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Assessment Report

The Reality of the Syrian Opposition and Current and Future Challenges

Policy Analysis Unit- ACRPS

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The Syrian opposition – in all its different guises – along with the current government, was surprised by the outbreak of protests on March 15, 2011, which have garnered massive public support, especially in Deraa and Duma, in the governorate of Rif Dimashq.¹ The element of surprise was embodied in the fact that the opposition formulated its assessment, based on many political and security indicators which were showing that Syria would be late in following the path taken by Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Some political forces, such as the Kurdish parties and the Muslim Brotherhood, even urged their supporters not to take part in the demonstrations that were called for by some activists before the revolution. This was due in part to their experience when waging battles against the oppressive security system in Syria in the past few years.²

The Beginning of the Revolution and the Lack of Opposition

In the beginning, the Syrian opposition movement took the form of spontaneous youth protests, chanting slogans of freedom and demanding reform, while some others wagered on the reformist image of President Bashar al-Assad. Their shock came after the speech he delivered in Parliament on March 30, 2011, which resulted in a limited evolution to slogans like “Down with the Regime” at protests in Latakia and Deraa, which expressed disappointment in the president’s speech while emulating the Egyptians’ slogans from Tahrir Square. Both the geographic footprint and the human size of the protests evolved at a steady pace, gradually expanding horizontally, by sweeping additional towns and cities, as well as vertically, since protestors began embracing more radical demands. While the conventional partisan opposition was watching and waiting, the *Democratic Socialist Union Party (Hizb al-Ittihad al-Ishtiraki al-Democrati)* officially declared involvement in the protests. This meant full participation of the Union’s strong youth wing in the widespread demonstrations in Deraa, Saqba, and other cities in Rif Dimashq, as well as employment of the “moving groups” method in Aleppo. As for the Muslim Brotherhood, it officially announced its involvement after Assad’s first speech. The

¹ “Damascus Countryside” in Arabic, Rif Dimashq is one of the 14 governorates of Syria. It is situated in the country’s southwest.

² The general secretariat of the Kurdish Political Council held its regular meeting on January 30, 2011, while the general council of the Kurdish Democratic Alliance in Syria held an exceptional meeting on February 2, 2011. Both called for their constituents to control themselves, to be wary and careful, and to avoid being influenced by irresponsible media. Also, the Muslim Brotherhood strictly forbade its members from participating in the protests due to Law 49, which stipulates that membership in the Brotherhood is criminal and is punishable by the death penalty.

general supervisor of the Syrian Brotherhood, Muhammad Riyad al-Shaqfa, stated on March 31, 2011 that the Brotherhood “is actively running and participating in the protests”.³

The Chaos of Conferences and Delayed Unification

In the first few months of protest, the Syrian opposition did not think to form an overarching, unifying committee or a political leadership to guide its movement and political direction. Because of this, division, fragmentation, and improvisation became major features characterizing its political factions and organizations, as well as a lack of mutual trust resulting from poor communication and the absence of real political grassroots actions, in addition to an outdated organizational structure and an elitist mobility confined to upper-class political gatherings and encounters. In the beginning, its movement was confined to arbitrary initiatives and meetings which could be regarded more as solidarity activities rather than organizational frames, like the Istanbul meeting on April 26, 2011, which included a variety of actors, and the Antalya conference on June 1-2, 2011, which was organized by several actors and in which some parties and currents of the opposition participated, like the Brotherhood and Damascus Declaration members living abroad. The outcome of this was a statement which called for the resignation of the president and the ceding of his powers to his Vice President. Following that, a meeting was held in Brussels on June 4, 2011, which saw the participation of Islamist and tribal personalities and entities. It also resulted in the formation of the National Coalition to Support the Syrian Revolution. Then, a consultative meeting consisting of figures from the national opposition was held independently on June 27, 2011 at the Semiramis Hotel in Damascus. It called for the “overthrowing of the authoritarian regime”, and for a ruling out of the military-security option as a pre-condition for engaging in any dialogue with the regime.

