Syria hope to build a future rooted in dignity, freedom, and peace.

Chapter Twelve

Dividing and Devastating the Country

2015 – 2020

Syria entered a profoundly turbulent and chaotic stage of instability, marking a drastic shift in the country's political and social landscape. What had once been a relatively unified nation began to fracture violently, torn into fragmented territories controlled by various groups.

At the heart of this fragmentation was the regime, which, in an attempt to maintain its grip on power, resorted to forming numerous militias. These militias became instruments of terror, wielding authority in a brutal and often arbitrary manner over the population within the regime-controlled areas. The consequences for ordinary Syrians were severe and deeply traumatic.

The regime-backed militias operated with near impunity, given free rein to act in any way they saw fit. Under the veneer of legality provided by

the regime's endorsement, they engaged in a variety of destructive and oppressive activities. Their power was reinforced by the regime's supply of weapons and resources, ensuring these militias were heavily armed and capable of enforcing control through intimidation, violence, and fear.

"The regime had a strategy – and it was brutal. They didn't just rely on traditional institutions anymore", Yusif said. "Instead, they created local power centers – militias, really – to enforce loyalty through fear".

"Exactly", Hamza agreed. "These militias became the real power on the ground. And they weren't just enforcing the regime's instructions – they were terrorizing people, especially the poor. Arbitrary arrests became the norm".

"People were being picked up for no reason – no evidence, no charges", Emad explained. "Just taken. And once someone was arrested, their families were thrown into a nightmare".

"The blackmail was relentless", added Tameem. "Families had to pay huge ransoms just to get their loved ones back. And if they couldn't pay? The consequences were disastrous".

“Militias would set up checkpoints all over the place – roads, highways – and they targeted travelers, especially young men”, said Yasser. “They’d kidnap them and demand money from their families like it was some kind of twisted business”.

“That’s the thing – it was a business”, Yusif pointed out. “Human lives turned into profit. And all of it happened under the regime’s protection”.

“These militias had complete control in the areas they operated. No one could stop them. And with that kind of unchecked power, abuse became routine”, Saud asserted.

“The violence they inflicted was horrifying”, added Emad. “Communities were crushed, people were constantly living in fear, and the most vulnerable suffered the most”.

“It was a trap. On one side, you had the regime with its iron grip”, said Tameem. “On the other, these lawless militias acting like warlords. There was no justice – just survival”.

“And fear. It touched everything”, Yasser reacted. “Daily life wasn’t really life anymore – just a constant effort to stay invisible, to avoid becoming someone’s next target”.

Just like arming Battout in the military training camp, the regime armed militias and both sides used arms against all. Battout attacked all students, and the regime attacked the Syrian people. Unlike the regime’s militias, that primarily preyed upon the poor and marginalized, Battout’s aggression was indiscriminate. He attacked not only students but also the regime’s own hierarchy, such as the brigadier.

This positioned Battout in a complex light: while his actions were violent and often brutal, his principles seemed to revolve around a kind of ‘justice’ that did not discriminate based on social status or wealth.

The regime militias, in contrast, were driven by greed and cowardice. They focused their attacks almost exclusively on poor people, exploiting their vulnerability for material gain. Their violence was selective, aimed at those least able to defend themselves. They deliberately avoided confrontations with powerful or influential figures, fearing repercussions.

This fear contrasted sharply with Battout's approach, who seemed fearless in challenging both the oppressed and the powerful alike. In this sense, Battout represented a twisted form of justice or principle, whereas the regime militias were merely instruments of oppression and exploitation, devoid of any such honor or courage.

This chaotic division of Syria extended far beyond the internal dynamics of militias and regime forces; it reshaped the very geography and social fabric of the country. Syria became a patchwork of fragmented territories, each ruled by different groups with their own rules and restrictions. Movement between these areas became not only difficult but dangerous and prohibitively expensive.

In the east, the Kurdish militia established control. The Kurdish forces were vigilant in enforcing their borders and strictly limited the movement of other Syrians through their territory. Non-Kurdish Syrians found it difficult or impossible to travel freely within these areas, as the Kurdish authorities sought to maintain tight control over their lands, sometimes barring entry or imposing stringent conditions on visitors or residents.

Meanwhile, the western part of Syria remained under the regime's control. Many Syrians who had left or fled found themselves unable to return, especially those wanted for compulsory military service or other political reasons.

The regime's security apparatus-maintained lists of wanted individuals, making travel within regime-controlled areas risky for those who fell afoul of its rules. The regime's policies effectively segmented the population, limiting free movement and reinforcing divisions.

The northern regions of Syria were dominated by various opposition groups, each controlling different towns and districts.

Travel and transportation across Syria's divided territories became a nightmare. What once was a relatively straightforward journey now required navigating a maze of checkpoints, hostile territories, and unpredictable dangers.

Routes that previously took just a few hours could stretch to a very long time. This was not only due to the increased distance taken to avoid

conflict zones but also because of the extensive security checks, frequent stops, and the risk of attacks along the way.

The cost of travel also skyrocketed. People had to pay exorbitant fees to smugglers, militia checkpoints, or corrupt officials simply to pass through areas controlled by different groups. For many, these expenses were a heavy burden, further exacerbating the economic hardships caused by the conflict. The safety of travelers was never guaranteed, and stories of harassment, theft, or violence during these journeys were common.

This fragmentation and the militarization of society deeply affected all aspects of daily life. Families were separated, commerce disrupted, and the social cohesion that once held communities together was eroded. The inability to move freely impacted not only economic activity but also access to essential services such as healthcare and education, which became scarce or unevenly distributed across the different territories.

The division of the country into Kurdish-controlled east, regime-controlled west, and opposition-held north created physical and social barriers that made travel perilous and costly, further deepening the

country's wounds and prolonging its suffering. The Syrian people found themselves caught in a web of fear, violence, and fragmentation, with little hope for unity or peace in the near future.

In 2015, Yusif undertook a remarkable and arduous journey to visit his parents in his hometown, Al-Qouraya. This journey would become one of the most memorable and challenging experiences of his life. Spanning nearly 48 hours, the trip involved multiple modes of transportation, including airplanes, buses, and private vehicles and required navigating through a country torn apart by the war and divided among various groups. In normal circumstances, travelling from Kuwait to the same town takes only three hours.

The journey began at Kuwait International Airport, where Yusif boarded a flight bound for Istanbul, Turkey. This first leg of the trip was relatively smooth, marking the beginning of a much more complex route. Upon arriving in Istanbul, Yusif met with other passengers who were also making the same journey toward Syria. These individuals, like him, were

Syrian expatriates yearning to reunite with relatives after years of separation.

The second stage of Yusif's journey involved traveling from Istanbul to the city of Gaziantep, located in southern Turkey. This leg was completed via a domestic flight on Turkish Airlines. From Gaziantep, they proceeded by road to Kilis, a Turkish town situated near the border with Syria. Kilis served as an important transit point for many Syrians attempting to cross back into their country, especially during those years of intense conflict.

Yusif and his companions spent a night in Kilis to rest before continuing the next day toward the Syrian border. The atmosphere in Kilis was a mixture of tension and anticipation. While the town itself was relatively peaceful, its proximity to the border reminded everyone of the fragility of the situation just a few kilometers away.

Crossing into Syria marked the most uncertain and risky part of the journey. Syria in 2015 was a country divided into zones of control by various armed groups. The route Yusif had to take was far from straightforward; it was carefully designed to avoid regime-controlled

areas, which were heavily fortified and often hostile to returnees from abroad. The regime considered all returnees who cross to Syria via Turkey as perpetrators.

The journey also sought to bypass Kurdish militia territories, where entry was either restricted or entirely prohibited to non-Kurds. Instead, the path led through territories controlled initially by the FSA and later by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), each overseeing different stretches of the route.

The road into Syria was like a zigzag pattern, reflecting the chaotic patchwork of control across the country. What should have been a direct journey was instead a meandering path through deserts, farmlands, and small towns – constantly shifting based on which group controlled which area at any given time. The risk of ambush or conflict was ever-present, yet, paradoxically, the areas controlled by the FSA and ISIS proved to be passable, if not peaceful, for travelers like Yusif.

Along the way, their van was stopped at dozens of checkpoints set up by both FSA and ISIS fighters. At some checkpoints, armed guards would inspect vehicles, check IDs, and inquire about destinations.

While these encounters caused delays, Yusif recalled that the guards at these checkpoints were surprisingly respectful to civilians. Unlike checkpoints operated by the Syrian regime – where bribery, humiliation, and harassment were common – these ones simply involved only verification. Though time-consuming, the process went relatively smoothly, and the travelers were allowed to proceed without extortion or physical threats.

Despite the apparent civility shown during the journey, the region under ISIS control operated on an unpredictable and often contradictory set of rules. Though no harm came to the passengers during their passage, Yusif later learned of a deeply personal loss: his house in Al-Qouraya had been confiscated by ISIS.

The house was taken without formal charges or justification. Instead, the ISIS fighters claimed that because Yusif had been living abroad, his property was no longer protected under their rules.

To add insult to injury, the house was reportedly handed over to a Chinese foreign fighter who had joined ISIS. This arbitrary seizure of private property was against the Islamic principles that ISIS claimed to uphold. In Islamic law, the right to private property is considered sacred, and confiscating someone's home without due process or clear evidence of wrongdoing is strictly prohibited.

Despite this painful development, the primary goal of Yusif's journey was fulfilled: he was reunited with his old parents in Al-Qouraya after more than five years apart. The town, although affected by the war, still retained some of its charm and familiarity.

February's chill hung in the air, but the warmth of family and community made up for the cold. For two weeks, Yusif relished the comfort of conversations and walked through familiar streets. He reconnected with

childhood friends, neighbors, and relatives – many of whom he hadn't seen since the war began.

These short two weeks felt like a return to another life, a time before chaos had enveloped the country. Yet, the awareness that it would soon end lingered throughout his stay. After saying his goodbyes, Yusif embarked on the return journey to Kuwait, retracing the same complex and exhausting path back through checkpoints.

Once again, the road was long, the checkpoints frequent, and the delays frustrating, but he was ultimately able to return safely.

Back in Kuwait, life continued. While Yusif had been able to visit his family, many of his friends were still separated from theirs or had lost everything in the war. Despite the hardship, stories of resilience and achievement among the Syrian diaspora emerged. One notable example was Abdulhameed who had also left Syria years earlier and had pursued his academic ambitions abroad.

