

‘Democracy won’t come to Syria overnight. But now, we have hope’

Sunday 15 December 2024, by [Al-KUWATLI Bassam](#), [RAPOPORT Meron](#) (Date first published: 11 December 2024).

From exile, Bassam Al-Kuwatli long dreamed of Assad’s fall. As head of the Syrian Liberal Party, he now plans to return to push for a democratic future.



Syrians in Germany celebrate the fall of Assad Regime, December 8, 2024. (Wikimedia Commons)

On Nov. 25, the Syrian Liberal Party (Ahrar) held its first ever in-person meeting in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The party was established four years ago, but according to its president, Bassam Al-Kuwatli, it had been forced to operate virtually throughout that time. Registering the party in Syria was impossible, and meeting in person was equally unfeasible under the regime of Bashar Al-Assad.

Just days after this emotional first gathering, the rebel group Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), led by Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani, began advancing from Idlib in northern Syria toward Aleppo. Within 10 days, in a campaign that astonished the entire world, they captured Aleppo, followed by Hama, and then Homs. Meanwhile, other rebel forces took control of territories in the southern part of the country. By Dec. 8, the Assad regime had fallen — after more than half a century of brutal rule, and after withstanding 13 years of armed uprising — opening up an entirely new and unfamiliar chapter for all Syrians.

Al-Kuwatli, 54, hails from a well-known Damascene family; one of his relatives, Shukri Al-Quwatli, served twice as president of Syria in the 1940s and ’50s. Although he was born in Bulgaria, he moved to Damascus as an infant and grew up there, raised under the Ba’athist educational system, as he puts it. He left Syria in the late ’90s and settled in Canada. In recent years, he returned to the region, living in Turkey before moving to the United Arab Emirates about a year ago.

Al-Kuwatli and his colleagues in the party, like many other Syrians, longed for Assad’s fall and believed it to be possible — but when it finally happened, it caught him by surprise. He still struggles to envision what a new Syria without Assad will look like. He is certainly not an Islamist, unlike Al-Jolani’s fighters, and he seeks to prevent Syria from becoming a federation of minorities. “I don’t want the Bosnification or Iraqization of Syria,” he says. Although half-Kurdish and married to a Kurdish woman, he is also not enthusiastic about the idea of an independent Kurdish state, noting that most Kurds in Syria live outside the areas formally defined as “Kurdish.”



Bassam Al-Kuwatli (Courtesy)

As old-fashioned as it might sound, Al-Kuwatli simply believes in democracy and in the revival of the “Arab Spring,” which many had written off. Yet he acknowledges that achieving democracy could take a long time — perhaps even decades.

In Al-Kuwatli’s eyes, Israel contributed to Assad’s downfall by significantly weakening Hezbollah and the Iranians. However, he argues that Israel did not want Assad to fall, preferring a weak, fragmented Syria that might gradually forget about the occupied Golan Heights (known in Arabic as the Jawlan) — an outcome, Al-Kuwatli insists, that will never happen. Peace, he believes, is possible, but the Jawlan — from which Al-Jolani takes his nom de guerre — will always remain an obstacle, along with Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Meron Rapoport - Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Can I congratulate you? Is this a happy day?

Bassam Al-Kuwatli - Yes, definitely. We have big hopes and big fears about what’s to come, but we couldn’t have started doing anything if the regime hadn’t fallen. Now, [Syria] is open to a lot of scenarios, and instead of sitting and waiting on the side, we can try to be an actor [in shaping its future]. It’s important for the Syrians to have some agency, and now there’s an opportunity to do so.

How do you explain how such a powerful regime fell like a house of cards in a matter of days?

When the [rebels’] operation began, we all thought it was a local operation — somehow agreed upon, or at least ignored, by both Russia and Turkey to punish Assad or push him toward reconciliation with [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan, which he’d been refusing for a while. We still think maybe that’s how it was initially, but the sudden crumbling of the regime opened the door to new opportunities, whether for HTS or the Turks, and apparently a decision was taken: let’s continue and see how far it goes. Nobody expected it to go so far, neither HTS, nor the Turks, nor the Russians.

But it seems that the minimal support from Iran and Hezbollah caused the collapse, because the Syrian army is totally demoralized. You have soldiers there who are conscripts, placed at checkpoints against their will, and very badly taken care of, living on two eggs and one potato a day. They have no cause to fight for. So the feeling is that the initial crumbling [of the regime] around Idlib to Aleppo had a domino effect: [the regime’s soldiers] ran away, not expecting or wanting to be on the front line.

