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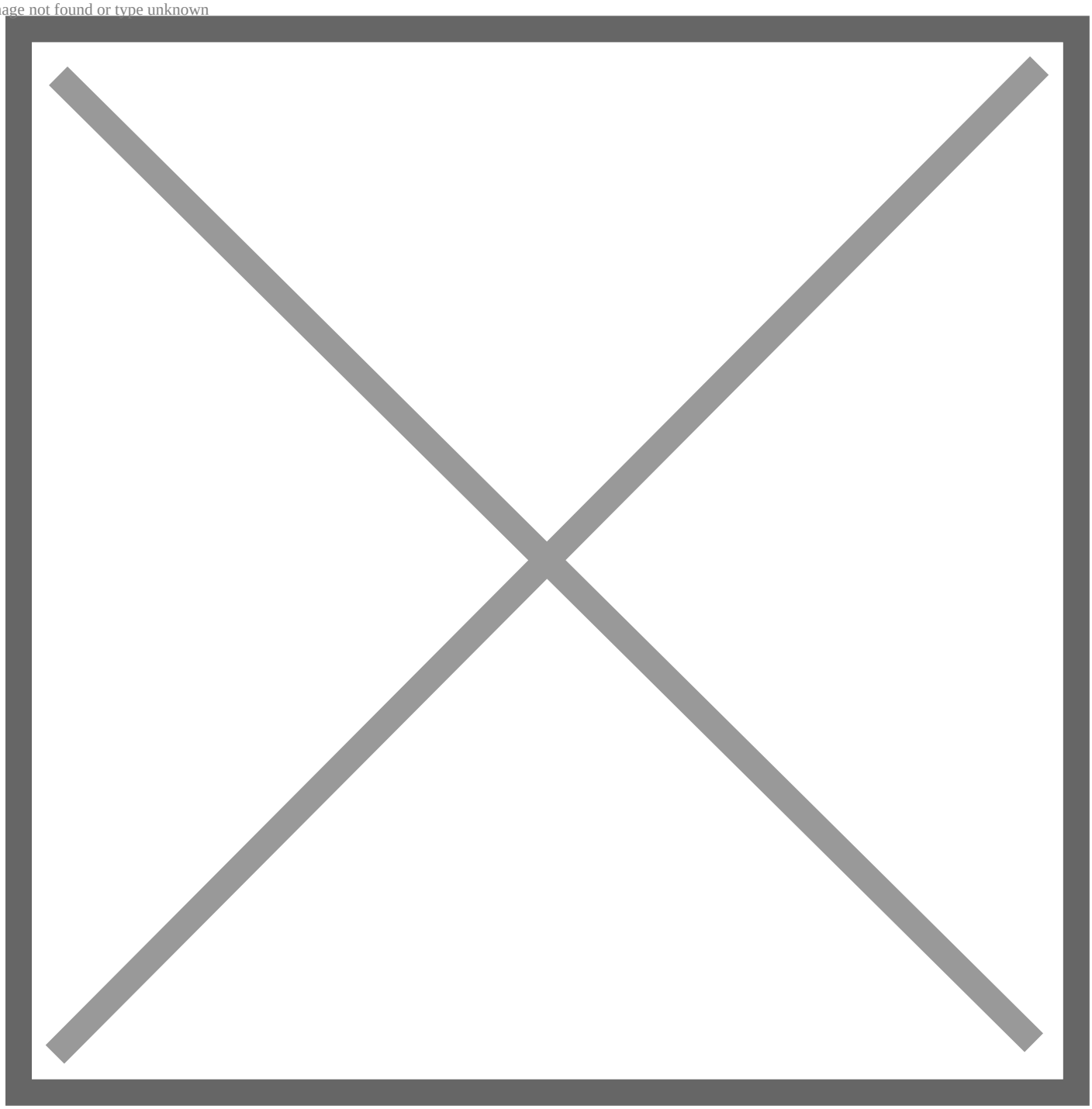

