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TRANSCRIPT

Babel: Translating the Middle East

"Nicolas Pelham: Ahmed al-Sharaa and Syria's Future"

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FEATURING

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Jon Alterman: Your remarkable profile of Ahmed al-Sharaa began by describing him as refreshingly pragmatic or profoundly untrustworthy. Is that something your sources felt or something you ended up feeling after reporting your story and talking to him?

Nicolas Pelham: It's certainly something that many of the people that I spoke to felt. I suppose this is a man who's just been through so many different transformations and so many different personas, so many different nom de guerre, so many different dress styles, his career changes have just been phenomenal. I spent the best part of three months in Syria trying to find out as much as I could about the man. It's really hard to find a single constant about him except for the one overriding fact that this man has done all he could to achieve power and keep it.

He has changed hats, changed organizations so many times, and convinced many people that he is something other than the man he's turned out to be. I suppose the one fact that we know about him is that he's true to himself, and he wants power, and he intends to keep it by fair means or foul.

Jon Alterman: The way I read your profile, the remarkable thing is his ability to win the trust of people. He became Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's deputy in Iraq. He became a trusted lieutenant of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi before they split and had tensions. What seems remarkable to me is that in very difficult, strange situations, he managed to persuade powerful people that he was their guy.

Nicolas Pelham: He's managed to outsmart some very smart people. If you look back very early on when he went off to Iraq just before the American invasion and was pretty disillusioned—came back to Damascus, hung out with groups that were looking at trying to spread jihadism across the Middle East, primarily into Iraq to destabilize the American operation—he was picked up by Syrian Mukhabarat, and everyone else in the group that he was picked up with was sent off to Saydnaya. He was let go.

Jon Alterman: That's the infamous prison full of torture and death.

Nicolas Pelham: Absolutely. Yes. He managed to convince them that he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time and was on his way to a shisha bar, and

they let him go. You find that same ability to deceive when he's picked up by the Americans in Iraq, when he's in Mosul, caught planting explosives. He managed to convince them through his ability to speak an Iraqi dialect, which he picked up incredibly quickly. He manages to convince both his American interrogators and his Iraqi interrogators that he's an Iraqi and then spends the rest of his jail term in what became laboratories for an Iraqi jihad, then befriended the cohorts of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as he said. He goes on to convince Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who's the head of the Islamic State, that he should be his point man for Syria. He's then sent off to Syria, where he tries to establish his own organization.

When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi calls him back and tells him that he's merging his organization into the Islamic State, Sharaa says no. He managed to convince the head of al Qaeda that he would be his loyal deputy in Syria and again betrays him. In the jihadist world, once you swear an oath of loyalty, you're held to that. Somehow, he manages each time to convince another jihadist group that he will be their man on the ground. There are many who are left asking how to trust this new version of the man who was Abu Mohammad al-Jolani and has gone back to his childhood name of Ahmed al-Sharaa. How can you trust this latest guise? Who exactly is the man that is now the self-declared president of Syria?

Jon Alterman: I was also struck, you have a passage in your piece that Hezbollah, the first Islamist group to deploy suicide bombers, used to spend years grooming martyrs, dangling the promise of a better afterlife. Hamas is said to have taken months, and al-Sharaa is said to have prided himself in converting novices to killers in a matter of weeks. It seems that his persuasive power is not only of people with tremendous power and authority over him but also of people below him.

Nicolas Pelham: Again, I find it very hard to match the reputation with the man that I met in the People's Palace in Damascus. The man that I met was somebody who said all the right things but didn't look particularly comfortable saying them. He was fidgeting, playing with his nose, his feet moved back and forward. He didn't like having to meet my editor and the rest of *The Economist* team at the time. It was quite filtered and

awkward, and it was really hard to establish any personal touch with him.

I was trying to understand, how is this the man who sent scores, if not hundreds, of Syrians and foreign fighters off to become suicide bombers and give their lives for the cause? He didn't come across to me as somebody who had a huge amount of charisma or was somebody who I'd want to die for what he believed in. I was trying to work out, what was it that people saw in him? Yet this was somebody who really introduced suicide bombing into the Syrian uprising, the Arab Spring, in 2011. He was the prime driver of turning what had been a popular uprising into a jihadist onslaught against the Assad regime.