With the protests’ momentum on the increase and the list of demands expanding, two opposition figures, Haitham Maleh and Emad Rashid of the Islamist current, called for the holding of a “Syrian National Salvation” conference in Istanbul and Damascus on July 16, 2011. However, the security mission that the Syrian forces carried out in Kaboun prevented the conference from being held in Syria. Thus, it was only held in Istanbul, and was overshadowed by the overwhelming presence of Islamist currents and clerics. The Muslim Brotherhood also participated heavily alongside political figures from other currents, especially the Kurdish camp, which had previously pulled out due to disagreements about references to the “Syrian Arab Republic”.

³ The Arab Socialist Party was the first to release a statement announcing its involvement in the protests on March 18, 2011. Many from its leadership were arrested in Deraa and Duma. The Muslim Brotherhood’s statement was published via press release to the General Observer of the Muslim Brotherhood group.

The conference was improvised without any preparation, and there were many disagreements among those who called for it regarding political issues and the issue of elections. It failed to accomplish any of the goals it had set out, especially when it came to forming a new political and administrative body (a shadow government) that could take over in the event the current regime were overthrown.

Moves by several Syrian opposition parties continued, with utter and constant failure to reach an overarching national formula for unity; so on August 29, 2011, the Syrian Youth Group, which said it represented the Local Coordination Committees inside Syria, announced in Ankara the formation of a Transitional National Council headed by Burhan Ghalyun and including 94 members. The names of the members of the council that were announced represented a varied mix of the intellectual, political, social, and sectarian currents in Syrian society, but most of them were not consulted on the matter. Furthermore, the independent Islamist current and the National Action Group for Syria boycotted this move, attacking it because they had been invited to a consultative meeting in Istanbul, attended by Islamists and technocratic figures, in order to form a Syrian National Council. Yet on September 15, 2011, the formation of this council was announced according to the same mechanisms that governed previous conferences, neglecting to represent a broad spectrum of the Syrian opposition.

The chaos of the conferences and continuing divisions among the traditional opposition caused major resentment among the protestors, which resulted in September 23, 2011 being dubbed the Friday of “Opposition Unity”. There was a tendency among those using social networking to grant the traditional opposition one last chance before an “Overthrow the Opposition” protest banner would accompany an “Overthrow the Regime” banner. Many of the opposition factions responded to that warning, and more intensive meetings were held in Istanbul, which resulted in the formation of the Syrian National Council on October 2, 2011. It called in its founding statement for the overthrow of the existing regime with all its major figures and all its symbols, including the president. The council appointed a political leadership, designated a general secretariat, and declared itself “the sole representative of the Syrian revolution, both in Syria and abroad”, and frequent statements followed, considering it the sole *legitimate representative of the Syrian revolution*.⁴

⁴ Division and distribution of membership and seats in the general secretariat of the National Council were given according to the movements that participated, which were: the Damascus Declaration (four seats), the Muslim Brotherhood (five seats), the administrative board of the Transitional National Council (five seats), the Kurdish parties (four seats), the revolutionary grassroots and the Union of the Syrian Revolution Local Coordination Committees (six seats), and independents (nine seats). The council was headed by Burhan Ghalyun, with the presidency of the council being on a rotational basis.

A New Classification of the Opposition Factions⁵

The declaration of the Syrian National Council marked a new attempt to heal the rifts among the parties, groups and other forces of the opposition and a path to their unity; however, it could not be the uniting framework for all the major blocks of the revolution in Syria and abroad. The forming of the council marked the dividing line in a new classification of the Syrian opposition in two main frameworks, which are:

The internal factions in the Syrian National Council, which are:

The Muslim Brotherhood:

This is one of the oldest political movements in opposition to the regime, one that had engaged in armed struggle against the regime in the 1980s. The Brotherhood announced its involvement in the uprising early on and proceeded with supportive political activity. What distinguishes the Brotherhood is the fact that it had been open to all initiatives and participated in most of them, yet did not initiate its own until now, despite a statement by its leadership declaring that it had already prepared a political vision of Syria dating back to 2004. Because of an enforced ban and the threat of death sentences for members, the Brotherhood works through “pillars” inside Syria more than it acts as a group. It possesses a hotbed (scattered “pillars” throughout) instead of branches and partner organizations. These “pillars” are active in the popular Islamic current in its broadest sense, which constantly goes beyond the Brotherhood in its various directions and its effective and influential rules.