REPORT

Sednaya prison, a Christian’s testimony of Syria’s slaughterhouse

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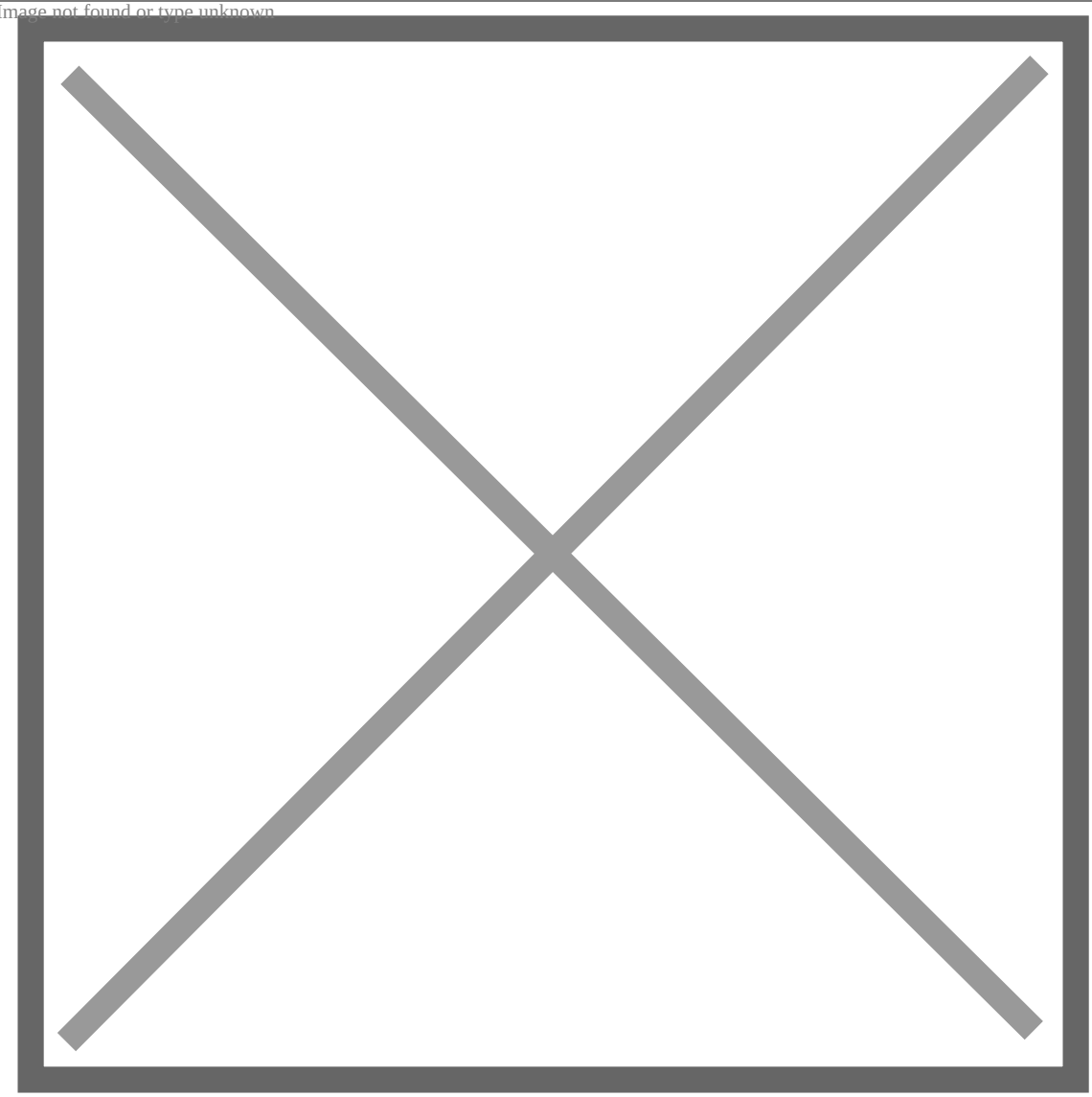
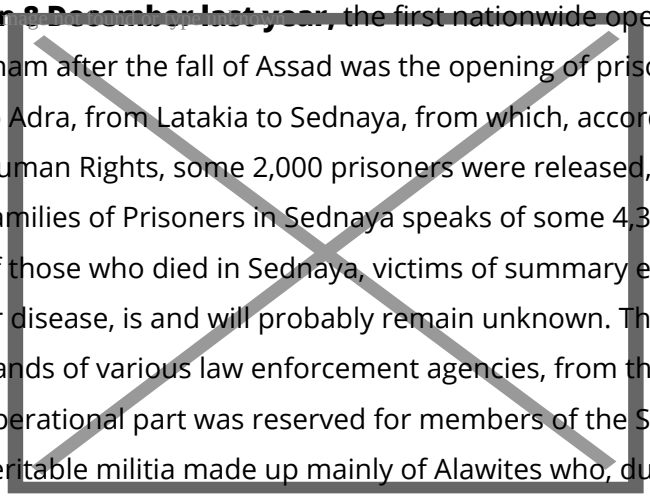
Elisa Gestri



