UNDERSTANDING SYRIA'S POLITICAL OPPOSITION

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Pluralism, Human Security & Sustainability Centre
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Understanding Syria's Political Opposition*

I. Introduction: Scattered or Pluralistic?

It has become a cliché to dismiss the opposition in Syria as divided and deride its infighting. In fairness, such pluralism was natural, even inevitable under the circumstances. Through four decades of rule by Hafez Assad and then his son, and particularly since the crushing of the Islamist rebellion in 1982, the regime systematically has denied potential competitors the opportunity to coalesce or develop domestic constituencies. As a result, the array of personalities, parties and coalitions that comprise today's political opposition lack not only practical political experience, but also effective means of determining their relative domestic weight and popularity. Most significantly perhaps, amid an uprising that has no common ideological denominator and is dominated by those from poor rural and suburban areas, no political groups can lead the street.[1]

Syria is experiencing the birth of a multi-faceted political scene, albeit one that will remain fundamentally detached from realities on the ground unless and until the space for meaningful politics opens. Facing a regime whose core remains relatively cohesive and whose external allies have provided it with virtually unconditional diplomatic and military support, the opposition confronts other significant challenges: developing a strategy to fulfil the demands of a decentralised popular uprising; responding to competing pressures from Western and Arab allies; and resolving its own issues of leadership, structure and balance of power.

The political opposition presently consists of an assortment of actors, each enjoying only limited impact. Such lack of agency – not its much-maligned division – is its principal collective failure to date. Indeed, as the initial exuberance of a predominantly peaceful uprising steadily dissipated amid destructive warfare, various opposition components failed to take any meaningful initiative to shift the conflict's trajectory in a direction serving their shared interests. Most leaders have opted for a passive stance, awaiting solutions from others, whether Western military action; the activity of rebel armed groups; or diplomatic manoeuvres in Washington and Moscow.

Meanwhile, battlefield developments call into question the political opposition's relevance. A dizzying, fluid collection of militant factions at times cooperate, at others compete and in-

* Plusec-Pluralism, Human Security and Sustainability Centre/Plusec-Centre de pluralism, de la sécurité humaine et du développement durable (Plusec) retained the International Crisis Group to conduct this research and analysis and to prepare this report.

[1] Riyadh al-Shaqfeh, secretary general of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, explained the challenges facing the Syrian National Council (SNC) – then the opposition's main political umbrella: "It is true that sometimes the SNC seems to follow the street rather than defining a policy and trying to orient the masses. This is a result of Syria's recent history. For 50 years, political activity was banned". Crisis Group communication, April 2012. The uprising's demographics have presented another challenge to opposition intellectuals more accustomed to the relatively cosmopolitan Damascene environment, as well as to the Brotherhood, whose traditional base is in the urban middle class. See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°108, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011.

creasingly clash with one another; throughout, the political opposition has shown itself devoid of any real influence over them. Yet, the rising power of extremist groups, coupled with intensified infighting among militant factions, paradoxically underscores the fact that any resolution will require the emergence of an opposition capable of representing the interests and demands of a wide spectrum of the uprising's base.

This report addresses whether and how the opposition might reach that point and, in so doing, examines the historical, social and geopolitical environment in which it operates. It is based on extensive field research both inside and outside Syria.

II. The Principal Political Groupings

The primary elements of the political opposition include:

- Syrian National Council (al-Majlis al-Watani al-Souri)

Established in October 2011, the Syrian National Council (SNC) served as the opposition's largest and most influential political body until the formation of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (discussed below) in late 2012. At its inception, the SNC included prominent parties and figures from across the ideological spectrum and could credibly claim to enjoy a popular mandate from on-the-ground activists who saw it as the uprising's political representative in dealings with the international community.[2] At its emergence, this seemed a crucial factor: indeed, it coincided with the fall of Muammar al-Qadhafi's regime in Libya, raising hopes among many opposition supporters that the SNC could duplicate the role of Libya's Transitional National Council in prompting Western military intervention.[3]

Although initially welcomed by friendly governments and activists alike, the SNC lost credibility with both audiences in ensuing months. This chiefly was due to its reluctance to take clear positions on questions of armed insurgency and Western military intervention; failure to incorporate prominent secular opposition figures (most notably those associated with the National Coordination Committee, discussed below);[4] and widespread perception that the Muslim Brotherhood dominated its decision-making.[5] In November 2012, under U.S. and Qatari pressure, SNC leaders agreed to incorporate their organisation into the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.[6]

- National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (al-Itilaf al-Watani li-Qiwa al-Thowra wa al-Mu'arada al-Suria)

[2] Activists inside Syria voiced strong support for the SNC at the outset. On 7 October 2011, Friday demonstrations were held under the slogan, "The Syrian National Council represents me". See, eg, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PtPg10yUjo; www.youtube.com/watch?v=wh8C0rqJowI. For background on the SNC's formation and component factions, see Aron Lund, "Divided They Stand: an Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions", Foundation for European Progressive Studies, May 2012.

[3] Libyan rebels, backed by NATO airpower, captured Tripoli in late August 2011. Activist support for Western intervention along the Libyan model was illustrated by the weekly slogans of Friday demonstrations, chosen through an online ballot and voiced in chants and banners across the country. Demonstrations on 9 September 2011 adopted the slogan "Friday of International Protection"; on 28 October, "No-Fly Zone Friday"; and on 2 December, "Safe-Zone Friday". See Noah Bonsey and Jeb Koogler, "The People Want Foreign Intervention? What the Online Discussion Reveals about Syria's Revolutionaries", Huffington Post, 23 May 2012.

[4] The SNC's reluctance to clearly endorse armed resistance and Western intervention even as regime violence against pro-opposition communities intensified in mid-2011 opened it up to intense criticism from on-the-ground activists and hardline media figures, who gained a following among the uprising's popular base. Activist frustration was compounded by public discord among some SNC members that hurt efforts to project a united front to Western governments whose support – and potential intervention – was viewed as essential. See, eg, demonstrators in Homs criticising the SNC's reluctance to call for safe-zones in December 2011, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb47ZLl6RzQ. Discussions with SNC members during this period revealed disagreements on whether to endorse armed activity and international intervention and the absence of any internal mechanism to resolve them. Crisis Group interviews and communications, November 2011-April 2012.

[5] Perceptions of disproportionate Brotherhood influence began to take hold within the SNC's first two months. In November 2011, a Christian SNC member said, "the SNC is not well organised, and the Brotherhood people dominate the executive bureau. They are reasserting themselves through it, and I don't like it at all". Crisis Group communication, November 2011. This stance became increasingly common among secular members in ensuing months.

[6] For an explanation of the role of external pressure in creating the Coalition, see Section IV below.

Created in November 2012 following an initiative by Riyadh Seif, a veteran dissident, and in the context of heavy U.S. diplomatic manoeuvring, the Coalition aimed to broaden the political opposition's base and restore its credibility amid growing activist and diplomatic frustration with the SNC.[7] Though SNC members were awarded roughly one third of the Coalition's 63 seats at the time, the inclusion of a local council representative from each of the country's fourteen provinces, coupled with election of Moaz al-Khatib – a popular Damascene cleric and recent political prisoner – as president and of Suhair Attasi, a prominent activist, as one of two vice presidents, initially appeared to signal a shift toward greater activist influence.[8] As with its predecessor, the Coalition initially benefited from public approval in the form of Friday demonstrations.[9]

Ultimately, however, external pressures and inter-party brokering – the dynamics that enabled its formation in the first place – circumscribed the influence of activists within the organisation, while exacerbating its internal polarisation. As discussed in detail in Section IV, power within the Coalition has been concentrated within three political blocs. One, led by Mustafa Sabbagh, a businessman considered close to Qatar, includes most "local council" representatives. A second is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, which comprises secular figures and other Islamists and has proven flexible in its external alliances. The third, led by Michel Kilo, a veteran opposition intellectual, coalesced in June 2013, after the Coalition admitted additional secular figures as part of an expansion to 114 members. This bloc benefits from Saudi support.

- The National Coordination Body for the Forces of Democratic Change (Hei'at al-Tansiq al-Watania li-Qiwa al-Taghyir al-Demoqrati)

Founded in Damascus in late June 2011, the National Coordination Body (NCB) comprises leftist, nationalist and Kurdish parties and figures. It presents itself as a secular alternative to the Coalition (and, earlier, to the SNC)[10] and vehemently opposed both the shift toward armed rebellion and calls for Western military intervention. Its ultimate goal is not the "fall of the regime", but rather "democratic change"; as it sees it, the former ought to be accomplished through the latter, rather than become its substitute.[11]

Because its leader, Hassan Abdel Azim, and other senior figures continue to operate openly in Damascus, members often refer to themselves as the "internal opposition", in distinction to their foreign-based SNC and Coalition counterparts. Although NCB figures engaged in on-and-off and ultimately unsuccessful unification talks with SNC leaders throughout 2011, the organisation perhaps is best known for its public criticism of its larger opposition rivals. Leading on that front is Haythem Manna, a charismatic senior figure whose willingness to

[7] Speaking a week before the opposition conference in Doha that gave birth to the Coalition, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton bluntly stated Washington no longer considered the SNC an acceptable leadership body. "US calls for overhaul of Syrian opposition", Al Jazeera, 1 November 2012.

[8] See the original list of Coalition members, at www.facebook.com/SyrianNationalCoalition/posts/378471308902671.

[9] Friday demonstrations on 16 November 2012 were held under the banner of "Support for the Coalition". See, eg, www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152373139660727&set=a.10150397575815727.619133.420796315726&type=1; www.balladnews.com/?p=16883.

[10] For a detailed description of the NCB's formation and composition, see Aron Lund, "Divided They Stand", op. cit.

[11] See the NCB's proposal for a negotiated political resolution to the conflict: " رؤية هيئة التنسيق للحل السياسي التفاوضي في سورية" ["The NCB's vision for a negotiated political solution in Syria"], 9 May 2013, www.facebook.com/Syria.National.Coordinating/posts/664486740231870.

lambast both the SNC and the Coalition has helped make him the movement's highest profile, most-controversial member.[12]

This has come at a price. The NCB's refusal to join with the SNC angered the uprising's activist base, which viewed opposition cohesion as key to unlocking needed foreign support.[13] Even as the authorities arrested several prominent NCB members and placed significant restrictions on its activity, the organisation's continued presence in Damascus has lent weight to accusations that it acts, wittingly or not, as a tool for a regime determined to prevent the emergence of a credible, unified opposition.[14] Dismissed by prominent activists and unable to conduct grassroots activity inside the country, demonstrate a tangible popular base or show that peaceful dissent can yield greater results than armed insurgency, the NCB has been at pains to remain politically relevant.

