

# Yassin al-Haj Saleh: “For the first time, we have a horizon in Syria”

Exiled Syrian Intellectual Hopeful for Syria’s Future After Assad’s Fall

Tuesday 7 January 2025, by [Al-HAJJ SALEH Yassin](#), [EL AZZOUZI Rachida](#) (Date first published: 20 December 2024).

**For this writer, one of Syria’s leading intellectual opponents of the Assad regime, the Syrian people are experiencing a moment comparable to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Speaking about the return to his homeland, justice, and reconstruction, this exiled thinker reveals his fears and hopes.**

Originally from Raqqa, a city in northeastern Syria that Islamic State had made its capital, Yassin al-Haj Saleh spent sixteen years in prison (1980-1996) under *Hafez al-Assad* for membership in the Syrian Communist Party, then endured the reign of the son, *Bashar*. In March 2011, he joined the revolution and went underground. Forced to flee from repression, he sought exile in Turkey in autumn 2013 and then Germany in 2017. Not without experiencing torment: the disappearance of his wife, *Samira al-Khalil*.

A former political prisoner herself (1987-1991) and tireless human rights activist, she was kidnapped in October 2013 by jihadists in Douma, likely from the Islamist group **Jaish al-Islam** “*Army of Islam*”, while taking refuge in southern Damascus to escape the torturing regime. At her side were another icon of the Syrian opposition, lawyer [Razan Zaitouneh], her husband *Wael Hamada*, and another fellow activist, *Nazem al-Hamadi*. That same year, two of Yassin al-Haj Saleh’s brothers were kidnapped in Raqqa by Islamic State. One of them is still considered missing.

Passing through Paris to promote his latest book published in French, “*On Freedom: Home, Prison, Exile... and the World*” (L’Arachnéen editions), Yassin al-Haj Saleh has been caught up in history. The regime he has fought against for decades collapsed in mere days. “**The era of eternity has ended. Now history begins, with all its difficulties and challenges**”, responds the founder of the journal *Al-Jumhuriyah* (“The Republic”).

His friends, including comparative literature professor and writer *Catherine Coquio*, who wrote the preface to his essay, celebrate a personality whose “way of thinking about his experience, and seeing himself on the ‘circumference’ of political groups, has given him the position of critical observer-thinker-activist that will be invaluable in the years of reconstruction. His catalysing role in the Syrian diaspora is complemented by a talent for bringing Syrian experience into dialogue with the world, and for thinking about today’s world.”

## **Mediapart: How are you, Yassin al-Haj Saleh?**

Yassin al-Haj Saleh: I’m overjoyed. I still haven’t fully taken it in. Many Syrians are comparing what’s happening to us to the fall of the Berlin Wall. It’s a fair comparison. When I heard talk of a “battle for Aleppo”, I thought to myself: “They’re dreaming.” But Aleppo fell quickly. The regime collapsed in eleven days - it’s incredible. This struggle for change has been going on in Syria for nearly fourteen years. All that blood shed over years to achieve this...

A dark criminal page of our history is turning, a page that blocked the horizon. Now, for the first time, we have a horizon. Perhaps it will become obscured again in years, decades. I don't know. But today, what we've wanted for so long has been achieved. We have a bit more power to influence the future in a way that aligns with our dreams.

### **Does what's happening represent a continuation of the 2011 revolution?**

Yes, but within a different process. I hear many Syrians criticising the *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) group. That gives me hope - it's a sign of the population's political awakening. The revolution, a long struggle, was a great school for political learning. The beginnings of the new Syria are taking place under the auspices of prisoner liberation.

The opening of the prisons - symbols of the regime's barbarity where tens of thousands were tortured for many years, sometimes without their families' knowledge - is a historic event. I fear that the estimate of those killed under torture is understated. The mass graves haven't yet been explored. It will take years to have a clearer picture of the scale of the massacres and mass torture perpetrated.

During these years, when tens of thousands were killed, tortured or disappeared, we were portrayed in a very negative way that affected us considerably. Syria was just **Daesh Islamic State**, terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism. The Syrian people no longer existed, were invisible. We could no longer speak.

### **Are you thinking, like so many Syrians, of returning home?**

Yes, of course. I hope to be there in a few weeks, though I don't know exactly when. I need to prepare my journey. I was tortured and spent many years in prison. The HTS Islamists are now in power. Intellectually, it's a stimulating challenge. Politically, I'm not sure. I need to explore. I don't forget that they are Islamists, even if they're not the same group that kidnapped my wife and friends, nor the same group that kidnapped my brother.

### **How do you view the first steps of Ahmed al-Sharaa, formerly known by his jihadist name Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, the new master of Damascus?**

That he's an Islamist isn't the reason for my distrust of Jolani. I don't trust politicians in general. I prefer to be sceptical about everyone. It's healthy scepticism, not blind. The challenge is immense to live up to and represent the pluralism of Syrian society - multi-faith, multi-ethnic, with stark differences between urban and rural areas.