Hezbollah lost a lot of its capabilities and morale [in the war with Israel]. They had a larger war to

fight which I don't think they were prepared for. The Iranians in Syria were hit as well, and not capable of attacking [HTS and other opposition groups], even after they tried to bring in militias from Iraq. So that played a role in their inability to support the regime.



Syrian rebels at the Hama Military Airport after its capture, December 2024. (Voice of America/Wikimedia Commons)

Hezbollah and the Iranians were more organized than the Syrian army, and they played a large role in the war and also in [creating] demographic change, displacement, and holding onto key positions. Assad was so dependent on them that he couldn't make political moves [without their approval]. That's part of what maybe angered the Russians and made them at least turn a blind eye at the beginning of this operation.

You said it's a happy day for you. Yet you are the president of a liberal, secular party, and the man currently taking over Syria used to be part of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. How can you explain this?

Very simply: the feeling in Syria is that the bigger enemy is Assad, who is the cause of all [of Syria's problems]. The degradation of the country and its education system, playing people against each other — all of this is what led to Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Our priority is to get rid of Assad, to open the system.

We are surprised, honestly, to see a change in the narrative of Al-Jolani. If you listen to his last interviews, he [seems like] a nice guy. For those of us who know his history, of course we don't trust him, but we think that pragmatism is a good trait. If Assad was pragmatic enough, we wouldn't have been here.

A radical who is pragmatic — who is willing to change his approach, and who is attacking or dismantling some radical elements — is not necessarily bad. We want people to enter into politics and not into killing each other. Politics and democracy, if they happen, are a good mechanism to deal with our conflicts. We cannot prevent people who are against our ideas from participating in democracy, because then we push them again to carry weapons and fight.

I saw the interview with Al-Jolani on CNN — he looked very pragmatic. How do you explain this change, and did you see it coming?

He's realizing he cannot have a role [in Syria's future] if he continues with his [Islamist] narrative. That forced him to cooperate with certain parts of the international community on eliminating [Hurras Al-Din](#) [another Al-Qaeda offshoot in Syria] and other radical elements. We think that somebody is working with him on his PR, which again is not necessarily a bad thing. But still this doesn't make us sure what the future will be.

There are two main forces today in Syria, HTS and PYD [the left-wing, Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party, which controls northeast Syria]. The fear now is how they're going to work out a government that represents [both].



The Syrian Democratic Forces announce an offensive north of Deir ez-Zor, Sept. 9, 2017. (Voice of America/Wikimedia Commons)

How much power do you have, compared to these stronger groups?

We have no military power, but our ideas find support among a significant portion of the urban middle class and [social and ethno-sectarian] minority groups.

The [communique](#) released by the interim regime was very beautiful — almost in the style of the French Revolution, the way it called for a democratic and just state. Do you believe this? And do you think it's possible to achieve this in a place like Syria that is so divided after 14 years of civil war?

I believe we need to give everybody the benefit of the doubt. We [as the liberal forces] have a role to play as well: we need to participate [in the construction of this democratic order].

Now, whether it's possible — I think in the long run, yes. But things don't evolve overnight. We are all graduates of the same Ba'ath party schools, we all have the same mindset. If I gave a million dollars each to a person from the opposition, a person from the PYD, and a member of the Assad regime, they would all build exactly the same school: two stories with metal on the windows, no trees in the yard, a fence, and someone to serve coffee and tea to the director.

Evolution takes time. I was in Bulgaria during the fall of communism, and I was invited back 25 years later for the anniversary. The country hadn't changed much. Only on my last visit, two years ago, did I start to see a new generation that thinks differently. We're not talking about instant democracy. But we need to start working on it. It's not something that can happen by itself.

It has become common knowledge that Syria's descent into civil war was due, in part, to external intervention from a variety of actors, from Iran and Russia to Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and of course Israel. How much of what we just saw over those 10 days was a Syrian-led movement, and how much was it determined by foreign powers?

From day two [of the Syrian civil war], if not day one, there was always interference. Interference definitely led to violence, violence led to more interference, and at some point, Syrians lost their agency.



Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, October 20, 2015. (Kremlin.ru/Wikimedia Commons)

Take Al-Jolani, for example. I will not say he is a tool of the Turks, but Turkey supported him in a

way or utilized him; he has some independence, but he still needs them to a degree. So there is still interference today — but at least now we have two actors nearly out of the equation, which are Iran and Russia. The question is how we can slowly get rid of the other external actors. When a country is weak and fragmented, every [foreign actor] will try to achieve their own interests in it.