Although its efforts to establish a middle ground arguably can appeal to Syrians weary of war and alienated by extremism on both sides of the conflict, there is little evidence of strong support for the NCB. Instead, polarised public sentiment tends to favour either Assad or so-called revolutionaries.[15]

- Building the Syrian State Movement (Tayyar Bina al-Dowla al-Suriya)

Founded in Damascus in September 2011, Building the Syrian State is a small party led by Louay Hussein, a writer and former political prisoner still based in the capital. Like the larger, more prominent but less cohesive NCB, it supported the 2011 protests yet eschewed calls to topple the regime, rejected foreign intervention and criticised the shift toward armed rebellion.[16] Hussein remains a fierce critic of both the authorities and opposition militants, but his group's inability to garner tangible popular backing is symptomatic of broader challenges facing the moderate opposition whose presence in Damascus the regime continues to tolerate.

- "Opposition" within the government

Although the regime primarily has relied on its security services, military apparatus and allied militias to subdue the uprising, it also has sought to project a degree of openness to "reform"

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[12] A prominent, Paris-based dissident and human rights activist, Manna eloquently condemned the regime during the initial weeks of the uprising, bringing him significant visibility and popularity. However, his credibility among activists suffered in the months that followed, as his public rejection of the SNC's legitimacy hampered efforts to market the nascent body as a unifying opposition umbrella. Manna's aggressive, often personal attacks on opposition counterparts and willingness to engage in such criticism during appearances on pro-Iranian and pro-Hizbollah Arab media outlets further strained his relations within the opposition. Crisis Group interviews, current and former Coalition, SNC and NCB members, April-May 2013. For an example of activist criticism of Manna, see "(هيثم مناع) برنامج حاجي عاد الثورة الصينية" ["The Chinese Revolution program 'Haji 'Aad': Haythem Manna", 19 December 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_I0a7H9LlY.

[13] See, eg, November 2011 protests held in several Syrian cities under the banner "The National Coordination Body does not represent me", www.youtube.com/watch?v=jN_b6ZFDsaA and www.youtube.com/watch?v=gucAEbWpudQ.

[14] While charges that NCB activity serves regime interests are most commonly heard among activists, prominent SNC and Coalition members have voiced similar concerns. A widely respected dissident and prominent Coalition figure captured this sentiment in late 2011, even as efforts to bridge the SNC-NCB rift continued: "I do not think the regime created the NCB, but it likes it". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, November 2011.

[15] A Western analyst who conducted extensive interviews with NCB members and sympathisers described the difficulty of estimating its appeal on the ground: "They're in a difficult position. Even in Damascus the regime does not allow them to engage in any activities, such as providing aid, that might allow them to gain public support. As a result, even when we speak to Syrians who sympathise with the NCB's platform, they generally do not consider themselves supporters of the group". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, August 2013.

[16] See Hussein's 29 August, 2011 interview with *Baladna*, a Damascus newspaper, available at www.syriahro.org/29-9-2011-syrian% 20observatory9.htm; also, "Building the Syrian State's Facebook page", www.facebook.com/Tayyar.Syria; and for more background, "Building the Syrian State", Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 September 2012.

and "dialogue", albeit on its own terms.[17] In June 2012, it appointed to the cabinet two members of the pre-uprising opposition, Ali Haider and Qadri Jamil.[18] From their posts as, respectively, national reconciliation minister and deputy prime minister for economic affairs, they have adopted a softer line than is typical of the regime toward the prospect of talks with the mainstream opposition.[19] Still, the opposition's principal political actors view them as instruments of the regime's broader messaging strategy, and neither is considered close to Assad's inner circle.

This report focuses primarily on the Coalition because, whatever its shortcomings, it remains the most consequential opposition political body.[20]

[17] For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°33, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, 10 April 2012.
[18] On Haider's and Jamil's political affiliations, see Aron Lund, "Divided They Stand", op. cit.
[19] See, eg, Jonathan Steele, "Syrian government says war has reached stalemate", *The Guardian*, 19 September 2013.
[20] The opposition's Western and regional allies acknowledged the Coalition as "the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and the umbrella organisation under which Syrian opposition groups are gathering" at the 12 December 2012 "Friends of Syria" meeting. See "The Fourth ministerial meeting of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People, chairman's conclusions", 12 December 2012, at www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/syria/friends_kaigo/2012_12/pdfs/2012_12_01.pdf. Since June 2013, the Coalition includes representatives from the SMC, a network led by defected Brig. General Salim Idris (see Section III below).

III. Fuelling a Vicious Cycle

A. A LEGACY OF SUPPRESSION

Since Hafez Assad's forces crushed the Islamist uprising-cum-insurgency in 1982, the opposition has been able to organise meaningfully solely in exile. With membership in their ranks punishable by death, leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood – the Baath party's chief rival throughout the first decade of Assad's rule – maintained their structure abroad but grew ever more isolated from their dwindling popular base.[21] Inside the country, intense regime repression prevented the emergence of credible leaders or organised political parties, save for those the regime co-opted to create a veneer of opposition.[22]

On an individual level, some continued the fight but bereft of any organisational structure, genuine popular following or political platform. The result was the development of a scattered, personalities-based secular opposition, dissidents more than politicians, intellectuals willing to boldly criticise regime corruption and human rights abuses yet unable to offer a coherent political vision.[23] This produced an arguably rich political scene, albeit elite-centric and largely disconnected from society.

The disconnect widened due to society's gradual Islamisation – a trend the regime tolerated and, to some extent, encouraged. Indeed, under Bashar, authorities opened space for conservative Islamic community organisations at home, while embracing Islamist resistance groups abroad, even as they prevented the emergence of coherent leadership or political representation within that growing social sector.[24]

At the same time, the regime sought to contain secular dissidents by sowing mistrust among them[25] and preventing forms of coordination that might have proved useful during the cur-

[21] For background on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, see Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (London, 2013).

[22] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, a prominent Damascus-based dissident, described the depth and breadth of regime efforts to prevent emergence of potential competition: "This country was politically drained for decades. The regime used to cut [off] the heads of all political figures, respected notables, and independent authorities of the social scene, as well as the cultural, economic and religious leaders, even in sports. The only political figures this country has produced over half a century of Baathist rule are subjects, flunkeys and dwarfs". "Interview: Yassin al-Haj Saleh", Syria Deeply, 4 December 2012.

[23] As addressed in Section IV below, lack of organisation among secular dissidents helped give the Muslim Brotherhood disproportionate influence within the political opposition when the uprising began. This comparative advantage has fuelled fears among secular activists of Islamist dominance that Brotherhood leaders themselves appear to view with ambivalence. A leading Brotherhood member and ex-spokesman explained: "The problem is that the [rest of the] opposition is composed of individual figures rather than actual parties. This is due to the history of regime oppression, but we wish others had parties like us – political work needs parties, not individual intellectuals". Crisis Group communication, Zuheir Salem, April 2013.

[24] Under Bashar, increasingly visible socio-economic inequities and the receding role of the state and Baath party among the poor coincided with regime steps to allow emergence of a more vigorous, conservative Islamic civil society. This period also was marked by increasing regime emphasis on support for a range of Islamist "resistance" movements in Lebanon, Gaza and Iraq, as both a foreign policy tactic and a means of gaining good-will. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy*, 14 December 2009. "Now we complain of the Islamist nature of the opposition, but it is largely our fault. All we did for decades was to repress leftist intellectuals while allowing people to build more and more mosques". Crisis Group interview, former official, Damascus, September 2013.

[25] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, a prominent dissident, explained: "The Assad regime depended on 'divide and rule' strategy: it nurtured divisions by turning the different ethnic, religious and sectarian groups against each other. It did that also by creating yes-man political parties and other half-loyal opposition parties. It also did so by attracting dissidents with carrots and sticks, and sometimes by terrorising them". "Interview", op. cit.

rent uprising, such as talks with the exiled Muslim Brotherhood.[26] Unable to genuinely communicate with the public or outside actors, domestic opposition groups grew increasingly insular – preaching to the converted within their own ranks while focusing much of their resources on self-preservation. This prevented not only emergence of potential regime competitors but also development of a culture of open, democratic dialogue within the opposition.[27] In the absence of a demonstrable political base, personal suffering at the hands of regime security services became the de facto currency of political legitimacy among opposition figures.[28]

Just as it thwarted the emergence of any competitive political organisation, the regime eliminated potential rival power centres within the Alawite community that forms the core of its support.[29] It undermined the influence of Alawite religious leaders; ensured that political and economic power was concentrated in families closely tied to the president;[30] dealt particularly harsh punishments to Alawite dissidents;[31] and exploited opportunities to remind Alawites of the dangers in a potential Sunni uprising.[32] All of which supported its overarching strategy: to persuade members of the community that, their reservations toward the regime notwithstanding – and there were many – no alternative capable of protecting them and the relative gains achieved under Assad's rule existed.

Ramifications of this legacy have dogged the opposition from the outset of the uprising. The regime underscored the threat of Islamist extremism long before it emerged as a meaningful component of the uprising, successfully stoking fears among various constituencies and rival-

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[26] Beginning in the 1980s, regime efforts to eradicate and prevent the resurgence of Brotherhood influence included detention and sentencing of secular dissidents who either advocated or pursued dialogue with the Brotherhood. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the 2005 Damascus Declaration (a call for a transition to democracy signed by leading opposition figures inside and outside the country) heightened regime fears of cooperation among dissidents. See Tony Badran, "Divided They Stand: The Syrian Opposition", The Mideast Monitor, 31 October 2006; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°24, *Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges*, 11 February 2004.

[27] An opposition intellectual said, "the continuing security pressure destroyed democratic culture within [opposition] parties; it led them to contract and withdraw inward, unable to mobilise or grow …. Eventually, [any opposition] party leader's biggest goal became the perseveration of his own leadership, and the main aim of party members became the preservation of their own lives and those of their families". Nader Jabali, " المعارضة السورية قصة فشل (ج2) " ["The Syrian opposition: a story of failure (part 2)"], Zaman Alwasl, 27 April 2013. An Arab intellectual based in Damascus prior to the uprising said, "let's face it; in Syria as elsewhere in the region, the only 'dialogue' opposition figures ever could have was with the security services". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, September 2013.

[28] Personal rivalries and mistrust that developed throughout years of underground dissident activity and regime crackdowns still manifest themselves. Describing the scene at a tumultuous gathering of secular opposition figures in Cairo in late 2011, a veteran dissident recalled: "Many of those who attended with us fought the entire time. They argued over who did or said what back when they were in prison together. These are the kinds of petty fights that occur among opposition figures as the country burns". Crisis Group communication, May 2013.

[29] For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°143, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, 27 June 2013; also Peter Harling and Sarah Birke, "The Syrian Heartbreak", Middle East Research and Information Project, 16 April 2013.

[30] See Leon Goldsmith, "Syria's Alawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective", *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, vol. 3, no. 1, July 2011.

[31] Regime detentions and sentencing of dissidents long appeared to single out Alawites. For example, among the ten prominent figures detained in 2001 following a brief period of increased tolerance for dissent in the first months of Bashar's rule, the longest sentence was on the lone Alawite, Aref Dalilah. "Syrian Prisoner of Conscience Freed", Amnesty International, 8 August 2008. During the uprising, the regime seemingly treated Alawite members of the National Coordination Body (NCB) more harshly than non-Alawite colleagues. Although it has allowed Hassan Abdel Azim, an NCB leader, to operate openly in Damascus, it is widely believed to have imprisoned Abdul Aziz Khair, a respected Alawite dissident and leading NCB figure who disappeared at a regime checkpoint upon return to Damascus from a September 2012 Beijing visit. Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, op. cit.

