

DIVIDED THEY STAND

An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions

Aron Lund

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Divided They Stand – An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions

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Introduction

The uprising which erupted in Syria in March last year has become the most protracted and destabilizing of all the revolutions now sweeping the Arab world. The Baath Party-led government of President Bashar al-Assad has been severely weakened by popular protest and international isolation, but the regime and its military might have remained largely intact.

With their hopes for a split in the regime fundamental unfulfilled after more than a year of conflict, the opposition has little hope of defeating Assad on its own. He, in turn, seems equally unable to extinguish the protests. As the conflict grinds on, the anti-regime movement has increasingly turned to armed struggle, while sectarian sentiment is inflamed by conflict and violence.

Syria has now entered the early stages of a civil war, which looks set to intensify over the coming year. The stalemate could suddenly break – through an internal coup, major defections, foreign intervention, an assassination of Assad, etc. – but there is little understanding of what the effects would be at this stage. The most prudent option for outside decision-makers is to plan for a protracted conflict.

In this situation, the Syrian opposition has a key role to play – but it has so far failed to effectively do so, because of internal disagreements and severe structural weaknesses. The international community's slow response to the Syrian crisis was partly dictated by the realization that Syria's weak and divided opposition groups could not – and still in 2012 do not – provide an effective alternative to the Assad regime. In January, the Syrian dissident Hazem al-Nahar wrote, *à propos* his own efforts to help unify the opposition:

Now we have the very situation I feared: a Babel of contradictory and competing voices that leaves everyone, regime loyalists and opponents alike, mistrustful and dismissive of the Syrian opposition [...] The situation is just as the regime would have it: an opposition fractured and divided over issues that have no basis in reality.¹

This disunity is a major obstacle to any peaceful resolution of the conflict. Every conceivable path away from sectarian conflict requires a functioning opposition leadership:

- If there is a foreign intervention, or if the government suddenly collapses, civilian politicians need to stand ready to fill the vacuum.
- If the regime is to be toppled through armed struggle, a strong and legitimate opposition leadership with adequate resources to control unruly commanders, is the only thing that can prevent warlordism.
- If an internal coup should remove Bashar al-Assad, the new regime will want to coopt at least some elements of the opposition movement, if only as window-dressing for continued military rule. If the opposition is unable to push for more serious liberalization at that moment of change, the opportunity will be lost.

¹ Hazem al-Nahar, 'The Discourse and Performance of the Syrian Opposition Since the Beginning of the Revolution', Heinrich Böll Stiftung, January 2012, <http://www.lb.boell.org/web/52-788.html>

- And finally, even if the regime *doesn't* fall, but survives in crippled form through military victory or a peace deal, it will have to negotiate a face-saving compromise to regain some measure of legitimacy. Again, the opposition cannot afford to squander the opportunity.

One could roughly divide today's Syrian anti-regime movement into three complementary and interlinked modes of activism: *political*, *armed*, and *revolutionary*. This report will focus primarily on the *political* side of the Syrian anti-regime movement, identifying the major coalitions and component groups, ideological strands, rivalries and collaborations, and the dynamics between exiled and internal groups.

This is not to say that the *armed* organizations, such as the Free Syrian Army, are not of crucial importance to Syria's future – quite the contrary.² Neither is the focus of this report intended to downplay the leading role of the *revolutionaries*, i.e. the local activist networks and non-organized demonstrators who have been the driving force of the uprising from day one.

However, the *political* opposition groups – by which I mean non-violent, organized dissidents seeking influence in the future Syria – deserve their share of the attention. They have played an important role in relation to the media and for the international political debate. The revolutionary narrative they've helped shape feeds back into the Syrian protest movement, affecting its political and tactical choices, and influences the response of international and regional actors to the events in Syria. Several states, both pro- and anti-Assad, are supporting various opposition factions, in the hope of shaping a future government and/or acquiring proxy influence over Syrian politics. The regime itself is likely to sue for peace at some point, and if negotiations begin, the composition and resources of the opposition camp will be crucial to the outcome.

While it is unlikely that any of today's political opposition groups will *control* the future Syria, they are likely to play a significant role in a future transition phase or reconciliation process. Regardless of who rules Syria in the future – the current regime, breakaway elite factions, a government installed with foreign backing, or armed rebels – they will need to connect with the political opposition to legitimize their own position.