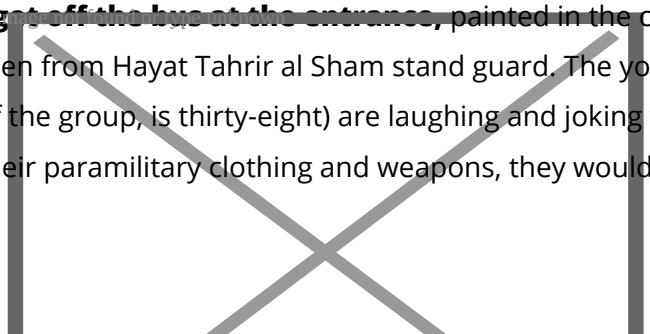
On a mild, sunny day, I set off from Damascus on a microbus, as the small 15-passenger buses are called here, for Sednaya, the Assad regime's symbolic military prison, known as the 'human slaughterhouse' and intended for the regime's enemies and 'special' prisoners.

The village of the same name sits on a hill about 20km from the capital and is known for the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Our Lady of Sednaya, which tradition has it was founded in 547 by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I himself. The prison is located on the main road a few kilometres before entering the village, on the right when coming from the city. The place name Sednaya means 'gazelle hunting' in Arabic, as the area seems to have been the hunting estate of the Roman governors of the province of Syria. The name has a sinister ring to it, given the hundreds of thousands of men, women and children who have been imprisoned, tortured and killed in the prison since its inception in 1987.



On 8 December last year, the first nationwide operation by the men of Hayat Tahrir al Sham after the fall of Assad was the opening of prisons all over the country, from Hama to Adra, from Latakia to Sednaya, from which, according to the NGO Syrian Network for Human Rights, some 2,000 prisoners were released, while the Association of the Families of Prisoners in Sednaya speaks of some 4,300 people freed. The exact number of those who died in Sednaya, victims of summary executions, torture, rape, starvation or disease, is and will probably remain unknown. The running of the prison was in the hands of various law enforcement agencies, from the army to the police, but the operational part was reserved for members of the Shabiha, Assad's secret police, a veritable militia made up mainly of Alawites who, during the years of the regime, were guilty of the most appalling crimes against the Syrian people. Suffice it to say that the aforementioned Syrian Network for Human Rights estimates that only 24,000 people out of a list of 136,000 who disappeared have been released from Syrian prisons since 8 December; the fate of the rest is unknown but sadly imaginable.

As the microbus climbs the hill, we come across a demonstration of soldiers from Assad's army protesting outside a barracks; they are demanding the return of their identity cards, confiscated by Syria's new leaders, arguing that they have done nothing wrong and are entitled to at least their documents back, if not their jobs. A fellow traveller assures me that '90 per cent of them will be satisfied if it turns out they have done nothing wrong'. As we approach the prison, we are greeted by a billboard advertising Sednaya's Sheraton Hotel; sadly, the billboard is set against the backdrop of the prison building, which can be glimpsed at the top of a small hill.



I get off the bus at the entrance, painted in the colours of the new Syria, where some men from Hayat Tahrir al Sham stand guard. The young gunmen (the oldest, and leader of the group, is thirty-eight) are laughing and joking with each other, and were it not for their paramilitary clothing and weapons, they would look like a bunch of ordinary guys.

Their beards are not overly long and their faces are uncovered. After finding out that I had arrived by bus, one of them offered to take me on his motorcycle to the building, a few kilometres from the entrance. This is where the atmosphere begins to change: the impact of the huge building can already be felt from the outside. At the entrance, an old taxi waits for some international journalists who are already inside.

I went inside with my young guide and stopped in front of the door of the first cell we came across. Without having seen anything yet, I was struck by the smell, a real punch in the stomach, indescribable. My guide tells me that in each cell - the ones I see are square, about 5 by 5 to the eye - up to a hundred people could be crammed in. We also go downstairs, to the entrance of the infamous tunnels where prisoners were kept in darkness and subjected to the worst tortures. I prefer to recount the testimony of Charbel, who spent four and a half years in Sednaya.