In 2016, Abdulhameed earned his PhD in Islamic Studies, a significant accomplishment not only for him but also for all his colleagues. At a time

when the country was being misrepresented and misunderstood, Abdulhameed's success represented a return to authentic scholarship and intellectual contribution. His degree was more than a personal triumph; it symbolized the potential of Syrians to rise above the conflict and seek excellence through education and perseverance.

Abdulhameed's achievement showed that, even away from homeland, it was possible to contribute meaningfully to one's heritage and faith. For Yusif and others, these successes offered hope and a reminder of what Syrians could achieve when given the opportunity to live and learn in peace.

However, by 2017, the eastern region of Syria descended into one of the darkest and most chaotic phases of the war. The already complex conflict deepened as new battles erupted, involving multiple groups vying for territorial control.

Abdulrahman recalled this period with a heavy heart, stating, "In 2017, things became worse in the eastern region of Syria due to the eruption of a war amongst many different parties". These words captured the anxiety

and devastation that swept across the Euphrates valley, particularly in Deir Ezzor and the surrounding towns and villages.

The conflict reached a new intensity as ISIS found itself under attack from two powerful fronts. On the right bank of the Euphrates River, the Syrian regime forces, heavily supported by Russian air power and pro-regime militias, launched a ferocious offensive on ISIS positions.

Meanwhile, on the left bank, the U.S.-led International Coalition, in coordination with Kurdish-led forces conducted their own aggressive campaign to dislodge ISIS from key territories.

This simultaneous pressure from both sides turned the region into a battlefield with no refuge. Towns, villages, and even farmlands became targets of artillery, airstrikes, and ground invasions. Civilians, as always, bore the brunt of the violence.

Tameem described the situation as one of the most terrifying and suffocating periods of the war. “This was one of the worst times for the region”, he said. “People were trapped there, and it wasn’t easy at all to move from one area into another due to the continuous shelling”.

Movement was risky, even for those attempting to flee. There were no guarantees of safety – no matter which direction they turned.

Yasser emphasized the brutality of the regime and its allies. “The worst shelling was conducted by the Syrian regime, Russia, and their militias”, he recalled bitterly. “They didn’t care about civilians. They shelled everything and every area, regardless of whether it had civilians or militants”.

The indiscriminate bombing campaigns turned homes, schools, markets, and hospitals into piles of rubble.

In addition to conventional airstrikes and artillery shelling, regime helicopters frequently dropped explosive barrels on densely populated areas. Saud described the scene in haunting detail: “Explosive barrels and rockets rained down on the areas. A huge number of civilians were killed during this time. It was chaos. Entire families were wiped out in seconds. Streets once filled with life became ghostly ruins”.

Faced with these unbearable conditions, people attempted to flee. Panic spread rapidly as the threat of death loomed from both the skies and the

ground. “People rushed quickly, looking for safety”, Saud continued, “especially by attempting to leave those areas and move to safer ones”.

Tameem described this mass movement as one of the most tragic aspects of the war: “This sparked internal migration inside the country, in which thousands of families had to leave their homes and towns to move to safer areas, especially in the north”. The northern part of Syria, under the control of various opposition groups and Kurdish forces, became a refuge for countless families, but it quickly grew overwhelmed by the influx.

Tents and makeshift shelters began to cover many open fields and areas. The region faced immense pressure, as infrastructure and services were ill-equipped to handle such a large population increase.

Food, water, medical aid, and basic necessities were all in short supply. And yet, people continued to arrive – anything was better than the death and destruction they had left behind.

During this mass displacement, many people died on the roads while trying to flee. Shelling followed them, and so did hunger, thirst, and exhaustion.

Abdulrahman reflected on the situation: “People in those areas suffered too much to find shelter since everything was difficult at that time, including transport”. “The transportation costs skyrocketed due to the danger, and many families were simply too poor to afford a safe journey. Nevertheless, they had no choice. Staying meant risking death”.

Journeys that should have taken hours stretched into days. Convoys of desperate families moved through dangerous paths and rugged terrain, trying to avoid frontlines and landmines. Women carried children, elderly men walked arduously, and sick individuals waited for help of others to carry them away from the dangerous areas.

Yusif recounted his own family’s experience during this dire time. “It was a disastrous situation”, he said. “My parents and my brothers’ families left the town and headed to the north on a journey that took several days”. He described the departure as agonizing. “The situation was miserable, but they were out of options. A lot of other families underwent the same situation”.

Yusif's family, like thousands of others, traveled through dangerous terrain, passing destroyed towns, and military checkpoints. The journey was exhausting, but their determination to survive pushed them forward. Eventually, they reached a safer area, but the trauma of what they had experienced never left them.

Meanwhile, Basel and Nader also decided it was time to leave. They locked up their grocery store for the last time, unsure if they would ever return, and joined the swelling crowds moving north. Their departure marked not only the loss of a livelihood but the end of an era in their small community.

Basel and Nader, like most of the town's residents, would remain displaced for years. They stayed in the north, where relative safety allowed for a temporary semblance of normalcy. Many families who fled during this period did not return home until the fall of the Syrian regime – some never returned at all. Their homes were destroyed, and they lost everything.

In another perilous journey during 2017, Ibraheem fled the devastation of Syria and sought refuge in Germany, driven by the urgent need to protect himself and his family. Leaving behind the only home he had ever known, he risked everything to get out of the relentless violence and chaos that had turned daily life into a living nightmare. His journey was not just a physical one – it was a leap of hope, fueled by optimism for safety, and a future free from terror.

Mudhafar successfully completed his specialization in otolaryngology at Damascus University in 2017, where he developed a deep expertise in diagnosing and treating disorders related to the ear, nose, and throat. Following his graduation, he travelled to Yemen and gained valuable hands-on experience working at several hospitals, including the Royal Hospital in the capital city of Sanaa. His time there allowed him to refine his clinical skills and contribute meaningfully to patient care in a challenging healthcare environment.

Yusif endured a deeply sorrowful time on February 5th, 2018, when his father passed away, may Allah embrace him in His boundless mercy. His

father's death followed a long and painful journey, shaped by displacement, physical hardship, and the critical absence of proper medical care in war-torn Syria.

He was 76 years old, and like many elderly civilians in Syria during that period, he endured the harshest of circumstances in the final years of his life. His passing occurred in Idleb province, a region at a time overwhelmed with internally displaced people and constant instability.

The conditions leading up to his death were as tragic as they were reflective of the broader suffering faced by millions of Syrians. The security situation in early 2018 had deteriorated to an alarming degree.

The country was divided among various groups, and violent clashes were frequent, with no safe passage between areas. As a result, travel in and out of Syria was almost impossible. Those who were trapped inside the country, especially in opposition-held areas like Idleb, found themselves isolated, cut off from the outside world.

During that time, border crossings were either completely closed or heavily restricted. Travel was effectively frozen. Whether someone

needed to leave the country for medical treatment, to reunite with family, or even just to flee violence, the reality was grim: no one was going anywhere.

The feeling among people was that they were imprisoned in their own land, locked inside a vast open-air prison where they had no control over their movement, safety, or future.

Compounding the security and travel crises were the devastating economic, financial, and political conditions that had engulfed the nation. Daily life became a struggle for survival. Basic necessities like bread, clean water, and fuel were often unavailable or unaffordable.

Medical facilities were either destroyed or lacked the equipment and staff to function. Pharmacies were empty, and hospitals, when not targeted by airstrikes, were overwhelmed and under-resourced. For people like Yusif's father, who needed access to regular medical attention, these circumstances were lethal.

By 2018, many Syrians had been forced to flee their homes, some multiple times, as frontlines shifted and regions fell under new control. Most

people were concerned primarily with their own survival and that of their immediate families.

They were busy navigating a dangerous landscape, planning escapes, or rebuilding shattered lives. Families had to make impossible decisions: whether to stay in their homes and risk death or embark on perilous journeys to unknown destinations in the north or toward border areas. These mass displacements meant that families had to abandon everything, homes they had lived in for generations, their possessions, property, and businesses.

These recurring displacements left families physically and psychologically exhausted. Every move involved leaving something else behind, whether a home, a community, or a part of their identity. The uncertainty of whether they would ever return, combined with the trauma of starting from zero again and again, took a psychological toll on everyone, especially the elderly, like Yusif's father.

Within these incredible situations, Yusif's father lived out his final days. Surrounded by the instability of war, cut off from advanced medical care,

and constantly on the move or adjusting to displacement, he faced challenges that no person of his age should have endured.

His death was not simply a result of old age, it was the direct consequence of a system that had collapsed under the weight of violence, neglect, and destruction.

Chapter Thirteen

Dramatic Fall of the Regime

2021 – 2024

Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Yusif and his close circle of friends found it increasingly difficult to maintain contact, especially with those who had remained inside Syria. The intensity of the conflict, coupled with the deterioration of the country's communication infrastructure, often meant that even basic phone calls or internet messaging were not easy.

Some of the colleagues had managed to flee Syria, dispersing across different countries in search of safety and stability. Even among those who had left, regular contact proved to be a challenge. Life abroad came with its own burdens – settling in unfamiliar territories, dealing with legal and financial challenges, and coping with trauma. These factors often created psychological and logistical distances that were hard to bridge.

But for those who had made it to Kuwait, the situation was much better. Being in the same country allowed for more frequent communication and occasional meetings. During one of their rare gatherings, Yusif and his friends found themselves discussing the nature of the Syrian regime and how it managed to cling to power for so long, despite the massive uprising and the war that followed.

“You know”, Yusif began, “the regime was always vague... surrounded by an intentional fog of confusion. Nothing was ever clear – not the policies, not the intentions, not even the alliances. It was as if secrecy itself was the regime”.

Ahmad A. nodded in agreement. “Exactly”, he said. “And don’t forget, the regime wasn’t just acting alone. It had powerful allies – external powers that shielded it diplomatically and militarily. Over the years, the regime wove a dense web of interests with various players: other regimes, criminals, human traffickers, drug dealers, even international arms dealers. These weren’t just incidental alliances – they were essential pillars that sustained it”.

Yasser added, “That’s what allowed the regime to survive for so long. By diversifying its alliances – even with the worst of humanity – it ensured that it always had someone to fall back on. If one backer withdrew support, another would be ready to step in. It was a brutal kind of pragmatism”.

