

People in Syria Are Afraid. Rick Sterling

By [Rick Sterling](#) and [Qusay](#)

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Following is an interview with a high-level translator and university professor who lives in Damascus. He was interviewed by Rick Sterling on January 15. Qusay is not his real name.

Rick Sterling (RS): What is the current situation in Damascus?

Qusay: It is over a month since the overthrow of the Assad regime. The situation is not stable. In the area where I live, Dummar, there was a very heavy artillery fire exchanged. I saw the events myself. I was going to work and saw what happened. The official statement said that there were some people belonging to the Assad regime who were taking weapons. So the HTS military leadership sent groups to confront them. It was really terrifying. Children were running in the streets. Women and men on the street and in cars were terrified because the bombing was very close. So everyone saw death today feeling that a bullet or a bombing could reach them.

And two days ago in Latakia there was some soldiers of the Assad group. They kidnapped seven people of the Tahir Sham group. And then there were negotiations between the two parties. Then about 4,000 soldiers went there in Latakia in order to free them. And by the end they killed the soldiers and with their command. The situation in Homs is not stable either we already have sectarian calls.

Some people are calling for the killing of Shia in areas like Hama. Of course, all society is condemning these calls because this is not us, this is not Syria. But the problem is that always the new leadership says, oh, these are individual cases. They say they don't represent the face of the new Syria, which is something good. But in reality, unfortunately, these military personnel, they do acts that really terrify people. Just last week they killed the mayor of my area. They said that he was with Assad's intelligence and he brought 200 people into jail. So they brought this person into the square and they said that you are condemned for this. Then people started to stone this person and then they shot him. So people were very terrified after this feeling to go outside. So these acts really terrify people, the revenge policy may destroy everything.

RS: What is the situation in Aleppo?

Qusay: The situation Aleppo is calmer because in Aleppo we don't have various ethnicities. Almost all people are Sunni with a minority of Christians. So we don't have the same intense situation as we have now here. In the same area that I live, we have a particular area for Kurds, another for Sunni. So this is the problem for instance, why in Damascus or in Homs, we have this intense situation.

RS: Is there evidence that Turkey is planning to absorb or occupy Aleppo permanently?

Qusay: No. When HTS took over Aleppo, there were these calls but nowadays we don't hear that. Today the new Syrian foreign minister went to Ankara and met President Erdogan for the first time. Now we have a Syrian delegation going to Turkey with the Minister of Defense and other ministers. This is the first official visit to Turkey.

I have Syrian friends and relatives in Turkey and they have been told that they can remain in Turkey for six months, then they will have to return to Syria. So this was the main goal of everything that has been carried out. After six months, only those who have permanent resident status or citizenship in Turkey can stay, all the rest have to go to the north of Syria because most of them are from Aleppo or Idlib and these areas.

RS: Have many Syrians in Turkey returned to Aleppo or northern Syria yet?

Qusay: Actually, but the number is very few, very small in number. The situation in Syria is very bad. So people say until things get better, we can't think of returning. But so far nobody is returning unless for short visit and get back to Turkey.

Just yesterday the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany stated that they are going to allow Syrian refugees in Germany to go back to Syria for a short visit without losing their refugee status.

Every day we have delegations coming from Italy, France, Germany, US, and Arab states. Everyone wants the serious situation to be stabilized in order to send their refugees back because very high costs for those countries.

RS: Who is the new Syrian foreign minister and who are the people being appointed to high administrative positions in Syria?

Qusay: They are all the same people who were in Idlib with Ahmed Sharaa (leader of HTS). He brought those who were leading Idlib and they took all the positions in Syria. No position is giving to anyone outside their people. Just last week they interviewed Ahmed Sharaa about considering people from other areas. People who have expertise and knowledge. He said maybe in the future, but now he will rely on his people. He is making mistakes similar to what Hafez Assad did in the beginning of his rule that he only brought people from Latakia. So let's say maybe Sharaa is going to make the same mistakes because all of them, they come from religious background, all of them. They have Sharia certificate but some of them are in charge of ministries of which they nothing.

RS: Has the HTS regime fired the previous workers and authorities?

Qusay: Yes. They did this for most of the positions, especially the high ones. But they kept the workers for a very short time. Now they fire tens of thousands of workers. People are now in the streets calling for their salaries.

RS: Do the tens of thousands who have been fired or terminated still receive a small salary or are they completely cut off?

Qusay: So far nobody has received any salary. People are starving from hunger. And now they issued these resolutions of firing people and people are in the streets. They are in lost. They don't know what to do in Syria we have more than 1 million workers and employees. So they said that we are going to fire 800,000. We are going to leave only 200,000, those

special ones and the rest we are going to fire. And so you are speaking about a real disaster in the social sector and people don't know what to do because they have to pay for their life even though their salary is nothing.

RS: What's happening with the cost of food and other goods? Is it going up or prices going up or down?

Qusay: Prices are going down because we have goods from Turkey. But the problem is that people don't have money. So even though prices are about 20 to 30% less in general, especially about food, but people don't have money. So what is the point of that? Prices are very cheap but if I don't have a penny, it means nothing for me.

RS: What's happening with the electricity situation? Is power available for more hours in the day?

Qusay: No, same as before. Every eight or nine hours, we have electricity for one hour. So for the whole day it is two hours of electricity.

RS: Are there any signs of reconstruction or building or foreign investment?

Qusay: We have delegations coming and going. They all say they will bring investments, but so far people haven't seen anything. This is the problem. It's very cold nowadays. People don't have money and don't have electricity. Although the prices are decreasing, people don't have a penny to pay for anything. This is the disaster that people face every day.

RS: You were a professor at a private university. What's happening there? Are the private universities open and operating again?

Qusay: Yes. Last week we returned to our universities. My university was looted of everything. Now we are in reconstruction, buying new accommodations and computers and laboratory stuff. Because it was looted. But now we are back to teaching. Yes, situation is better. We don't have salaries but they say that next week they will start to pay for previous weeks.

RS: So how about the students? Are there many students coming back?

Qusay: Most students are back because our final exam is going to be by the end of the month. And if they don't come, they will not be allowed to go for the final exam. So people are forced to come, even with the high cost of transportation fees.

RS: And are there any other changes happening in the university education that have been imposed by the HTS regime?

Qusay: Yes. They are modifying the education, especially for high school. They canceled the course in national education because it spoke about the role of Hafez Assad, his son and the national identity. They also modified some religious interpretation of the Koran in an Islamic education course. They changed the interpretation of particular verses. One of the verses has been interpreted that Christians are those who have been misguided by God. This provoked a lot of anger on Facebook, with people saying, "How does this come that Christians are misguided? Are you crazy?"

These are some of the changes they have made. This kind of sectarianism is dangerous.

RS: What's happening with Israel? Are they continuing to attack areas and does it look like they will withdraw from the Syrian land that they've occupied?

Qusay: Yes, they withdrew from most of the lands that they occupied. It seems there are things under the table in order not to escalate problems with the new Syria government

RS: And are many people trying to leave Syria because of the situation and because they fear the new authorities?

Qusay: Many people were optimistic at the beginning. Some thought now we have a new phase of freedom. But now with all these things happening around us, people are all thinking of leaving the country for two or three years. So things could be settled down by that. And then to return. I have many Druze, Christian, and even Sunni friends who would like to leave. They also are afraid because some accusations can lead to stoning and death. Like the mayor who has been killed in a terrible way. People are afraid.

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