

Syrian president's wife says she has fully recovered from breast cancer

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ID:

1564924430221123700

Sun, 2019-08-04 10:22

BEIRUT: Asma Assad, wife of Syrian President Bashar Assad, has fully recovered from breast cancer, she told state TV on Saturday, a year after it announced her diagnosis.

Since Syria plunged into war eight years ago, the 43-year-old former investment banker has taken on a public role of leading charity efforts and meeting families of killed soldiers, but has also become a hate figure for the opposition.

Activists and insurgents accuse Asma Assad, born in London to a family from Homs City, of being complicit in atrocities they accuse the Syrian government of committing. Her husband's enemies have dubbed her "the lady of death" while supporters praise her as "the jasmine of Damascus."

The war has killed hundreds of thousands of people, uprooted at least 11 million, and created one of the world's worst refugee crises.

A year ago, the Syrian presidency published a photo of Asma Assad hooked up to a drip, smiling and sitting next to her husband in a hospital room. It said she had started treatment for "a malignant tumor" that was discovered early.

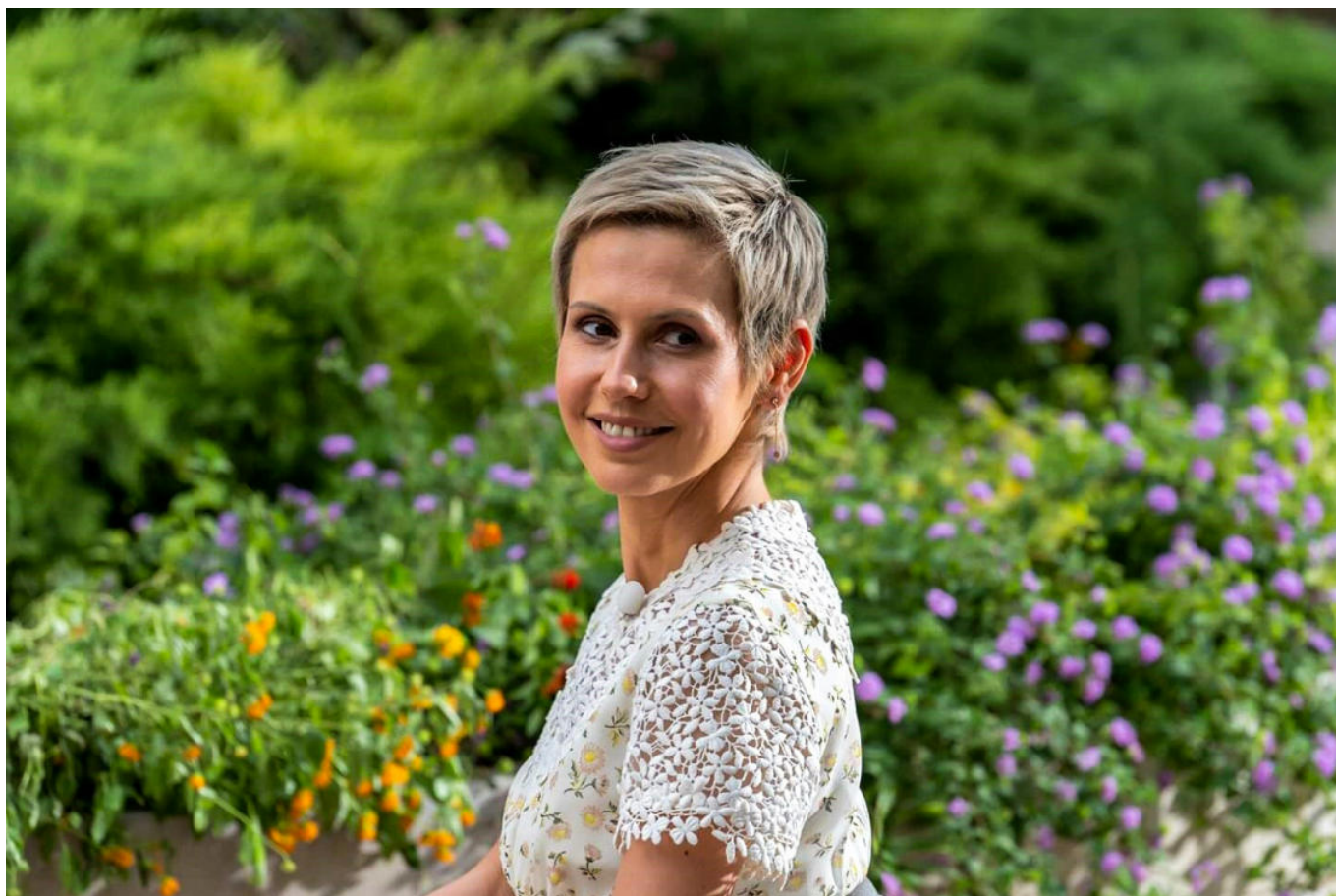
"My journey is over, with all its pain and weariness, its drawbacks and even its positives. Praise God, it's over. I have fully triumphed over cancer," she said in the interview broadcast late on Saturday. She said she had received chemotherapy treatment at a Syrian military hospital.