[32] See Peter Harling and Sarah Birke, "The Syrian Heartbreak", op. cit.

ries among opposition elites.[33] Opposition figures themselves reinforced this theme, as prominent secular figures repeatedly warned against Islamist dominance of the SNC and Coalition even as they bickered among themselves.[34]

B. THE "ARAB SPRING" CONTEXT

Like its Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan predecessors, the Syrian uprising developed without defined ideology, charismatic leadership or central organising body. Many leading voices emanated from the streets – via predominantly peaceful protests and, later, armed struggle – and demands were articulated along the lowest common denominator, namely the fall of the regime. Defining the regime and describing what ought to replace it were and remain sources of disagreement.

Too, and although a few activists gained national prominence through social media and television exposure, for the most part their networks were localised.[35] Indeed, to the extent national activist networks emerged, these generally have concentrated on external messaging rather than internal strategic coordination and, most importantly, are not sufficiently extensive to speak on behalf of the uprising as a whole.[36]

Although activists early recognised the need for an external political body, they looked for it to provide representation as opposed to leadership. Under this view, the exiled opposition's role was to advocate on behalf of those rising up and win the international support activists considered necessary to topple the regime; its legitimacy depended on living up to these expectations.[37] In practice, this meant that the external opposition's inability to obtain such foreign backing would be tantamount to failure.

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[33] Efforts to paint the uprising as a predominantly sectarian, extremist plot, initially handled by the regime in its typically ham-handed manner, namely by official media and spokespersons, gradually were taken up by others. Online news sites such as syriatruth.org, sympathetic Lebanese media outlets such as the pro-Hizbollah *Al-Akhbar* and previously imprisoned activists such as Bassam al-Qadhi combined modest criticism of regime corruption and excessive violence with louder, more consistent efforts to depict the opposition as dominated by violent Islamists.

[34] Haythem Manna – then one of the opposition's most prominent personalities – began publicly dismissing the SNC as Islamist-dominated almost immediately following its inception. See Othman Tazghart, "مقابلة | هيثم مناع" ["Interview with Haythem Manna"], *Al-Akhbar*, 6 October 2011. Less controversial secular figures echoed criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood's role. Michel Kilo, a prominent leftist opposition figure, published an article in August 2012 accusing Riyadh al-Shaqfeh, the Brotherhood leader, of seeking to use the SNC to cement Brotherhood dominance over post-Assad governance. Michel Kilo, "رداً على رياض الشقفة: «بيتكم من زجاج»" ["In response to Riyadh al-Shaqfeh: 'your house is made of glass'"], *As-Safir*, 3 August 2012. Relations between Kilo and the Brotherhood warmed following the former's entrance into the Coalition in May 2013. See Section IV. A secular opposition intellectual noted: "The secular wing has two problems. First, they don't like each other and cooperate very little among themselves. Secondly, they don't have money behind them". Crisis Group interview, Amr al-Azm, 29 April 2013.

[35] In early 2012, a Syrian academic based abroad who has worked extensively with activists inside the country described difficulties in improving coordination among local councils: "They play as freelancers and not as parts of a well-orchestrated machine. They now have their own power struggles and local agendas …. The idea of unity, a national network, and a theoretically well-grounded plan is not inherently attractive [to them]". Crisis Group communication, Ahmad Nazir Atassi, January 2012.

[36] One such body is the General Commission for the Syrian Revolution (al-Hei'a al-'Ama lil-Thowra al-Souria), which became one of the most prominent activist organisations through its online messaging and media appearances. As seen, a leading member, Suheir al-Attasi, became vice president of the National Coalition upon its establishment. Even the General Commission's relatively limited focus on external messaging and aid delivery eventually suffered from public spats among leading figures, as well as accusations of external political interference. See Bahia Mardini, " انسحاب الهيئة العامة للثورة السورية من الائتلاف وتوقيف سهير الأتاسي عن تمثيلها" ["The General Commission of the Syrian Revolution withdraws from the Coalition and stops Suheir al-Attasi from representing it"], Elaph, 2 June 2013.

[37] A member of the revolutionary council in Homs said, "we organise inside and serve the revolution here. We look to the SNC to work outside on condition that it acts according to the work done inside. The SNC does not

Social media played a role in enforcing this de facto arrangement. Criticism from on-the-ground activists instantaneously was magnified by videos and Facebook material reposted on opposition news sites and aired on sympathetic satellite networks.[38] With politicians unable to safely operate inside Syria and activists and militants generally restricted to a specific geographic area, online communication has been the virtual public space of opposition politics. Coalition leaders broadcast positions and respond to activist criticism on Facebook; militant groups promote activity and announce political and ideological positions on YouTube, then argue them on Twitter;[39] activists and everyday supporters use all three mediums to applaud, debate and especially criticise the words and deeds of politicians and militants claiming to represent them.[40]

This has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it helped create a level of accountability, if only in the court of public opinion, to which opposition political representatives are held; it also enabled opposition figures without a real popular base to credibly act as the uprising's diplomatic wing. On the other hand, it meant that the political opposition never was empowered to play a true leadership role. Legitimacy remains vested in those sacrificing on the ground, as well as in activists and rebels who lack the space and resources required to play a proactive political role. Too, the legitimacy acquired through sacrifice has proved to be a temporary asset, as even those with lengthy records of suffering at regime hands eventually become associated with the "five-star hotel opposition" once they leave the country and are incorporated into the SNC or Coalition.

In this sense, activist expectations regarding the political opposition have conflicted with those of Western governments whose support they seek. For months, the U.S. in particular stressed the need for the opposition to forge a "unified, coherent vision for what a future post-Assad Syria could look like"– an immense challenge given the opposition's circumstances and one that exceeded its popular mandate.[41] Indeed, well aware of the limitations of that man-

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have *carte blanche* to act". Crisis Group communication, April 2012. Burhan Ghalioun, the SNC's first president and a prominent Coalition member, described the external opposition's limited mandate: "The Coalition's job is to mobilise political, humanitarian and military support for the revolution and the afflicted people …. The Coalition is not a parliament to represent [those] inside or outside [Syria]". 29 May 2013, www.facebook.com/BurhanGhalion/posts/559407460778321.

[38] Criticising the SNC's ineffectiveness in a 19 February 2012 YouTube video filmed in the Homs neighbourhood of Bab Amr amid intense clashes and shelling, Khaled Abu Salah, a prominent activist, explained: "It is the people who said 'the SNC represents me', and it is the people who will revoke your legitimacy if you don't support them and take all the actions requested of you". His video was rebroadcast on leading Arab satellite channels, www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PT266SxBVc.

[39] For background on militant use of social media, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°131, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 12 October 2012. Though interaction among opposition supporters remains highest on Facebook, Twitter's increasing popularity among rebel factions has added a new dimension to militants' public communication.

[40] Politicians and militants often appear sensitive to activist criticism and seek to address it. For example, when in June 2013 regime forces launched an intensive campaign to retake the then rebel-held neighbourhood of Khalidiya in Homs, activists released a statement blaming rebel losses on SMC failure to coordinate and deliver promised weapons. It generated coverage in pro-opposition media outlets and, in following days, the SMC and its leader, Salim Idris, responded to rising criticism via media appearances and Facebook. See "إعلاميو عاصمة الثورة يحذرون الائتلاف والأركان: إن بعتم حمص فاعلموا أنها نهايتكم" ["Media activists in the revolution's capital warn the Coalition and the SMC: if you sell Homs know that it will be your end"], Zaman Alwsl, 27 June 2013; also Idris's 11 July appearance on Al Jazeera, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-W81hNjxJO4, and the 6 July Facebook post, www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=504437929628196&set=a.458923474179642.1073741828.458106567594666&type=1.

[41] Speaking three weeks after the Coalition's formation, Clinton lamented the opposition's delay in presenting such a vision. Agence France-Presse, 29 November 2012.

date, opposition figures have been reluctant to risk their legitimacy by staking out positions or backing uncertain "political options" amid the regime's violent campaign.[42]

The end result has been an opposition without an institution capable of developing and implementing a more comprehensive strategy or offering compromises – whether to international actors, senior regime figures or Syrian constituencies. Instead, the exiled opposition has tended to follow the rank and file on the ground and echo its demands. By early 2012, that meant embracing armed insurgency and actively pursuing Western military intervention despite low probability of the latter and apparent inability of the former to succeed without it.[43]

C. THE DYNAMICS OF MILITARISATION

The political opposition's decision-making has been further constrained by the conflict's militarisation. Though armed struggle began with an emphasis on protecting civilian protesters, the relationship between civilian activist bodies and armed militants shifted as violence escalated, with the former ever more marginalised or subordinate to the latter. The regime's own resort to a military solution – using tanks, fighter jets and Scuds, rather than clubs and Kalashnikovs – raised the human cost of dissent and denied the opposition the ability to organise civil governance in areas from which regime troops had withdrawn but which it bombed from afar.[44]

As a result, the influence of middle-class, urban activists declined, as fighters from poor suburbs and the countryside increasingly came to embody the opposition on the ground.[45] In some cases, notably Aleppo, rural fighters belonging to rival factions fought for territorial control of urban neighbourhoods, much to the chagrin of local activists.[46] Where armed groups established authority, some employed tactics akin to those of the security services they replaced: suppressing and arbitrarily detaining activists who dared criticise their rule by exposing petty looting and authoritarianism cloaked in jihadi rhetoric.[47]

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[42] Emphasising the challenges facing his exiled peers, an Alawite activist based abroad said, "most politicians outside the country are individuals. They don't have connections to the ground or a popular base inside the country. So they have to maintain strong, hawkish positions in order to maintain legitimacy". Crisis Group interview, May 2013.

[43] "At the beginning, the SNC opposed foreign intervention because [then president] Burhan Ghalioun was against it. Now, Ghalioun has changed his position because of the regime's violence and the changing mood on the street". Crisis Group interview, former SNC member, Washington, April 2012.

[44] See Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, op. cit.

[45] This dynamic intensified as the war dragged on. A former Damascus activist now working in Turkey to train and assist activists still living in Syria noted the increasing difficulties in finding partners given that the more educated activists have been killed, detained or have left the country. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013. The vast majority of educated, middle-class activists with whom Crisis Group interacted in 2011 and 2012 no longer live in Syria.

[46] A member of an activist group in Aleppo complained: "The three most powerful factions run a joint local judicial authority. But there is no justice – the rulings are in the hands of the more powerful party. We are facing a new military dictatorship that's just as bad as Assad's". Crisis Group communication, March 2013.