Damascus Declaration:

This consists of internal as well as external opposition groups and other entities that have confirmed their support and involvement in the uprising “until democratic change is achieved through the destruction of the current corrupt regime”, according to a statement by its general secretariat in Syria on September 13, 2011. However, the multitude of “general secretariats” of the Damascus Declaration and the differences in their directions in Syria and abroad make it the most detached from the actual pulse of the street protests. Moreover, it has become apparent that the general orientations of the general secretariat

⁵ The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies has published an analysis paper on May 15, 2011 titled “The General and the Particular in the Ongoing Syrian Popular Uprising”, posing in specific detail the movements and groups of the traditional opposition. It can be viewed at:

<http://english.dohainstitute.org/Home/Details?entityID=5ea4b31b-155d-4a9f-8f4d-a5b428135cd5&resourceId=2b204584-1b7d-4caa-9495-e6eb07a7c136>

of the Damascus Declaration – in terms of alliances – mostly matches and coincides with the orientations of the Muslim Brotherhood and its attitude. However, all members of the Damascus Declaration agreed on calling for the toppling of the regime, betting on its exhaustion due to the uprising, ending in its demise. The Declaration, in addition to some Islamic figures' positions, is considered to be supportive of increasing international pressure in order to legitimize outside intervention, namely by calling for it. For this reason, prominent figures who are members of the Declaration have made the most evident and recurrent diplomatic and coordination efforts with regional states and other forces involved in Syrian affairs.

The Independent Islamic current and the National Action Group for Syria:

These consist of partisan entities that are not directly involved in the inner circle of the traditional Islamic parties, and are mostly concentrated abroad.

This current announced the formation of the Transitional National Council in Istanbul on September 15, 2011 as a political reference and frame for the opposition forces, and appointed its leaders, calling on the various opposition factions to join according to the mechanism it had put in place and the political agenda it had prepared, while it continued work on selecting a leadership.

However, the prior refusal of the internal opposition to join the Council, combined with the Damascus Declaration's and the Muslim Brotherhood's vague stances on the matter, as well as the determination of its founders to keep its current organizational and political structures, resulted in its being cast aside with the previous initiatives, and consequently it declared that it had joined the newly expanded National Council formed on October 2, 2011.

The entities of the new movement:

Since the protests had spread all over Syria, a need for proper organization of the protests has arisen, especially with no end in sight to the protests in the near future that can be envisioned through tangible indicators. Therefore, the Union of the Syrian Revolution Local Coordination Committees emerged on the political scene. The majority of them were local initiatives launched in various regions to organize banners and slogans within the spontaneous movement of the protestors. The Union constituted support for the uprising's momentum. With the perceived longevity of the revolution, local committees proliferated in a fragmented manner all across Syria, demonstrated by the fact that many cities, regions and neighborhoods had five or more "committees" each. To fight this

reality, many unifying entities were formed, the most notable of which is the Union of the Syrian Revolution Local Coordination Committees (*Ittihad Tanseeqiyat al-Thawra al-Suriya*) and the Local Coordination Committees, which have combined the committees across Syria. They also have had a role in organizing the media to take action, promoting the uprising, and contributing to shaping the directions of public opinion for those using Facebook, the internet, and following the news via satellite.