"Those who sold their land and nation, who carried arms against their Syrian brothers under foreign orders," she said, responding to critics who had said she deserved the diagnosis. "Do you think they have any room left for morals?"

Since 2011, air strikes have battered major cities, the United Nations has documented chemical weapons attacks on civilians, and countless have faced torture or disappeared. Damascus denies targeting civilians.

With vital help from Russia and Iran, Assad has now reclaimed most of Syria. In recent years, his military has crushed strongholds held by an array of rebel factions, some that had received Turkish, Gulf or US backing.

In a rare interview in 2016 with Russian state-backed TV, she defended President Assad and said she had rejected secret offers to leave the country, which she believed sought to undermine her husband.



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[Asma Al-Assad](#)

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MP calls for stripping British-born Asma Assad's citizenship

[Sudan factions initial pact ushering in transitional government](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1564911948320334200

Sun, 2019-08-04 09:30

KHARTOUM: Sudan's military rulers and the main opposition coalition initialled a constitutional declaration on Sunday, paving the way for a transitional government following the overthrow of long-time leader Omar al-Bashir.

The two sides reached agreement on Saturday on the shape of a transitional

government in lengthy negotiations since Bashir's overthrow by the army in April.

The parties are expected to put their final signatures on the agreement on Aug. 17 at a ceremony in Khartoum attended by foreign leaders.

Bashir, who is wanted for war crimes in Sudan's Darfur region by the International Criminal Court, was deposed after months of mass protests. Continuing unrest, during which dozens of demonstrators were killed, has plunged Sudan into turmoil.

Sunday's formalities were attended by African Union and Ethiopian mediators, who had helped broker the accord. Those present in the room clapped and cheered as army and civilian representatives held up copies of the agreement. Hundreds celebrated in the streets, dancing, chanting revolutionary songs, waving national flags and sounding horns.

"Today, the civilian state is achieved," said Nusseibeh Abdullah, a 21-year-old woman.

One of Sudan's top generals, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who is deputy head of the Transitional Military Council that will be superseded by the interim government, said the agreement was a victory for Sudan.

"We have finally agreed on a constitutional document that will change the course of history for our country," he said.

Dagalo, also known as Hemedti, commands the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, some of whose members have been accused of involvement in killing demonstrators who have repeatedly turned out in huge numbers to press for political progress.

TRANSITION

Despite the optimism, some have cautioned that it is still too early to tell how events will unfold in the lengthy transition period required to prepare for elections after three decades of autocratic rule under Bashir.

"It is not the first time that Sudan signed some sort of agreement to resolve very difficult political questions," said Magdi el-Gizouli, a Sudanese academic and a fellow of the Rift Valley Institute.