“Some countries”, Yasser continued, “were openly supportive of the regime, regardless of its well-documented record of atrocities. They ignored the suffering of the Syrian people and turned a blind eye to the regime’s use of torture, starvation, and chemical weapons. Others, however, preferred to act in the shadows”.

“Some countries pretended to be champions of human rights”, Ahmad A. said bitterly, “but they dealt with the regime through backchannels. Their support was more discreet, but no less significant”.

Saud, who had been quiet, interjected, “Those are the worst, in my opinion. The hypocrites. They acted like they cared – issuing statements, expressing concern – but behind the scenes, they were as complicit as the

others. The only difference was that they feared their own public opinion and international backlash, so they disguised their involvement”.

Ahmad A. nodded. “Exactly. This widespread, multilayered support is what kept the regime afloat for decades”. Throughout the war, the Syrian regime lost significant portions of the country, sometimes nearly half the territory. Yet it remained obsessed with maintaining control over Damascus and other key cities. These areas, especially the capital, held not only strategic but also symbolic value. As long as the capital was under regime’s control, it could claim legitimacy. It could insist that it was still the rightful government of Syria.

“The regime didn’t really care about the rest of the country”, Yusif said. “It allowed entire provinces to fall or burn. Its focus was always on the capital. The moment Damascus was secure, they felt secure – even if the rest of Syria was collapsing”.

This tunnel vision allowed the regime to project strength, even in the face of massive territorial losses. By portraying itself as the last bastion of ‘order’ in a country falling into chaos, the regime partially succeeded to

convince or deceive some international observers that it was still the lesser evil.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, fear was eating away at the regime itself. Ever since the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, the leadership lived in a constant state of paranoia. They knew their position was precarious. They understood that popular anger was justified and that betrayal could come from any corner – even from within their own ranks.

“The fear of collapse was always there”, Ahmad said. “It haunted them every day. They were as afraid as the civilians they oppressed – maybe more. Because they knew that if the regime fell, there would be no hiding. No forgiveness. They had too much blood on their hands”.

What made matters worse for the regime was the internal distrust among its top officials. Many of them were deeply involved in crimes – torture, murder, embezzlement, and drug trafficking. They were all complicit, and each one knew the others’ secrets. This mutual guilt was supposed to bind them together, but in reality, it tore them apart.

“There was a strange kind of balance within the regime”, Yusif observed. “A balance of fear. On the one hand, they were united by shared criminality. If one of them fell, it could trigger a domino effect – so they had to protect each other. On the other hand, they hated and mistrusted each other because everyone knew just how ruthless and corrupt the others were”.

This internal tension was perhaps the most corrosive force of all. While the regime projected unity to the outside world, inside, it was fractured and suspicious. Some high-ranking officials believed others were more responsible for the atrocities and deserved to take the fall first. Power struggles and silent betrayals were common. The regime, to a certain extent, had survived the revolution and the war, but it was now rotting from within.

The final years were marked by desperation. Even as they received continued support from allies abroad, regime officials couldn't shake the sense that their time was running out. For years, they had played a dangerous game, but the web of alliances was starting to fade away.

International interest was waning. Domestic resistance, though weakened, was reigniting in unexpected ways.

By 2024, cracks had widened to the point of no return. In December of that year, the long-feared and long-awaited collapse finally came. The regime fell, not in a blaze of glory or a grand military defeat, but more like a house of cards folding under its own weight.

Yusif and his friends watched the regime's fall not with joy, but with a heavy mix of relief and sorrow. The price had been too high. Millions of lives were destroyed. Entire cities flattened. A generation displaced.

However, the Syrian regime was an oddity by every standard, and even its collapse struck many as surreal. From its rise to its fall, everything about it seemed abnormal and out of step with the natural course of political history.

Its origins lay in a military coup decades ago – a seizure of power that marked the beginning of authoritarian rule, one that would endure through contradictions, manipulations, and a sustained grip on the nation's resources and people.

What allowed the regime to survive for so long wasn't strength or legitimacy – it was the ability to exploit contradictions within society and manipulate national causes. It cloaked itself in slogans of resistance, national unity, and state-building.

It promoted the image of a strong, sovereign nation committed to defending Arab causes and building a formidable military to confront foreign threats. But behind the rhetoric lay an entirely different reality.

The regime systematically hijacked these national causes to consolidate power. It appropriated the narrative of resistance – not to fight real enemies or foreign occupation, but to justify its own authoritarianism.

“It's chilling when you think about it. The regime always claimed it was building a strong military for national defense – but that was just a cover”, said Abdulrahman. “In reality, they monopolized the country's wealth and poured billions into the military and security forces, not to protect Syrians, but to control”.

“Exactly”, said Tameem. “The army was never about protecting the homeland from external threats. From the beginning, it was repurposed as

an internal weapon – used not against enemies at the border, but against the very people it was meant to defend. When the revolution began, the military turned its firepower on Syrian cities – shelling neighborhoods, gunning down protestors, crushing poor communities under the treads of tanks”.

“And let’s not forget the intelligence agencies. They were another pillar of this oppressive system”, added Yasser. “You’d think intelligence services would be about public safety – but no. These were agencies built for fear. Fear and control. Their job was to suffocate any form of protest before it even had a chance to breathe”.

“Tens of thousands disappeared into their prisons. Arbitrary arrests became routine. Torture was systematic”, said Ahmad T. “People were blackmailed and sometimes vanished without a trace. These weren’t rogue acts – they were institutional policy. The intelligence branches functioned like the regime’s secret police, designed to extinguish hope”.

“By the time the revolution erupted in 2011, those institutions were already fully prepared. They were the tip of the spear in the crackdown”,

Abdulrahman explained. “Peaceful protests were met with mass arrests and torture. The goal wasn’t stability – it was total silence. The kind of silence that only comes from terror”.

“The regime had spent decades laying the groundwork for this kind of repression”, added Tameem. “Every law they passed, every institution they built – it all served a single purpose: to protect the regime, not the people. They ruled not through legitimacy, but through intimidation, coercion, and sectarian manipulation”.

“But here’s the thing: fear might work for a while, but it doesn’t last forever”, said Yasser. “History shows that even the strongest empires, the most brutal tyrannies – they all fall eventually. You can’t silence a population forever”.

“No tyranny is permanent. The regime thought it could bury the truth and break the people’s will – but the spirit of resistance always finds a way back”, Ahmad T. interjected. “That’s what they failed to understand”.

“You know, when the regime finally fell, it was both shocking and somehow inevitable”, said Abdulrahman. “After decades of fortifying

Damascus – pouring all their resources into making the capital this impenetrable fortress – it all just collapsed without any kind of resistance”.

“That’s what struck me the most. The regime, which had always been so obsessed with holding Damascus at all costs, simply fled when the moment came”, Tameem noted. “No grand battle, no last stand. Just abandonment. The capital fell quietly, in a vague way just like the vagueness of the regime”.

“That quiet fall exposed a lot of uncomfortable truths about how fragile the regime really was. It wasn’t the invincible force it pretended to be”, said Yasser. “Once its foreign backers started pulling away – or couldn’t keep up their support for different reasons – the whole system began to crumble”.

“Exactly. The regime’s strength was never really about its grip on the people or internal resilience”, Ahmad T. explained. “It depended heavily on external alliances, foreign funding, and diplomatic deals. Without those, it had nothing solid beneath it”.

“And that dependency showed just how disconnected the regime was from its own population”, said Abdulrahman. “Syrians never supported the regime genuinely. They were ruled through fear and control, not through any real representation or legitimacy”.

“For decades, people lived under constant surveillance, repression, and systemic abuse”, Tameem remarked. “The regime ruled with an iron fist, silencing voices and crushing protests. So, when it fell, it wasn’t a moment of mourning – it was a moment of relief, even celebration”.

“I remember the streets filling up with people – cautiously hopeful but undeniably joyful”, said Yasser. “After years of suffering in silence, the weight of dictatorship finally lifted. For the first time in decades, Syrians could imagine a future that didn’t revolve around fear and sectarian division”.

“That hope was contagious. People weren’t just celebrating the fall of a regime – they were dreaming of a new Syria”, Ahmad T. commented. “A Syria free from repression, from injustice, from the manipulation that had kept them divided for so long”.

“It was a new beginning, fragile but full of promise”, Abdulrahman concluded. “And it reminded everyone that even the most entrenched tyrannies can fall, and with them comes the chance to rebuild something better”.

However, one of the most telling signs of the people’s maturity was their behavior in the immediate aftermath of the regime’s collapse. Despite the anger and trauma of decades under authoritarian rule, the overwhelming majority did not descend into chaos. They did not loot public institutions, destroy infrastructure, or take revenge on fellow citizens.

Yes, there were minor incidents, but for the most part, Syrians chose to protect public facilities and services. In many areas, local communities came together to safeguard public institutions. This collective action stood in stark contrast to the regime’s propaganda, which had long portrayed demonstrators and most of the Syrian people as criminals or extremists.

Ironically, many of those who stepped forward to preserve public order after the collapse were the same people the regime had previously demonized. These individuals had been labeled traitors, terrorists, and

societal threats – people whom the regime once claimed that they needed to be “cut off” from the national body like a diseased organ.

The regime had compared its violent offensives to medical procedures – justified by the need to maintain national health.

But reality exposed the regime’s lies. The so-called “rotten organs” were, in fact, the very people who held the country together in its most fragile moment. They were ordinary citizens including doctors, teachers, engineers, and civil activists who simply believed in freedom and dignity. Their actions after the fall of the regime disproved decades of official rhetoric and proved that the people were not the problem – the regime was.

Perhaps the most sensitive part of the regime’s collapse was the uncovering of long-hidden secrets. With intelligence offices and prisons no longer guarded, Syrians began to learn the full extent of the horrors committed behind closed doors. Mass graves were found. Torture chambers were exposed. Families finally received confirmation about the fate of some loved ones who had disappeared years earlier.

The truth, long buried under layers of propaganda, was finally emerging. It was painful, but also necessary. Syrians began the difficult task of confronting their past while trying to build a future. The fall of the regime opened the door not only to political change but also to national healing.

The road ahead remained uncertain and full of challenges. The fall of a dictatorship does not automatically lead to a stable democracy. But for many Syrians, that moment marked the end of a nightmare and the beginning of a new chapter – one in which they could, perhaps for the first time in decades, shape their own destiny.