[47] Nowhere was this phenomenon more visible than in Raqqa, which in March 2013 became the first (and thus far only) provincial capital to fall under complete rebel control. Since then, jihadi groups have steadily asserted their dominance. The most infamous, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), has generated strong criticism from activists for its authoritarian tactics, public executions, ideological extremism and vicious sectarianism, and has been accused of firing on peaceful demonstrators, bombing a rival faction's headquarters and detaining activists for offences ranging from non-violent dissent to smoking cigarettes during Ramadan. Crisis Group interview, activist detained by ISIL and subjected to beatings in captivity, Beirut, September 2013. See also, eg, "دولة العراق والشام تعتقل الناشط الإعلامي محمّد مطر" ["ISIL arrests the media activist Muhammad Mattar"], Zaman Alwsl, 10 July 2013; and "عناصر دولة العراق و الشام يضربون " شرطياً " بسبب " مخالفة " و يعتدون على " متظاهرين في الرقة " ["ISIL beats a policeman because of a [traffic ticket] and attacks demonstrators in Raqqa"], Aks Alser, 1 August 2013.

The dominant role played by armed militants has complicated the already difficult task of developing ties between the exile-based political opposition and actors on the ground. Despite numerous efforts, the armed opposition has yet to develop a central coordinating structure capable of credibly representing its interests. The "Supreme Military Council" (Majlis al-Qiada al-Askaria al-Alia, SMC), formed in December 2012 and led by Salim Idris, a brigadier general who defected from the regime, is touted in Western capitals as a moderate national leadership body; in fact it is at best a loose weapon-and supply-distribution network lacking ability to coordinate activity even among groups theoretically under its umbrella.[48]

Local armed militant leaders who seek financial and material support are not exclusively dependent on the SMC. As seen below, the opposition's main backers, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, work with the SMC but simultaneously maintain direct ties to individual armed factions. SMC influence is further weakened by independent funding campaigns managed by ultra-conservative, Gulf-based Salafi clerics who channel money to a range of groups, including factions whose leaders nominally hold positions within the SMC.[49] Finally, groups have strengthened their arsenals and bolstered their coffers by capturing regime weapons depots and, in some cases, looting private property; several have gained control of lucrative border crossings, and a few – most notably jihadi factions – have seized and operate oil and gas facilities.[50]

Due to these varied funding sources, the armed opposition landscape has remained pluralistic and fluid. The SMC at times cooperates, at others competes with other national and local networks, including ideologically coherent coalitions such as the Salafi-dominated Syrian Islamic Front (Al-Jabha al-Islamiya al-Suria)[51] and ad hoc "operations rooms" established to improve coordination in a specific campaign or battle.[52] Local leaders and individual fighters

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[48] On paper, the SMC (usually referred to in Arabic as Hei'at al-Arkan or Qiadat al-Arkan) includes leaders from several of the most powerful rebel factions, including Liwa al-Islam, al-Farouq, Saqour al-Sham and Liwa al-Towhid. For a list of rebel leaders included in the SMC structure, see www.etilaf.org/en/coalition-components/supreme-military-council-of-the-free-syrian-army.html; for background on the early development and ideological platforms of leading rebel factions, see Crisis Group Report, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit. Idris, his aides and opposition politicians who work with his office consistently complain that Western and Arab countries mostly failed to deliver promised material and financial support. Crisis Group interviews, Istanbul, August 2013; see also Salim Idris interview with *Der Spiegel*, 24 September 2013.

[49] Salafi fundraisers, such as Kuwaiti clerics Shafi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi, provide hundreds of thousands of dollars to a range of armed groups and use their leverage to help organise joint "operations rooms" to coordinate offensives. Such fundraising is openly promoted on social media and occasionally includes fundraisers' visits to militant leaders, who often thank (and occasionally complain to) their external benefactors in YouTube videos and Twitter posts. See, eg, a leader from Ahrar al-Sham, a prominent Salafi group, thanking Shafi al-Ajmi for his role in setting up an "operations room" to assist in a battle in Aleppo province, twitter.com/talhaabu11/status/359869806142431232; also posts by Saqour al-Sham leader Ahmad Eissa al-Sheikh ("Abu Eissa"), nominally within the SMC leadership structure. He complained in August 2013 that he received less than promised from Shafi al-Ajmi. twitter.com/aleesa71/status/370878968490381312; twitter.com/aleesa71 /status/370880127267532800; twitter.com/aleesa71/status/370881032561893377; and twitter.com/aleesa71/status/370885387595825152; also jihadi social media user posting photo of Hajjaj al-Ajmi's meeting with Abu Omar al-Shisani, Chechen commander of ISIL-linked Jaish al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar, twitter.com/abohasan_1/status/3811488429948 35456; Saqour al-Iz announcing and posting photo of Hajjaj al-Ajmi's meeting with group fighters and leadership (Saqour al-Iz is a jihadi group based in the coastal mountains, whose links to Hajjaj are further noted below), twitter.com/Sqoor_Al3z/status/381875263774023680; and twitter.com/alhooty100/status/381802230577643522.

[50] For examples of Jabhat al-Nusra profiting from oil facilities, see *The Telegraph*, 18 May 2013; and McClatchy, 11 September 2013.

[51] The Syrian Islamic Front includes several local Salafi groups but is dominated by Harakat Ahrar al-Sham (Freemen of the Levant Movement). Ahrar al-Sham has affiliated factions throughout the country; its leader, Hassan Abboud, also heads the Front. For background on the Front, see Aaron Zelin and Charles Lister, "The Crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front", *Foreign Policy* (online), 24 June 2013.

[52] Joint "operations rooms" comprising an array of local factions became increasingly common in 2013. See, eg, Liwa al-Islam leader Zahran Alloush announcing on 21 September 2013 the creation of one in Damascus

are prone to shift allegiances based on sources of funding and equipment; even where coordination is strongest, it essentially is tactical, focused on the immediate battle at hand rather than a broader national strategy.[53]

Disarray among more mainstream armed opposition groups, coupled with the conflict's increasingly sectarian hue,[54] created conditions in which hardline Salafi and Salafi-jihadi organisations could thrive. Through superior organisation and access to steady funding streams, they emerged as the most effective rebel forces in parts of the country. The most prominent among them – the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)[55] and Jabhat al-Nusra – are openly hostile to the political opposition, reject the SMC's authority and, in ISIL's case, frequently clash with factions that receive SMC support.[56]

Even some of the more pragmatic Salafi factions, such as Ahrar al-Sham, remain outside the SMC network and disavow the political opposition's stated goal of a more democratic, pluralistic post-Assad system.[57] Arguably the most ominous development occurred in September 2013 when a group of powerful factions that previously had cooperated with the SMC joined with Jabhat al-Nusra to denounce the Coalition.[58]

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including his group, Ahrar al-Sham, and other Damascus factions, and thanking a Kuwaiti organisation for funding. The video of the announcement is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Grf-xJRHOfY; promotional material celebrating the Kuwaiti group's role in establishing the operations room, naming its organisers and providing contact information is at twitter.com/w3tasimo/status/3824435301168005 12/photo/1. Illustrating the fluidity, Ahrar al-Sham and two other factions announced withdrawal from the operations room nine days after its creation, twitter.com/Ahraralsham/status/38478459 7956833281/photo/1.

[53] For examples of the shifting nature of militant affiliation, see Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)", *London Review of Books*, 21 February 2013.

[54] See Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, op. cit.

[55] A Muslim Brotherhood organiser who travels frequently to rebel-held areas, speaking to Crisis Group shortly after returning from an August 2013 trip to Idlib, reported that ISIL was the most powerful group in northern and eastern Syria and was benefiting from control of oil fields it had wrested from Jabhat al-Nusra when it split from the group in April 2013. He described how ISIL fighters shut down a civil society training program he was organising in a Syrian town near the Turkish border, threatening to punish him as an apostate if he did not cease and desist. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013.

[56] ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra both are openly affiliated with al-Qaeda and reject the SMC's legitimacy. The SMC accused ISIL of assassinating one of its commanders in Latakia on 11 July and of other attacks against non-jihadi fighters and activists. See, eg, SMC spokesman Louay al-Maqdad's interview, Al-Arabiya television, 24 July 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v =0GyUebYObs0. A series of clashes opposed ISIL and Ahfad al-Rasoul in Raqqa province in August 2013. "عشرات القتلى والجرحى في تفجير سيارة مفخخة استهدف مقر لواء احفاد الرسول في مدينة الرقة" ["Dozens killed and wounded in a car bomb explosion targeting Ahfad al-Rasoul headquarters in Raqqa city"], Aks Alser, 13 August 2013. The same occurred in September 2013 between ISIL and Asifat al-Shammal in Azaz, outside Aleppo. *The New York Times*, 18 September 2013. For background on the ISIL-al-Nusra leadership split, see Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, op. cit.

[57] Ahrar al-Sham, a powerful Salafi goup, remains outside the SMC structure but has acknowledged some coordination with its leadership. See www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v =simuv4yIVgU. Its leader, Hassan Aboud, explained his group's political stance: "Democracy is a sword hanging over the head of whoever the Western powers want to eliminate from the scene …. We say that we have a divine system that God made for those he created and worship him, and he put us on this earth to build and establish it for him Almighty". Al Jazeera, 8 June 2013. For background on differences in affiliation, ideology, tactics and long-term objectives that distinguish al-Qaeda-linked jihadi groups such as al-Nusra from Syria-focused Salafi factions such as Ahrar al-Sham, see Crisis Group Report, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

[58] On 24 September, eleven armed groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and three of the most powerful factions linked to the SMC –Liwa al-Towhid (based in Aleppo), Liwa al-Islam (based in Damascus), and Saqour al-Sham (based in Idlib province) – released a statement rejecting the legitimacy of the Coalition (and its yet-to-be-formed interim government) and calling upon fellow groups to "unite in a clear Islamist framework" with the shared goal of "applying Sharia and making it the sole source of legislation", www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=101534
25991795727&set=a.10150397575815727.619133.420796315726&type=1. It was released on the heels of the U.S.-Russian agreement to remove the regime's chemical weapons and thus of Washington's decision to fore-

The growing strength of hardline groups has put the SMC in a difficult position. Sensitive to charges from fighters and activists alike that it has given undue priority to its ties to the West and Arab states at the expense of the struggle within Syria, the SMC has sought to tout its military achievements. At times, it has gone so far as to take credit for operations conducted by the very jihadi forces that reject its legitimacy.

The perils of this became apparent in August, when Salim Idris belatedly claimed an SMC role in the campaign to "liberate" the regime's Alawite stronghold.[59] The offensive, the largest to date in the mountainous Latakia countryside overlooking the coast, generated tangible excitement within an opposition desperate to break the military stalemate and extend the fight to the regime's heartland that, unlike opposition strongholds, has largely been spared destruction. The SMC, eager to appear relevant, was at pains to demonstrate involvement.[60] Yet, by all accounts, jihadi factions and Ahrar al-Sham led the campaign from the outset.[61] Idris's claims placed the SMC in an uncomfortable position weeks later, as an independent investigation concluded that fighters had killed at least 190 civilians in overrun villages, including dozens of elderly, women and children.[62]

More broadly, and as the brutal coastal campaign illustrates, the spread and escalation of violence, along with its intensified sectarianism, has further polarised society and empowered extremists on both sides of the conflict. Accordingly, the political opposition has been hampered by tensions between two of its central objectives: maintaining support from the militant rank and file, while gaining backing from figures and communities who, while opposed to the regime, fear the alternative to Assad's rule. The deepening divide between these audiences has made it ever more difficult to appeal to one side without offending the other.[63]

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go military retaliation for the 21 August use of the weapons on the Damascus outskirts that brought to new heights opposition frustration with the West.