With the increase in the number of movements and conferences, the leaders of the Local Committees saw the importance of unifying these efforts within the framework of a single organizing body that would join the activists of the Syrian revolution on Facebook and other social media networks, and called it the “Syrian Revolution General Commission”. This Commission included in its organizational structure the Local Coordination Committees, their representatives, the regional representatives, and the revolutionary council of the Union of the Syrian Revolution Local Coordination Committees.

The General Commission was not able to start an initiative of its own, did not express – as a single entity – its support for any of the opposition movements, and often saw divisions among its major constituents’ stances towards the opposition initiatives. At the end of the road, all movements were joined under the umbrella of the Syrian National Council that was established at the beginning of October.

The National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change:

This was announced on June 30, 2011, and included 15 parties of the National Democratic Rally⁶, the leftist parties, and the parties of the national Kurdish movement, as well as some national figures from both internal and external oppositions groups.⁷ The Coordination Committee held its first congress on September 17, 2011, announced the formation of a Central Committee that includes 80 members, and released statements announcing its complete support for the Syrian uprising, counting on the “overthrowing of the corrupt authoritarian regime” to exact true national democratic change. Moreover, it stated “three *no's*”: *no violence, no sectarian strife, no foreign interference*. As well, it emphasized the necessary conditions to facilitate comprehensive national dialogue.

⁶ The National Democratic Rally consists of the Arab Democratic Socialist Union Party, the Democratic People’s Party, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party, and the Arab Socialist Movement.

⁷ Hasan Abd al-Azeem, general secretary of the Arab Democratic Socialist Union Party and the official spokesperson of the National Democratic Rally, was elected the general coordinator of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, while Hussein al-Oudat, an independent figure, was elected as his deputy, and Burhan Ghalyun, another independent personality, was elected as the deputy of the general coordinator abroad. Samir Ayta (independent) was elected as the head of the office of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change abroad.

In their experience, division reigned among both internal and external opposition entities, with the Damascus Declaration boycotting any participation, while the Democratic People's Party refused to appoint any representatives to the Committee even though it was a part of the National Democratic Rally, therefore aligning itself with the Damascus Declaration's stance. For their part, members of the two Kurdish councils (representing 11 parties) took part in drafting the Committee's charter but they did not sign it because they requested the inclusion of the Damascus Declaration as a member. Due to the Damascus Declaration's refusal to join, these parties could not sign off on the charter and consequently ended their involvement. The Committee was also affected by the withdrawal of one of the dynamic Kurdish parties, the Yekiti Party, due to internal party differences on the issue of alliances, while the Kurdish Democratic Union⁸ joined them, with its great influence in Aleppo and Afreen.

Furthermore, the constituent parties of the Committee suffer from traditional modes of operation. Also, the committee has to deal with the differences among party members, and independents on the one hand; as well as with disparities between its youth involved in the protests and its traditional leadership, on the other. This leads to difficulties in communication with the independent local youth coordination committees that fall outside the framework of the traditional party and rebel against it. It is worth noting that there is a political difference between the revolutionary tendency of local committees (through their slogans that ask for the toppling of the regime and the demise of the president) on the one hand, and the reformist tendency of the committee (which seeks the ending of the tyrannical security approach and not the regime itself, and raises the issue of changing the regime instead of toppling it, without ever mentioning the demise of the president). In light of the long activist experience of the Committee's members and their grassroots backgrounds, bearing in mind the conditions of their political activism (i.e. semi-public and semi-secret or covert at the same time), analysis cannot ignore the fact that this body could neither get rid of the traditional discourse prior to the revolution, nor adopt appropriate terminologies addressing both the masses and the regime.

⁸ The Kurdish Democratic Union has its roots in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is not a member in either Kurdish council due to its by-laws, which stipulate its allegiance to a Kurdish, non-Syrian president. The union joined the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, while at the same time entering into a strategic alliance with the regime on Kurdish political issues, especially in light of the Turkish position on the Syrian crisis.