People need to understand the immense burden left behind by the former regime. Its fall did not simply mark the end of a political era – it exposed a shattered state, deeply scarred and drowning in crises.

Decades of misrule created a country crippled by debt, riddled with corruption, and torn apart by sectarianism and profound social divisions. These were not accidental outcomes. The regime deliberately fostered these divisions as tools of control, exploiting sectarian identities and stirring internal conflicts to tighten its grip on power.

Throughout its reign, the regime cared little for the people or the nation's future. It operated with a singular focus: self-preservation. Any challenge to its authority – whether from opponents or even disillusioned supporters – was swiftly silenced, depending on what best served its interests. This self-serving approach ultimately led to the collapse of nearly every aspect of Syrian society.

What remains now is a country pushed to the edge. Syria sits at the bottom of international rankings in almost every category – governance, economy, healthcare, education, and public services. It has become a global symbol of state failure, and the consequences are felt by every single Syrian, regardless of where they live today.

Perhaps nothing reflects the damage more symbolically than the Syrian passport. Once a document of identity, it has now become one of the weakest passports in the world – offering almost no access to international travel.

To make matters worse, it is also among the most expensive, placing an additional burden on those already struggling abroad. This single

document encapsulates the struggle of the Syrian people – restricted, devalued, and blocked at every border.

Education, which should be a pillar of national progress, was severely undermined under the regime. Schools deteriorated, universities lost credibility, and the country fell far behind global standards. Generations of Syrian students grew up in a system that prioritized loyalty over knowledge and censorship over critical thinking.

Public health services fared no better. Government hospitals were left in a state of neglect and decay. Medical staff lacked equipment, medicine, and resources, while officials boasted of progress that never reached the people.

Public services, transportation, and communication networks followed the same path of deterioration. Infrastructure crumbled as corruption flourished. Roads became unsafe, public transport unreliable, and communication networks outdated and dysfunctional.

The state failed in its most basic responsibilities, while officials enriched themselves and built personal empires on the suffering of ordinary citizens.

Inside Syria, civilians were routinely harassed, assaulted, and detained by the regime's military and intelligence apparatuses. These institutions existed not to serve or protect the population, but to police and punish. Their legacy is one of fear, not security.

Outside Syria, the situation was equally bleak. Syrian refugees and expatriates faced humiliating travel restrictions and endless visa obstacles. With a devalued passport and a broken nation behind them, Syrians abroad were often treated as second-class citizens – regardless of their skills, education, or intentions.

They became almost stateless individuals. Restricted, unwanted, and burdened with the stigma of a regime they never supported.

What's important to recognize is that this suffering is not abstract. It is deeply personal and felt in every aspect of daily life – whether you are a student unable to access proper education, a sick person denied decent

medical care, a family split across borders with no hope of reunion, or simply someone trying to survive with dignity in a country that no longer functions.

The heavy burden of the former regime continues to shape every Syrian's reality. It didn't just destroy the economy or institutions – it devastated the very fabric of society. It made Syrians feel like strangers in their own land and outcasts abroad. The damage wasn't just physical, but psychological – instilling fear, mistrust, and despair across generations.

As Syria moves forward, it is vital that this legacy is not forgotten or underestimated. Healing will take time. Rebuilding institutions, restoring trust, and uniting a fractured society is an enormous task. But it begins with awareness – an honest recognition of the weight that the former regime left behind and the resilience of the people who continue to carry it.

Yusif and his friends often found themselves reflecting on the dark legacy of the former Syrian regime. What struck them most was how universally despised it had become – not just by Syrians who had suffered under its

grip, but by people from across the world. It wasn't merely a local tyranny; it had become a global symbol of cruelty, injustice, and oppression.

The day the regime's fall was officially announced, Yusif was surrounded by friends rushing to congratulate him. It wasn't just fellow Syrians who expressed joy – it was people from a wide range of backgrounds: Indians, Pakistanis, British, Americans, and many from across the Arab world.

The outpouring of relief and shared celebration came from those who had never even lived under the regime yet still felt the weight of its evil. This surprised Yusif. Why did people from other countries care so deeply? What had the regime done that made people, even beyond Syria's borders, harbor such hatred?

The answer became clear in the conversations that followed. Many of his non-Arab friends pointed to the horrifying footage and reports they had seen – particularly the revelations about Saydnaya Military Prison. That single facility had come to represent the darkest depths of human cruelty.

Documentaries, eyewitness testimonies, and leaked reports had pulled back the curtain on the atrocities committed there: systematic torture,

starvation, and extrajudicial executions. For many around the world, Saydnaya was not just a prison – it was a nightmare, a place that defied any standard of humanity.

“This wasn’t just about Syria”, one of Yusif’s American friends said. “Saydnaya looked like something from a horror film. But it wasn’t fiction. It was real, and it was sanctioned by a government. That’s what makes it so horrifying”.

Another friend from India added, “Normal human beings don’t treat each other like that. You don’t need to be Syrian to feel sickened by it. You just need to be human”.

Saydnaya, however, was only a glimpse into the wider suffering of the Syrian people. The entire country, many said, had been turned into one massive prison. It wasn’t just walls and guards that oppressed Syrians – it was a culture of fear, surveillance, and violence that had spread to every town, neighborhood, and home.

“You know”, Yusif said to some of his friends one evening, “I feel that Saydnaya became a symbol of the whole regime. It was a place of silence, darkness, pain – and so was Syria under that regime”.

Emad shook his head and said, “The name of that prison, and even the name of the area, should be erased. It’s cursed. It carries too much pain”.

Ahmad A. disagreed. “No, we shouldn’t change it. We should keep it exactly as it is – to remember. That place should stand as a permanent reminder of what we went through”.

Abdulrahman nodded in agreement. “Turn it into a museum. A national monument. Something that honors the victims and teaches future generations what happens when power is unchecked and unaccountable. We need to remember, not erase”.

The others echoed this sentiment. Keeping Saydnaya preserved – no longer as a place of torture, but as a place of memory – could serve both as a tribute to those who died there and a warning to those who govern in the future.

The next government, they agreed, must be reminded of what happens when leaders serve only themselves and abuse their power. The memory of Saydnaya, and everything it symbolized, must never fade.

With the regime gone, a door long sealed was finally open. Syrians who had fled the country, or had been forced into exile, now had the chance to return. For many, it was the first time they could safely travel to Damascus in years.

Flights to Damascus International Airport resumed, and with them came a wave of returning citizens – eager to reunite with family, visit childhood homes, and reconnect with a country they had been separated from for too long.

Yusif wasted no time. The moment it was possible, he booked his flight and returned to Syria – his first time back since 2015. The experience was dreamlike. Years of longing, worry, and painful distance suddenly collapsed into a single moment as he stepped onto Syrian soil. The air smelled the same. The streets looked familiar, yet so much had changed.

He wasn't alone. Many of his friends followed in the next weeks and months. Those who couldn't make the trip immediately began planning for the summer holidays, when schools and workplaces would give them enough time to visit. Slowly, the country that had scattered its people across the globe began to welcome them home again.

Some of Yusif's friends hadn't seen their families since the early days of the revolution in 2011. Others had spent over a decade in countries where they had no permanent status, struggling to build lives in exile. Now, for the first time, they were able to sit with their parents and walk in the streets of their hometowns without fear.

It was a bittersweet return. Joy was mixed with sorrow. Cities had changed. Some homes were gone. Many loved ones had died or disappeared. But being able to return – after so many years of fear, uncertainty, and exile – was healing in itself.

For this group of friends, the moment marked a turning point. They gathered in cafes and parks, visited old schools and neighborhoods, and shared memories of what life used to be like. But more importantly, they

looked forward. For the first time in a long while, they spoke not just about the past, but about rebuilding, about hope, and about a Syria that could be different.

What bonded them wasn't just shared suffering, but a shared dream – of a country no longer ruled by fear. They knew the path ahead would be long and difficult. The fall of the regime didn't magically fix the deep wounds left behind. But the fall created space – space for truth, for memory, and for the possibility of something better.

Chapter Fourteen

Post Fall Roadmap

End of 2024 and beyond

Awareness, awareness, awareness and nothing else. In times of political upheaval, national, and societal transformation, there is nothing more important than public awareness. It is not just a useful tool; it is the cornerstone upon which a nation can build its future during periods of instability and transition.

In the current historical context facing Syria and similar nations in the Arab region, public awareness stands as the most secure refuge and the most effective weapon in confronting the immense challenges ahead.

Throughout the Arab world, revolutionary movements have often been met with hostility, both internally and externally. These revolutions, which aim to bring change, justice, and freedom, frequently clash with entrenched interests that resist progress out of fear.

So, what exactly is public awareness? It is the collective understanding and knowledge of key issues among the general population. These issues can range from political reforms and human rights to health, education, and economic policies. When people are aware, they are less likely to be misled by false information, fearmongering, or sectarian propaganda. They become active participants in their country's future, not passive victims of it.

Enhancing public awareness is not the job of one single institution – it is a shared responsibility. Governments, civil society organizations, media outlets, educational institutions, and even the private sector must work together. Each of these entities has a role to play in informing the public, fostering critical thinking, and encouraging public engagement.

A media outlet, for instance, should prioritize facts over sensationalism. Schools and universities should teach students to think critically and understand the principles of governance and civil rights. Non-Government organizations (NGOs) should run outreach campaigns to

connect with marginalized people, and the government must create an environment where information flows freely and transparently.

At the center of all these efforts lies the individual. Every person is a building block of society, and society is the foundation of the nation. Without the active participation of individuals, society becomes weak, and so does the country. Therefore, all citizens have responsibilities to fulfill – towards their community, their nation, and even future generations. At the same time, all citizens have rights: the right to be respected, the right to live in safety, and the right to express their opinions freely, etc.

Freedom of expression is a pillar of any healthy society. People must feel that they can voice their concerns, share their perspectives, and debate important issues without fear of retaliation. However, this freedom must also be accompanied by a sense of responsibility.

Expressing one's opinion should not come at the cost of harming others or inciting hatred. Respect for differing viewpoints is the hallmark of a civilized and progressive society. When citizens listen to one another with

respect and engage in constructive dialogue, they foster mutual respect and help heal the divisions that may have been sown by the ex-regime.