But he added: "I think if there is reason for optimism, the reason is not in the negotiation rooms, the reason is in this popular movement that doesn't want to go away."

Ethiopian mediator Mahmoud Dirir said the agreement "establishes civilian and democratic rule that seeks to build a state of law, a state of equality, a state which does not marginalise its citizens".

The agreement was welcomed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all of which see themselves as influential in Khartoum. Sudanese troops are currently operating in Yemen as part of a Saudi-led coalition is fighting Houthi rebels.

According to a document seen by Reuters, the formation of a sovereign council, which will run the country during a three-year transitional period leading up to elections, will be announced on Aug. 18.

A new prime minister will be named on Aug. 20 and a cabinet on Aug. 28. The cabinet and the sovereign council will meet together on Sept. 1, ahead of the appointment of a legislative assembly in three months.

The 300-member assembly will serve during the transitional period. The main opposition coalition, the Forces of Freedom and Change, will have 67% of its seats and other political groups not associated with Bashir will have the rest.



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UAE diplomat says Sudan turning page on Muslim Brotherhood rule
Sudanese activists, army finalize power-sharing deal

[Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian Hajj pilgrims face rising costs and political tension](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-08-03 23:24

BEIRUT: Every Hajj season, Rafic Hariri International Airport is the only corridor for Lebanese, Palestinian refugees in the country and Syrians who want to perform pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia.

Those who were issued their Hajj visas were informed three months ago. According to a diplomatic source in the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Lebanon,

"the Lebanese quota is 4,000 pilgrims who receive their Hajj visa at no cost, courtesy visas are allocated to politicians who give their supporters' names – and also receive the visa at no cost – and the embassy also gives visas to humanitarian cases such as those given last year to the parents of soldiers killed while combating terrorist organizations."

The source added that there had been "attempts to control politicians' applications in order to reduce any exploitation operations, which has contributed to limiting corruption."

There are 37 Hajj campaigns in Lebanon that take care of pilgrims' matters. Ibrahim Itani, head of the Hajj Affairs Committee, said that "the number of Lebanese and Palestinian pilgrims is stable, reaching around 20,000, and the Syrian Hajj Committee is responsible for Syrian pilgrims who are not included in the Lebanese quota."

Itani added: "This year, the authorities concerned with pilgrimage in the Kingdom increased the age of accepted pilgrims to people born in 1963 but it was restricted to those born in 1947 earlier. Priority is given to older people and those performing Hajj for the first time."

Pilgrims are accompanied by "around 40 doctors who form the committee's medical board."

Itani added that: "Lebanese and Palestinian pilgrims are told not to riot. They are also forbidden from carrying any political leaflets or cash exceeding SR40,000 (\$10,000). Pilgrims from Lebanon have always committed to that."

The number of Lebanese and Palestinian pilgrims is stable, reaching around 20,000, and the Syrian Hajj Committee is responsible for Syrian pilgrims who are not included in the Lebanese quota.

Ibrahim Itani, head of Hajj Affairs Committee in Lebanon

But to what extent has the economic decline in Lebanon affected the people's abilities to perform Hajj this year? Ahmed Jamal, one of the owners of Saudi-Lebanese company for Hajj and Umrah said: "There is a decline in application numbers. Last year, they were 10,000, but this year, it has declined to 6,500. Purchasing power has also dropped; people are no longer booking five-star hotels. The Hajj cost is \$2,900 minimum per person and can reach \$4,000."

He added: "1,650 Palestinian refugees applied this year to perform Hajj, whereas their number ranged from 1,700 to 1,800 last year."

Campaign manager for the Fotowa lil Hajj wal Umrah, Abdulrahman El-Taweel said: "The purchasing power of Lebanese and Palestinians has declined in relation to service requests for Hajj."

"Some campaigns pay \$400 per pilgrim due to them taking busy rooms far from

Makkah and Madinah. Since we are a non-profit organization, the cost does not exceed \$1,300."