Aron Lund
Uppsala, Sweden
May 5, 2012

² For a detailed look at the Free Syrian Army, I recommend Joseph Holliday, 'Syria's Armed Opposition', Middle East Security Report 3, Institute for the Study of War, March 2012.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS (with coalition memberships):

ADO	Assyrian Democratic Organization (Assyrian-Christian party) (DD, SNC)
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey's governing Islamist party)
ASM	Arab Socialist Movement (socialist party) (NDA, DD, NCB, other faction: NPF)
CAP	Communist Action Party (Marxist group) (NDA, TYM and NCB)
BSS	Building the Syrian State (reformist opposition group)
DASU	Democratic Arab Socialist Union (Arab Nationalist group) (NDA, NCB)
DBASP	Democratic Baath Arab Socialist Party (leftist Baath splinter) (NDA, NCB)
DD	Damascus Declaration (opposition coalition) (SNC)
FSA	Free Syrian Army (armed anti-regime militia) (treaty with SNC)
HCRS	Higher Council for the Syrian Revolution (<i>tansiqiya</i> alliance) (SNC)
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraqi-Kurdish group)
KNC	Kurdish National Council (main Syrian-Kurdish alliance)
LCC	Local Coordination Committees (<i>tansiqiya</i> alliance) (SNC)
MB	Muslim Brotherhood (Sunni Islamist group) (SNC)
MJD	Movement for Justice and Development (Sunni Islamist group) (DD, SNC)
NCB	National Coordinating Bureau (opposition coalition)
NCC	National Change Current (liberal group) (close to SNC)
NDA	National Democratic Assembly (opposition coalition)
NSF	National Salvation Front (former coalition of Abdelhalim Khaddam)
NPF	National Progressive Front (Assad's ruling Baath Party-led coalition)
PFLC	Popular Front for Liberation and Change (pro-regime 'opposition' coalition)
PKK	Workers' Party of Kurdistan (Turkish-Kurdish group)
PPW	Party of the Popular Will (leftist pro-regime 'opposition') (PFLC)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraqi-Kurdish group)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Kurdish PKK offshoot in Syria) (NCB)
SCP	Syrian Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist, two factions) (NPF)
SDP	Syrian Democratic Platform (leftist group) (close to NCB)
SDPP	Syrian Democratic People's Party (socialist group) (NDA, DD, SNC)
SNC	Syrian National Council (opposition coalition)
SNDB	Syrian National Democratic Bloc (secular-nationalist group) (SNC)
SRGC	Syrian Revolution General Commission (<i>tansiqiya</i> alliance) (close to SNC)
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party (pro-regime pan-Syrianist group) (NPF)
SSNP/i	Syrian Social Nationalist Party/Intifada ('opposition' wing of SSNP) (PFLC)
TYM	Marxist Left Assembly (Marxist opposition coalition) (NCB)
WRAP	Workers' Revolutionary Arab Party (Marxist-nationalist group) (NDA, DD)

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PART ONE: THE REVOLUTION

The Syrian Arab Republic

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

President: Bashar al-Assad (Baath Party, since 2000)

Prime Minister: Adel Safar (Baath Party, since 2011)

Government: National Progressive Front (Baath Party, and minor allies)³

Capital: Damascus (2.5 million)

Major cities: Aleppo (3 million); Homs (1.3 million); Hama (850,000)

Population: 22,5 million, plus at least 1 million Iraqi and 520,000 Palestinian refugees

Surface Area: 185,180 km² (incl. Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, 1,295 km²)

GDP (ppp): \$109.9 billion (2010)

The modern state of Syria was created out of the collapsing Ottoman Empire in World War One, with little consideration of the area's ethnic and religious makeup. It was awarded to France as a 'mandate' by the League of Nations, and became independent in 1946.

Syria's early history was turbulent, partly due to the lack of strong central institutions and of a common national identity. Competing supra-national loyalties (such as pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism and pan-Syrianism⁴) opened the country to outside penetration. At the same time, narrow and primordial loyalties to family, clan or religious sect often proved dominant on the ground. A small group of wealthy urban families issued mainly from Syria's Sunni Arab majority controlled state affairs and the economy, while the rural populations, including Sunni Arabs and Kurds, Alawites, Druze and others, endured semi-feudal socioeconomic conditions and were poorly represented in national politics. Sectarian political mobilization and popular prejudice aggravated the situation of the religious minorities, particularly the small heterodox Shia sects: Alawites, Druze and Ismailis. As impoverished peasant communities, they endured a double socio-economic and politico-religious marginalization.

Following Syria's ill-fated intervention in the Palestine War of 1948, the parliamentary system of government collapsed. Regional Arab politics and the Cold War had a highly destabilizing effect on Syria, and helped sustain a long string of military rebellions throughout the 50s and 60s. During this period, Syrian regimes seldom lasted longer than a few years, and they were rarely effective at ruling the country.⁵

³ The NPF is led by Bashar al-Assad and the Baath Arab Socialist Party, which enjoys a guaranteed majority in all NPF organs. It was founded in 1972 by Hafez al-Assad. The member parties are all supported and in most cases controlled by the government. They include the Arab Democratic Unionist Party (socialist), Arab Socialist Movement (socialist), Arab Socialist Union (Nasserite), Democratic Socialist Unionist Party (Nasserite), Democratic Social Unionists (Nasserite), National Pact Movement (socialist), Socialist Unionists (Nasserite), Syrian Communist Party (orthodox Marxist-Leninist, led by Ammar Bagdash) Syrian Communist Party/Unified (semi-reformed Marxist-Leninist, led by Hanin Nimr), Syrian Social Nationalist Party (pan-Syrianist, Mahayiri wing). Recently, more parties have been legalized, but they have not (yet) become members of the NPF. The two Communist Party factions (particularly the SCP/Unified), the SSNP and possibly the National Pact Movement are the only NPF parties that appear to retain some limited independence from the Baath.