Syria's path forward will not be easy, but it is not impossible either. What is needed most now is unity and cooperation. The remnants of the old regime have left behind deep societal wounds – sectarianism, mistrust, corruption, and fear. These internal struggles are compounded by numerous challenges on the regional and international stages.

“Some powers really fear the domino effect”, said Yusif. “When one country rises up, it can inspire others nearby to do the same. That scares those who want to keep things as they are”.

“Absolutely”, Emad agreed. “And it's not just foreign powers resisting change. Some local elites, political groups, even some people in the general public who have been misled – they all end up opposing progress because they benefitted from the ex-regime, no matter how unfair it was”.

“That's why public awareness is so crucial. It's like a light cutting through the fog of propaganda, confusion, and fear”, said Abdulhameed. “When

people are truly aware and educated, they can't be easily manipulated or divided. That's how real nation-building happens".

"True", Yasser reacted. "But we also need to be realistic. Moving from an authoritarian regime or a failed state to a fairer, democratic system isn't simple. There will be mistakes, setbacks, and instability along the way. That's just part of the process".

"The key is how the society handles those growing pains. Both the government and the public have to be patient and committed to each other", Yusif explained. "Mistakes are inevitable, but if the government acts quickly, transparently, and professionally to fix them, it can earn the people's trust".

"And the citizens need to understand the challenges ahead. Real reform isn't instant", said Emad. "It takes time – rebuilding institutions, changing laws, even transforming the national identity. That all takes a bit long time".

"Exactly", Abdulhameed agreed. "If either side loses sight of this big picture, things could fall apart fast. Without awareness and patience, the

country risks falling back into chaos – which is exactly what some foreign players want”.

“Those powerful forces benefit from instability”, said Yasser. “They want Syria to stay weak and divided for their own strategic goals. The only way to prevent that is through unity, constant vigilance, and above all, a well-informed population”.

“So, in the end, the fight for a better future is as much about knowledge and patience as it is about action”, Yusif noted. “If people stay aware and committed, there will be a real hope for a better future”.

“One more important thing”, added Yusif. “All divisions must be eradicated – whether tribal, sectarian, or personal. We have to put the nation’s interests above everything else”.

“Exactly”, Emad commented. “Syrians need to come together, prioritize the greater good, and look beyond their own groups. Only then can we overcome the challenges we face after all the conflict”.

“Cooperation is key”, Abdulhameed noted. “It’s not just between citizens but also between different groups, institutions, and the government and

the people. A society that values collective progress over individual gain is the one that will build a stable, and prosperous future”.

“That unity will be the foundation for restoring security, trust, and development”, Yasser asserted. “Without it, we risk falling back into division and instability”.

“Right now, everyone has to make sacrifices”, Yusif asserted. “Whether you’re a government official, a teacher, a businessperson, or a student, there’s a role to play. Sometimes that means putting aside personal grievances or working hard without immediate reward”.

“Even simple acts, like helping a neighbor, count. These sacrifices aren’t wasted – they’re investments in a future that still holds a lot of promise for Syrians”, Emad responded.

“The idea that ‘the best is yet to come’ isn’t just wishful thinking”, said Abdulhameed. “It’s a vision that can become reality – but only if Syrians remain united, informed, and determined”.

“The challenges we face during this transition are tough, but they’re also opportunities. If the people come together, those obstacles can become the steppingstones to growth and rebirth”, Yasser affirmed.

“As Syria stands at this crossroads, we can’t just focus on today’s problems. We need to look ahead with clarity and purpose”, added Yusif.

“And that means learning from the past – understanding how corruption, dictatorship, and dysfunction took hold for so long”.

“If we don’t learn those lessons, we risk repeating the same mistakes”, said Emad. “But if we do, we can build a future where those dark chapters will be behind us”.

“Absolutely”, Yasser agreed. “Syria’s future depends on all of us, committing to that journey – together”.

However, one of the most corrosive traits embedded in the political culture of the past was bootlicking – a form of blind flattery and loyalty that contributed significantly to the rise and entrenchment of authoritarianism.

If any people around the world wish to succeed in building a fair, modern, and democratic society, they must reject such destructive behaviors. Bootlicking is more than just a bad habit; it is a form of hypocrisy and self-degradation that devalues truth, merit, and integrity.

It is the act of excessively and insincerely praising those in power – often for things they haven’t achieved – in order to gain personal favor or material benefits. When practiced widely, it becomes a cultural disease that helps elevate unworthy leaders and silences critical voices.

To truly move forward, Syrians and all people who have suffered under authoritarian regimes must bury this toxic practice once and for all. It was, after all, a defining feature of the former regime – a tool used to maintain power, silence critical voices, and cultivate a false image of strength and popularity.

Yusif said during a discussion with some of his friends, “For me, the best word in English is bootlicking”.

Emad agreed, replying, “You’re right”.

Yusif continued, “They deserve to be described like that – or even worse. Bootlickers are the ones who make dictators and tyrants. Without them, these rulers would never believe they were invincible”.

“This insight captures a deep truth: dictators are not born, they are made and sustained by those around them who shower them with undeserved praise, conceal their flaws, and manipulate public opinion in their favor”, said Ahmad T. “These individuals – whether motivated by fear, ignorance, or personal gain – are complicit in the destruction of democratic values”.

“When rulers see people acting submissively and bootlicking, they start overestimating themselves”, said Saud. “They take their minor, even meaningless, achievements as proof of greatness. They become convinced that the public loves them, that they are irreplaceable, and that they deserve to remain in power forever”.

“This illusion of popularity is dangerous”, Tameem commented. “It blinds rulers to reality, discourages self-reflection, and detaches them from the people they are meant to serve. Worse still, it leads to the suppression of

criticism, as anyone who dares to speak the truth is labeled a traitor while flatterers are rewarded”.

Yusif then pointed out that not all bootlickers are the same. “There are two types”, he said. “The first are the bankrupt ones – people so ignorant and retarded that they praise those in power without even gaining anything from it. They genuinely believe in their idols and offer praise without question or expectation”.

These individuals often do so out of brainwashing or fear. They don’t seek benefits, but their blind loyalty is still harmful. By supporting unworthy leaders, they help create a system where truth and merit are sidelined.

“The second type”, Yusif continued, “are like mercenaries. They praise corrupt officials to gain some financial benefits, status, or influence. They don’t believe in the praise themselves, and they know that they don’t tell the truth – they simply say what’s necessary to secure their own interests”.

Saud noted that this second type is especially dangerous. “They prioritize personal interests over public good”, he said. “They are willing to sell out the country, society, and even their dignity for temporary gain”.

These mercenary bootlickers often find positions of influence and power under corrupt regimes, using their access to manipulate systems, silence critics, and perpetuate the very oppression that hurts the general public. Their actions weaken institutions, breed inequality, and contribute to national decline.

Rejecting bootlicking does not mean we should be ungrateful or disrespectful toward public servants. As Yusif clarified, “This doesn’t mean people shouldn’t thank each other. Of course, gratitude is important. But we must view officials – regardless of their positions – as public employees. They are there to serve the people for a certain period, and then they leave”.

This is a crucial principle in democratic societies: no official, no matter how powerful, should be seen as a savior or eternal ruler. Power must rotate. Leadership must be held accountable. Officials should be judged by their actions, not praised simply for holding office. When leaders are praised only when they earn it, they are more likely to stay humble, responsible, and focused on service rather than self-glorification.

Hamza emphasized this point: “All officials will leave their positions sooner or later. If they try to hijack the state or cling to power beyond their time, they will eventually meet the same fate as the ex-regime. History will not be kind to them. They will be remembered with scorn and resentment after they’re gone – if not in life, then in death”.

This sobering truth is visible throughout history. No tyrant lasts forever. No corrupt system can sustain itself indefinitely. What remains is the legacy – how leaders are remembered and whether their time in power advanced or damaged the nation. Legacy is shaped not by propaganda, but by people’s real experiences.

Therefore, political awareness is not just about understanding policies or supporting reforms. It is also about recognizing unhealthy cultural behaviors like bootlicking and working collectively to dismantle them. It involves teaching future generations the importance of critical thinking, public responsibility, and ethical leadership.

To prevent a return to authoritarianism, Syrians must demand transparency, celebrate merit over loyalty, and cultivate a society where

free expression, accountability, and dignity are the norm – not the exception. Citizens must be empowered to question, challenge, and replace leaders when necessary – peacefully and democratically.

Yusif often emphasizes a vision that many aspire to, but few understand deeply: to move our country forward – one step closer to true civilization – we must embrace a set of core values that form the foundation of a thriving society.

These values include hard work, seriousness in our duties, dedication to serving the country, tolerance, diligence, and respect for the opinions of others, even when those opinions differ from our own. Above all, we must prioritize the public interest, working tirelessly to ensure it is upheld and preserved.

These principles are not merely lofty ideals; they are practical, essential tools for nation-building. Without them, no amount of infrastructure or policy reform can sustain progress. But importantly, Yusif said embracing civilization does not mean abandoning our religion, cultural values, traditions, or principles. On the contrary, the greatest civilizations in

history have been those that respected and built upon their spiritual and cultural foundations.

Our faith and values provide the moral compass and strength that guided our ancestors to achieve greatness. What we need today is to be wise enough to praise what is worthy and criticize what hinders progress, always with the goal of contributing to the country's growth.

Criticism, when wielded responsibly, is a powerful tool for improvement. It must not be a weapon for personal attacks or destructive division, but rather a means to identify areas that need reform or better management. This concept of constructive criticism has been a significant driver behind the success of many developed nations.

These countries have cultivated societies that respect differing opinions and encourage open dialogue because they understand the immense benefits of critical feedback in refining governance, institutions, and policies.

Constructive criticism helps create accountability. It ensures that those in power do not become complacent or disconnected from the needs of the

people. For criticism to be effective, it must be focused, informed, and directed toward solutions, not just complaints.

This is why promoting political awareness among the public is so vital. When citizens understand their rights and responsibilities and have access to transparent information, they can engage in meaningful discussions about their country's future.

In this context, the role of the media is paramount. In any healthy democracy, the media functions as the “fourth authority” – alongside the judiciary, the parliament, and the government. Writers, journalists, and media institutions have a responsibility to promote positive and successful practices within the country while exposing mistakes and abuses through measured, and constructive criticism.