[59] Facing criticism that the SMC had not materially supported fighters in the coastal mountains and amid charges it had sought to prevent or halt the offensive, Idris visited the area on 11 August, a week after the campaign was launched. He addressed these criticisms and announced SMC support for the campaign in a video allegedly filmed near the front, www.youtube.com/watch?v= kS59bq9fVvw&feature=youtu.be.

[60] Opposition supporters voted online to hold Friday demonstrations on 9 August under the slogan "the Heroes of the Coast are Coming", www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/posts/ 10153245737700727. Ten days later, with the battle having turned against the rebels, a leading mainstream pro-opposition Facebook page criticised both SMC and Coalition: "We ask the honorable SMC: Was it you who planned for and opened up the coastal front? If that is the case, you need to work decisively to direct support to this front, and failure from you is unacceptable. And if it wasn't you, then go home and leave the matter to those [responsible for it]", www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/posts/101532899116 30727.

[61] YouTube videos released during the first 24 hours of the offensive showed ISIL fighters raising their flag atop a captured regime observation tower. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2c4PyTrjac. Sheikh Saqr, leader of the jihadi Saqour al-'Iz, identified himself as head of finances for the campaign's "operations room" and a figure from Ahrar al-Sham as his deputy. He thanked Hajjaj al-Ajmi and another donor for hundreds of thousands of euros in support. See twitter.com/alhooty100/status/367616208893657088; twitter.com/alhooty100/status/367617429 83459 2256; twitter.com/alhooty100/status/367614598192824320; and twitter.com/alhooty100/ status/367612775931342848.

[62] See "You can still see their blood: executions, indiscriminate shootings, and hostage taking by opposition forces in Latakia countryside", Human Rights Watch report, 11 October 2013.

[63] One outcome has been to hamstring the opposition and prevent it from seizing on potential political opportunities. This occurred in December 2012, when Syrian Vice President Farouq al-Sharaa voiced unprecedented (albeit carefully worded) criticism of the regime's reliance on a military solution. The opposition's reaction was muddled at best, as explained below. See Ibrahim al-Amin, "Exclusive Interview: Syrian VP Farouk Al-Sharaa Proposes Alternative to War", *Al-Akhbar*, 17 December 2012.

D. THE LIMITS OF EXTERNAL SUPPORT

1. The opposition and the West's waiting game

By mid- to late-2011, as months of protests culminating in a highly anticipated Ramadan campaign failed to shake Assad's hold, and regime violence intensified, opposition activists and politicians alike concluded that only a combination of armed resistance and foreign military support could produce victory.[64] Having seen NATO initiate its Libya intervention purportedly to pre-empt a bloodbath in Benghazi, the opposition adopted a grim sort of optimism regarding potential Western involvement.[65] Each documented instance of civilian bloodshed by regime forces was seized upon to appeal to reluctant decision-makers in Washington, Paris and London.

Mixed messages from Western capitals contributed to this dynamic. Non-committal assertions from Washington that "Assad's days are numbered" and reports that military options were under review were divorced from their context and stripped of nuance, endlessly recycled by the Arab news media.[66] This in turn fuelled hope that muscular Western support was just around the corner.[67]

The gulf between Western intent and opposition expectation prompted a cycle of pressure and frustration. Opposition activists and politicians interpreted Western appeals that they unite and develop more representative bodies as implicit pledges of substantially increased support once they did so.[68] These expectations for the most part have gone unmet,[69] as have

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[64] A senior member and ex-Muslim Brotherhood leader, said, "we are not calling for intervention to topple the regime but for the protection of civilians. A no-fly zone and humanitarian corridors are necessary for that". Crisis Group communication, Ali Sadreddeen al-Bayanouni, April 2012. For more background, see Crisis Group Report, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

[65] A former SNC member and U.S. academic looked back: "Everyone in Syria was astonished that this could go on. People were of the view that it would take the international community only a few hours, that given all their talk of human rights they certainly would intervene to stop this murderous regime". Crisis Group interview, Mourhaf Jouejati, May 2013.

[66] Coverage on popular Arab satellite networks sympathetic to the opposition (most notably Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya) not only amplified activist calls for foreign intervention, but also tended to highlight Western hints of possible military involvement. A prominent Syrian dissident critical of the SNC's early calls for intervention said, "it is important to remember the atmosphere at the time, especially in the media – not just Al Jazeera, but even France 24 and others. The media campaign advocating foreign intervention was overwhelming, and it contributed to making this [Libyan] logic seem undeniable". Crisis Group interview, May 2013.

[67] U.S. President Barack Obama was careful to downplay the likelihood of military action, pairing statements that Assad had to go with cautionary words on the utility of arming the opposition. But amid consistent reports that the Pentagon was planning potential military options, these presidential signals of reluctance failed to resonate with the opposition. As heard by activists, politicians and militant figures, the message was one of steady escalatory Western rhetoric that eventually would have to manifest itself on the ground, as it had in Libya. This assessment was shared even by opposition figures in Washington who met with U.S. officials. A former SNC member said, "the international community is going through a checklist. We have to go through all these different failed attempts until we reach an agreement that everybody accepts, or until the West feels it has no option but intervention. I'm 100 per cent sure that we're heading toward an international intervention". Crisis Group interview, Washington, April 2012.

[68] Crisis Group interviews, Coalition members, Istanbul, August 2013; communications, Coalition and former SNC members, April-May 2013.

[69] U.S. efforts to persuade opposition members to establish the Coalition in November 2012 generated expectations of a concomitant increase in support. Secretary of State Clinton's comments in early December suggested as much: "Now that there is a new opposition formed, we are going to be doing what we can to support that opposition". *The New York Times*, 5 December 2012. Yet, anticipated U.S. financial support reportedly failed to materialise. According to a June 2013 report based on documentation provided by the State Department, the U.S. gave the Coalition no funding during its first seven months; as of June, half the $250 million the U.S. pledged between December 2012 and April 2013 was in the process of being delivered to organisations operating independently of the Coalition; and the rest awaited Congress' approval. See McClatchy, 19 June 2013.

more explicit promises of international assistance offered by donor countries at various "Friends of Syria" conferences.[70]

Opposition political and militant leaders further complain that conditions attached to support are a moving target. When the SMC was established in December 2012, many in the opposition anticipated this would persuade Western officials who previously had complained they lacked a trustworthy rebel military partner; instead, the growing strength of jihadi factions was then invoked in the West as a principal reason not to provide arms.[71] Members of the so-called mainstream opposition likened this to a catch-22: they were told they needed to reverse the gains of better-equipped extremists as a condition for being provided the means to do so.[72]

2. Regional competition

Of all the factors complicating opposition efforts, perhaps the most damaging has been lack of coordination among regional backers. Opposition leaders view the governments of Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia as their most important supporters. Turkey provides safe ground for political and military leaders to organise; Qatar and Saudi Arabia are principal sources of funding; all three extend valuable diplomatic backing and logistical support. But their poor cooperation has created perverse incentives that undermine the stated goal of developing cohesive, effective leadership bodies on both military and political fronts.

Although sharing the objective of toppling the regime and weakening its Iranian patron, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are inclined to support individual opposition components rather than the nascent umbrella institutions. Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, additional funders, reportedly have tended to follow the Saudi line, while Turkey is considered closer to Qatar.[73] While this regional alignment resembles that which has emerged with regard to Egypt, the dividing line in Syria has been less overtly ideological; both sides have backed different secular Syrian actors, while the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has shifted its alliances in accordance with prevailing political winds.[74] The bottom line, however, is the same: in Syria as in Egypt, opposition actors have made use of their respective external backers as leverage in their internal competition; in turn, regional rivalries have exacerbated opposition divisions.

Militarily, three factors stand out. First, Qatar and Saudi Arabia typically make independent decisions as to which factions to assist, to the detriment of more collective command networks.[75] Secondly, private Gulf-based donors raise and directly provide funds to individual

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[70] Though it is impossible to track exactly how much money ultimately has been given and by whom, evidence supports opposition complaints that donors are at least slow to fulfil promises. For example, at the 2 April 2012 "Friends of Syria" meeting in Istanbul, Gulf states reportedly pledged $100 million for the SNC to pay salaries for fighters. BBC and *The New York Times*, 1 April 2012. Yet, partial funding earmarked for salaries materialised only six months later; by the time payments were made in October, the SNC was on its last political legs and its irrelevance in the eyes of fighters was firmly established. *The Daily Star*, 23 October 2012.

[71] After weeks of British and French pressure forced the end of an EU embargo on arms supplies to the opposition, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague suggested that material support was necessary because "we're only going to get a political solution to this crisis if the opposition – the moderate, sensible parts of the opposition – can't be destroyed". But less than a month later, UK media reported Prime Minister David Cameron had abandoned plans to provide weapons, partly out of concern some would end up with jihadis. SMC head Salim Idris was incensed, arguing that without Western support "soon there will be no Free Syrian Army to arm. The Islamic groups will take control of everything, and this is not in the interests of Britain". *The Guardian*, 17 June 2013; *The Telegraph*, 15 July 2013; *The New York Times*, 16 July 2013.

[72] Crisis Group interviews, Coalition members, Istanbul, August 2013.

[73] Ibid.

[74] See Section IV below.

[75] See Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who are the Saudis and Qataris Arming?", *Time*, 18 September 2012; "Who will Control the Syrian Rebels' Guns?", *The New Yorker*, 14 June 2014. Competition between the two countries cooled somewhat after the 22 June 2013 Friends of Syria meeting in Doha, during

factions.[76] Thirdly, Turkey has made little apparent effort to restrict the flow of foreign fighters transiting its territory to northern Syria. The first two factors rob aspiring command networks (such as the SMC) of potential leverage over local leaders, who themselves have scant incentive to sacrifice autonomy so long as multiple sources of supply are available. The second and third factors have empowered more extremist groups, which disproportionately benefit from private Salafi funding and the influx of foreign fighters.

The political impact of regional dynamics has been more apparent still. As discussed below, Saudi-Qatari rivalry in particular has helped shape the opposition's distribution of power and set the rules by which its internal political game is played. Exploiting intra-Gulf competition is as essential to individual political success as it is damaging to the opposition as a whole. As a prominent opposition figure put it, just two months after he helped mobilise Saudi backing to install a secular bloc as the Coalition's most powerful force:

> Arab donor countries are the biggest obstacle to the political opposition coalescing and improving its cooperation. If we could do things on our own without foreign interference, we could work together. But Arab countries use their support as a tool.[77]

which both joined the other nine states there in renewing a commitment that all military support be channelled through the SMC. A Coalition member offered a caveat: "The SMC is just an office. The Saudis and the Qataris tell them to whom to distribute; they work directly with rebel factions and basically just keep Idris in the loop. It would be much better if they gave him the support and let him decide how to allocate it". Crisis Group interview, Samir Nashar, Istanbul, August 2013. An opposition organiser added: "The biggest problem is lack of coordination between supporting countries. If they would all agree to put their money in funds controlled by the Coalition and SMC, it would give these bodies real power for the first time. Take for instance the issue of salaries to soldiers: the lists of who gets salaries are in Qatari and Saudi hands, not those of the Coalition or SMC". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013.