⁴ *Pan-Syrianism*: An ideology arguing for the formation of a 'Greater Syria' comprising most of the eastern Mediterranean Levant region. It was espoused by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), which played an important role in 1940s-1950s Syrian and Lebanese politics. Today, pan-Syrianism is marginal as an ideological movement, but Levantine regionalist sentiment remains a factor in Syrian politics, even if mostly cloaked in pan-Arab terminology.

⁵ For a detailed history of this period, see Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, Oxford University Press, 1965.

The Baath Party, a conspiratorial Arab nationalist movement, took power in 1963, but instability continued. In November 1970, Defense Minister Hafez al-Assad seized power from leftwing Baath radicals in a bloodless coup dubbed the 'Corrective Revolution'.

Assad's Syria

Assad, an Alawite from the Latakia region in Western Syria, surrounded himself with relatives and tribal allies from his religious community, and so fortified his rule. Officially, the regime remained nonsectarian and secular, and Assad retained many powerful Sunni Arab allies, to make sure that his government wouldn't degenerate into an Alawite-only affair. Poor rural populations, including many Sunni Arabs, supported Baathist rule, in recognition of government efforts to develop the countryside. Other religious minorities appreciated Baathist secularism, and generally accepted Alawite dominance as a relative improvement on Sunni majority rule. In this way, Assad was able to construct a sort of 'alliance of the minorities' to underpin his rule, even while alienating a large segment of the Sunni majority.⁶

Assad's centralized decision-making, in combination with an assertive if pragmatic foreign policy, allowed him to transform Syria from an unstable state subject to outside influence, into an independently run minor regional power, albeit at a high cost to political liberties and economic development.

Throughout the 1980s, Syria played a leading role in the Arab struggle against Israel. It had an armed presence in Lebanon from 1976 to 2005, when it was forced out following the murder of Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafiq al-Hariri (widely thought to have been carried out by Syria and its Lebanese allies). Syrian influence has also been evident in Palestinian and Kurdish politics, as well as, to a more limited extent, in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. After 1979, Syria began acting in concert with the Shia theocracy in Iran. Over the years, this unlikely alliance of convenience has developed into a fixed axis of Middle Eastern politics.

Hafez al-Assad initially liberalized Baathist rule. He was lauded for restoring stability to the country and rekindling the economy, and for his role in the 1973 October War with Israel. Eventually, however, Assad's favoritism of Alawites in the security sector, the blatant corruption of top-level regime officials, and increased tension with Sunni religious opinion, began to seriously inflame social and sectarian relations.

Assad's decision to intervene in the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) on the Christian-rightist side in 1976 was immensely unpopular among Arab nationalists, leftists and Sunni Islamists alike. A downturn in economic growth in the mid-1970s contributed to the unrest, and both the secular and the Islamist opposition simultaneously began radicalizing. Significant popular dissent had appeared by the late 1970s, alongside an armed Sunni Islamist campaign. Foreign pressures on the regime, which was involved in large-scale fighting in Lebanon and various intra-Arab power-struggles, contributed to the unrest.

The secular and intellectual opposition movement was crushed in a countrywide crackdown in spring 1980. The Islamist rebellion, which the Muslim Brotherhood formally joined in

⁶ For a biography of Hafez al-Assad, see Patrick Seale, *Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, rev. ed. 1995. On Syria's sectarian question, see Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, I. B. Tauris & Co., rev. 4th ed, 2011. For the socio-economic angle and other aspects of Assad's system, refer to Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria. Revolution from Above*, Routledge, 2002.

1979, was put down with brute force. The struggle culminated in a massacre in the rebellious city of Hama in February 1982. These measures defeated the uprising.

The sectarianism and brutality unleashed by the struggle had by then significantly changed political dynamics in the country. The bloodshed at Hama and elsewhere had raised the stakes so high for regime supporters, particularly Alawites, that a peaceful transition away from minority dictatorship now appeared impossible. The president abandoned his initial attempts to craft a populist consensus, to instead rule by the gun. Political power was concentrated in the hands of a trusted core of mainly-Alawite military and intelligence chiefs, while civilian party and state institutions were reduced to a facade.⁷

The 1990s brought some lessening of tension, and a modicum of controlled economic liberalization to cope with the loss of Soviet support. Still, the economy had by then stagnated and living standards were slipping across the board. Real change did not occur until after June 2000, when Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as president of Syria.⁸

Syria under Bashar

Bashar eased political repression, allowing for a brief blossoming of dissident activity, the so-called 'Damascus Spring'. This modest experiment with political liberalization was ended in autumn 2001. Syrian politics have since remained authoritarian even by regional standards, but there has not been a return to the extreme levels of repression under Hafez al-Assad. Economic globalization and the advances in information technology also affected Syria, with much of the population now preferring foreign satellite channels to Syria's own state media. The regime has had no choice but to adapt and expand the tolerated margin of dissent.