When the media sheds light on errors or corruption, officials become more attentive and conscientious in their work, knowing that public scrutiny holds them accountable. This transparency helps maintain a culture of integrity and diligence.

In societies where the media is independent and free, citizens receive accurate information, and the government cannot act with impunity. Activating this role of media is crucial for building trust between the public and their leaders and for encouraging reforms that reflect the people's best interests.

Political awareness extends beyond understanding current events – it involves active participation in the democratic process. This means that people should vote for and elect honest individuals who prioritize the public interest over personal gain. Public interest benefits everyone in the country, creating stability, economic growth, and social harmony. Conversely, personal interests often serve only a small group at the expense of the broader society.

Citizens must recognize the power they hold through their vote and use it responsibly to support candidates who demonstrate integrity, competence, and a genuine commitment to serving the nation. Only then can democracy function as it should, producing leaders accountable to the people.

On the other hand, Ministers and all public officials must prioritize actions over words. Leadership is not about making promises; it's about delivering results. Don't say "we will" – say "we have done". The time for declarations and lofty speeches has passed. What the nation needs now is not appearances, it needs statements to be delivered only when there's a success to showcase. True leadership means working quietly, persistently, and relentlessly, even when the spotlight isn't on them.

At this critical stage, the country demands extraordinary dedication and tireless effort from its people and leaders. Recovery will not come through rhetoric, it will come through hard work, honest governance, and consistent action. Let progress speak for itself. Let people see change, not just hear about it.

All officials should recognize that their absence from public view is rarely noticed or lamented by the people. It is not their mere presence on screen that matters, but the substance and impact of what they contribute. Officials should only step into the public eye when they have meaningful accomplishments to share or significant progress to report. What the

public truly longs for is tangible achievement and results, not endless discussions or promises about plans and initiatives that have yet to materialize. Ultimately, people value action and outcomes far more than speeches or appearances devoid of real progress.

“Always keep in mind”, said Saud, “that justice is the foundation upon which everything meaningful and lasting is built. It is the cornerstone of a stable society, the guiding principle of good governance, and the basis for trust between people and institutions. Without justice, laws lose their legitimacy, systems crumble, and divisions deepen”.

“Justice ensures fairness, protects rights, and holds individuals and institutions accountable”, Saud continued. “It is what gives value to freedom, strength to unity, and dignity to every human being. Whether you’re building a nation, leading a community, or making personal decisions, justice must be at the heart of every action and intention. When justice is upheld, everything else – peace, prosperity, and progress – can follow”.

“Another important thing is clear and fair constitution”, said Abdulhameed. “It’s the backbone of how a country runs – setting the rules, dividing powers, and protecting citizens’ rights”.

“Absolutely”, Tameem agreed. “But having a constitution just written down isn’t enough. If it doesn’t clearly define what each official is allowed to do, especially the senior ones, it’s almost useless. Without limits, power can easily be abused”.

“Exactly”, Yasser approved. “Take presidential terms, for example. If the constitution doesn’t clearly limit them – say, to two four-year terms – then you risk a situation where a president or a group can cling to power forever. That’s dangerous”.

“That’s why parliament’s role is so important”, Abdulrahman asserted. “They’re elected by the people, so it’s their job to carefully review any new constitution to make sure it really benefits the country. If they don’t, the people have every right to push back or demand changes”.

“Right”, said Abdulhameed. “Any socially aware and responsible parliamentarian won’t approve a constitution that doesn’t protect the people or put real brakes on government overreach”.

“And more than that, a solid constitution should make sure everyone is accountable – from the president to ministers, MPs, and all officials. No one should be above the law”, added Tameem.

“Exactly”, said Yasser. “That’s the foundation of good governance. If the president does something seriously wrong or threatens the nation’s wellbeing, parliament should have the power to impeach. Without those checks, authoritarianism can creep in”.

“So, adopting a clear, accountable constitution isn’t just a legal step – it’s a crucial milestone in a country’s development. It ensures fairness, protects rights, and keeps power balanced”, Abdulrahman explained.

“The constitution must be a living document that truly serves the people”, said Abdulhameed, “not just those in power”.

Ahmad T. highlighted corruption, which is another significant issue that hinders development. “One major barrier holding Syria back is

corruption”, he explained. “It drains resources, ruins trust and weakens our institutions. All must fight corruption”.

“That’s true”, said Tameem. “To fight corruption effectively, we need independent bodies that can audit and investigate government actions without interference”.

“Yes, like an independent audit bureau and a judiciary free from political influence. When these institutions are truly autonomous, they can fairly uncover corruption and hold officials accountable, if they commit mistakes, no matter who they are”, said Yasser.

“But that independence has to be respected. The government can’t meddle or try to control these bodies if we want real transparency”, added Ahmad T.

“Exactly”, said Abdulhameed. “When transparency and accountability are enforced, public services can flourish, and corruption starts to fade. That’s how we create the foundation for lasting economic and social progress”.

“Embracing criticism is key, too. Constructive feedback shouldn’t be seen as a threat but as a way to improve”, Yasser asserted. “That means the media must be free and empowered to monitor those in power”.

“Moving Syria forward means building a system that supports honesty and openness at every level”, Abdulrahman noted.

“Absolutely”, Abdulhameed replied. “It’s a long road, but these changes are essential if we want a future that’s fair and prosperous for all”.

However, the people of Syria carry with them a profound sense of hope and high expectations for the future. After years of hardship and struggle, they look to their government with a deep desire for positive change, stability, and progress. This is a pivotal moment, the government must rise to meet these hopes with unwavering commitment, competence, and transparency.

It is not enough to simply acknowledge these expectations; the government has a responsibility to act decisively and effectively to address the needs and aspirations of its citizens. Whether it’s rebuilding infrastructure, ensuring justice, fostering economic growth, or promoting

social unity, the leadership must demonstrate that it is capable of delivering real, tangible improvements.

The Syrian people's trust is a powerful mandate, but it also comes with immense pressure. The government must embrace this challenge wholeheartedly, proving through consistent actions that it is worthy of that trust. Only by doing so can the nation move forward toward a future of peace, prosperity, and dignity for all its people.

Another crucial aspect of good governance that often gets overlooked but it is fundamental to protecting both officials and public resources is financial disclosure. Transparency in the financial affairs of public officials is essential not only to safeguard public funds but also to protect the officials themselves from unwarranted suspicion.

Any honest official should welcome financial disclosure and disclose his financial information as a natural and necessary part of his service because it demonstrates integrity and a commitment to accountability.

In fact, any official who opposes financial disclosure may raise red flags. Resistance to transparency often suggests that there may be hidden

interests or plans to exploit public resources for personal gain. Transparency, therefore, acts as a deterrent against corruption and misuse of power.

Historically, the concept of financial disclosure is not new. The first known ruler to implement such a system was Umar Ibn Al-Khattab, the second Caliph of the early Islamic state. He introduced procedures to monitor the wealth of officials under his Caliphate.

If he detected a suspicious increase in an official's fortune, he would recalculate how much he could have legitimately earned during that period and require the official to return any excess to the public treasury. This early practice set a precedent for financial integrity and accountability in governance, illustrating that protecting public resources is as old as organized government itself.

Financial disclosure today remains a powerful tool for transparency. It ensures that public funds are used appropriately and builds trust between citizens and their government. When officials openly declare their assets and financial interests, it reduces the risk of corruption and reassures the

public that their resources are safe and being used for their intended purposes.

Moreover, financial disclosure protects officials by removing suspicion. When the wealth of officials is clear and publicly known, it becomes harder for malicious players to falsely accuse them of corruption or financial impropriety. In this way, transparency serves as a shield for honest public servants, allowing them to perform their duties with dignity and confidence.

Accountability is another fundamental principle closely linked to financial disclosure. Contrary to some misconceptions, accountability is not a shameful process; it is an essential mechanism that encourages officials to work harder and more responsibly. Knowing that mistakes and negligence will be noticed and addressed compels officials to exert their full efforts toward achieving success in their roles.

Accountability also serves as a gatekeeping function by ensuring that only qualified, capable individuals hold key positions of power. When officials are held responsible for their actions, it prevents incompetent or unfit

individuals from occupying roles they cannot effectively manage. This, in turn, helps improve the overall efficiency and effectiveness of government operations.

Accountability creates a culture where officials are motivated to prioritize public interests above personal ones. They recognize that their performance will be evaluated, and failures will have consequences. This environment fosters a professional and ethical public service that is more likely to meet the needs and expectations of the people.

In addition to financial disclosure and accountability, the existence of multiple political parties is a vital feature of a healthy political system. Political pluralism opens the door to competition among parties, which can stimulate better governance and improved services for the country.

When several parties compete for power, they present clear policies and distinguished programs to win the support of voters. This competition encourages transparency, responsiveness, and innovation in the country. Citizens benefit because parties and their candidates strive to address public concerns and deliver tangible improvements in their communities.

In contrast, countries with a single-party system often face significant problems. When one party monopolizes political power, it can lead to hijacking authority by that party and its leaders. Without competition or the threat of losing power, the ruling party may become complacent, inefficient, or corrupt. The party retains control regardless of whether it serves the public interest effectively, leading to stagnation and sometimes even repression.

Political pluralism, therefore, acts as a safeguard against authoritarianism and unaccountable governance. It ensures that power remains subject to public choice and that leaders must continually earn the trust of the people. In such systems, political parties have a vested interest in promoting good governance because their survival depends on public approval.

As for constitution, the Syrian people are the ultimate guardians of the constitution they live under, and it is they who must have the final say in its application and enforcement.

For any constitution to function effectively and justly, the citizens must be politically aware and actively engaged in the political process. This engagement begins with the ability to elect officials who serve the public interest – and just as importantly, the power to remove those officials through democratic ballots when they fail to meet expectations.

Political awareness among the people is fundamental. It empowers citizens to demand accountability and ensures that those in power understand their role is temporary and contingent upon good governance. When the people recognize that their elected officials, including presidents, can be ousted through regular, free, and fair elections, it creates a system of checks and balances that incentivizes officials to perform their duties diligently and responsibly.

Such a system requires a degree of patience and realism. Syria is a country that has endured deep wounds and profound challenges, and its recovery will not happen overnight. The citizens must appreciate that rebuilding a nation – physically, socially, economically, and politically – requires time.