He was the one who was sending Saudis and Syrians and Iraqis to blow themselves up at the Assad regime's security installations. Again, I found it hard to match that sense of somebody who would push people to give their lives for his ideology with somebody who to me didn't come across as believing in very much except his own right to rule.

Jon Alterman: One of the themes that comes across several times in your piece is how soft-spoken he is. One of the things that always struck me when I watched videos of both Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki, who also inspired people to die for their cause, was they also were relatively soft-spoken. They came across as reluctantly reaching the conclusions that the only option is to fight and die. Did you think that his reluctance, his soft-spokenness was somehow modelled or similar to these other jihadist leaders, or is there something even more awkward going on, something different in your mind?

Nicolas Pelham: We tend to think of extremists as people who are going to be fire and brimstone preachers who are going to be screaming at us and telling us that there's only one way to salvation. The man that I met was somebody who was a lot more measured, a lot more calculating, a lot more Machiavellian. When you look at the way that he's tried to present himself in the past, it certainly does look as if bin Laden had been a model. If you look at the fatigues with the white Afghan headdress, that was drawn straight out of the costume of Osama bin Laden.

The man that I met was somebody who reminded me much more of the previous incumbent in the palace, Bashar al-Assad. He was somebody who was shy, introverted, lightly awkward, soft-spoken. There was something uncannily similar in the mannerisms of the current president and the previous one that I'm still struggling to understand. If anything, I think it's the model of the previous system of Syria that may have the most bearing on the new government that is coming to Syria under Ahmed al-Sharaa.

Jon Alterman: You suggested that it was raising the issue of Israel that seemed to make him most uncomfortable and brought your meeting to the end. Is that what happened or was there something else going on that you thought precipitated the end of your conversation?

Nicolas Pelham: Normally, when you meet heads of state in the Middle East, they're very well prepped. They've spent a lot of time preparing. They've had advisers discuss the questions and answers. They've got a message that they want to impart. This was very different.

What was most astonishing about it was that it didn't really seem to be his show, although he was the one who was speaking. It was much more that of the man who was sitting next to him, Shaibani, the foreign minister, and one of his closest advisers, the one who set up his media department. It was he that called time on the interview, pretty much pulled Ahmed al-Sharaa up and Sharaa apologized and said, "I'm sorry, I have to go," in English.

It really seemed that he was almost at Shaibani's beck and call. His adviser also didn't really have much experience with comms. She'd only been in the country for a month. She was a daughter of a Syrian exile. I suppose the impression that I was left with was that he doesn't really have a team that can fill the presidential palace. It felt eerily empty. He was trying to fill shoes which didn't quite fit.

Jon Alterman: I visited Assad twice at his presidential palace early in his rule, and it always felt cold and empty. It always felt to me like that long hallway with the red carpet leading to the presidential office was a little bit like the *Wizard of Oz* and was intended to inspire awe, but ultimately felt like a very strange architectural feature that is unlike any presidential office I've ever seen, where it's usually surrounded by people

supporting the president. The presidential palace in Damascus always seemed to me to accentuate the separateness of the president from anybody supporting him. It's a strange place.

Nicolas Pelham: Yes. Bizarrely, it's called the People's Palace and yet it couldn't feel more removed. It's up on a hill above Damascus, and you do feel a separation from the rest of the city. I was trying to understand how this man is going to connect with the city below. He's been out of Damascus since 2003, so over 20 years, and he comes back having spent his world really within a jihadist milieu.

Jon Alterman: It's remarkable to me that his messaging has seemed so well calibrated. I have been struck that the messaging coming out has been the same in Arabic and English from the interim government. It seems to be a fairly sophisticated calibration of what all the foreign interests want from Syria, expect from Syria.

Nicolas Pelham: It feels like somebody who, in a sense, knows the lines that the world wants to hear, and possibly those his own people want to hear, but is just going through the motions. There's remarkably little follow-through. Although he's met a very large number of people, decisionmaking is held within a tiny cluster of maybe five or six people. The complaints you hear again and again are: (A) that this man is overwhelmed, and his clique is overwhelmed; (B) they don't want to delegate, and they don't trust others around them.

In a sense, their way of running a very complex country full of multiple sects and ethnicities is very much the Idlib model, the model that they adopted when they ran a small enclave in the northwest of Syria. It's that same secretive, distrusting, somewhat paranoid approach to the outside world. The sense that once you've got power, you need to hang onto it at all costs and that power sharing is going to be a slippery slope to losing power altogether.