[76] Though Saudi Arabia claims to have reined in its clerics' independent fundraising efforts, such campaigns openly persist in Kuwait and, to a lesser extent, Qatar, attracting contributions from private donors throughout the region. See, eg, a jihadi Twitter user posting Qatari bank account information for a fund benefiting militants in East Ghouta, Damascus, twitter.com/desilento/status/ 370115593430528000.

[77] Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013.

IV. Misplaying a Difficult Hand

The Coalition, like the SNC before it, is failing to serve as an effective, inclusive leadership body. Though the tone of debate within the opposition often appears personal or petty, principal issues of contention concern not only the balance of power among competing political blocs and their foreign allies, but also crucial questions of identity and strategy. The opposition's struggles to resolve its internal equation and define a coherent approach have rendered it reactive rather than proactive, unable to take the initiative or seize on tactical opportunities. As a result, both the SNC and now the Coalition have proved unable to shape decision-making among key target audiences: powerful regime figures, ambivalent domestic constituents and wary international powers, as well as activists and militants on the ground. In effect, the opposition has been left with a leading political organisation that does not truly engage in politics.

A. WORKING OUT THE OPPOSITION'S INTERNAL EQUATION

Attempts to organise an opposition umbrella group face a central structural challenge: how to determine the relative role and weight of various groupings under conditions in which parties have been prevented from organising, much less testing their in-country support through public demonstrations or elections. This conundrum is further complicated by two factors characteristic of the Arab uprisings, namely regional competition and disagreement over Islam's role. In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, these dynamics emerged primarily during the transitional process following the toppling of the previous regime. In Syria, they have emerged as key fault lines during the uprising itself.

1. Regional and ideological dynamics of bloc politics

In the absence of any reliable gage of domestic support, internationally-brokered talks to form an umbrella group typically favour those who are most organised and most closely connected to foreign backers. In other words, regional and wider international politics, often blamed for stymieing the Coalition, in fact were integral to its very formation and part of its DNA. Individuals directly involved in Riyadh Seif's initiative to create a more effective leadership body benefited from the U.S. push to adopt it as the basis for a reconstructed opposition;[78] the Brotherhood and its allies within the SNC gained strength from Turkish and Qatari support;[79] and Mustafa Sabbagh, a previously little-known businessman, was bolstered by Qatari backing.[80] Independent figures bereft of such outside backing were left at the mercy of those who enjoyed it; prominent Damascene dissident cleric Moaz al-Khatib emerged as a consensus candidate for the presidency in part through the good offices of others in the Coalition, who did not fear him precisely because he lacked his own support base.[81]

[78] On 1 November 2012, Riyadh Seif provided the immediate catalyst for the Coalition's formation by calling for a "National Initiative", a new, more inclusive opposition body that would prioritise establishing an interim government to administer opposition-controlled areas. Qatari diplomats joined U.S. counterparts in pressuring opposition figures to form a new body during four days of meetings in Doha that concluded on 11 November. The Coalition's founding platform published that day was largely based on Seif's initiative, and he was named one of the body's two vice presidents. Yezid Sayigh, "The Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem", The Carnegie Papers, April 2013; Al Jazeera, 1 November 2012. The full initiative text is at www.globalarabnetwork.com/opinion/8872-2012-11-01-182451.

[79] The Brotherhood's strong relations with Qatar and Turkey helped it emerge as the SNC's most powerful component; its critics assert that Doha worked to strengthen the SNC's weight within the Coalition when it was put together. Crisis Group communication, Kamal al-Labwani, secular Coalition member, February 2013.

[80] As discussed below, Sabbagh leveraged his strong relations with Qatar to emerge as one of the Coalition's most powerful figures.

[81] A U.S.-based Syrian academic with ties to the Coalition described constraints facing al-Khatib.: "Moaz sought from the beginning to centre authority in the presidency, but the fact that the Coalition was completely

Throughout its first six months, the Coalition was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and Sabbagh. As had happened with the Syrian National Council, the Brotherhood thrived thanks to superior organisation, discipline and alliance-building. It de-emphasised ideology, seeking instead to build partnerships with secular opposition elites and establish a popular base inside the country.[82] While this helped the Brotherhood maintain strong influence within the SNC and Coalition, it did not entirely convince sceptics who suspected it of diverting the bodies' resources to support its agenda inside the country.[83] Yet, even as it continues to weather criticism from some secular quarters, forging meaningful alliances with non-Islamists has remained a pillar of Brotherhood strategy.

Through the first two years of the uprising, the Brotherhood's partnership with leftists and liberals associated with Riyadh al-Turk – one of Syria's most respected dissidents and author of the Damascus Declaration that challenged the regime in 2005 – gave it a secular cover and, more importantly, a sizeable and well-organised political bloc.[84] Together, the Brotherhood and its allies dominated the SNC and continued to closely cooperate as a powerful "SNC bloc" within the Coalition, holding roughly a third of its seats until the body expanded and elected a new leadership in mid-2013.[85]

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dependent on Qatari money from its inception ensured that Sabbagh retained significant leverage" as secretary general. Crisis Group communication, Amr al-Azm, April 2013. Though he lacked close ties with any of the opposition's main political blocs, al-Khatib had a strong reputation among opposition activists due to his history of dissent as a Damascus cleric. Upon his election, the most popular pro-uprising social media outlet (and frequent critic of the exiled opposition) posted: "Today the Syrian people looks to a man the likes of whom it hopes to be governed by", www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152374597400727&set=a.10150397575815727.619133.420796315726&type=1.

[82] In March 2012, the Brotherhood published a covenant that avoided distinctly Islamist language and explicitly committed it to working to establish a "democratic, pluralistic state" built on a "civil constitution" written by a freely elected assembly. Notably, the document stated that equal rights among all citizens included the right to hold "the highest positions" in the state, understood to include the presidency. This ostensibly sets the Syrian Brotherhood apart from some of its sister organisations and indeed from the Syrian regime itself, whose 2012 constitution affirms that the "religion of the president of the republic is Islam". See "عهد وميثاق من جماعة الإخوان المسلمين في سوريا" ["A covenant and pact from the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria"], at the Brotherhood's website, www.ikhwansyria.com. See also the 2012 Syrian constitution, in English at www.voltairenet.org/article173033.html.

[83] Kamal al-Labwani, a secular Coalition member and frequent Brotherhood critic, accused the group of using "its role within the SNC to create the Committee for the Protection of Civilians [Hei'at Himayat al-Madaniyin], which was essentially a network of militias throughout the country". Crisis Group communication, February 2012. The Committee, widely rumoured to have Brotherhood links, gives financial and material support to select rebel factions; the movement also is said to support the Shields of the Revolution Commission [Hei'at Daru' al-Thowra], a network of rebel factions whose December 2012 conference in Turkey was attended by Brotherhood leaders. Brotherhood figures acknowledge warm relations with various mainstream factions but deny providing direct material support. Crisis Group communication, Zuheir Salem, senior Brotherhood official, April 2012. Whatever their full extent, the Brotherhood's links with armed groups do not appear to have given it much direct influence or standing among militants. A Brotherhood organiser who frequently travels in northern Syria and maintains friendly relations with several factions admitted that his affiliation earns him little good-will in rebel territory. "Inside, I never identify myself with the Brotherhood – or the Coalition, for that matter. Doing so would only hurt me, as there is a lot of animosity toward us". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013. For background, see Raphaël Lefèvre, "The Muslim Brotherhood Prepares for a Comeback in Syria", The Carnegie Papers, May 2013.

[84] The cooperative relationship between Damascus Declaration figures and the Brotherhood dates to July 2005, when Riyadh al-Turk met with then-Brotherhood leader Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni in London. The declaration released three months later included language affirming Islam's role in society; the Brotherhood endorsed it a day after release. Tony Badran, "Divided They Stand: The Syrian Opposition", op. cit.

[85] Prior to the Coalition's May 2013 expansion, roughly 22 of the Coalition's 63 active members were from the SNC bloc. Crisis Group communication, Coalition member Burhan Ghalioun, May 2013. The Brotherhood claims its influence is exaggerated, though it is magnified by both the presence of secular allies and members who, while independent of the Brotherhood, enjoy roots in, and maintain close ties to it. Crisis Group commu-

As for Sabbagh, he invested time, money and personal relationships to develop a network of so-called "local council" representatives through conferences his organisation hosted outside Syria prior to the Coalition's formation. With strong Qatari support, he emerged as the clear winner of Coalition formation talks in Doha.[86] Several local council figures – some apparently lacking meaningful ties to activists in areas they purportedly represented – gained Coalition membership as representatives from their respective provinces, while Sabbagh himself was named secretary general.[87] According to Coalition rivals, the combination of Qatari backing and the presence of Sabbagh allies among local council representatives gave him in effect roughly a quarter of Coalition seats prior to the 2013 expansion.[88]

In March 2013, the Brotherhood and its SNC partners allied with Sabbagh's bloc to elect Ghassan Hitto interim prime minister. They overcame fierce objections from independent secular figures within the Coalition as well as from Saudi Arabia, both of whom suspected a Qatar-backed, Islamist-led alliance between the Brotherhood and Sabbagh was in control.[89] Fallout from the controversial election in effect ground Coalition activity to a halt, crippling Hitto's efforts to form an interim government and setting in motion dynamics that fundamentally shifted the balance of power within the political opposition.

Riyadh signalled displeasure and determination to play a more direct role in opposition politics, leaving the Brotherhood and its SNC allies scrambling for Saudi support they recognised as critical to the Coalition's future. Talks between Saudi officials and secular SNC members culminated in an unprecedented early May visit to Saudi Arabia by an SNC delegation that

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nication, Zuheir Salem, April 2012; interviews, Brotherhood organiser and Coalition members, Istanbul, August 2013.

[86] Sabbagh developed strong relations with Qatar while running the Syrian Business Forum, which backed activist and rebel groups and, according to him, received "logistical" support from Qatar. Qatar was the Coalition's principal financial backer during its first six months. Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution", *The Financial Times*, 17 May 2013.

[87] Several of the fourteen slots allotted to local activist council representatives went to persons closely associated with Sabbagh. A prominent Coalition member said, "Sabbagh's power comes from the fact that most of his allies within the Coalition are representatives from local councils. He played a big role in selecting who would represent them. Not all local council representatives are close to him – [Damascus representative] Moaz al-Khatib, for instance, is not. But most of them walk with Sabbagh, because he funds them and has done so since before the formation of the Coalition through the Syrian Business Forum, with Qatari support of course". Crisis Group communication, Burhan Ghalioun, May 2013. While Sabbagh later acknowledged his role in selecting some local council representatives, his camp characterises the bloc he leads as an alliance of like-minded figures who agree that work inside the country, rather than external diplomacy, should be the Coalition's priority Crisis Group communication, Sabbagh adviser, October 2013; also Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar seized control", op. cit.