Hassanein El-Khalil, a managers for the El Khalil for Hajj campaign, is frustrated by the decline in economic capability.

He said: "This year, 275 applied for our campaign for a Hajj visa whereas their number reached 340 last year."

He said: "The Kingdom's allocation of a quota for pilgrims in every country is great. Without it, millions could not have visited the Kingdom for Hajj.

"There are two types of people performing Hajj: One that wants a decent and clean sleeping space with no interest in quality, and another that looks for five-star services, the latter's number has declined."

El-Khalil added that "most people wishing to perform Hajj are elderly who want to pray. We are responsible for everyone under our sponsorship, even if one of the pilgrims asks to stay in Makkah for longer, we are responsible for them before the Saudi authorities."

Procedures for Syrian pilgrims differ from those from Lebanon and Palestine.

Abdulrahman Nahlawi, head of the information section in the Syrian Hajj Committee in Turkey, told Arab News: "The office in Beirut was established six years ago, and the Hajj file was taken from the regime in Syria in 2012 and became under the guardianship of the Syrian Hajj Committee affiliated with the Syrian Coalition in 2013. We are responsible for all Hajj operations, and no Syrian pilgrim can go to the Kingdom without going through us, regardless of their political and ethnic orientations.

"The Syrian quota has been stable for six years, and the number of pilgrims this year is 22,500. They received their visas from four Saudi embassies in Cairo, Amman, Beirut and Istanbul. Iraqi Kurdistan is new this year but their applications are low."

In order to register, applicants must have a Syrian passport or valid residence in their country. Syrian refugees in Lebanon cannot travel by Lebanese laws that do not allow them to return in case they decide to leave.

Nahlawi said: "Syrians who would like to perform Hajj from Syria go to Beirut through legitimate border crossings between the two countries, or go via Turkey if they are in the north of the country.

"The number of people living in Damascus or under the regime's control who would like to perform Hajj is small. They fear security investigations upon their return. This is happened two years ago when pilgrims were referred to the Palestinian security branch, and underwent investigations to see if they belonged to the opposition or made contact with it. Last year, no one was investigated and pilgrims returned peacefully."

Nahlawi added: "The number of people who have applied this year has reached 34,000, and the Hajj visa gives priority to the elderly with a 64 percent

proportion allocated to them.

“The number of men and women who would like to perform Hajj is close, and there is no decline in applicants’ financial capabilities. We are working on controlling the campaigns’ gains so they do not overcharge.”



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Iranian pilgrim’s sight saved by Saudi doctors in Makkah
More than 1,600 Saudi Red Crescent volunteers to provide emergency services during Hajj

[Libya’s Mitiga airport halts air traffic following shelling](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1564844163574497200

Sat, 2019-08-03 14:51

CAIRO: Libya’s Mitiga airport halted air traffic on Saturday after a

shelling, the airport authority said on its Facebook page. Mitiga is the only working airport in the Libyan capital Tripoli, which has been under attack by the eastern-based Libyan National Army, commanded by Khalifa Haftar.



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Libyans intercept boat carrying 75 Europe-bound migrants
Libya unity govt protests at 'untruths' in UN report

[Blast kills 31 regime fighters at Syria airbase](#)

Author:

AFP

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1564843046594434400

Sat, 2019-08-03 13:31

BEIRUT: A munitions blast killed 31 regime and allied fighters at a military airport in central Syria Saturday, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, increasing an earlier toll.

State news agency SANA reported earlier that a “technical fault during the transport of expired ammunition” had killed an unspecified number of victims at the Shayrat airbase in Homs province.

The Shayrat airbase is one of the regime’s most significant installations in the centre of the country.

In 2017, US air strikes hit the base in response to a suspected sarin gas attack on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhun in northwest Syria that killed more than 80 people.

According to the Pentagon, US intelligence had established that the base was the launchpad for the alleged chemical attack.



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Airstrikes halt in Syria’s Idlib as truce goes into effect
First group of Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian pilgrims leave Beirut for Hajj