While Bashar showed a strong appetite for market reform, as opposed to political liberalization, he was apparently wary of proceeding too fast. A rapid pace of economic reform, the argument went, would have empowered the urban Sunni bourgeoisie originally dethroned by the Baath in the 1960s. Bashar's strategy was to instead gradually expand a regime-linked private sector through controlled liberalization. This has resulted in a sprawling web of joint ventures, government-backed investment schemes, and corruption, which connects the Alawite military elite to a re-emerging business aristocracy. Middle- and upper class support for Bashar consequently remained strong. For most Syrians, however, this arrangement has held little immediate promise. Growing income disparities, the regime's neglect for the rural poor, and a severe drought in northern Syria have all put pressure on the once reliably Baathist countryside.⁹

While Bashar had presented himself as a reform president, he had by 2010 delivered very little except economic reform (modest by global standards, although significant in Syrian terms). Popular enthusiasm for the new president had initially been high, and nationalism kept it alive in the 2001-2008 period of regional 'cold war' over Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq.

⁷ There are interesting parallels between the 1979-1982 crisis and today's uprising. For more on this, see Aron Lund, 'The Ghosts of Hama', Swedish International Liberal Centre, June 2011, silc.se/874/ny-silc-rapport-om-krisen-i-syrien/

⁸ On Bashar al-Assad's rule generally, see Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the limits of change*, Routledge, 2004; Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria. Bashar al-Asad and the first years in power*, I.B. Tauris & Co., 2007; Fred H. Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, Saqi/SOAS, 2009. See also the many excellent reports on Syria produced by the International Crisis Group, available at www.crisisgroup.org.

⁹ International Crisis Group, 'Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V): The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution', MENA Report No. 108, July 6, 2011; Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Syria: from "authoritarian upgrading to revolution?"', *International Affairs* 88:1, 2012.

Even so, public faith in Bashar had deflated considerably by the end of the decade, largely reflecting the continued economic woes of most Syrians.

During this period, there was also a noticeable uptick in religious polarization. Bashar had generally pursued a conciliatory line towards the Sunni religious community, but external factors pulled Syria in the other direction. The Sunni-Shia warfare unleashed by the USA's 2003 invasion of Iraq strained Sunni-Alawi relations in Syria, while also demonstrating the dangers of rapid regime change to religious minorities. Sunni chauvinist agitation increased in the pan-Arab media, in response to the Iraq situation and the growing tension between the Gulf states and Iran.¹⁰ Syria played a role in all of these conflicts, and was involved in a power struggle with Sunni and pro-Saudi Lebanese groups following the 2005 Hariri affair, when the Syrian army was forced out of Lebanon.¹¹ All these developments put new strains on sectarian relations in Syria.

The 2000s therefore featured a multi-layered realignment of loyalties in Syria. On the one hand, the Assad regime moved away from its original base in rural and working class milieus, towards the professional middle class and major state-connected business groups (a process well under way in the 1990s, but dramatically accelerated under Bashar). On another level, regional conflicts and the breakdown of state control over information enabled a simultaneous and interlinked resurgence of political opposition and sectarian sentiment. While the Sunni rural poor experienced Bashar's rule chiefly through the pressures of globalization and market reform, religious minorities in the same socioeconomic situation and geographical localities generally drew closer to the regime – if only for fear of the likely alternatives, namely civil unrest and/or increased Sunni and Islamist influence.

HISTORY OF SYRIA

1946	Syria independent from France.
1948	First Arab-Israeli war, Israel is created.
1949	First Syrian military coup.
1958	Union with Nasser's Egypt, Syria secedes in 1961.
1963	Baath Party takes power.
1966	Leftist Baath faction seizes power.
1967	Syria loses Golan in 'Six Day War' with Israel.
1970	Hafez al-Assad takes power.
1973	'October War' with Israel.
1976	Syrian troops enter Lebanon, opposition to Assad grows.
1979	Muslim Brotherhood declares war on Assad.
1980	Major crackdown on peaceful opposition.
1982	Hama massacre ends Islamist rebellion. War in Lebanon.
1984	Failed coup by Refaat al-Assad, brother of Hafez.
2000	Hafez dies, is succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad.
2001	'Damascus Spring' crushed by regime.
2004	Kurdish riots in Qamishli.
2005	Syria leaves Lebanon. Damascus Declaration formed.

¹⁰ Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, own or indirectly control much of the pan-Arab media landscape, and this is often reflected in the editorial line of these channels and newspapers.

¹¹ For a detailed – now outdated and as it turned out partially inaccurate, but still very interesting – history of the Hariri assassination and its aftermath, see Nicholas Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon. The assassination of Rafik Hariri and its impact on the Middle East*, I.B. Tauris & Co., 2006. More current information may be found in the reports from the United Nation's Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) at www.stl-tsl.org. There is unfortunately no single source available on opposing theories about the Hariri murder and the many controversies surrounding the STL, but much can be gathered from the archives of blogs such as *Syria Comment* by Joshua Landis (www.syriacomment.com) and *Qifa Nabki* by Elias Muhanna (www.qifanabki.com).

