The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

‘They Destroyed Everything’: With Russia Gone, Syrians Begin a Long, Painful Process of Rebuilding

By Joseph Roche and Iryna Matviyihsyn

January 22, 2025



Civilians in Ghouta are recovering from years of siege and devastating war led by the Assad regime with the help of the Russian and pro-Iranian forces. Syria, Jan. 7, 2025. **Iryna Matviyishyn**

Damascus Governorate, SYRIA — The central alley souk in Arbin, a neighborhood in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta, is bustling with people. Among the ruined buildings, vendors have set up their stalls and shout out the day's prices at the top of their lungs.

One month ago, HTS, a movement formed from the merger of rebel and jihadist groups based in the northwestern Idlib governorate, overthrew Bashar al-Assad’s regime following a lightning offensive, ending five decades of dictatorship in less than two weeks. Assad’s ally Russia, which had propped up the regime with military force, was forced to retreat to its bases at Tartus and Khmeimim.

Since then, long-suppressed civilian voices have come to the forefront.

“The Russians destroyed my house during the siege,” cries an old man at the market, his cane raised to the sky.

“My son and daughter also died because of the Russians,” adds another. “They killed everyone and destroyed everything.”

Located just a few kilometers from Damascus, Eastern Ghouta was the site of one of the most violent and deadly battles of the Syrian Civil War. As the epicenter of anti-Assad protests in 2011, it was besieged by the regime starting in 2012 and relentlessly bombed by Russian aviation.

It wasn’t until 2018, after five and a half years of siege, chemical attacks and famine, that Eastern Ghouta’s rebel fighters agreed to lay down their arms and exile themselves to the Idlib pocket as part of a Russia-brokered evacuation deal.

Seven years later, the neighborhood is little more than a field of ruins, sparsely populated by survivors who, until the regime’s collapse, had lived under the control and repression of the Russian forces operating there.

Mamdouh Abdul Latif, 32, an egg vendor in Arbin’s souk, recalls those days bitterly. His round face, framed by a blond beard, glistens in the sunlight.

“The Russians based nearby often raided our neighborhood,” he says. “We were terrified of them, especially the Chechen fighters. We avoided interacting with them, but it wasn’t a peaceful relationship. They were monstrous. They would often come to our market and just take whatever they wanted. But what could we do?”

Abu Salmun, an elderly man standing nearby whose face is scarred by an explosion during the siege, interrupts Latif.

“Under the 2018 agreement, Assad’s forces couldn’t enter Ghouta. So it was the Russians who handled security,” he explains. “Assad had the Iranians behind him, and the Iranians had the Russians behind them. In the end, it was the Russians who called all the shots.”

Abu Salmun recounts how Russian troops once arrested his own son.

“They took him for no reason. I sold my house and paid a bribe to get him out,” he says. “Yesterday, I saw photos of Saydnaya [a prison in Damascus governorate notorious for its atrocities]. God knows what would have happened to him if he’d stayed there. The prisoners were crammed together like sheep in those jails.”

Pausing for a moment, Abu Salmun leans on a nearby vegetable stall. He smiles, a grimace lost in the scars on his face.

“In the end, it’s thanks to the Ukrainians that we’re free,” he says. “If they hadn’t destroyed the Russian army, God knows how long Assad would have stayed in power.”

Rebuilding amid the ruins

In Arbin, the time for celebrating Assad's overthrow is gradually coming to an end, giving way to a phase of uncertainty about Syria's future.

In Damascus, al-Julani, the leader of HTS and Syria's new head of state, has shed his jihadist identity, adopting his civilian name, Ahmed al-Sharaa. He has traded his khaki uniform for a European-style suit and now welcomes diplomats and ministers from around the world to his office.

But despite this symbolic transformation, al-Sharaa and his "Salvation Government" face the immense challenge of rebuilding a country devastated by over a decade of war.