The Syrian Opposition: Role and Prospects

The forming of the Syrian National Council proved to be a new step in the attempts to unify the Syrian opposition factions. However, the decision of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change – which is the cornerstone of the opposition on the inside – to boycott the Council’s work has raised many concerns regarding the development of a disagreement between those living in Syria and those living abroad as it could lead to deeper divisions. In light of the complex political conflicts, this could result in more political controversy and a rift more severe than that between the Rally (the current Coordination Committee) and the Damascus Declaration factions. As such, overcoming differences and division is one of the most important challenges facing the Syrian opposition in general, and the new National Council in particular.

The step of forming the National Council had a positive impact on the revolutionary movement in Syria as it garnered the latter’s support. The General Commission and the Local Coordination Committees have announced that “the National Council is their main representative and expresses their political aspirations”. Some of their most prominent figures – those possessing a great deal of respect and trust among rebellious youth, despite their various ideological directions – are looked upon as a guarantee and political boost for efforts to formulate a democratic discourse that goes beyond nationalist, partisan, and ethnic differences and polarizations. The political factions which are members of the Council need the credibility that some of these figures possess while addressing democratic issues, which was missing in their initial discourse.

The real challenge for the Council now is to present a real democratic alternative to the authoritarian reality against which the uprisings erupted, and to act as both initiator and guarantor for the joining of different social groups that are still hesitant in their participation in the popular uprising, despite their solidarity with the protests’ demands of democracy. To be a real democratic alternative is not something that results solely from demanding the fall of the regime. Without a doubt, the preservation of this unified structure, which includes different political forces, and developing this structure constitute challenges that will determine the fate of the Council.

Furthermore, the Syrian opposition, especially the Syrian National Council and the Coordination Committee in Syria, must provide clear and honest answers regarding the approach and tools of the revolution, especially in light of calls to “militarize” it. This makes it imperative for political leaders to develop an inclusive political resolution which will provide guidance to the movement. The spontaneous aspect and local organization of the protests constitute its main characteristics, despite the existence of many organizations and movements.

The Syrian opposition must end the issue of external interference. It is still an ambiguous issue in the political discourse of the Syrian National Council, as it rejected in its founding statement “any external interference that would compromise national sovereignty”. At the same time, it called for “international protection for civilians” without defining a mechanism for such a course of action, which prompted some of its figures to suggest military intervention as a possible, “acceptable” tool. Based on this, the political leadership is obliged to explain its vision and mission when it comes to “international protection” and what this might entail.

The issue of external military intervention reflects the internal opposition’s flaws as it points out its social and organizational weaknesses, as well as the limitations of its methods and abilities in implementing the “overthrow of the regime” slogan. It also shows its political influence to be confined to virtual media outlets, as well as satellite channels, rather than as part of direct involvement in the protests. These structural faults from which the major Syrian opposition groups suffer are the biggest obstacles limiting their influence and role. Their poor political performance is directly correlated to poor internal institutional competency, and these are flaws that will increase exponentially as the revolution grows longer.

In conclusion, a great historic responsibility lies on the shoulders of the Syrian opposition. Its failure to unite its masses while constituting the revolt’s complementary political façade will have major repercussions, for it is not only affecting the phase of struggle to overthrow the regime, but it will also have a deep impact in building the state of the future in Syria, especially when it comes to the particularities of the Arab Levant (*Mashreq*), with its ethnic, racial, and sectarian differences, based on previous experiences in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

The slogan “overthrow the regime” poses two challenges: the first is to answer the question of means, methods, and strategies of the revolution, while the second is to present a democratic alternative to the existing regime. It must be a pluralistic political alternative, rather than a pluralistic sectarian one, for overthrowing the regime via a democratic revolution means erecting a democratic regime. Therefore, the first and principal task of the united revolutionary opposition against is to formulate the answers to these questions and present them to members of the Syrian public protesting against the regime. These answers should be provided in the form of an agenda and a strategy to be implemented. If the opposition fails to carry out such a politically guided and planned revolution aimed at establishing a democratic regime, Syria will be heading for civil war. Historically speaking, civil war is the primary excuse for authoritarian regimes.