2006	Former VP Khaddam forms NSF alliance with Brotherhood.
2008	Violence in Lebanon, Syria reclaims influence.
2009	NSF and Damascus Declaration both split.

The opposition before 2011

Media reports on the conflict in Syria often casually refer to 'the Syrian opposition', as if there existed a single recognized group representing anti-regime Syrians. The truth is more or less the opposite: not only is there no monolithic Syrian opposition, but until 2011, there was not even a dominant faction among the Syrian opposition groups.

The opposition landscape is so fragmented and disconnected, that there is little clarity even among activists themselves about what groups and coalitions are truly effective or enjoy popular support. All organized groups are small, and a prominent individual dissident's word will often carry greater weight than that of a political party with hundreds of members. Yet, such imbalances are only one reason for the continuous splintering of the Syrian opposition: 'There are personal problems, and problems connected to our methods, and problems with alliances, and problems with the past', says Michel Kilo, a well-known independent dissident.¹²

The current Syrian opposition movements have emerged over a half-century of Baathist rule; some are even older. Well-established groups therefore exist side by side with newly created organizations, while personal and political rivalries with roots in the 1950s continue to affect opposition politics today.¹³

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB)

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is the largest opposition group, with quite significant support within Syria's Sunni Arab majority, but it was driven into exile after its failed armed uprising in 1979-1982. Its Sunni sectarian character and past abuses make many secularists and religious minorities fearful of the MB. The group has tried to dispel such fears during the 2000s, by calling for democracy and religious tolerance, but minority/secularist opinion remains largely hostile.

Internally, it is torn between a moderate 'Aleppo faction' and a somewhat more hawkish 'Hama faction'. The former MB General Inspector Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni and his group of members mainly from Aleppo were ousted by current General Inspector Mohammed Riad al-Shaqfa and his ally Mohammed Farouq Teifour, both from Hama, in 2010.

The National Democratic Assembly (NDA)

In late 1979, the National Democratic Assembly (NDA, *al-tajammou al-watani al-dimouqrati*) was created as a coalition of Arab nationalist and leftist parties, but then swiftly suppressed in a 1980 crackdown. While largely ineffectual thereafter, it remained the primary framework for secular opposition until the Bashar era. The NDA is currently led by Hassan

¹² Interview with Michel Kilo, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2011.

¹³ For more on the state of the opposition at the start of the uprising, see Aron Lund, 'Weakening regime, weaker opposition', *Near East Quarterly*, Issue IV, May 2011, www.neareastquarterly.com/index.php/2011/06/15/weakening-regime-weaker-opposition/

Abdelazim, and contains six parties, most of them based mainly inside Syria. Although very weak, the NDA has considerable experience and international contacts, and it is the most important bloc of 'traditional' opposition groups inside Syria.

Abdelazim's own Democratic Arab Socialist Union (DASU) and the Syrian Democratic People's Party (SDPP) created by Riad al-Turk are by far the most important parties in the NDA. (Some of the other four are barely functional, and count their members in the low tens.) However, the DASU and the SDPP are historic rivals, and their relationship has deteriorated further during the Bashar era. While the DASU argues for gradual reform and periodically seeks accommodation with the government, the SDPP has allied with Islamist and exile groups in trying to intensify conflict. Since the mid-2000s, the SDPP is somewhat estranged from the NDA, and prefers to work through the Damascus Declaration, another opposition alliance.¹⁴

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ASSEMBLY (NDA)

Democratic Arab Socialist Union (DASU): A Nasserite group led by Hassan Abdelazim. Syria's largest Arab, secular opposition party – possibly around two thousand members – and the dominant group in the NDA. Promotes a 'soft' opposition line and is largely supportive of the regime on foreign policy issues.

Syrian Democratic People's Party (SDPP): See the Damascus Declaration factbox.

Arab Socialist Movement (ASM): A very small socialist group with roots in the 1940s peasant movement created by Akram al-Hourani (1912-1996), formerly linked to the Baath Party.

Workers' Revolutionary Arab Party (WRAP): A very small 1960s splinter group from the Baath Party, formed by Marxist-influenced intellectuals. Led by Abdelhafiz al-Hafez.

Democratic Baath Arab Socialist Party (DBASP): A very small, far-left Baathist faction with roots in the pre-Assad regime of Salah Jadid, led by the exiled ex-foreign minister Ibrahim Makhous.

Communist Action Party (CAP): A very small 2004 recreation of a 1981-1993 Marxist group, formerly strong in student and intellectual circles, with heavy Alawite representation. The original group never joined the NDA, but the reestablished group became a member in 2006.