Jon Alterman: You suggest several times in the article that he is arrayed against a number of ethnic militias, other kinds of forces. He's not necessarily the strongest of all of them. Who are the other powerful factions in Syria? There's the Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeast, the Kurdish group. Who are the other armed factions that matter that he is trying to establish control over?

Nicolas Pelham: If you look at the geopolitical map of Syria under Sharaa, it looks very much like the geopolitical map that existed under Bashar al-Assad. If anything, it's even more of a patchwork. You've got a central spine running from Damascus up to Aleppo, which remains under Sharaa's control. Then when you go beyond that spine, you see bits of the country keeping their distance, slipping away. In the north, you still have the multiple militia groups that get most of their salary payments via the Turks. They're the old Sunni rebel factions who fought the Assad regime. They have yet to hand over their weapons, and they still control a band along the Turkish border that runs from Sharaa's former enclave of Idlib towards the northeast of Syria.

Also in the northeast, you have, as you said, the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF, which is a Kurdish-led militia that occupies some of the best farmland in Syria and its prime oilfields. If you then go clockwise around Syria's borders, you get to another Sunni rebel zone of Tanf. Again, they're under U.S. protection. They don't seem to have to hand over their weapons. You then get north of the Jordanian border to the Southern Front. They're also a tribal Sunni militia that were the first to get to Damascus but have since retreated back toward the Jordanian border around Daraa. They have reservations about Sharaa's rule.

Alongside them are the Druze. Many of their leaders seem increasingly to be looking to Israel for protection. You then go up along the coast to the Alawite heartlands, which was Assad's sect and comprised a lot of the security infrastructure of the former regime. They seem to be trying to keep Sharaa's forces at bay. There's been an upsurge of fighting there and horrific atrocities, but that seems to have been sparked by Sharaa's efforts to establish checkpoints and patrols and conduct arrests of people that they accuse of working with the former regime.

Really, all around this central spine, you've got bits of Syria where some of the groups have nominally accepted Sharaa's rule, but all of them have kept their weapons and all of them want to essentially have a degree of autonomy and rule themselves and are very nervous about what Sharaa's governance is going to look like.

Jon Alterman: How powerful do you think Turkey and Turkish intelligence is in helping secure Sharaa—in putting some boundaries on what Sharaa does? Are they decisive or were they a catalyst and now were in a secondary role?

Nicolas Pelham: They were certainly a catalyst at the end of November for Sharaa's push toward Aleppo. I'm not sure they're a catalyst for much beyond. It seems that Turkey, having tried to reach out to Assad and essentially do a deal which would provide for a return of refugees from Turkey, was snubbed by Assad and essentially gave up on any hope of a rapprochement with Syria under Assad and decided the only way that they could secure a return of refugees was to expand rebel-held territory in the north and take Aleppo.

Beyond that, at some point, I think Sharaa begins to diverge. Indeed, he'd had a difficult relationship with Turkey even before that. Many of the aspirations that Turkey had for Syria under Sharaa have yet to be realized. I think they were hoping for a maritime agreement. They were hoping for a defense agreement with Sharaa. Those don't appear to have materialized when Sharaa went to Ankara. Turkey probably had expected that they were going to be, at the very least, a primus inter pares and extend their influence into Syria. Yet it feels as if Sharaa is carving out something of a separate course. I'm not sure it's an entirely independent course, but he does look as if he's at least as beholden to the Saudis as he is to the Turks.

Jon Alterman: One of the other powers that matters is the United States, which helped broker the deal between Sharaa and the SDF, the Kurdish group. Some people in Washington certainly think that that's a prerequisite for the United States to withdraw from Syria because there would be confidence that the counter-ISIS fight in northeast Syria would not collapse because of fighting between the Kurdish groups and the Sharaa government. What do you think the future U.S. presence in Syria is going to be, and what is the Syrian assessment of the future U.S. role and what they want the future U.S. role to be?

Nicolas Pelham: It was striking in an interview that we did with Sharaa that he was quite positive about coming to an agreement with Russia and its bases in Syria, but he was frustrated that he hadn't had a similar agreement with the United States.

Jon Alterman: When was this interview?

