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EACH CHRISTMAS *The Economist* names a country of the year. Not the happiest: that would nearly always be Scandinavian, making for a dull, predictable contest. Nor the most influential: that would always be a superpower. Rather, we try to identify the country that has improved the most, whether economically, politically or in any other way that matters.

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Syria's improvement, by contrast, has been political. Little more than a year ago it was ruled by Bashar al-Assad, an odious dictator backed by Iran and Russia. His jails were stuffed with political prisoners, and dissent was punished with torture or death. Thirteen years of civil war had claimed more than half a million lives. Mr Assad's forces had used chemical weapons and barrel bombs indiscriminately on civilians. More than 6m people had fled from the country.

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Entertainment and, yes, alcohol are allowed. Mr Sharaa has brought about a series of positive surprises, holding the country together and forging good relations with America and the Gulf states. As Western sanctions are relaxed, the economy is starting to recover, too.

Huge problems remain. Militias carried out two atrocious local massacres of minorities, in which 2,000 people died. Mr Sharaa rules in a clannish way, and in such a fragile country much could still go wrong.

Nonetheless, Syria in 2025 is far happier and more peaceful than it was in 2024. Fear is no longer universal. Life is not easy, but it is more or less normal for most people. Voting with their feet, some 3m Syrians have returned home. Our choice goes to Syria, too. ■