After the presidential succession in 2000, the 'Damascus Spring' ushered in a new generation of opposition leaders. While the NDA played an important role in the movement, independent activists and new groups emerged alongside the party-based opposition. The leading names during this era included former parliamentarians Riad Seif and Mamoun al-Homsi, independent writer Michel Kilo, the economist Aref Dalila, medical doctors Kamal Labwani and Walid al-Bunni, and the lawyers Heitham al-Maleh and Habib Issa.¹⁵

The Damascus Declaration (DD)

Syria's entanglement in the Hariri affair in Lebanon, and its conflicts with the USA over Iraq and Palestine, inspired renewed efforts to unify opposition ranks. In October 2005, the 'Damascus Declaration' (*i'lan dimashq*) was announced: a joint statement by numerous

¹⁴ For information on the NDA, I have relied on Feisal Derraj & Mohammed Jamal Barout (ed.), *al-ahzab wal-harakat al-qawmiya al-arabiya (The Arab Nationalist Parties and Movements, 2 vols.)*, and *al-ahzab wal-harakat al-yasariya (The Leftist Parties and Movements, 2 vols.)*, Arab Centre for Strategic Studies, Damascus, Syria, no date of publication; Mohammed Najati Tayarah, 'The Political Parties', *Mokarabat*, www.mokarabat.com/dcen5.htm; and on interviews with Hassan Abdelazim (DASU, Damascus 2008), Riad al-Turk (SDPP, Damascus 2008), Hassiba Abderrahman (CAP, Damascus 2008), Ghassan el-Mufleh (ex-CAP, Brussels 2009), Faraj Bayrakdar (ex-CAP, Stockholm 2009), Ahmed Faiz el-Fawwaz (ex-SDPP, Damascus 2008), and others.

¹⁵ For a history of the Damascus Spring, see Alan George, *Syria. Neither Bread Nor Freedom*, Zed Books, 2003.

opposition groups demanding a multi-party democracy.¹⁶ The signers included the NDA, the MB, Kurdish and Assyrian parties, and prominent dissidents such as Michel Kilo, Riad Seif, Fida al-Hourani, Jawdat Said, Nawwaf al-Bashir, and others.¹⁷

The Damascus Declaration (DD) grouping soon ran into trouble. By January, the signatories put out a statement trying to reconcile demands by secularist and leftist groups with the Islamism of the MB, among other things, but problems persisted.¹⁸ The defection of Syria's former vice president, Abdelhalim Khaddam, seduced the MB into also joining a separate, Saudi-backed alliance, the National Salvation Front (NSF) in 2006. As a consequence, it began to lose touch with the DD. It later also split from the NSF, and unsuccessfully tried to sue for peace with the regime in 2009.¹⁹



When the DD elected a leadership in December 2007, severe conflict erupted between an Arab nationalist/leftist camp around DASU leader Hassan Abdelazim and the Paris-based dissident Heitham Mannaa, and the new leadership, which was dominated by Riad al-Turk's SDPP and various Islamists, liberals and Damascus Spring-era figures, such as Riad Seif. The DD was paralyzed by these disagreements and a wave of arrests. In spring 2009 a new leadership in exile was announced.²⁰ It retained little of the membership inside Syria and had a very poor representation of the 'historical' opposition. Control over the DD now seems to be shared between the SDPP and a minor US-backed group (the MJD), with Kurdish and Assyrian members playing second fiddle.²¹ The group has adopted a pro-Western regime change rhetoric, profoundly alienating the Arabist-leftist camp around the old NDA.

Many view the rise and fall of the unity projects of the 2000s as primarily a consequence of international and regional developments. 'The Damascus Declaration emerged from the erroneous belief that the USA was about to topple the government' says Ammar Abdelhamid, a liberal dissident in US exile. 'When it became clear that this wasn't going to happen, everybody went back to their ideological positions. Some quickly, like Abdelazim, and some slowly, like the Muslim Brotherhood.'²²

The Syrian opposition thus emerged from 2009 with all of its major coalitions in disarray: the DD had split repeatedly and drifted off into exile, the NSF had virtually ceased to exist, and the old NDA was crippled by the disagreements between its two main parties, the SDPP and the DASU.

¹⁶ 'Damascus Declaration in English', *Syria Comment*, <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/11/damascus-declaration-in-english.htm>

¹⁷ Information on the DD is drawn from numerous sources, including interviews with Hassan Abdelazim of DASU (Damascus 2008), Riad al-Turk of the SDPP (Damascus 2008), Riad Seif (Damascus 2008), Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni and Zoheir Salem of the MB (London 2009), Malik al-Abdeh of the MJD (London 2009), Kamiran Hajo of the KDPS/al-Parti and the DD's Temporary Secretariat (Västerås, Sweden 2009), and others.

¹⁸ DD, 'bayan tawdihi,' al-Nida, January 31, 2006, http://www.annidaa.org/modules/news/article.php?com_mode=nest&com_order=0&storyid=84

¹⁹ Mohammed Al Shafey, Fatima el Issawi & Saad Jarous, "Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Withdraws from Opposition Group," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 6, 2009, <http://aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=16306>. Also see statements by the MB on April 4, 2009 and the NSF on April 8, 2009.

²⁰ DD, 'al-i'lan 'an tashkil al-amana al-muaqqata li-i'lan dimashq fil-kharij,' al-Nida, April 9, 2009, <http://www.annidaa.org/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1144>

²¹ Formally, three NDA parties have remained as members of the DD: the SDPP, WRAP and ASM. In practice, only the SDPP appears to influence within the group, while the other two are negligible.

