Thursday, Dec. 12, 2024 / Will Syrians return home?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <Morning\_AK>

OMAR ALSHOGRE (Director for Detainee Affairs at the Syrian Emergency Task Force): The most beautiful moment was when I was seeing the prisoners being liberated from Aleppo and further to Hamaa and to Homs. And then when they came close to Sednaya Prison, it got really serious in my heart because it was a place that I know very well. I spent almost a year there.

NOEL KING (host, *Today, Explained*): That was when Omar Alshogre was 19 years old. Today he’s 29, living and working in Stockholm, and was watching as Syria’s dictatorship fell.

OMAR: I didn't know that a human being could be so happy before.

NOEL: <laughs>

OMAR: I'm telling you the joy was so…

NOEL: <laughs>

OMAR: …so unmatchable. I wanted to laugh so hard, I wanted to jump, but I ended up crying like a baby. And I cry of joy.

NOEL: <laughs>

OMAR: The joy of being free. It’s the first time I feel it.

NOEL: Now Omar has a choice to make: his happy life in Sweden or his newly-freed country. Coming up on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

<BUMPER> Peter: “You’re listening to *Today, Explained*.”

NOEL: I’m Noel King. Before Omar Alshogre got to Sweden, where he now works for the Syrian Emergency Task Force and for a tech company that makes self-driving cars, he had seen a lot of Europe. And a lot of Europe didn’t want him.

OMAR: Greece sent me to, to, you know, Macedonia, then Serbia, Serbia, Croatia, Croatia, Slovenia, Slovenia to Austria, Austria to Germany, Germany to Denmark, Denmark to... everybody was sending you to the next place. Nobody wanted to have you.

NOEL: Now before that, he was 15. And he was thrown in prison like thousands of others for protesting Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Omar was shuttled to something like nine prisons but he ended up in Sednaya - the most notoriously brutal. His memories of Sednaya are still very sharp:

OMAR: And I can tell you something. Pain makes you say anything. You don't think about the long term consequences of your false confession, that's going to be sentenced to execution or life in prison, No. You think about stopping the pain right now because every cigarette they were burning me with, every bone they were breaking, every thing that was hurting in my body was not even caring about the future, just caring about right now. I want the pain to stop. So I gave them the false confession they wanted, and that false confession led to them to transfer me to ten different prisons. Last one was Sednaya. And the special thing about Syrian prison is, you always dream about them sending you to the prison before the one you are at right now because it just gets worse. And when you reach Sednaya, that's when you for sure know that you you're never coming out. Sednaya is dark. Sednaya is painful. Not the pain itself. It’s the fear when you hear people screaming and the guards keep torturing them. Because at Sednaya you're not allowed to scream under torture. So if you’re screaming that means they are beating you until you are quiet, sometimes you are quiet by death, and sometimes you’re quiet because you can’t breathe anymore or you've learned a lesson you’re not allowed to scream.

NOEL: How old were you when you were in prison there, Omar?

OMAR: When I was in Sednaya, I was, it was my third year in prison, so I was 19 at that time. 18, 19.

NOEL: You were barely more than a kid.

OMAR: No, I was a kid. Because I was taken to prison first time when I was 15. And then the last time when I was 17. And I, I was a minor when I was in prison. And I didn't grow up like anyone else would do. I was in cell, silent and the torture and starvation for years. I didn't feel like I grew up in that normal sense of growing up. So I was a little boy all the time. And that actually was the privilege that I had because the prisoners around me cared about me because I was that little boy.

NOEL: Hm.

OMAR: In me, they saw their kids. Many of them were older. They saw their kids. But most important, they saw someone who could potentially survive and get out and reach to their families and tell their families that they, they need to do something to get them out or something. So the doctor took care of my wounds and taught me how to take care of his wounds. And the psychologist talked to me about how to treat our trauma so we don't die of the traumatic experience we go through every day. And the teacher, how to improve our grammar. And the engineer was talking about how messed up that building was.

