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Syrians living in Turkey celebrate after Syrian rebels announced that they have ousted President Bashar Assad from Syria, in Istanbul, Turkey, Dec. 8, 2024. (OSV News/Dilara Senkaya, Reuters)

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The apostolic nuncio to Syria says he hopes the war-torn nation will "move toward reconciliation" and at least "some prosperity" under democratic rule, following former Syrian President Bashar Assad's ouster in a lightning offensive by rebel groups.

Cardinal Mario Zenari spoke with Vatican News hours after rebels entered the capital of Damascus, which Assad was reported to have fled sometime on Dec. 8, after being absent from the public eye during most of the rebels' two-week campaign. Assad and his family are now in Moscow and have been granted asylum there, according to state media in Russia, a key backer of the Assad regime.

Zenari told Vatican News he had been unable to sleep amid the "constant gunfire" in Damascus, but noted the "shooting in the streets" was "celebratory" amid a stunning transition of power that happened without a bloody contest for the capital.

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali said in a recorded video message posted Dec. 8 that he was "ready to cooperate with any leadership chosen by the people, and provide all possible support to ensure a smooth and systematic transition of government tasks, and the preservation of state facilities."

The rebel offensive ended the five-decade rule of the Assad family, which has been marked by violent repression and brutal crackdowns on dissent. During his three decades in power, Assad's father Hafez established a Soviet-style economy and quashed opposition. Initial hopes that Bashar Assad — who assumed power in 2000 after his father's death — would prove more moderate were extinguished when Assad turned to longtime family allies to exert an increasingly authoritarian rule.

When pro-democratic protests sparked civil war in 2011, Assad responded with brutal force that ultimately saw more than 500,000 killed and countless atrocities marked by detention, torture and executions, prompting the United Nations to convene an independent international commission of inquiry on Syria.

As of 2024, 16.7 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian aid. More than half of Syria's 23 million pre-war population is displaced, with 5.2 million refugees and 6.8 million internally displaced persons, according to UNHCR, the U.N. refugee agency.

"Now, the path ahead is steep," Zenari told Vatican News, noting that "those who have taken power have promised to respect everyone and to build a new Syria."

A number of local, regional and international parties have participated in the long-running Syrian conflict, including some allied with Islamic extremists. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham ("Organization for the Liberation of the Levant"), which led the rebel forces, was initially linked to Islamic State and al-Qaida, but reestablished itself in 2016 under its current name while looking to move away from extremist roots. The U.S. still designates HTS as a foreign terrorist organization.

HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Golani told The New York Times in an interview posted Dec. 6, "Our goal is to liberate Syria from this oppressive regime."

Golani has sought to reassure Syria's small Christian population — concentrated in Aleppo, and currently estimated at about 30,000, down from some 200,000 at the start of the civil war — that his forces would "ensure your protection and safeguard your property."

"Aleppo has always been a meeting point for civilizations and cultures, and it will remain so, with a long history of cultural and religious diversity," he said in a statement posted to the Telegram messaging platform.

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Agence France Presse reported Armenian Catholic Archbishop Boutros Marayati of Aleppo told worshippers during a recent Divine Liturgy there, "Do not fear, dear brothers. We have received assurances from all parties. Continue living normally, and everything will remain as before, even better."

"The rebels met with the bishops in Aleppo immediately after their victory, assuring them that they would respect the various religious denominations and Christians," Zenari told Vatican News. "We hope they will keep this promise and move toward reconciliation."

"As for the situation of the Christians all over Syria, we have been in contact with many of our partners, and all information received says that the rebels have sent many messages to all minorities to reassure to them that the goal is to turn over the Assad regime and not to (seek) revenge from anyone," Michel Constantin, regional director for the Catholic Near East Welfare Association-Pontifical Mission in Lebanon and Syria, told OSV News in a Dec. 8 email.

CNEWA, established in 1926 by Pope Pius XI to support the Eastern churches, administers the Pontifical Mission, which was founded as the Pontifical Mission for Palestine by Pope Pius XII in 1949 to care for Palestinian refugees. The mandate of the mission, which was subsequently placed under CNEWA's direction, has been extended by several pontiffs to care for all those affected by war and poverty in the Middle East.

Constantin said in his email that "after almost 10 days of occupation (in) Aleppo, all incoming information from our Christian partners say that so far no one has touched any Christian house or church or institution."

He noted that "we will need more time to figure out how the transfer of power will be implemented and how the political process will evolve," especially given the number of factions and their international backers — whose interests both overlap and conflict — that are involved.

"At the social level, it seems that the rebels are well organized, but of course many difficulties remain very challenging for the inhabitants and the population," Constantin said.

He pointed out that prices have increased sharply, since "the currency has been changed" from the Syrian pound to the Turkish lira or the U.S. dollar, while "the majority of people" only have Syrian currency.

Zenari told Vatican News that "beyond reconciliation, we hope Syria can also find some prosperity because people have reached their limit," with people "unable to survive in the country as it had become."

He also expressed hope that the international community would assist the nation in its task of rebuilding as "a new Syria based on democratic principles." He cited as an example "abolishing sanctions, as they are a burden that weighs heavily on the poor."

As Syria stands at a crossroads, "we hope that a door of hope may open because what we witnessed was hope dying — or already dead," Zenari told Vatican News. "So we now hope that, with the help of the international community and the goodwill of all Syrians, a path toward reconciliation, reconstruction, and a minimum of prosperity for all people can begin."

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