²² Interview with Ammar Abdelhamid, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2010.

DAMASCUS DECLARATION FOR NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CHANGE (DD)

Movement for Justice and Development (MJD): A very small liberal-leaning, London-based Sunni Islamist group, created in 2006. The MJD has controversially sought and received US financial backing, and thus gained influence within the DD far beyond its numbers.²³ The MJD's leader Anas al-Abdeh heads the DD since 2009, while his brother and fellow party member Malik al-Abdeh ran the DD's main asset, the Barada TV channel, from 2009 until 2012.

Syrian Democratic People's Party (SDPP): A charter member of the NDA, which was until 2005 called the Syrian Communist Party/politbureau. The SDPP has been distinguished by its hardline approach to the regime, and its alliances with Islamist and other groups outside the NDA's nationalist/leftist consensus. With the name change, the SDPP abandoned orthodox Marxism-Leninism for social democracy. The SDPP is currently led by Ghiath Uyoun al-Soud (in Syria), but in practice its historic leader Riad al-Turk (in Syria) retains influence. Abdelhamid al-Atassi (in Paris) often acts as the SDPP's international representative, and has been involved with the DD.

National Liberal Alliance (NLA): A very small party, functioning as the political vehicle of the liberal Aleppo businessman Samir Nashar, who heads the DD's General Secretariat.

Workers' Revolutionary Arab Party (WRAP): See the National Democratic Assembly factbox.

Arab Socialist Movement (ASM): See the National Democratic Assembly factbox.

Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO): An ethnic Assyrian Christian group, currently led by Gabriel Moshe Gawrieh. Active both inside Syria and in the diaspora.

Kurdish parties: Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (Abdelhamid Hajji Darwish; linked to Iraq's PUK), Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria/al-Parti (Abdelhakim Bashar; linked to Iraq's KDP), Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria/Democratic Yekiti (Ismail Hami), Kurdish Democratic Patriotic Party in Syria (Tahoun Saadoun Sifouk), Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria (Aziz Dawoud).

Note — During the 2011 uprising, the Kurdish parties appear to have left the DD, or are in the process of doing so. They now work through the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The ADO has gained its own quota in the Syrian National Council (SNC), outside the DD framework. The ASM and WRAP are extremely small, and mostly active in the NDA. This leaves the MJD and the SDPP as the dominant components of the DD, along with some independents such as Nashar.

EXTERNALS AND INTERNALS

The exile-internal (*khariji-dakhili*) dimension of the Syrian opposition is often remarked upon by activists themselves, and it has both structural and political implications. Activists abroad have long played a disproportionately influential role in opposition politics. This is partly due to their freedom of movement and access to international media, but also due to the fact that a large part of the Syrian opposition and intellectual elite was forced into exile in the 1980s. Even organizations primarily active inside the country normally keep 'external' branches to help organize contacts within the diaspora, media work, fundraising, etc. The stereotyped perception, which holds a grain of truth, is that the 'externals' tend to be more hardline in their opposition to the regime (and in some cases amenable to the idea of foreign support), while the 'internals' are wary of sectarian upheaval or foreign involvement, and argue for gradual change. There are however numerous exceptions to the rule, and such disputes are much more clearly structured along ideological and party lines than by geography.

²³ Craig Whitlock, "U.S. secretly backed Syrian opposition groups, cables released by WikiLeaks show," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-secretly-backed-syrian-opposition-groups-cables-released-by-wikileaks-show/2011/04/14/AF1p9hwD_story.html. Barada TV is available at www.barada.tv, while the MJD webpage is at www.forsyria.com.

The Syrian revolution

The Syrian revolution began in March 2011, inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world. Early attempts by exiled groups to start a protest failed.²⁴ Instead, the spark that set off the revolution was a mid-March local protest in Deraa, in the Houran region of southern Syria. Opposition members were marginally involved at the outset of these events – for example, the Deraa-born exile Heitham Mannaa and his allies were in touch with some of the original demonstrators both before and during the March events, and local party members enthusiastically joined the protests²⁵ – but they played no significant role in the spontaneous slide into open revolution that followed.

In fact, the traditional political opposition was caught unprepared by the outbreak of revolution. It has been too weak in terms of numbers, organization and resources to significantly contribute to – not to mention control – anti-regime activity on the ground. This situation generally persists in early 2012. In sum, the traditional political opposition has not led the revolution, although it has been able to support it to some extent.

On the other hand, both old and new political opposition groups have been active in shaping the media image of the revolution, in trying to create a credible post-Assad leadership, and in trying to influence regional and international policy towards Syria. Opposition groups have also acted in a self-interested fashion, trying to attach their own names to the revolutionary action and thus gain relevance in the eyes of anti-regime Syrians.

The sectarian problem

The street-level uprising itself has followed its own logic, shaped by local factors and by the regime's response. From the Houran, the revolution quickly leapfrogged into other anti-regime hotspots, aided by pan-Arab and international media. By early summer 2011 it had spread through most of central and northern Syria, but some key areas remained quiet. The relevance of sectarian sentiment and class divisions has become increasingly apparent as the uprising intensified.