NOEL: And this was all in prison, where you met the doctor and the psychologist and the engineer and the teacher, all imprisoned with you?

OMAR: Yes, yes. Political prisoners in Syria are usually the top and highly educated people of the country. Those are not criminals or anything. The regime put them in prison because the regime, those are threat to the regime. Educated, smart people, knowledgeable people are the biggest threat for the regime.

NOEL: How did you get out of Sednaya prison?

OMAR: Look, I feel like in a way, I never really get out. As in get out.

NOEL: Mm.

OMAR: But I was announced for execution in June of 2015, on a Tuesday. They took me from my room. And they, they put me in the room, 48 hours preparation for execution. And then they take me and they put me on the, somewhere on the ground. And then they load their guns and they aim. And then the officer says, Shoot. Poof! And they shoot. And I remember like, mmmmmmm, what is like, in my ear. And I was so excited because I was so afraid that death is going to hurt so painfully. And they shot me and it didn't even hurt. So I got so excited that, so, finally dead and to heaven.

NOEL: Mm.

SCORING IN <I Am Just Not Sure Anymore - BMC>

OMAR: I stood up and I had no blindfolds, no chain metals around my my hands or anything. And I stand up and tried to open my eyes and I couldn't. The light was so strong. And then I fainted. Then I woke up again. I managed to very slowly open my eyes, and then I saw a tree. And I haven't seen a tree in a very long time. I haven't seen color in a very, very long time. When I saw color for the first time, I was like, wanted to cry of happiness, nobody understand how important it is to see color like blue. I haven't seen blue in so long time. Those three years felt like 300 years. And I go to that into the ground because I was starved and I just wanted to pick anything. Grass, anything. Doesn't matter. I get down to the ground and I look down. I saw so much blood on my feet. And I. I always believe there is no blood in heaven.

NOEL: Hm.

OMAR: And then I realized I may be still alive. And that could be the worst thing that could ever happen to me, because I was informed that my family died in a massacre. So, like I had, my hometown was burned, my school was bombed. Even the girl I was in love with, her house was bombed. So she is probably dead. And like, I had nothing, had nothing to live. Had nothing to get out for. So I either die or stay in my cell. And then a car comes, pick me up and takes me somewhere else and somewhere else and somewhere else, just things move too quickly for me to understand. And then I was standing between my mother's arms. Suddenly, and I was like, I didn't know what was happening. I really was yet questioning whether I'm alive or dead, in heaven or not. And then my mom, you know, looks at me and say, my love, my heart, my son Omar. And she hugs me very hard. And like, I ask her. Didn't you, like, die? And she says, No, no, no, no, no, no. We smuggled you out of prison.

NOEL: Oh my god.

OMAR: When she told me they smuggled me out of prison, I got so mad because I didn't get smuggled out of prison. I was, like, executed, I told them. they were looking at me as like, what do you mean? I said I was executed. They shot and put me. They executed me. I got so frustrated. They said, no, no. That was just a mock execution. The execution guards, the head of the prison, everyone was bribed. My mom managed to reach everyone and bribed everyone to get me out of prison. So I was smuggled out of prison on my execution day, June 11th, 2015.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: And now, it’s nine years later. Omar has an adopted family in Sweden, he has friends to eat dinner with - even though he can’t just go knock on their door at 7 in the morning to ask if they want to have coffee - Swedes don’t like that. That’s something Syrians do … and so then, there’s Syria.