Large parts of Syria, including regions under Kurdish or Turkish militia control, remain beyond his reach. In areas liberated from the Assad regime, tensions between Alawites (the sect Assad's family originates from and the backbone of his regime), Sunnis and Christians risk further escalation.

Meanwhile, in territories previously held by Assad, the situation is equally bleak: the economy is nearly non-existent, electricity is available only a few hours a day, and rampant inflation continues to cripple daily life. The government also has to deal with tens of thousands of Syrians who are finally returning home after years as refugees.

Abu Rami, an HTS soldier, is one of them. A knife and ammunition magazines strapped to his uniform, he is a child of Eastern Ghouta.

"I first served in Bashar's army. Then I defected to join the opposition and defend my neighborhood," he explains. "I can barely remember those years. Everything is blurred in my memory."

From 2012 to 2018, he and his comrades from Faql Al Rahman, a moderate Islamist group, lived under daily bombardments, famine and sarin gas attacks. Their return is tinged with melancholy.

"The first hours after the liberation were so overwhelming that I could barely breathe," says Abdul Rahman, one of his comrades.

"Everyone welcomed us as heroes. People fired into the air, played drums, and hosted feasts. But after that, it was hard to come back home. Everything about our life here was destroyed by Assad and the Russians."

Walking through the maze of streets, Abu Rami stops in front of a mosque under construction.

"This was an 11th-century mosque. The Russians destroyed it. Further down, that's the church they bombed. Assad claimed he was protecting Christians, but he killed them too," he says.

Further along the streets, he adds: "No one was waiting for me at home. My parents died

during the siege, and other members of my family too. All my memories are gone. The house where I got married was destroyed."

A hundred meters away, his eyes well up. "My father and mother died on this street, killed by a Russian Iskander missile."

On what remains of a central square, Abdul Rahman points to a building. "That was my house. The Russians destroyed it." One by one, he climbs the stairs. At one point, he stops, and after a few seconds of silence, pushes aside a stone with one of his boots. "This is the room where my sister and my mother died."

The return

In a room of his house, damaged by a Russian airstrike, Nasser, a young HTS soldier who recently returned from exile, feeds a central stove with sunflower seeds to heat one of the few renovated rooms in the family home. Part of his family stayed behind after 2018, while he fled into exile in Idlib.

"I hadn't seen him since 2012," says his uncle Ayman, who fled to the north of the country before the siege of Ghouta began.

Nasser is still trying to readjust to being back. Several times, he attempts to describe the emotions he is feeling upon his return.

"I can't believe it. My body is here, but my heart can't grasp what's happening. I think no one expected the regime to fall so easily or that we'd be back home so quickly," he says. Between cigarettes, he admits: "I had resigned myself to the idea that I'd never see my family or my city again."

"I met my nephew for the first time last month," Nasser says, pointing to the young man. "Look how tall he is. He has a beard. He's a man now."

Wissam, Nasser's nephew, barely knew he had an uncle in Idlib.

"Because of Bashar, we didn't call each other. We were too scared to talk. We knew they were there, but we never hoped we could speak. Seeing each other now is like living a dream," says Wissam.

Still, Ayman, his round face worn by years of hardship, acknowledges the difficulties exiles face when returning to their neighborhoods.

"There are two big problems: housing and jobs," he says. "Over 90% of the buildings have been destroyed, and there aren't enough jobs for everyone."

Abu Rami, Nasser and their comrades are stationed in Ghouta, but they don't know for how long. As soldiers, they could be sent to another city or neighborhood at any moment. So they take things day by day, savoring the chance to be home.

"I dream of bringing my children here," sighs Abu Rami. "I have three. They're with my wife in Idlib. Inshallah, they'll come here soon. The only thing I long for is to live in peace in my

neighborhood and never leave it again.”

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/01/22/they-destroyed-everything-with-russia-gone-syrians-begin-a-long-painful-process-of-rebuilding-a87684