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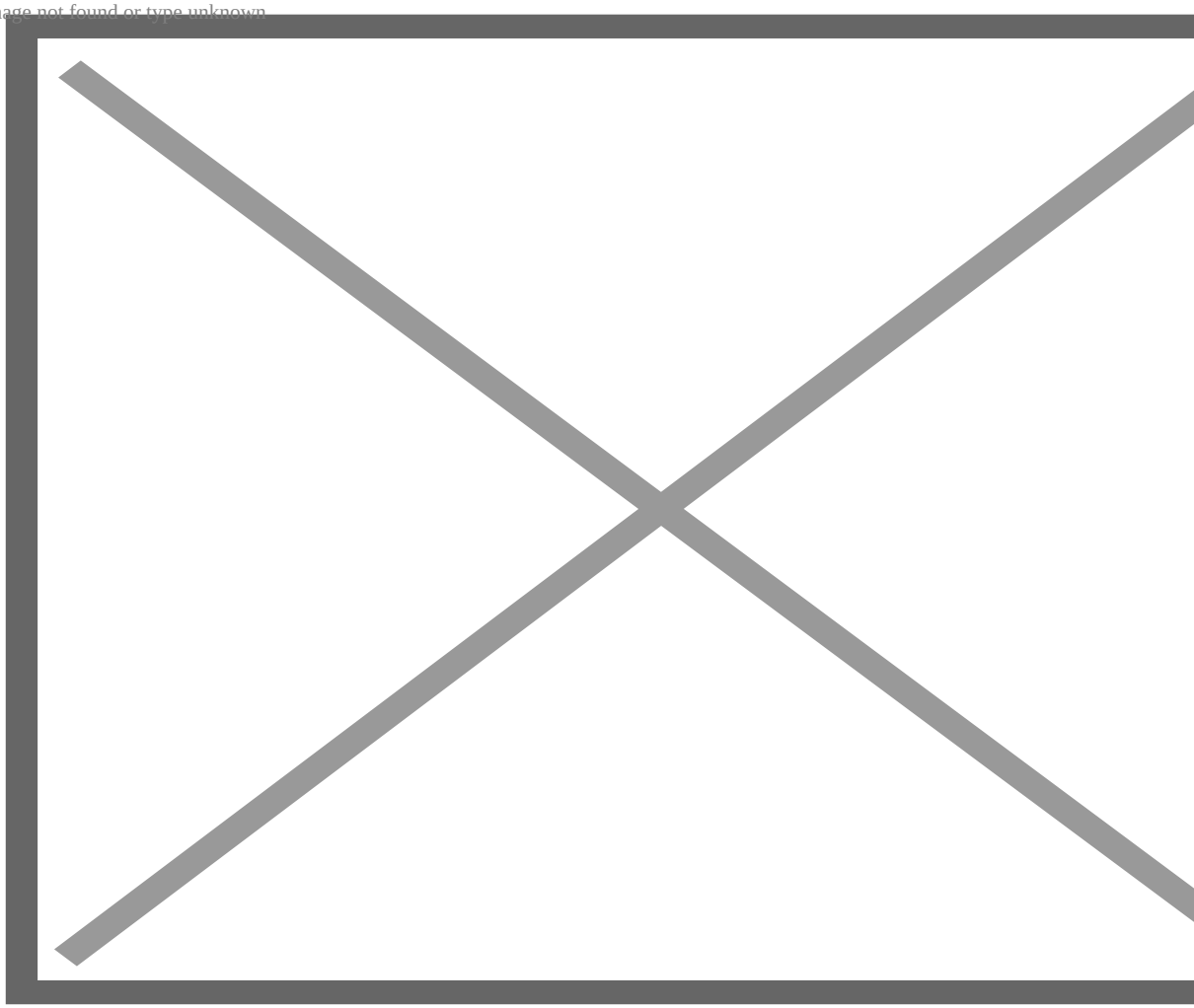


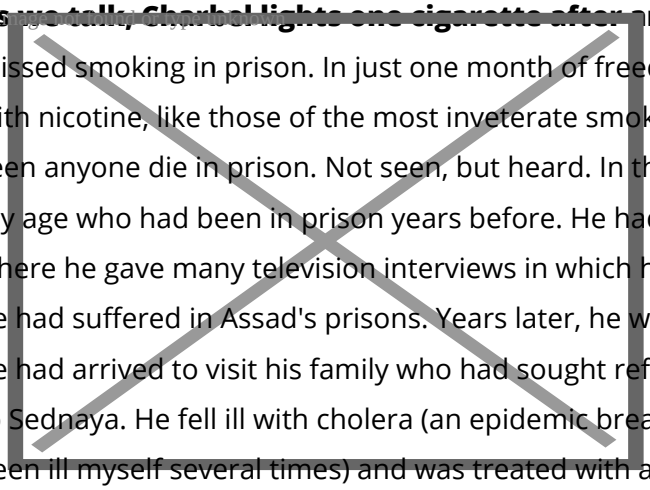
I met Charbel (the name is fictitious) in his office - released at dawn on Sunday 8 December, he returned to work on the morning of Tuesday 10 December. Forty years