OMAR: I have to tell you about my hometown. My hometown is the most beautiful town that ever existed in the history of towns. I’m from the coast, so it has the sea, it has the mountains, it has the rivers. It has my grandma. And then it has my sister who I haven't seen in 13 years and haven't met her kids. Not even in a single time. So I miss her. And I miss, I miss my father and my brothers who were killed and put in mass graves. I would love to go there and sit and probably talk a little bit to my father and to my siblings. And I have so much things to do. That being said, that being said, I can't ignore the fact that I lived half of my life in Sweden and I have a family here. I have friends here. I have a job here. I have, I feel home in Stockholm. This is reality. I can’t change it. So I have two homes, one in Syria and one in Sweden. Both are very important to me. What's important for me is to rebuild Syria, contribute with the education that I have, with the knowledge I have gained, and the experience I have from democracies to help Syria. At the same time, I can't ignore the fact that I care very much about Sweden. So it will always stay as my home. So moving, being hybrid, you know, traveling back and forth. We'll see.

NOEL: So things in Stockholm, things in Sweden, have gone very, very well for you. I want to look at what is on the other side. I want to look at what might be in Syria for you. So we, we did an episode about this group, HTS, the group that overthrew al-Assad. They are an Islamist group. They have links to Al Qaida. The leader says he would like to govern as a moderate, that he considers himself a moderate. What do you think of this group that overthrew al-Assad and is there anything that they could say that might make you more likely to want to return to Syria?

OMAR: The most important point to highlight here is the fact that regardless of who overthrow the regime and their military operation, it’s the Syrian people, who over 14 years fought to bring down the Syrian regime.

NOEL Ah, huh.

OMAR: Which means nobody can come and then appoint themselves as a leader, regardless whether they are good or bad. You know, on this list or that list, it doesn't matter. What matters is the Syrian people went out to the streets for 14 years and they brought down the dictator, Bashar al-Assad. And now it's a phase where we have to lead that phase to transition, where we have election and we choose the people that we believe in, both in parliament and as president. And that's it, period. Nothing else. Nobody else comes and say, I claim that power. You know, the Syrian people have brought down the dictator that's been established for 53 years and had allies like Russia and Iran and Arab Emirates and China and North Korea, all the dictators in the world, and yet the Syrian people brought him down. So imagine a new emerging potential dictator wouldn't survive long. I tell you, the Syrian people will not settle. Remember, every mother has lost a son in Syria. Everyone have experienced the struggle. And nobody has the right to come and say, hey, I liberated you. No, we liberated Syria, all of us, with every struggle we had. By me, by speaking up and someone else by holding their gun and fighting, protecting their families and someone else by building, someone else by doing this. It, we all, all Syrians together brought down the Syrian regime and all Syrians together decide on the future of Syria. Anything else, I would start a revolution against. My father was killed so we have freedom. My brother, my other brother were killed to have freedom. My cousin. So we can have freedom and democracy. Would not let anyone come and take it from us. And this is I'm not talking now against any sort of group. I'm just talking in general, saying this. I would definitely never settle for less than having a real democracy in Syria.

NOEL: Omar. How old are you now?

OMAR: I'm 29. Handsome and happy.

NOEL: 29. Handsome. I can attest. We are on Zoom and happy. You seem very happy. I've seen stories about people in Turkey, in Lebanon lining up at the borders to just basically walk back into Syria, to try to get back in immediately.

OMAR: Mm hm.

NOEL: When your mind goes to when might it be safe for us to return, what do you think?

SCORING IN <Canopy Dusk - BMC>

OMAR: Firstly, lots of Syrians were not safe in Lebanon. Syrians were killed, were tortured, were kidnapped and so on. Syrians felt safe in Turkey in the beginning, but in the last few years they start to feel like they are discriminated against, have faced racism and so on. Of course, not from, from the whole country, but some incidents have led to build the perception that Syrians are not welcome in Turkey. So they, they were not feeling like they could stay longer. So the fact that Syria was liberated from the Assad regime was a great incentive for them to move immediately. So the streets towards Damascus were so crowded. That being said, I don't think it's safe yet because nobody's certain. Nobody knows what's going to happen next week. So it's too early for anyone to return. I wouldn’t encourage people to do it yet. I wouldn't do it myself.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Omar Alshogre. He works for the Syrian Emergency Task Force as their director of detainee affairs. And he’s based in Stockholm.