Nicolas Pelham: It was about a month ago.

Jon Alterman: Okay, so it was in the middle of February. He came to power December 8.

Nicolas Pelham: The way that he'd present himself on taking power is that somehow he could bring Syria back into the Western orbit. He chased out the Iranians, looked as if the Russians were going to abandon their base and that he was going to reorient Syria into a pro-American Western fold. That hasn't happened. Critically, if he's going to make Syria work, he needs to be able to pay his fighters, he needs to be able to bring other fighters on board. If he wants to establish a new Syrian army, he needs to attract the militias that we talked about into the army and to be able to pay them. He's got to pay his own civil service.

Since December 8, Syrians, by and large, have not been paid and they haven't been paid because of sanctions. Other donor states in the region, the Qataris, the Saudis, have flinched at providing finance, which would allow him to pay those salaries because of sanctions. There is real destitution now in Syria. The economy was already broken under the Assads, it's got even worse under Sharaa, and that early confidence boost is evaporating really fast. People talk about the end of the honeymoon period, the sense in which maybe Sharaa isn't going to be the solution to Syria's problems.

I think he was expecting that the West would come on board with a post-Assad regime. Those expectations in hindsight look naive. There's a lot of nervousness about who Sharaa is and what sort of Syria he wants to run. There's concern that he really hasn't been as inclusive in his methods of running the country as he initially promised.

It looks as if he's trying to gut the country in a similar way that Paul Bremer did when he took over Iraq. He's dissolved the old armed forces, the old security forces, not just the intelligence apparatus that imposed this reign of terror on Syria, but even the traffic police. He's purged vast numbers from the civil service, so the hospital administrators have been kicked out of their jobs. There's a sense that the country was struggling to function under Bashar al-Assad and is now even more dysfunctional because of some of the steps that he's taken.

In the same way that we thought he was going through the motions when we interviewed him, it feels like he goes through the motions when it comes to a national dialogue or a constitutional declaration. It's all hurried and he wants to get it out of the way, but it's not particularly sincere or genuine. When he talks about democracy, you have to extract the word. It's like extracting a tooth. Ultimately, the Syria that he seems to want to lead is a Syria that, in many ways, looks like that old totalitarian system that existed under Bashar al-Assad: one of absolute control.

He talks of having a legislative assembly but wants to appoint all its members. He makes a show of listening when he meets different segments of Syrian society, but ultimately, the decisions that materialize seems to be those that essentially serve his own hold on power. He's brought his government from Idlib and imposed that on Syria. He was supposed to be establishing an interim government which was more inclusive, but he stuttered on that.

Syrians, unlike with the regime change in Iraq or in Libya, seem to have given the new system a vote of confidence by going back to work, getting the transport systems running, the schools running, the hospitals running, the courts running. There was a willingness to make Syria work under Ahmed al-Sharaa, and yet he seems to have taken that for granted and just tried to monopolize power rather than recognize the degree to which all Syrians helped engineer the ousting of Bashar al-Assad. There'll be many reasons why it might not work, and clearly sanctions are one of them. A lot of the responsibility is going to rest with Ahmed al-Sharaa and the clique around him.

Jon Alterman: Gulf governments, the Turkish government, governments that are not staking their position toward Syria on how much democracy there is—are they interested enough to salvage this government, to help it consolidate power? Or do you feel there really does need to be Western support that can only be gathered through moves toward pluralism and democratization?

Nicolas Pelham: The dilemma that faces countries in the region is very similar to the dilemma that existed under Bashar al-Assad. You've got someone in power that you don't particularly trust, whose background makes you

nervous. The Jordanians and others still consider him to be a terrorist in a suit. Yet the fear of yet another round of bloodshed in Syria scares them, I think, even more. There could be many more refugees that pour out of Syria again.

What I was saying of the Syrian population largely holds for many in the region. Not all in the region, but many in the region. They want a Syria that can get back on its feet and functions. There's also recognition that for Syria to function properly, it needs to come together, and it needs a form of power sharing, which includes all the various elements of Syrian society that we've discussed.

The great fear of many Syrians and many in the region is that if Sharaa does feel beleaguered—the more precarious his rule becomes—the more he will retreat and rely on that rump base of those who want to see a Sunni supremacist state, that actually he's going to go back to those who he knows best and trust the most, which are his old jihadist core.