On the one hand, Israel is boasting that Assad fell thanks to their attacks on Hezbollah, and telling the Syrian people that their common enemies are Iran and Hezbollah. On the other hand, Israel is very worried about what's to come. What don't the Israelis understand about what happened in Syria?

What Israelis don't understand is that no Syrian can abandon [the quest for the Jawlan](#). Some Syrians would say that it's not a priority now, but abandoning it is not an option — it would be political suicide. We have 800,000 people from the Jawlan who want to go back to their homes and lands. My feeling is that Israel has always been trying to keep Syria divided so that this situation somehow goes away. My maternal grandmother is from Jawlan. The family still has land ownership documents.

Does Israel have more of a reason to celebrate Assad's downfall, or to fear it?

I don't think the Israelis wanted Assad to go; they wanted a divided Syria with Assad. But if we're talking about Israelis like you, I think the success of the Syrian revolution is a good thing, because hopefully a democratic Syria will be able to work toward proper peace with the Israelis.

We [in the Ahrar party] believe in some kind of united southwest Asian region — or Middle East, if you want to call it — where people can move and work freely, where Jews can live in Damascus, Baghdad, Tehran, and Ankara, and the same for Arabs and Palestinians. That's what we hope for. But that's not what today's Israel thinks about.

Israeli soldiers in the Golan Heights near the border with Syria, December 8, 2024. (Michael Giladi/Flash90)

I suppose Hezbollah has tainted the Palestinian issue in the eyes of many Syrians, but where does Palestine stand in the eyes of people like Al-Jolani?

For Syrians, there are mixed feelings. The Palestinian issue was exploited by the Assad family for too long. "You need to be silent because of Palestine," they would say. "You cannot have democracy because of Palestine." We even have a security branch called Palestine Branch, which arrests people on issues not related to Palestine. That led people to say: stop exploiting the Palestine issue [for your own benefit].

At the same time, there's always this feeling of solidarity. Don't forget that the whole region used to be one — there are still family ties [between Syrians and Palestinians]. They [the Palestinians] are the same people as us. When they're attacked, we're attacked as well. So maybe Gaza hasn't been Syrians' top priority, but they talk about it, they care, they show solidarity. It has never disappeared.

How much do you think a democratic Syria could impact the stability of non-democratic regimes in the region?

We don't know how democratic it will be, and how long it will take. Everybody felt that the Arab Spring was dead. Now, [the fall of Assad's regime] changed the perspective again. It's not dead.

[Assad's downfall] could pose a threat to certain regimes, and we hope it will maybe push toward a more peaceful transition. In 2011, if he was a bit smarter, Assad could have emerged as a national hero [by promising to] lead change, and maybe he would have stayed in power as well. We don't

expect immediate change — it could take a decade or two. But now, at least, there is the hope that [the Arab Spring] is still alive.

Will you go back to Syria now?

Definitely, hopefully. Once they open the airports, we need to be there.

[The last time I was there was] in 1996. In 2013, I entered literally 50-100 meters inside Syria from the north, visiting the border crossing that became a hospital in Bab Al-Hawa and the refugee camp behind it, but that's it. I have a 13-year-old daughter who is in London and has never seen Syria, and neither have my other children.

Are you going to establish your party in Syria itself, or is it too early?

That's the objective. We don't know yet how anything is functioning; the new regime is trying to run a government now without staff, without anything. But we need to be registered — we need to be present in Syria.

Meron Rapoport

P.S.

- +972 Magazine. December 11, 2024:

- <https://www.972mag.com/syria-democracy-assad-collapse-bassam-al-kuwatli/>

A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

- Meron Rapoport's article on +972 Magazine:

- <https://www.972mag.com/writer/meron-rapoport/>

- Meron Rapoport is an editor at Local Call.

Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war. The world is reeling from Israel's unprecedented onslaught on Gaza, inflicting mass devastation and death upon besieged Palestinians, as well as the atrocious attack and kidnappings by Hamas in Israel on October 7. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing this violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to intensify their attacks on Palestinians. The most far-right government in Israel's history is ramping up its policing of dissent, using the cover of war to silence Palestinian citizens and left-wing Jews who object to its policies.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 14 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, entrenched occupation and apartheid, and a normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land.

Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is a leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists, activists, and thinkers can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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