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Meet the Syrian Olympian paying his own way to Rio

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Swimmer Azad al-Barazi competed for Syria in the 2012 Summer Olympics. He's making a push for 2016, even if Syria isn't funding his training. Michael Sohn/AP

The headline still upsets the California lifeguard with the giant hands.

"Azad al-Barazi: Swimming for Assad."

In the weeks before the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, Azad al-Barazi, a Saudi-born, California-raised Olympic swimmer of Syrian descent, was labeled as something else: The Olympian [competing for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad](#).

Usually patient and steadfast, the line tweaked the apolitical al-Barazi. Assad is not – and never has been – motivation for al-Barazi, now 26. In fact, he doesn't even like him.

"I can say this to you right now, because I live in the U.S.: I'm not with [Assad] at all," he said. "We don't like him at all. It's nice being in the U.S. and being able to say that."

He pauses before finishing his thought: "In Syria, I'd be killed."

It has been a complicated few months for al-Barazi, a decorated athlete. Since Syria's civil war began nearly three years ago, he's worn many hats: Son, brother, student, teammate, lifeguard, 2012 Olympian and 2016 Olympic hopeful. But he's also the most prominent bridge in the sports world between Americans and Syrians.

The end of the Winter Olympics in Sochi doubles as the halfway point for athletes hoping to compete in the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. For al-Barazi, his road to Rio is paved with even more uncertainty. He doesn't know whether the situation in Syria will have improved by that time, and he is training without the funding and sponsorship of the Syrian Olympic Committee.

But the growing frustration has not stopped al-Barazi, who continues to train and fund himself in hopes of getting another chance in two years.

"I understand what the situation is, and that's why I'm still swimming right now and paying out of my own pocket," he said. "It means a lot to me to swim for the people of Syria right now."

With Syria as unstable as it is – now and for the foreseeable future – perhaps no other Olympian has more of a chance to help change and define his or her home country's future than al-Barazi.

"His calling is to show the world that Syria is not completely destroyed," said Markus Rogan, a fellow Olympic swimmer and friend. "The hope is that this one swimmer can make it. It's one hope, but it's him. I think he realizes that."

Breaking the mold



Al-Barazi is still disappointed in his showing at the 2012 Olympics. Wayne Jones/AP

Ten Olympians represented Syria at the 2012 Games, and al-Barazi knows that being from the U.S. affords him much greater freedom than the others.

In London, al-Barazi befriended Wessam Salamana, Syria's first Olympic boxer since the 2004 games. Salamana knew of al-Barazi's position against the Assad regime. The boxer told the swimmer that if he said he was against the government like al-Barazi that he'd get his head chopped off. Afterwards, al-Barazi said Salamana told him that his time in London was his most significant period of individual freedom.

When al-Barazi later found out that Syrian Olympic officials allegedly suspected Salamana of enjoying himself too much, and took away his Olympic credentials, he said it broke his heart.

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Azad al-Barazi, Syrian Olympic swimmer

Al-Barazi's first trip to the Olympics also left him a bit heartbroken. He finished seventh in his heat for the men's 100-meter breaststroke, and failed to qualify for the semifinals.

"I was a little kid coming into the big-athlete world," he said. "I simply choked."

That same day, Aleppo, Syria's largest city and once a place of mass support for Assad, was attacked by the regime army. It was framed as a military effort to keep Syrians safe. Shortly thereafter, Khaled al-Ayoubi, the lead Syrian diplomat in London, defected, [abandoning the Assad regime](#).

The Syrian situation has an added layer for al-Barazi, because of how his family's history is intertwined with the country's politics. In 1949, Muhsin al-Barazi, an influential Arab thinker and the cousin of al-Barazi's grandfather, became prime minister. But his reign lasted only a month. He was overthrown and executed in a coup led by Col. Sami al-Hinnawi.

About 14 months later, the swimmer's grandfather Hersho avenged his cousin's death, murdering al-Hinnawi in Beirut.

Many years later, al-Barazi's father Tayeb, formerly a computer specialist with IBM, moved the family, including Hersho, to the U.S. Given the family's notable past in Syria, adjusting has been tough at times, especially as a large contingency of aunts, uncles and cousins preferred to stay.