[88] Crisis Group interview, Burhan Ghalioun, 1 May 2013. Ghalioun estimated that Sabbagh's bloc had eighteen members at the time.

[89] Some secular activists believe Sabbagh and his close allies adopted a pragmatic Islamist approach along the lines of Turkey's ruling AKP; such impressions are difficult to assess, as his public statements give little ideological indication. Crisis Group interview, Amr al-Azm, April 2013. Secular figures outside the SNC bloc favoured Asaad Mustafa, a secular former governor of Hama who also appeared to enjoy Saudi backing, over Hitto, a low-profile businessman who had lived in the U.S. for two decades. Independent Coalition members who walked out in protest did not object to Hitto personally but rather to how the Sabbagh and SNC blocs purportedly pushed through his election without consensus. Riyadh's allies within the opposition adopted a similar posture; Louay al-Maqdad, a prominent SMC spokesman seen as close to Saudi Arabia, rejected Hitto on behalf of the SMC, citing lack of consensus. Crisis Group communications, Kamal al-Labwani, March 2013; Burhan Ghalioun, May 2013; see also Agence France-Presse, 24 March 2013. Secular members outnumbered Islamists within the Coalition during its first six months, but the former's influence was diluted because they did not act as a bloc: some allied with the Brotherhood, others with Sabbagh, and those who remained independent did not coordinate closely among themselves. According to a roster of Coalition members circulated by pro-opposition media outlets in May, 38 of the Coalition's then 63 participating members qualified as "liberals"; 25 were classified as Islamists. Zaman al-Wasl, 22 May 2013.

included Farouq Tayfour, the Brotherhood's deputy leader and point man on opposition political affairs. Three days of discussions produced clear signals that the SNC bloc would withdraw support for Hitto, as well as an understanding of substantially higher direct Saudi support to the Coalition.[90]

Saudi Arabia's more muscular involvement provided decisive momentum to a push by independent and secular figures to weaken the Brotherhood's and Sabbagh's influence by expanding the Coalition's membership base. With frustration reaching new heights following Hitto's election, Kilo – an influential Christian dissident – organised an alliance of prominent secular figures from inside and outside the Coalition. Benefiting from Saudi and Western diplomatic support, the grouping pushed through an expansion agreement during a bruising, divisive late May Coalition meeting in Istanbul.[91] In addition to adding seats for activist representatives, the expansion in effect created two new blocs: the "Democratic", led by Kilo, and the "Free Syrian Army", whose members would be selected by Salim Idris.[92]

Subsequent Coalition elections in July made clear that the balance of power within the body had shifted. Secular figures backed by Saudi Arabia now played the leading role. Still, fundamental rules of the game remained essentially unchanged. Members of Sabbagh's bloc complained of their exclusion from decision-making, and familiar criticisms of bias and lack of consensus were widespread.[93] In effect, a new ruling partnership enjoying close ties to Riyadh replaced the Qatari-backed alliance between Sabbagh and the SNC.[94]

The SNC bloc itself fractured, as the Brotherhood broke with some of its secular SNC partners to ally with Kilo.[95] This yielded a new Coalition president, Ahmad al-Jarba, a Democratic bloc

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[90] A secular member of the Coalition and the SNC's executive committee who attended the meetings with Saudi officials explained: "This is a major change. Saudi Arabia is now going to play as big a role on the political side of the opposition portfolio as it has on the military side. It is likely that this is going to come at the expense of the Qataris". Crisis Group communication, Samir Nashar, May 2013.

[91] A senior figure involved in organising the secular "Democratic" bloc confirmed he had met with a leading Saudi official responsible for the Syria portfolio and acknowledged that Riyadh had pledged support. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013. Western support for the expansion also was visible. For example, a video leaked from the sidelines of the May Coalition meeting showed French Ambassador to Syria Eric Chevallier scolding a small group of attendees after an initial vote on expansion resulted in acceptance of eight new members, not the 22 reportedly agreed. www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcM59Hw1iUI.

[92] After eight days of tumultuous talks that earned ridicule from activists and included high-profile intervention by French, Turkish, Saudi and Qatari diplomats, Coalition members agreed to add 51 new members, including fourteen from Michel Kilo's "Democratic" list (he originally demanded 25); three "local councils" representatives; two SNC members (a third also was on Kilo's list); and three independents. In addition to those 22, the Coalition added fifteen rebel militant representatives subsequently named by Salim Idris and fourteen activist members (one from each province) that would be chosen in June by a Coalition committee. Expansion proponents accused Sabbagh of hindering the effort and suggested the Brotherhood's support was important in ultimately pushing it through. The official Coalition announcement at www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=467233840026417&l=b86fab7487&refsrc=http%3A%2F%2Ft.co%2FUvRO2dr95S&_rdr; also Reuters, 30 May 2013.

[93] A Sabbagh adviser said repeated outreach had not met much cooperation from those currently controlling the politburo. Crisis Group communication, October 2013. Prominent secular SNC figures left off the politburo voiced similar concerns. Crisis Group interview, George Sabra, SNC president and Coalition member, Istanbul, August 2013.

[94] A senior Democratic bloc figure claimed that an alliance with Idris gave their combined blocs 50 of the Coalition's 114 seats. "There is more than just an electoral alliance with [Idris's] Free Syrian Army bloc. It is a deep alliance because we see them as an ally and guarantor that shares our social perspective, and they see us likewise". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013.

[95] Crisis Group interviews, Coalition members, Istanbul, August 2013. A political adviser to a senior Brotherhood figure explained: "There was disagreement within the Brotherhood over whether to stick with Sabbagh and Qatar, since they are closer to our school of thought, or whether to side with Kilo and the Saudis and trust that they sought a meaningful alliance, rather than a tactical electoral one. Allying with Kilo and the Saudis was the sounder choice". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013.

member known for his close relations to the Saudi leadership,[96] as well as a newly empowered political bureau also led by the Democratic bloc, albeit featuring a powerful Brotherhood contingent.[97] During the politburo's first weeks of activity, cooperation between secular and Islamist members appeared strong, a noteworthy development given Kilo's originally stated aim of weakening Brotherhood influence and the fact that this coincided with the Saudi-backed military ouster of the Brotherhood in Egypt.[98]

2. The challenge of incorporating activists on the ground

Although activists were allocated a third of the seats in the Coalition, and some of their more prominent groups initially endorsed the new organisation, they could not convert this into meaningful influence. This hardly is a surprise. Activist networks tend to be unstructured and decentralised and holding local elections is a practical impossibility, so ensuring their representation in opposition bodies presents a real challenge.

Still, efforts to address it fell significantly short. Several of the fourteen slots reserved for local councils instead were assigned to individuals close to Sabbagh, fuelling mistrust that grew in subsequent months.[99] Nor was the issue of activist representation dealt with effectively at the leadership level. Although two prominent figures with strong ties to on-the-ground activists, Moaz al-Khatib and Suheir al-Attasi, originally were named Coalition president and vice president, their political weight within the body remained limited, because they lacked the support of a political bloc.[100]

The question of activist representation is further complicated by realities of exile politics. Even for popular figures like al-Khatib, al-Attasi or others who were active within Syria during the uprising's early months, credibility is a currency that depreciates rapidly once an individual becomes entangled in the luxury-hotel meetings and inter-bloc wrangling that, for many Syrians, have come to define the Coalition.[101]

The feeling of alienation among activists was exacerbated by the Coalition's failure to create an interim government following Hitto's divisive election. This arguably squandered an op-

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[96] A tribal figure from north-eastern Syria with a relatively low profile prior to his election, Ahmad al-Jarba reportedly has close ties to senior Saudi decision-makers and is said to have facilitated Saudi support to opposition armed groups prior to becoming Coalition president. He narrowly defeated Sabbagh in a run-off. Crisis Group communication, Samir Nashar, July 2013; interviews, Coalition members, Istanbul, August 2013. *Asharq al-Awsat*, 7 July 2013. According to a senior Democratic bloc figure, its members won eleven of the nineteen politburo seats; the Brotherhood and other Islamists took eight. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013.

[97] Prior to the election, the Coalition amended its bylaws to strengthen the politburo at the expense of the presidency and general secretary. *Kulna Shuraka*, 6 July 2013, all4syria.info/Archive/88695.

[98] Crisis Group interviews, senior Democratic bloc figure; adviser to senior Brotherhood leader; and Ahmad Ramadan, politburo member allied with the Brotherhood, Istanbul, August 2013.

[99] In a statement announcing its withdrawal from the Coalition following the May expansion, a leading activist network traced the distrust to an early promise to allow groups on the ground to choose their representatives: "Instead, individuals were appointed to their positions by those who held power within the Coalition. Once again, the revolution was robbed of its true representatives". *Kulna Shuraka*, 2 June 2013. Other activists confirmed that some appointees did not represent relevant, on-the-ground organisations. A Damascene activist said, "most councils included in the Coalition's initial formation have little influence on the ground, and some don't even exist". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013.

[100] Crisis Group interviews and communications, Coalition members and activists with Coalition ties, March-September 2013.

[101] Suheir al-Attasi, a founding member of the General Commission for the Syrian Revolution, faced harsh criticism from the group once in office. Ties between her and the General Commission were in effect cut when the group withdrew from the Coalition in June 2013. See *Elaph*, 2 June 2013; also www.facebook.com/Suhair.Alatassi/posts/526533627381977.

portunity to build on-the-ground ties between the Coalition and internal activists.[102] The extent of that disconnect became plain during the lengthy expansion meeting in late May, as months of simmering frustration with the Coalition came to a boil. In a joint statement, four prominent activist networks threatened to withdraw their support from the Coalition if activist representatives were not allocated at least 50 per cent of its seats.[103]

Although only one of the groups followed through on its threat, the Coalition expansion did little to strengthen civilian activist influence. The fourteen activists added in June almost certainly enjoy stronger ties to groups on the ground than previously had been the case,[104] yet they were selected by a committee of Coalition members representing the body's competing blocs. In other words, they reflected the balance of power between existing power centres, as opposed to the infusion of a new and fresh independent bloc.[105]

B. THE QUESTION OF STRATEGY

The absence of a coherent strategy – understandable given difficulties in constructing a political leadership from scratch and competing pressures from the activist base and international sponsors – came at a real cost. It expressed itself through disagreements over both what an end to the conflict might look like and how to attain it.

The debate came to a head in 2013, with the war locked in stalemate and hopes for Western military intervention dwindling (save during the brief, three-week period following the 21 August chemical weapons attacks). At that point, the opposition began to address the possibility of a political resolution, weighing conditions under which it might pursue a negotiated end to the conflict and with whom.

