



Cathrin Schaer

Turning points

It was a lot like the fall of the Berlin Wall. Euphoria at the end of a repressive, authoritarian regime. No need to be careful about what you said to your mum on the phone any more in case someone was listening. But at the same time, there was another kind of fear – about what would come next.

That was how the demise of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad felt to many Syrians living in Berlin. During Syria's 13-year civil war, more than 6 million people fled their homeland.

Though most stayed nearby – Turkey and Lebanon host by far the most Syrians – about 1.3 million made it to Europe. The majority ended up in Germany, and of those, an estimated 50,000 live in Berlin.

The al-Assad regime fell before dawn on a Sunday, and when people woke up, nobody could quite believe it. An impromptu demonstration was organized in Kreuzberg, a Berlin neighbourhood where many migrants of Arab descent live.

My neighbour, who fought against the al-Assad government only to lose all his childhood friends, his love, his 20s and his belief in justice, took down the green and black flag of the Syrian revolution he has kept pinned to the wall for

years, tied it to his backpack, and we went to the party.

The flag was everywhere that Sunday. Flying from cars that sped past us, honking wildly, passengers flashing two-fingered victory signs as they went. It was drawn on little kids' faces and car bonnets, wrapped around arms and painted on portable speakers that blasted the songs of the Syrian revolution, even though the singers were murdered or tortured to death years ago.

About 5000 people were at the demonstration. There were rowdy chants of "one, one, one, the Syrian people are one" and there were silent embraces. Grown men holding each other, beards brushing, sobbing quietly into the other's damp shoulder for a minute or two. They knew full well what the person in their arms had lost and that, just maybe, it hadn't

been for nothing after all.

And always there was the greeting, "mabrouk". Congratulations, it means, and it conveyed the idea that despite all the pain and horror, despite precarious, difficult years as refugees, as outsiders, they had survived and the tyrant had not. As one Syrian wrote on social media, "I'm not a Syrian refugee any more. I'm Syrian. Just Syrian." Another noted gleefully that al-Assad was the only Syrian refugee now.

But what happens in Syria doesn't stay in Syria. It never has, historian Simon Sebag Montefiore pointed out in a rambling article in the *Times*, tracing the concept from ancient Greece to the Ottoman Empire to the post-World War I Middle East.

The Syrian civil war

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provides even more recent examples. When it began, nobody could have predicted it would allow the extremist Islamic State group to establish its death cult in Syria and incite terror everywhere else. Or that it would lead to Europe's "refugee crisis", emboldening far right, anti-immigration parties (who plague us to this day) and almost causing the end of the European Union.

These latest events will also reverberate beyond Syria. Is it the beginning of something better? As yet, nobody knows. Having made their lives here, many Syrians in Berlin are still biding their time, waiting to see what comes next.

No matter what does, even the most cynical among us desperately hope that the rare light we glimpsed that Sunday in December – a fragile sliver of joy and justice served, glittering at the very end of long, dark, grim tunnel – may now somehow be reflected, refracted and magnified back onto us all. ■

Cathrin Schaer is a freelance journalist living in Berlin.



GETTY IMAGES

Refugees no more: Berlin-based Syrians celebrate the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime.