



Three-star Syrian revolution flags fly alongside Christmas bells above a street in Bab Tuma, Damascus.

A Christmas in Damascus: The First in a Post-War Syria

Story by Robert Young in Damascus, Syria — December 24–25, 2024

Sixteen days after the collapse of President Bashar al-Assad's government, I traveled to Damascus on the eve of Christmas to observe life in the capital under the new government of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the anti-Assad coalition faction now in control of the capital region.

Christmas Eve: Entering Syria from Lebanon

On the morning of December 24, the 110-kilometer (68-mile) stretch between Beirut and Damascus—the respective capitals of Lebanon and Syria—took nearly five hours across three different vehicles. The journey, once a routine two-and-a-half-hour trip, was slowed by no fewer than eight checkpoints: two on the Lebanese side and six on the Syrian.

In the days following President Bashar al-Assad's departure on December 8, anti-Assad rebels swiftly seized control of the Syrian capital and its border with neighboring Lebanon. On the Syrian side, fortifications were strewn with shattered glass, toppled concrete barricades, and bullet-riddled posters of the deposed president. An empty tank sat by the roadside.

I was one of thousands seeking entry that day, among them returning refugees who had lived years in exile. I told my driver I was from *Singāfūra*—Arabic for Singapore. He relayed this information to the armed HTS guards as I presented them with a Canadian passport. This apparent discrepancy, along with the lack of any visa documents, drew no scrutiny. No visas, no stamps, no bribes, no questions—the guards, having enough chaos to deal with already, waved me through at every checkpoint.



LEFT: A Syrian post at the Masnaa checkpoint abandoned after rebel forces seized control.

MIDDLE: Damaged Syrian barricades painted with the two-star Syrian flag.

RIGHT: A defaced image of Bashar al-Assad, deposed President of Syria.

Exploring: The Old City of Damascus

Damascus, the world's longest continuously occupied capital, served as the seat of the Umayyad Caliphate from 661 to 744 CE. In the heart of Damascus's Old City neighborhood stands the Umayyad Mosque, a site of worship since the Iron Age, transitioning from Aramean rituals to a Roman temple, then a Christian cathedral, and finally a mosque in the 7th century.

In the prayer halls, faithful congregated in worship, while outside in the courtyard, visitors snapped selfies and posed for photos. Young people waved a three-star Syrian flag—a deliberate rebuke to the two-star emblem of Assad’s regime—symbolizing their hopes for a new era. Residents posed with anti-Assad security forces, many of whom were young people themselves, too young to recall life before the war and now in the capital for the first time.

Armed with an offline Google Map I had downloaded earlier in Lebanon, I wandered through Bab Tuma—“Gate of Thomas”—a historic neighborhood in the Old City, searching for a place to spend the night. After encountering several boutique hotels with English-speaking staff, I checked into the Agenor Hotel: \$120 for the night, with a suite upgrade and a lavish breakfast.

As in Beirut, U.S. dollars were readily accepted, often preferred over the hyperinflated local currency. Even simple restaurant meals required stacks of cash counted by machines typically found in the operation of bank tellers. Yet despite its economic turmoil, Damascus’s hospitality infrastructure—its preserved heritage sites, stunning hotels, and bilingual staff—hints at a latent potential for investment and economic development.



LEFT: Two girls pose for a photo while holding a revolution flag in the Damascus Mosque courtyard.

MIDDLE: An armed man, one of several, is posted inside the Damascus Mosque courtyard.

RIGHT: The interior courtyard of Agenor Hotel, one of many high-end boutique hotels in Bab Tuma, a historical neighborhood in Damascus’s Old City.

Exploring: The Christmas Market

A day before my arrival on Christmas Eve, Islamist assailants torched a Christmas tree in *Suqaylabiyah*, a majority-Christian town near Hama, as days earlier, a Greek Orthodox church in Hama had also been attacked. This act of arson, captured on video and widely circulated online, sparked protests across Christian neighborhoods in Damascus, including Bab Tuma. HTS promised accountability, announcing arrests, but religious anxieties deepen across the country.



LEFT: A man installs Christmas decorations in a church in the Bab Tuma neighborhood of the Old City.
MIDDLE: A nativity scene and revolution flag occupy adjacent spaces outside the gates of the Old City.
RIGHT: A metal Christmas tree glows among other light installations at the Christmas market.

In the shadow of recent violence, Christmas Eve in Damascus unfolded with a striking display of festivities. While churches across the city held religious services, crowds gathered at the Damascus Christmas Market. Held in a large public square, the event featured an illuminated metal Christmas tree among many other light installations, and a concert stage. Food stalls lined the perimeter of the square, serving hot chocolate, cookies, and crepes alongside *shawarma* and other traditional Levantine staples.



LEFT: A woman sells patriotic trinkets and costume jewelry at the Christmas market.
MIDDLE: Two young men sell muffins and cookies, among many other food and beverage vendors.
RIGHT: A family of visitors enjoy hot chocolate around an open fire.

In the heart of the square a sprawling tent had been erected, where friends and families gathered to smoke *shisha* and share meals. Many women did not wear the hijab, while some wore Santa hats over their headscarves—an unexpected blend of Islamic modesty and secular Western festivity. On stage, singers passionately performed a mixed line-up of patriotic songs and Christmas carols in both Arabic and English as the crowd sang along at times.



LEFT: Visitors gather for shisha smoking, a popular pastime, under a tented seating area.

MIDDLE: A woman wearing a Santa hat on top of a hijab smokes shisha with companions.

RIGHT: Children pose for photos in front of an illuminated toy bear decoration.

The Day After Christmas: A New Day for Syria

This Christmas, as foreign analysts scrutinized Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) capacity to maintain order, Syrians seized a rare respite—their first sustained reprieve from violence in 14 years. For residents across sectarian and generational divides, the holiday symbolized not a geopolitical stress test, but a collective exhale from unrelenting conflict.

For many older Syrians who remember a time before the war, the promise of an end to endless war is met with skepticism. For younger Damascenes waving new flags and posing with anti-Assad fighters, their optimism embodies a generation that has never known peace, for whom hope is both necessity and naiveté.

Now, with Assad's regime toppled, the diverse coalition of anti-Assad forces will soon have to unite behind a new common purpose within a completely new political framework. As Syrians celebrate, the new coalition leadership under Ahmed al-Sharaa has a daunting agenda: consolidate power within its borders, gain the recognition of the international community, and secure the support of global power brokers—all while rebuilding a country where 60% of the infrastructure lies in ruins.