They should give the leaders a fair opportunity to demonstrate their commitment and capabilities, understanding that meaningful progress unfolds gradually. This does not mean unconditional acceptance of failure or corruption but rather a balanced approach that allows for growth and reform while keeping officials accountable.

However, “Beyond institutions and laws, the people themselves need to foster a culture of respect – respect for the nation, for each other, and for the rule of law”, said Yusif. “When a society respects itself, it earns respect from its leaders, and in return, demands that those leaders respect the rights and dignity of every citizen”.

“That respect is really the foundation of a civilized society”, added Abdulhameed. “It builds the social contract between the governed and those who govern”.

“And a crucial part of good governance in any democracy is setting clear limits on how long presidents and officials can serve”, said Tameem. “If everyone knows they have a fixed term – like four years with the chance

for re-election once – they will be more motivated to work hard and show real results”.

“Exactly”, said Yasser. “When officials have a deadline, it creates urgency and responsibility. They know their future depends on how well they perform, so ideally, they put the public interest first”.

“In that first term”, said Abdulrahman, “leaders are focused on building trust and proving themselves to win another term. The second term is often about leaving a positive legacy and making sure their party stays strong. Both terms encourage active service”.

“Now, compare that to systems where officials stay in power indefinitely, sometimes for life”, Yusif noted. “That breeds complacency and corruption. When they’re guaranteed their position no matter what, they start focusing on personal gain and maintaining power instead of serving the people”.

“Syria’s recent history sadly shows this clearly”, Abdulhameed commented. “Leaders who cling to power often do so through coercion or manipulation, not real public support”.

“And that concentration of power kills opportunities for fresh ideas and innovation”, Tameem asserted. “It breaks the trust between the government and the people”.

“Without competition and accountability, progress stalls and resentment grows”, said Yasser.

“So, for Syria to move forward, it needs to embrace respect, term limits, and genuine accountability – otherwise, the cycle will just continue”, added Abdulrahman.

“Absolutely. It’s about creating a system where both leaders and citizens play their parts with dignity and responsibility”, Yusif concluded.

Another aspect that can effectively help in guiding the country during this transitional stage is decentralization. Decentralization represents a significant step toward advancing reform and accelerating development. Redistributing authority reduces the burden on central administration, streamlines bureaucratic processes and speeds up decision-making.

During transitional phases, decentralization becomes particularly valuable, as it helps conserve time and resources. With numerous pressing

issues requiring attention, centralized management can lead to significant delays. In contrast, a decentralized approach enables more efficient handling of tasks across multiple levels of governance.

Effective decentralization involves empowering local offices, departments, and, where appropriate, even ministries with the authority to make decisions that directly support and drive development initiatives.

Additionally, “establishing a new civilized country isn’t small achievement”, said Yusif. “It’s an intricate mix of politics, law, economy, culture, and much more”.

“Absolutely”, Mohammad approved. “I think it all starts with having a clear vision and purpose. We need to define who we are as a nation – our values, identity, and goals. Without that, everything else falls apart”.

“Right, and once that vision is clear, the next step is drafting a solid constitution”, Abdulhameed noted. “A foundational legal framework that outlines the rights of citizens and the responsibilities of the government. That’s essential for justice and stability”.

“And the constitution should also set up governance structures. Executive, legislative, and judicial branches that are independent but accountable”, Ibraheem responded. “Plus, mechanisms for elections and citizen participation to ensure everyone has a voice”.

“Let’s not forget the economic foundation. Without a sustainable economy, nothing else can thrive. We need diverse industries and a stable currency to support trade and growth. With stable currency funds of Syrians working abroad will start flowing into the country”, Yusif asserted.

“Exactly”, said Mohammad. “And social infrastructure is important as well. Building strong education and healthcare systems, reliable public utilities, and social safety nets to protect vulnerable groups”.

“And cultural development ties it all together”, Abdulhameed pointed out.

“Promoting our cultural heritage, national symbols, and unity among diverse people will foster a strong national identity. Freedom of expression and human rights should be supported too”.

“We also need to boost diplomacy”, Ibraheem remarked. “Establishing foreign policy goals, building alliances, and engaging in global cooperation are key to our country’s long-term success and security”.

“Sustainable development is another crucial aspect”, added Yusif. “We need to balance growth with the country requirements and plan for future generations in addition to protecting environment that was highly impacted by war”.

“When you put it all together, it’s clear that building a country takes a lot of coordination and commitment across many dimensions”, Mohammad reflected.

“True”, said Abdulhameed, “but with a strong foundation in these areas, we can create a civilized, just, and prosperous nation”.

In developed countries around the world, the principle of accountability is deeply rooted in the political culture. Presidents, ministers, and high-ranking officials operate under the constant awareness that they can be held responsible for their actions. Mistakes are acknowledged openly, and

in many cases, officials resign or face legal consequences when they fail to perform adequately or commit serious errors.

In many Western democracies, it is common to see ministers resigning after mistakes or failures. This culture of accountability is not a sign of weakness but rather a mark of a mature political system that values transparency and responsibility. Officials understand that their legitimacy stems from their ability to serve the people honestly and effectively, and they respect the mechanisms that enforce these standards.

In the Arab world, by contrast, accountability is often absent. Disasters and failures occur frequently, yet officials rarely face repercussions. The absence of resignations or formal consequences sends a troubling message – that public interests are secondary to the preservation of power and privilege. This lack of responsibility weakens institutions and deepens citizens' disillusionment with their governments.

When presidents or officials hijack their positions – clinging to power at any cost – they set their countries on a path toward destruction. Such

authoritarianism inevitably breeds resentment, unrest, and instability that will lead, sooner or later, to the fall of the regime.

Wise leaders understand this reality. They recognize that true strength lies in serving the country well during their tenure and preparing the nation to thrive long after they have left office. By voluntarily respecting term limits and supporting peaceful transitions of power, such leaders earn the respect of their citizens and future generations.

A ruler's legacy is shaped not by how long he holds power but by how well he serves his people and safeguards the country's future. Wise leaders think beyond their own tenure and consider the impact of their decisions on their successors and the nation as a whole. This perspective elevates their leadership and ensures they are remembered with respect and gratitude.

For Syria, this vision is particularly important. The country has endured years of hardship, and the road to recovery will require leaders who are committed to building institutions, respecting the rule of law, and fostering unity. Respecting term limits and ensuring political

accountability are essential steps toward creating a political culture that values service over self-interest.

Citizens must be vigilant in demanding transparency, fairness, and respect from their officials. They must participate actively in elections, civil society, and public discourse. Political awareness is the foundation for these actions. When people understand their rights and the importance of democratic norms, they become an unstoppable force for positive change.

In the Arab world, many hope to one day witness a new political reality – one where former presidents and leaders retire with dignity, respected by their people and living peacefully alongside them! Why is it, then, that such a scenario remains so rare in the Arab region? Why is it that Arab ex-presidents often meet tragic ends, or face disgrace, exile, or even violent downfall? Why can't the Arab peoples enjoy the kind of political maturity and respect for former leaders that other civilized countries seem to embody?

The answers to these questions are complex and vary depending on the country and the individual leader in question. Yet, there are common

threads that help explain this unfortunate pattern. Broadly speaking, many Arab leaders suffer such fates because they failed to prepare for a life beyond power.

They operated under the dangerous assumption that their rule was permanent, that they were immune to the consequences of their actions, or even to death itself. Some were propped up by secret arrangements with external powers that placed them in offices and gave them a false sense of invulnerability.

In today's world, everything is possible, including such clandestine deals. But what remains impossible is to command respect and a positive legacy without genuine good governance. Leaders who don't take that into consideration will inevitably write dark chapters in their country's history.

When leaders seize authority through undemocratic means, they often become vulnerable to foreign manipulation. Major global powers can exploit their illegitimacy, pressuring them to comply with external agendas by threatening to remove them – either through direct intervention or by undermining them politically. Such leaders, lacking

genuine public support or a legitimate mandate, are easily coerced because their grip on power depends not on the will of their people, but on external approval.

In contrast, elected leaders are far more difficult to blackmail. Having risen to power through democratic processes, they are accountable primarily to their voters. Their role is inherently temporary, and they accept that they may leave office once their term ends. Because their legitimacy stems from public trust, not foreign backing, they are less vulnerable to external pressure and more inclined to prioritize national interests.

This is precisely why powerful international actors often support authoritarian regimes – openly or covertly – because it grants them greater influence over national decision-making. Dictators are more easily swayed, allowing foreign powers to shape policy and control outcomes that serve their own interests.

This dynamic is evident in the failure of many Arab leaders to take meaningful action in supporting Gaza. For nearly two years, our brothers

and sisters have endured unimaginable suffering, yet the response from Arab leadership has been passive at best. The silence and inaction reflect not a lack of capability, but a lack of political will – an outcome of compromised sovereignty and external dependency.

Ultimately, these failures are deeply rooted in the lingering impact of colonialism, which has shaped political structures across the region in ways that continue to hinder true independence. The question is not whether Arabs have the resources, influence, or strategic leverage to assert their interests – they do. But their hands are tied, often by the consequences of their own decisions, wrong calculations, and alliances that prioritize regime survival over collective dignity and national integrity.

One day, Yusif was talking to his American colleague, highlighting the fundamental differences between leadership in some Arab countries and in established democracies like the United States.

“While talking about an American ex-president, I used the word ‘reign’”, said Yusif. “I said during the reign of so-and-so”, and then the American

colleague immediately interrupted, saying “Come on, man! We don’t have reign; we have administrations”. That simple correction made Yusif reconsider his words, recognizing the deeper meaning behind it.

His colleague meant that the American presidents are elected for fixed four-year terms. If they perform well, the voters grant them a second term; if they fail, voters remove them through the democratic process. This mechanism ensures that no individual can rule indefinitely or consider themselves above accountability. The presidents are mandated by the people to serve for a certain period. That is what he meant by administration.

Yusif is aware that this system – where leadership is temporary and subject to public approval – is a critical foundation for building powerful, and fair nations. It empowers citizens, reinforces justice, and keeps rulers grounded in the realities of public service. The knowledge that people can hold them accountable keeps officials motivated to serve earnestly and responsibly.

“I believe this system is one of the core reasons which made America as a great nation”, Yusif explained, “along with a relatively strong culture of justice and respect for rights. I don’t mean that the U.S. is free from violations or that every individual receives perfect justice. What I mean is that relative justice prevails, which is almost absent in many other countries”.