There's this dilemma about the sanctions. Do you tie an easing or suspension of sanctions to greater pluralism in Syria, to more power sharing, or do you run the risk that actually the longer sanctions remain in place, the more precarious Sharaa's rule is going to become and the more he will retreat into that core base that, for understandable reasons, thought that they'd reached an age of salvation and yet three months on are still in these teeming huge refugee camps.

They're told in some ways that they own the new Syria, but actually, they're still stuck in refugee camps. For them, the more affluent areas of Syria where you do find Alawites and Christians look like a very tempting prize, look like spoils of war. I think a lot of the drivers behind the massacres that took place in Alawite areas have economic drivers. Alawites, by and large, did live more affluent lifestyles.

There is this risk that the more desperate people become, the more frustrated people become, the more Sunnis in the north will look to sweep south and try and take over the properties and cars and the relative wealth that exists on the coast in Damascus; the more other minorities and sects will reach out to foreign powers and seek their

protection, the more divided Syria will become. The hopes of turning a new page could flounder—and Syria could find itself back in another civil war. It's a real risk.

There was a coming together after December 8 and the country now feels as if it's pulling apart. The one glimmer of hope has come from the Kurds and this agreement that took place between the commander of the SDF and Ahmed al-Sharaa, which on paper provides for some merger between the northeast, which has the oil fields and has the farmland and has been outside central government control for over a decade. The reservation that many have is that this is an agreement which seems to delay an actual merger. It gives the Kurds and the Syrians until the end of the year to find some way of integrating into a new order.

It's still not clear what degree of autonomy, decentralization, or federalism al-Sharaa wants to offer the Kurds and other groups in Syria. From what we've seen over the past few months, I think his instincts are going to be to maintain as much control as he possibly can.

Jon Alterman: You've done some really remarkable long profiles in *The Economist*. You did a profile of Mohammed bin Salman. You did a profile of King Mohammed VI of Morocco. You now have done this profile of Ahmed al-Sharaa. What are the similarities that you see between Sharaa and these two canny, sometimes-hard-to-understand rulers? Where do you think Sharaa is really different from these other rulers?

Nicolas Pelham: Mohammed bin Salman and Mohammed VI of Morocco were both born into power. They had very different relationships with power. Mohammed bin Salman was hungry for it. I think Mohammed VI of Morocco in so many ways was horrified by it and has had a difficult relationship with his father's system. Ahmed al-Sharaa comes from a very different place. In many ways, he's more similar to Hafez al-Assad, the founder of the Assad dynasty, than he is to the other leaders that I've profiled. He's had to fight his way to power. He wasn't born into it.

If you had to pick somebody who you would expect to rule Syria, to be a successor to Bashar al-Assad, he would be an unlikely contender. Yet he's been very astute at finding his way, at acquiring power. He's very

cunning. He had a disastrous week when his own base was running rampage through Alawite areas. It really looked as if many in the region and in his own country were going to wash their hands of him. Then within a few days, he managed to claw back credibility with a deal with the Kurds, which I don't think anyone had really seen coming and gives Syrians hope that the country could be reunited under his rule.

He's somebody who's self-made in a way that the others weren't. I think he looks to others for role models. Mohammed bin Salman probably is a model of a strong man that he would like to be.

He's making many of the decisions that strong men do. He's putting his family into positions of authority. He's taking over the homes of the former regime apparatchiks in the best part of Damascus and giving them to his own, giving the home of a senior general under Assad to his brother and making his brother health minister, putting another brother in charge of the investment authority, putting somebody who's said to be his brother-in-law in charge of the ports authority. It looks as if he's trying to establish himself as a strong man, but he's conscious that he's not there yet, that this wasn't a role that he's born into. It's the role that he has to grab, and having grabbed, consolidate.

In many ways, this theory looks more like an old theory, whereas if you look to Mohammed VI and if you look to Mohammed bin Salman, they were trying to do something very new with the kingdoms that they inherited. In many ways, it feels to me as if Ahmed al-Sharaa is changing the pecking order but essentially keeping the nature of the state in place. This could, in hindsight, if he gets his way, end up looking more like a coup than a revolution.

Jon Alterman: Nicholas Pelham, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Nicolas Pelham: Thank you for having me, Jon. My pleasure.

(END.)