old, owner with his brother of a building materials company inherited from their father, Charbel comes from a middle-class Christian family in Damascus. He greets me with exquisite courtesy; he has an open smile, is handsome, well dressed and everything about him exudes energy and determination. His appearance is in stark contrast to the squalid places I have just visited. We exchange pleasantries, talk a little about ourselves, the situation in Syria, the country's past and present; it is difficult to get into the subject, it seems unbelievable that the person in front of me has ever been to Sednaya, even to visit a friend, let alone as a prisoner. Finally, I pluck up courage and ask him why on earth he ended up there. The answer is surreal. In 2019, our company had won major contracts from the Syrian government and the US embassy in Beirut - we also had an office in Lebanon at the time. One of our competitors, disappointed not to have won these contracts, reported me for espionage, citing the fact that our French partner in turn had an Israeli partner'.

Really? Was that all it took to end up in the toughest prison in Syria?
'Unfortunately, our competitor was also a member of the Shabiha and it was very easy for him to report me. In 2019, I was called to report twice by the secret police, who demanded money in exchange for the deletion of my file; I refused, so the third time, at the beginning of 2020, I was detained first for 28 days and then 50 days in two different police stations. Then I was sent to Sednaya until my release on 8 December". How many of you were in the cell and how were you treated? We were almost always four, for some periods three. As a Christian I was treated well, much better than my fellow Muslims. The Alawites are a minority, so they respect the Christian minority, while they hate the Sunnis. As you can imagine, this favouritism got me into trouble with my fellow inmates, whom I tried to help whenever I could. We passed the time talking to each other; I even learnt the Koran by heart from listening to them recite it. We slept on the floor and were given food in plastic bowls. We were allowed to wash, but only with cold water. We were allowed to shave once a month. The conditions were good compared to the way other prisoners were treated, tortured and killed.

Were visits allowed? "Yes, every 45 days meetings with the prisoners were allowed. My mother and my brothers visited regularly. My wife, on the other hand, came to see me only once, and last year she asked for a divorce through the prison administration. She wanted to rebuild her life and the timing of my possible release was unpredictable'. The break-up of families is another terrible consequence of arbitrary detention in Syrian prisons. While family members continue to search for their missing loved ones after many years, there are those who cannot wait for them to return. My mother used to bring me clothes, linen and toiletries that were regularly confiscated by the shabiha

men,' Charbel continues. Our guards received a salary of $20 a month, which they supplemented by stealing from the detainees. The visits were also an opportunity to ask family members for money to release us. This was a real business within the prison, run by a parallel administration under the secret police. My mother was asked for $200,000 to release me; she paid $10,000, then another $5,000, then was told that because of my 'special' case she should write directly to Bashar al Assad, which she did. Predictably, nothing happened.



As we talk, Charbel lights one cigarette after another: it's a sign of how much he missed smoking in prison. In just one month of freedom, his fingers have turned yellow with nicotine, like those of the most inveterate smokers. I dare to ask him if he has ever seen anyone die in prison. Not seen, but heard. In the cell next to ours was a man about my age who had been in prison years before. He had been released and fled to Holland, where he gave many television interviews in which he recklessly denounced the abuses he had suffered in Assad's prisons. Years later, he was arrested at Beirut airport, where he had arrived to visit his family who had sought refuge in Lebanon, and taken straight to Sednaya. He fell ill with cholera (an epidemic breaks out at least once a year, I have been ill myself several times) and was treated with antibiotics, which of course made his condition worse. For three days we heard him screaming in pain while the guards kicked him to make him stop moaning; after three days of agony he died. After a few seconds, Charbel adds: "Believe me, when I came out, I forgot everything. I don't know how to explain it, this place rips your heart out of your chest. You feel nothing. I ask him if he has any news of the man who unjustly sent him to prison. I'm trying to track him down. I know he is in Homs, risking his life now that Assad has fallen. I want to call him and tell him I am out: that will be my revenge. The rest I leave to God.