"When you say al-Barazi in Syria, everyone knows who you are," Tayeb said. "When you say al-Barazi here, maybe they think it's a banana in a supermarket."

Although al-Barazi doesn't like to get involved in politics, he has challenged long-held stereotypes in Arab-American relations. He was taking a sociology class at Santa Monica College in 2008, around the end of the American surge in Iraq, and was given an assignment to break a social norm and film it. So, al-Barazi, dressed in a traditional Arab thawb and keffiyeh, walked around with an American classmate -- a lifeguard friend -- dressed as a U.S. soldier in military fatigues. They held hands, draped their arms around each other and playfully grabbed each others' butts.

It's this mix of ethnic pride and American chutzpah that helps al-Barazi's efforts to rebuild Syrian culture.

"Azad is in a unique situation being of Syrian descent to demonstrate that life still moves forward beyond the civil war that grips Syria," said Dave Salo, his coach at Trojan Swim Club in Los Angeles.

Making an imprint

Born Jan. 4, 1988 in Saudi Arabia, al-Barazi and his family moved to the U.S. in 1996. He grew up as a water polo player, and started swimming competitively when he was 16. During this time, he never publicly acknowledged his heritage.

“Growing up, I never told people I was a Syrian,” he said. “As a foreigner, I was shy about it.”

After three years at Santa Monica College, he transferred to the University of Hawaii, where he walked on to the men’s swimming and diving team. He said he didn’t expect much. But by the time he was finished at Hawaii in 2009, his coach suggested that, through his parents’ citizenship, [al-Barazi should make a push for the Syrian Olympic team](#).

After swimming for Syrian Olympic Committee officials, he signed his one-year sponsorship deal to prepare for London and beyond.

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Azad al-Barazi, Syrian Olympic swimmer

In between jobs as a lifeguard and surf instructor, al-Barazi trained with Trojan Swim Club. One of his teammates was Rogan, a 6-foot-5 Austrian swimmer who was the flag bearer for his country at the 2012 London Games. Rogan was at least a little suspicious the first time he saw al-Barazi. A 6-foot-9 Syrian with “giant hands” isn’t who you’d expect to be a teammate, he said. But Rogan soon understood what the club’s coach saw when he decided to take on al-Barazi.

“He says, ‘I’m standing up for what my family stands for and I’m putting my neck out for this,’” Rogan said. “He wants to rebuild Syria. He wants to make an imprint.”

Two years away

Al-Barazi’s days and weekends are filled with physical therapy classes, Olympic training, CrossFit sessions and shifts as a physical therapy assistant. This is the life of an Olympic hopeful without a sponsor. Weeks after the 2012 games, al-Barazi was informed that he could no longer be funded by the Syrian Olympic Committee. Al-Barazi knows that as long as he’s not sponsored, he can’t bank on getting to Rio.



Though he continues to train in hope of getting back to the Summer Olympics, he knows the next two years will be very difficult.

Wayne Jones/AP

“When you’re focused on one thing, you just go for it,” he said. “Unfortunately, swimming isn’t everything right now. I wish it was, but I’m not getting funded.”

He’s also realistic.

“At the 2016 Olympics, I’m going to be 29 or 30. Am I going to train and still swim? Possibly and possibly not,” he said. “I have to focus on the real world as I try to pursue the next chapter of my life, but swimming is still there.”

Training has been difficult given the day-to-day grind of an unsponsored Olympic hopeful. But al-Barazi said he’s been inspired watching the Winter Olympics in Sochi. And Rogan, along with other teammates and friends, are trying to collect at least some of the \$250,000 needed to properly fund al-Barazi’s training from now until Rio.

“It is very hard for him and for us,” his father said. “He is pushing himself so much.”

Whether he’ll be able to compete for Syria in two years is anybody’s guess. If he’s given a chance, the proud Syrian hopes he can help in the healing and rebuilding process for his broken home. He has two years to prove he deserves it.

“I want to do this and I don’t care what the government says, because I don’t live there,” he said. “I’m planning on swimming for Syria.”