Coming up: millions of Syrians fled during the country’s civil war. How others are thinking about this question of when, and if, to return.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

AMANY QADDOUR (director of Syria Relief and Development, associate faculty member at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health): My name is Dr. Amany Qaddour. That's newly minted. I just defended my doctorate a few days ago.

NOEL: Congratulations.

AMANY: Thank you.

NOEL: You're having one hell of a month.

AMANY: Oh yeah. It was hours before all of this unfolded, so it's been, you know, a whirlwind. I'm the director of a humanitarian NGO called Syria Relief and Development, many know it as SRD, operating on the ground in Syria. And then I also hold an associate faculty position at Johns Hopkins at the Bloomberg School of Public Health.

NOEL: You are Syrian-American. Do I have that right? Can you just tell me about your ties to Syria?

AMANY: My heritage is Syrian. My parents are Syrian, but I grew up in the US my whole life, so I grew up in the Midwest.

NOEL: And where are we reaching you today, Amany?

AMANY: I'm in Gaziantep, Turkey. So for those unfamiliar, it's in the southeast of Turkey, one of the cities that was the epicenter, actually, of the earthquakes that hit last year.

NOEL: I want to get a sense of the scale of movement that happened as a result of Syria's decade-plus-long civil war.

AMANY: Mm hm.

NOEL: There were people who left the country. There were people who moved around inside the country. What are we talking about in terms of numbers and where did people tend to end up?

AMANY: Let's talk about outflow first.

SCORING IN <Neutral Irene - BMC>

AMANY: This is a country that has probably 6 to 7 million refugees outside of the country, one of the highest for those that have been following Syria for the past decade plus. This is one of the highest numbers of refugees across the world, now probably closely tied with Afghanistan and Ukraine. But for quite some time it was Syria. A lot of these refugees ended up in surrounding countries.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcWiiQiOvsg)*> UN: Syria civil war has left more than 130,000 people dead and forced millions to flee to neighboring countries like Jordan.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLFaTwr47EI)*> PBS: As fast as Turkey’s government could build the dozens of refugee camps along its borders with Syria, they were filled to capacity.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSVPU3fxzbg)*> PBS: Almost four million Syrian refugees have settled in countries neighboring Syria: Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.*

AMANY: And then the rest ended up many, many places: Europe, the UK, the US, Canada.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znSOREknqas)*> Euronews: Migrants and refugees received a warm welcome after arriving on a train from Austria to the German city of Munich. “How do you feel about being in Germany?” “I feel happy. We from Syria.”*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilgYRrfd3Iw)*> CBS: The 10,000th Syrian refugee is about to land in the U.S. today.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4L_qYRMJs6U)*> WIVBTV: In Canada the government is taking in 25,000 Syrian refugees and groups are already arriving in Toronto.*

AMANY: But I would say the bulk really of refugee hosting countries for Syrians have been the surrounding ones, including Turkey, where I reside right now. And then in terms of inflow within the country, across the various governorates, the majority of displaced communities have been in the northwest. This is one of the highest displaced populations across the world right now. Within the country, it's about six or so million displacements. And in the northwest, it's housed about 4 million. So these 4 million have come from other parts of the northwest as a result of aerial attacks to civilian infrastructure, hospitals, clinics, schools, marketplaces. Some were fleeing forced military conscription, particularly young men of military age. So really a mixture of reasons. But the northwest in particular, I would say, really housing the majority of the displaced.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: What are you hearing from Syrians who were displaced outside of the country now that Bashar al-Assad is gone? Do they want to go home?