The contrast is striking. Many Arab countries struggle with entrenched corruption, lack of accountability, and leaders who cling to power indefinitely. This breeds a political culture where justice is often elusive, and ordinary citizens feel powerless.

The lack of political renewal means that mistakes go uncorrected and leaders are rarely punished for misgovernance. When leaders are not held accountable by law or by the people, public trust erodes, and political instability becomes inevitable. On the other hand, nations that institutionalize accountability and the peaceful transfer of power create the conditions for social cohesion, economic development, and respect for human rights.

An important principle of governance is often overlooked: the government is a mirror of the people it serves. When people think big, unite around shared goals, and dedicate themselves to building their country, the government will inevitably follow their lead. Conversely, if a society is fragmented, corrupt, or complacent, it is unreasonable to expect the government to act otherwise.

It is simply illogical to have a corrupt government made up of dishonest officials serving an honest, cultured, and politically engaged population. Just as it is unreasonable to expect a good government to emerge from a society plagued by corruption, ignorance, or disunity.

People and governments reflect and complement each other. This dynamic means that societal progress requires both politically aware citizenry and responsive leadership. Reform must begin with education, raising political consciousness, and nurturing a culture of accountability among the people.

Another significant risk during this period is falling victim to manipulation and conspiracy. Foreign powers often treat individuals and

communities as mere pawns in their larger geopolitical games. They exploit divisions and grievances to weaken Syria, only to discard their so-called allies once these interests have been served.

This cycle of manipulation is reminiscent of colonial practices where colonial powers relied on local collaborators, only to betray and abandon them when convenient.

History teaches us that enemies often have more respect for those who honestly oppose them than for traitors who sell out their country for personal gain. Those who choose to collaborate with external enemies not only damage their own communities but also undermine the nation's collective resistance against foreign intervention and domination.

In contrast, minorities that stand firm with their country, who engage in honest dialogue and constructive nation-building, earn the respect and trust of all Syrians. Their loyalty becomes a foundation for a unified Syria where diversity is protected and celebrated rather than weaponized or exploited.

Currently, minorities face a pivotal moment in Syrian history. Their choice between national loyalty and foreign alliance will shape not only their own future but the destiny of the entire nation.

“This moment in Syria’s history is critical for minorities”, said Abdulrahman. “They face a crossroads that could define not only their own future but the future of the entire country”.

“Exactly”, Yusif replied. “Minorities are proud of defending Syria against external threats in the past, and now it is time to prove that or go in a different direction. Past actions are part of history while the current actions are part of the present and our future. The current stage requires a renewed commitment and actions, not just words”.

“It’s a test of whether those past loyalties are genuine or just convenient stories”, said Abdulhameed. “Minorities have two clear paths: one is constructive engagement – helping rebuild Syria, supporting national unity, and being part of a peaceful future.

“Choosing that path reaffirms their role as defenders of the nation and strengthens their place in Syrian society”, added Tameem. “It’s about active participation in recovery and reconciliation”.

“The other path is far more dangerous”, Abdulhameed continued, “siding with foreign powers that undermine Syria’s sovereignty”. “That choice damages the country’s future and calls into questioning the sincerity of their claimed loyalty and patriotism”.

“And those who align with outside forces risk alienation and losing the trust of the broader Syrian community, which can have long-term consequences for their safety and standing”, Abdulrahman remarked.

“What’s different today is how visible everything is”, said Yusif. “In the past, loyalties and actions could be hidden or forgotten, but now with constant media scrutiny – video, social media, news – every move is documented”.

“That transparency means no one can hide behind false narratives or vague claims. Every decision will be recorded and remembered”, Abdulhameed asserted.

“So, minorities need to choose wisely, because their choices will shape how they’re perceived for generations”, said Tameem. “The wrong side risks their reputation and the future security of their communities”.

“This isn’t just about politics – it’s about survival, dignity, and the future fabric of Syria as a united nation”, added Yasser.

“If Syria is to recover and move forward, it needs the commitment of all its people, especially those who have historically played vital roles. The time to act with loyalty and responsibility is now”, Abdulrahman asserted.

“One mor significant issue”, Yusif continued. “Minorities can play a crucial role in any future elections because they will have the power of the casting vote. They will shape leaderships through their votes that will tip the scales for certain candidates”.

“Another issue that should be handled in the future, not now”, said Abdulrahman. “The government should make every effort to enhance the value and international standing of the Syrian passport, academic institutions, etc. The principle of reciprocity should be considered for future implementation. While current circumstances may not allow for the

immediate adoption of such a policy, it remains essential to apply it in the future, ensuring that Syrian citizens are treated in accordance with how other countries treat their nationals”.

However, with a strong sense of awareness, unwavering diligence, and deep commitment – anchored firmly in the prioritization of national interests and mutual respect – the Syrian people will succeed in rebuilding their nation. The path to reconstruction will undoubtedly be challenging, but these challenges are not insurmountable. Obstacles will always exist, as is natural in any process of transformation, and the diversity of human nature means that not everyone will share the same passion for their homeland. While many Syrians love their country deeply and are dedicated to its future, some may remain indifferent or even apathetic toward national progress.

History has shown that when the majority of citizens come together to support meaningful reform and development, change becomes inevitable. Reform thrives on collective will and a shared vision for a better tomorrow. Reactionary forces and corrupt individuals are realities present

in every nation and community – these elements seek to resist progress for various personal or political reasons. Yet, their influence diminishes when the larger population stands united in pursuit of common good.

The key lies in fostering a culture where the majority embraces positive change, transcending differences and resisting divisive tactics. When the people's goodwill and determination prevail, progress unfolds naturally and steadily. In this way, despite the presence of those who may try to obstruct the journey, the collective strength and resilience of the Syrian people will drive the country forward toward lasting peace, stability, and prosperity.

As the years have passed, friends often reflect on how distant their university days now seem, more than two decades ago. Yet, the memories remain vivid and meaningful. They fondly recall the hard work, long hours, and intense effort, not as burdens, but as defining moments in an unforgettable chapter of their lives. Despite the passage of time, some of them continue to pursue their aspirations with the same passion and determination, even after all these years.

“Looking back”, said Yusif, “it’s incredible how far we’ve all come since our university days. Just recently, I finally earned my PhD in English Literature from Karabuk University, Turkey. It wasn’t just about the degree – it was the realization of a dream I’ve held for years”.

“It really shows how much dedication matters. Getting through those master’s programs was tough enough, but they were the essential steppingstones. Without those first degrees, going on to the PhD level would have been impossible”, said Abdulhameed.

“Absolutely”, said Mohammad. “Those early years shaped us. I remember how eager we all were for every opportunity – every master’s program we could apply to. It was a real challenge, but we kept pushing”.

“And it’s not just about academia. Look at Ibraheem. He followed a different path but just as admirable”, Abdulhameed remarked. “He wanted to become a judge, and through hard work, he got it. That’s a different kind of fulfillment – serving justice and upholding the law”.

“True”, said Yusif. “Each of us found his way, whether in literature, law, or other fields. But what ties us together is that shared commitment to

grow, to overcome obstacles, and to contribute meaningfully to our professions”.

“I think those early master’s programs were the real turning points. They opened the doors for us, gave us confidence, and set the stage for where we are now”, added Abdulhameed.

“It’s inspiring to see how dreams nurtured back then have become realities today. And it motivates us to keep aiming higher, no matter how tough the journey”, Mohammad noted.

“Exactly”, Yusif approved. “Our stories are proof that with perseverance and passion, those goals that once seemed far away can be reached”.

Later, on a cold winter evening, Yusif, Hamza, Emad, and Saud gathered around a campfire, surrounded by a handful of colleagues. The warm glow of the flames flickered across their faces as the night air carried a cold breeze. The group settled into a comfortable silence before conversations slowly started, filled with laughter, shared memories, and a deep sense of nostalgia that wrapped around them. Each story told seemed to echo the

bonds they had built over time, making the moment feel both friendly and timeless.

Emad began sharing some sweet memories and stories. After nearly 30 years, he turned to Yusif and asked, “Do you still remember Aquinas’s definition of the soul?”

Yusif smiled, of course. “It’s the first actuality of a natural body which has life potentially”. But to this day, I still don’t understand what it means!

“Apparently”, said Emad, “this became just part of your long-term memory that you will never ever forget”.

“Absolutely”, said Yusif.

Meanwhile, Hamza began to retell the story of Battout – a tale steeped in the bittersweet memories of their shared past at the military training camp.

When Hamza completed the story, Yusif said: “Since graduation, I’ve wanted to write a novel about Battout, but I kept changing my mind. The story is so closely tied to the ex-Syrian regime; therefore, I didn’t want to

write it honestly. Now, with the regime fallen, I feel free to tell it openly and honestly”.

Emad chimed in, “You should have written it earlier, maybe with some changes to fit the times”.

Yusif responded thoughtfully, “I was worried that modifying the story would dilute its impact. That’s why I kept postponing it”.

Saud, who had been listening attentively, added, “We all know the story well by now; it’s been retold so many times over the years. But honestly, we hope never to see anything like those ‘Battoutic’ actions again”.

Hamza nodded, “Absolutely. Those memories, though painful, have become part of our collective story – a reminder of what we endured, but also of our resilience”.

Yusif agreed, “Exactly. Now, we can tell the story as it is, no embellishments, no omissions. It reveals the deep injustice of the regime, the negligence of its leadership, and many other critical issues connected to those dark times”.

The story of Battout, now untethered from the constraints of censorship or fear, stands as a vivid narrative of the past regime's failings. It exposes the neglect and abuse of power that characterized those years, shedding light on the suffering endured by many under authoritarian rule.

As the friends concluded their conversation, their thoughts turned to the future – a future they hoped would be brighter, freer, and filled with opportunity. They wished for a Syria where the mistakes and injustices of the past would never be repeated, where young people could pursue their dreams without fear, and where truth could be told openly.

Yusif expressed a hope shared by many: “We wish a prosperous future for our country, and for all countries around the world that have suffered from tyranny, injustice, and colonialism legacy. We wish the lessons of the past to guide us toward a civilization based on dignity, respect and freedom”.

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Dedication

To every Syrian citizen ... inside the country or scattered across
the globe

About the Author

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