What destroyed Syria was having this rich plurality in the hands of one family. The worst thing that could happen to us would be an Islamic "Assadism" after Alawite Assadism. I fear a struggle between Islamists, between the more radical and more moderate. I also fear they'll attack women, deprive them of their rights, because many of the new rulers remain fanatics. Some will try. We mustn't let them succeed.

Syria won't become Afghanistan, and Jolani won't become **Mullah Omar founder of the Taliban**. Aleppo and Damascus cannot be run by Taliban-style rulers. We have quite a good level of education, large numbers of doctors, engineers, intellectuals and people who have gained experience over the last thirteen years. This gives me hope. But our economy is destroyed, 90% of the population lives below the poverty line. Reconstruction will be a long process with ups and downs, violence, crises and human suffering, very likely.

### **One of the crucial issues is justice. How do you see this, when your wife Samira al-Khalil,**

## **your brother and many of your friends have been missing for more than a decade?**

You cannot eradicate Assadism without justice. This requires bringing hundreds of people before national and international courts - Bashar al-Assad of course, but also all the regime dignitaries, the heads of security services, who have allowed barbarity to flourish. Lawyers and human rights activists already have prepared lists. But each accused must be treated with respect as a human being, citizen and according to the law.

I want to use the opening of this era of accountability to champion the great cause of justice. It's a matter of principle, of self-respect, of my wife's right, of my right. To be honest, each passing day reduces my hopes of finding Samira alive.

My revenge bears the name of justice, of law, of freedom. I don't kill anyone, there's no blood. I'm building an ethical, political and legal cause. This is the work of human rights activists and lawyers. It comes through my work as a writer who has always focused on Islam, and on the regime. It's not an ideology, nor a religion, it's a sensitivity to injustice.

## **Could you transform this sensitivity into political engagement?**

I don't think I have a talent for politics. I like reading, writing books. But I can help in many ways, I can advise on achieving democracy. That's the goal.

It's about preserving the freedom we've regained to prevent any slide back into dictatorship by other means. For this, we must invest in citizens, activists, people who share the same ideas.

It took the Tunisians four weeks to bring down Ben Ali, eighteen days for the Egyptians to overthrow Mubarak, a few months for the Yemenis and Libyans, who also had NATO intervention. Look at the situation in each of these countries today. In Syria, freeing ourselves from Assad will have taken us almost fourteen years. It was a school of political learning. Let's make use of that.

What's happening in Syria won't change the world, but I hope it will bring positive momentum, at least in the Middle East. The Israeli attacks, even before Assad's flight and continuing today, reflect a desire to humiliate the Syrian people and *an extremely colonial brutality*. Israel wants to associate these days of hope with national humiliation.

## **In your latest essay, you lament freedom "under siege"...**

Yes. When you're a prisoner, a refugee, your priority is to survive, to stop being tortured, raped, enslaved... Sovereignty is power over other lives. It's not about equality, rights, justice, it's about being sovereign over others, having them subordinate to you.

I was imprisoned for sixteen years in Assad's jails and I've been in exile since 2014. It's another prison because you're outside your country, away from home. Syria is the space of my struggle and the heart of my story. I think of prison and exile as a continuation of each other.

I learned a lot in these confinements. I became a writer because for thirteen years and six months of my sixteen years in prison, I could read. I was just a young medical student when they arrested me. My first eighteen months in detention and then my final year in **Palmyra prison** *one of Syria's most feared facilities* were terrible but, between the two, I read and learned.

The corruption in our country is such that we could improve our conditions by paying for books. I studied for my country, not for personal benefit. From my teenage years, I was involved in public and political life. I write, I always speak with reference to my experience in Syria. That's also why I

must return.

I am the element of continuity in the story. In recent days I've felt emancipated. I'm 63 years old. I became politically active at 17. So that's forty-six years. What I defended throughout this time has proved to be a good position, politically, ethically and intellectually. I won't rest on that. Never.

But I need this feeling because in the last thirteen years, especially after the kidnappings of my wife, friends and brother, I've been devastated. In a way, I'm responsible for what happened to them.

### **Why do you feel responsible?**

My brother became an activist because I, his older brother, had been imprisoned. As for Samira, she was wanted by the regime and had followed me to Douma in the insurgent *Ghouta* district, with our friend Razan Zaitouneh. I didn't want her to come. But she insisted. I wish I had resisted her desire to join me, we could have arranged her going underground for a while.

I didn't. I feel the burden of guilt. I have to live with that. However, in recent days I feel better. Better positioned to continue Samira's struggle, for justice, truth, her freedom above all.

I miss Samira terribly. She's such a beautiful person, generous, attentive. The very idea of my home is associated with her. Without her, I'm homeless. When, after our wedding she started building our home, I didn't support her much. I preferred renting flats. I've lived most of my life as a nomad, carrying my only wealth, my books and some clothes.

I would give anything to find her in our home. Today, my work has become my third home after my mother's and Samira's. Every day I read and write. But I feel the challenge of reinventing myself as a writer now that the regime that fed my books has collapsed.

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## **Yassin Al-Haj Saleh**

*Interview by Rachida El Azzouzi*

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