Al-Khatib, then the Coalition president, first brought up the issue in January. He announced willingness to sit down with its representatives – even naming Vice President Farouq al-Sharaa as an acceptable counterpart in potential negotiations – if the regime released thousands of political prisoners and renewed passports for Syrians living abroad.[106] Nearly four months later he presented a far more detailed initiative pursuant to which Assad would delegate full authority to either al-Sharaa or Prime Minister Wa'el al-Halaqi, then safely leave the country with up to 500 chosen regime figures and their families.[107]

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[102] Illustrating the extent to which the Coalition had failed to win activist confidence, Khaled Abu Salah, one of the most prominent activists named to the Coalition, declined to attend its major meetings and ultimately gave up membership, citing its divisive bloc politics, susceptibility to damaging Saudi-Qatari competition and failure to establish internal institutions and develop meaningful ties to activists and rebels on the ground. Crisis Group communication, May 2013. An activist group member in Aleppo was blunter: "The political opposition is nothing but ink on paper; they have no impact [on the ground], positively or negatively". Crisis Group communication, March 2013. The Coalition has played a role in coordinating aid delivery through its Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), headed by al-Attasi. However the ACU's primary role is that of middleman, connecting donor countries to activist groups inside Syria. Crisis Group communication, former ACU adviser, October 2013. Though a useful service, such coordination is not a substitute for direct Coalition activity on the ground.

[103] See "بيان صادر عن الحراك الثوري في الداخل السوري" ["Statement released by the revolutionary movement inside Syria"], 29 May 2013; www.facebook.com/notes/بيان-صادر-عن-الحراك-الثوري-في-الداخل-السوري/سوريا-في-المحلية-التنسيق-لجان/664415970252209.

[104] Crisis Group interviews, Coalition members and activists, Istanbul, August 2013.

[105] A Damascene activist with close Coalition ties, now based in Turkey, said, "you have some young activists who are part of Sabbagh's bloc and others who are close to Kilo. They all work with each other productively, but to get Sabbagh and Kilo to sit down together you need some sort of external mediation. The older generation is simply too absorbed in their longstanding battles". Crisis Group communication, September 2013.

[106] See *Asharq al-Awsat*, 31 January 2013; also Moaz al-Khatib interview with Al-Arabiya, 4 February 2013, available at www.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/04/264406.html.

[107] The sixteen-point proposal laid out a 100-day transition, including restructuring of security forces and internationally-brokered negotiations to appoint a full transitional government. www.facebook.comahmad.mouaz.alkhatib.alhasani/posts/652145404812523.

In the two initiatives can be found hints of an alternative – albeit incomplete – political strategy that goes beyond waiting for either military victory or Western intervention. In each, al-Khatib sought to distinguish between Assad and the state, thus to drive a wedge between rational actors and hardliners within the regime. Likewise, he tried to appeal to the broad array of Syrians who would welcome the end of Assad's rule but fear the breakdown of what remains of the state.. This approach stood out within an opposition that often ignores differences in interests and motivating factors among regime components, constituent bases and allies. In both cases, however, strong opposition from a range of Coalition figures aborted the initiative, sparing the regime the need to respond.[108]

Though al-Khatib's proposals failed to gain traction, external diplomatic pressures have since forced negotiation onto the Coalition's agenda. That push began in May, when the U.S. and Russia agreed to resurrect the all-but-forgotten June 2012 "Geneva communiqué" calling for the establishment of a transitional governing body that "would exercise full executive powers", including over the military and intelligence services, and be "formed on the basis of mutual consent".[109] It grew in intensity following U.S.-Russian agreement on steps to remove Syria's chemical weapons.[110]

Rekindled American interest in the Geneva framework has compelled the Coalition to address the prospect of talks prior to Assad's departure; it also further hampers formation of a provisional government.[111] Too, prospect of a "Geneva II" negotiation conference raises the question of who would participate in an opposition delegation; Russia's view that the National Co-

[108] Alarmed by al-Khatib's unilateral call for talks without pre-condition of Assad's departure, an array of Coalition members momentarily put aside other differences to push through a statement that identified the body's general assembly, rather than the president, as responsible for issuing initiatives and stipulated that any political resolution must exclude Assad and military leaders. See "الائتلاف الوطني يضع إطار الحل السياسي" ["The National Coalition lays out the framework of a political solution"], 15 February 2013, www.etilaf.org/date/2013/2.html?catid=10. The Coalition immediately rejected al-Khatib's second initiative, citing his decision to announce it via Facebook rather than the politburo as grounds to bar it from the agenda at the late May marathon meetings. Zaman Alwasl, 25 May 2013, zamanalwsl.net/readNews.php?id=38584.

[109] The communiqué came from a Geneva meeting of foreign ministers of the permanent UN Security Council members (China, France, Russia, the UK and U.S.), Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar. It did not address Assad's transition process role. Russia insists this be left for Syrians to decide; the U.S. maintains that the "mutual consent" clause implies Assad must go. Agence France-Presse, 9 May 2013; "Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué", 30 June 2012, www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf.

[110] Cooperation between Washington and Moscow in crafting the September agreement provided a jolt of momentum to the Geneva process that had stalled over the summer. At a meeting in early October, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov identified mid-November as the tentative target date for a "Geneva II" conference under UN auspices. See transcript of 7 October joint press conference, at www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/ 2013/10/215162.htm. However, crucial questions regarding composition of the opposition delegation and attendance of Iran and Saudi Arabia remained unresolved.

[111] The Coalition took a concrete step toward establishment of a provisional government with the September 2013 election of Ahmad Toameh as interim prime minister. It sees a provisional government as a means of providing on-the-ground services – sorely lacking in many rebel-controlled areas and provided by Salafi and jihadi groups in others. Toameh is a moderate Islamist from Dayr Zor who endorsed the 2005 Damascus Declaration, remained in Syria during the first two years of the uprising and maintains strong ties to Coalition members across the political spectrum. He was the lone candidate to replace Hitto in the preceding weeks. Crisis Group interviews and communications, Coalition members and activist with Coalition ties, August-September 2013; Reuters, 14 September 2013. The U.S. reportedly opposes formation of an interim government as possibly complicating efforts to create a negotiated transitional authority. Crisis Group communications, Coalition members, advisers, May-October 2013; interviews, French officials, February-June 2013.

ordination Body must also attend could both heighten the organisation's relevance and reignite divisive intra-opposition debates.[112]

Within the Coalition, the most broadly held position reflects a demand that emerged as somewhat of a consensus among mainstream activists and militants: namely, that any political resolution exclude Bashar Assad and his ruling circle, commonly understood to include leading figures within the security services. As a corollary, it holds that the regime and its backers will consider such an outcome only if and when they feel they are nearing defeat.[113] It follows from this perspective that negotiations under current conditions at best would be a waste of time, at worst an opportunity for the regime to regain credibility in the eyes of Western countries that – this camp fears – would settle for a future role for Assad if this meant speeding the war's conclusion.[114]

Other conclusions flow from this widely-shared perspective. First, that for negotiations to represent an opportunity rather than a threat, the opposition first must strengthen itself militarily (through increased foreign support and enhanced coordination) and obtain a clear upper hand on the battlefield.[115] Secondly, that a political resolution, far from being a substitute for an unambiguous opposition victory, must be a means toward that end.

For their part, the NCB, along with others who reject foreign support for militants as well as Western military action, embrace a strategy that has become dependent on another, less violent form of foreign intervention. To end the conflict – and potentially gain political relevance – the NCB banks on a U.S.-Russian deal that in effect imposes a political solution upon the regime and its foes.[116] It has been among the most vocal proponents of the original Geneva communiqué and the resurrected Geneva effort and maintains constructive relations with regime backers. In addition to Moscow's push for an NCB role in negotiations, there are hints

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[112] See Foreign Minister Lavrov's 8 October 2013 interview with Russia Today; transcript available at www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/c6e4172fbab9da3444257bff0020a512!OpenDocument.

[113] Crisis Group communications and interviews, activists and Coalition members, including Zuheir Salem, Samir Nashar, Burhan Ghalioun and Kamal al-Labwani, February-August 2013. Nashar said, "it's not that we are against a political resolution, but rather it's the question: what is this political resolution? Is it with or without Assad? If Bashar stepped down alongside those with blood on their hands – heads of security services, etc. – we could immediately transition to an interim government with regime participation. Most rebel militants would accept a political resolution under these conditions, except possibly for the extremists. And this form of resolution would allow us to maintain the state, which is what the overwhelming majority of Syrians want. But any attempted resolution in which Assad does not step down will be rejected by most rebels on the ground". Crisis Group communication, May 2013.

[114] As a result, there is broad apprehension within the Coalition regarding the push for Geneva II talks; many fear Coalition attendance would jeopardise its remaining credibility in pursuit of a political resolution that, at this stage, cannot possibly be achieved in a manner acceptable to the opposition. Ibid. Facing competing pressures from Washington and militants on the ground, Coalition leaders have floated various pre-conditions for participation. In early October, President Ahmad al-Jarba said it would only attend to negotiate the regime's surrender of power; he also conditioned participation on receiving unspecified guarantees from the opposition's regional backers and Iran's being barred unless it withdrew its forces from Syria. He added that any decision to attend would be made in consultation with the SMC and have to be approved by a Coalition vote. 7 October press conference, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1gl24QuWks#t=156. Those advocating Geneva attendance face an uphill battle; on 13 October, the Syrian National Council released a statement promising not to participate under current conditions, and its president, George Sabra, suggested the body would withdraw from the Coalition if the latter decided to attend. BBC (Arabic), 13 October 2013.

[115] Ibid. Burhan Ghalioun said, "so long as Bashar thinks he can win, there will be no progress toward a political resolution. For this reason, the countries backing the opposition need to increase their weapons support to opposition forces to a degree that convinces Bashar the security solution is failing, and he cannot win". Crisis Group communication, May 2013.

[116] See NCB leader Hassan Abdel Azim's 19 April 2013 interview with al-Mayadin television, www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-edp4q_swg. He argued that neither the armed opposition nor regime would make the concessions necessary for a resolution unless forced by their international backers.

that Iran and Hizbollah view it as a potential opposition partner.[117] So far, however, there is no sign that either of those parties is prepared to pressure the regime in the manner contemplated by the NCB.

[117] In a meeting with Crisis Group, a Hizbollah official referred positively to the NCB and indicated that the movement was in communication with it. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, August 2013.

V. **Conclusion**

For all its flaws and weaknesses, the Coalition remains a central actor. Existing political competitors, such as the NCB, enjoy even less credibility with the opposition base, while the declining influence of civilian activists, rising power of jihadist factions and escalating infighting among armed groups make the creation of a more representative political front prohibitively difficult. Besides, to endlessly search for a more credible and coherent political opposition is, in a fashion, to mistake cause and consequence: such an opposition will emerge, if at all, from a negotiating process viewed as credible and coherent by those the opposition is supposed to represent.

That is neither reason nor excuse for the Coalition to sit on its hands, waiting for others to provide it with the opportunity to become "relevant". Even merely surviving the conflict's current trends will require immediate action; as the late September statement by several leading armed factions rejecting the Coalition's legitimacy made plain, the status quo inevitably weakens the group in the eyes of key constituencies.

The Coalition has been distracted and bedevilled by a range of issues. Time and political capital have been squandered on an elusive quest to secure Western military intervention; internal political squabbling fuelled by regional rivalries; largely superficial efforts to incorporate activists; and panic at the thought of a political process involving the regime. The Coalition's purported foreign friends have done at least as much to encourage these harmful distractions as to detract from them.

APPENDIX A:

MAP OF SYRIA