AMANY: I think yes, but there's a caveat. So absolutely. I think without, you know, getting emotional about this, you can feel the hope and you can see the resilience of the Syrian people across the world right now. Scenes of people celebrating in almost every country and and real solidarity. I think, this is a moment in history, this is a moment in time for people and, before discussing kind of what's next, the apprehension that others might be, you know, questioning Syrians about is, let's, let Syrians have this moment. Let's let them celebrate, rejoice. Feel the joy. Feel the pain. Feel the suffering. Excuse me. Feel the loss and the family separation, the detainment, the persecutions. This is a bittersweet moment for a lot of people. And I think it's it's really important to let them process all of this. But on the other hand, when a lot of Syrians are now either wanting to return or, at a minimum, just get permission to enter the country, to reunite with parents that they haven't seen for ten years, young men and women that had to leave the country, separate from their families, out of safety or simply because of how much economic deterioration there was. It's also for me, I'm very cautious about what this means when, you know, many say they want to return. Is the time necessarily now? No. Is there a firm timeline? I also don't know. What I would say, especially to host countries is, you know, this is not a moment to exploit asylum policies. This is not a moment to sort of weaponize this, you know, critical point in time and immediately start discussing returns, especially if they're not, you know, this trifecta: voluntary, safe and dignified for people.

NOEL: This has been a contentious issue in some European countries. Have any European countries come out since Assad was forced out and said, we actually plan to do things differently now?

AMANY: So it's been a dizzying few days. I believe Austria has. I am cautious to mention names of other countries, but even prior to this moment in time, a few countries have been looking at their migration policies. So this is this is not a secret. Anyone can Google this. Germany has been looking at its migration policies. Holland has been looking. Denmark previously is really trying to understand what are the conditions in Syria so that they can also, I don't know if it's reframe or recalibrate their own migration policies, and determine, is it safe for returns and can Syrians be sent back now.

NOEL: If people were to choose to go back, what are they going back to? What is Syria look like now?

AMANY: That's really hard. I mean, a lot of people, it's just home for them. It's just I'm going back home. I'm going back to, you know, mom and dad or my brothers and sisters that were, you know, five years old before. And now they're teenagers. Like the heartwarming stories. So many of my colleagues, my team, you know, are going back right now and reuniting with family. And it's so touching. I think a lot of people had lost hope. There was a clear disillusionment, I would say, with the international system, very demoralized before this. But I do worry that what people are going back to now, you know, the country needs reconstruction. It needs development. It's been destroyed. So there really isn't, in certain areas, much to go back to. That's not the case for all parts of Syria. Um, inflation has hit the country hard. So generally, economic insecurity in Syria and outside, which is also adds to some of the the push-pull factors for some Syrians that have struggled also outside of the country, especially in neighboring countries, unable to afford basic services, basic amenities. You have decimated infrastructure. So public infrastructure, schools, very little job prospects. And across the health system, obviously, and I'm a public health practitioner. So this has been my area of focus for many, many years now is the hospital and health care infrastructure that's almost completely collapsed in certain areas.

NOEL: We talked to a young man named Omar earlier in the show who's 29 years old. He said his hometown is the most beautiful place in the world, but he's been in Europe since he was about 19 or 20. He has a whole life there. And so this is going to be a very, very hard call for someone like this young man. I imagine you're going to hear those types of stories again and again and again over the coming months and years.

AMANY: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think a lot of people now are grappling with this, especially, you know, I think of a lot of my colleagues and friends who've had children that have been born in other countries now. And there's this identity, you know, where we know, we hear there's something called Syria that we're originally from there. What that actually means, you know, they may be too young to process that.

SCORING IN <Neutral Richard - BMC>

AMANY: It's a tough decision then to kind of uproot them all over again, especially when some people, you know, some of the ones in Jordan and Lebanon, you know, they're on their fourth or fifth, sixth displacement. They've started their lives over multiple times. So some also just want stability in any form. So to then also be introduced to a different form of stability all over again. And I think it's just there's only so much a person can handle.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Dr. Amany Qaddour is the director of Syria Relief and Development. And she’s an associate faculty member at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Avishay Artsy made our show today. He was edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact checked by Laura Bullard and mixed by Andrea Kristinsdottir and Rob Byers. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]