Protests have been concentrated in rural Sunni Arab areas, with the Houran a prime example. Damascus and Aleppo have mostly seen small-scale activism, but the situation is very different in the surrounding Sunni Arab countryside, as well as in suburbs housing poor rural immigrants. Kurdish areas in the north of the Aleppo and Hassake Governorates have been quite calm, due to the regime's strategy of appeasing the Kurds and the ambiguous role of some Kurdish parties. Given that the Assad regime is dominated by members of the Alawite sect and fronted by the secular Baath Party, areas with a heavy concentration of religious minorities have fallen in behind the government. This includes the Alawi-majority Latakia and Tartous Governorates, and the Druze-populated Sweida Governorate. Syrian Christians, who are spread among the major cities and some rural enclaves, also mostly support the regime, fearing an Islamist takeover or a civil war in the Iraqi style.

The opposition is well aware of this sectarian issue, but it is a sensitive matter. Many dissidents will try to downplay the problem, for fear of contributing to it. Others, to the

²⁴ 'How Syria dodged an Egypt-style "day of rage"', *Christian Science Monitor*, February 6, 2011, www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0206/How-Syria-dodged-an-Egypt-style-day-of-rage

²⁵ Interviews with Nasser al-Ghazali, Örebro, Sweden, March 2011, and Heitham Mannaa, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2011.

contrary, argue that Syria's sectarian dilemma is too important to be ignored. When interviewed in October, Heitham Manna said that minority groups are represented in the revolution mostly in the form of 'pioneers and elites' without broad community support. He warned that many opposition groups are treating the problem too lightly: 'Nowadays they're looking for one Christian, two Alawites, three Druze, and then they say they're representative.' To the contrary, Manna said, there is 'a real sectarian problem' in some areas of the country, particularly Homs.²⁶

Militarization and internationalization

Rather than contemplate serious reform, which would have meant the end of Assad's rule, the regime has been fighting for time and to shore up support among the minorities and other sympathetic constituencies. Although this has included some liberalizing reforms, such as a new constitution and permission to form political parties, they have been too little too late to satisfy the revolutionary movement. The protests have continued and intensified, and as casualties mounted, hopes for a compromise solution evaporated.

Talk of armed struggle and foreign intervention increased over the summer, as did sectarian rhetoric. Paramilitary resistance groups began to appear along the Turkish border and in the Homs and Idleb Governorates. By mid-autumn, the revolution looked more like a civil war. Many armed factions have used the name *al-jeish al-souri al-hurr*, Free Syrian Army (FSA). A small number of these groups indeed appear to be under the control of the Turkey-based Col. Riad al-Asaad, a military defector who founded the FSA in July 2011. Others are affiliated in name only, and still others are entirely separate from the FSA.²⁷

In November, a round of brutal sectarian killings in Homs left many tens of Alawites and Sunnis dead. Confessional relations plummeted during the winter, particularly in mixed areas. The Homs Governorate, which has a Sunni majority with significant pockets of Alawites and Christians, was a particular flashpoint for religious violence.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION — 2011

Jan	14: Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali overthrown in Tunisia.
Feb	11: Hosni Mubarak overthrown in Egypt. 4-5: Failed attempt to call 'Days of Rage' demonstrations in Syria.
Mar	6: A group of children arrested by security forces in Deraa, Syria. 15: Minor 'Day of Rage' demonstrations around Syria. 16: Arrest of demonstrators in central Damascus, Syria. 17: Protests against the March 6 arrest escalate into riots in Deraa. 18: Friday protests in several locations, Deraa in open revolt. 19: Western intervention in Libya begins.
Apr	26-27: Opposition gathering in Istanbul, Turkey.
May	31-June 2: Congress in Antalya, Turkey, calls for overthrowing Assad.
Jun	4-5: Opposition congress in Brussels, Belgium. 27: 'Semiramis' opposition congress in Damascus, Syria. 30: National Coordination Bureau (NCB) founded in Damascus, Syria.
Jun	Major battles in Jisr al-Shughour, army defections begin.
Jul	16: 'National Salvation Congress' in Istanbul, Turkey. 29: Free Syrian Army (FSA) formed in Turkey.
Aug	23: Announcement of plans for a 'Syrian National Council' in Turkey.

²⁶ Interview with Heitham Manna, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2011.

²⁷ Joseph Holliday, 'Syria's Armed Opposition', Middle East Security Report 3, Institute for the Study of War, March 2012.

Sep	29: Burhan Ghalioun promoted by a conference in Ankara, Turkey.
	3: EU bans import of Syrian oil.
	5-8: Opposition unification meetings in Doha, Qatar.
	6: Arab League initiative to solve Syrian crisis.
	15: Syrian National Council (SNC) created with limited membership.
Oct	17: First NCB congress in Damascus, Syria.
	29: New unification meetings in Istanbul to expand SNC.
	2: SNC declares present makeup and is formally established in Istanbul.
Nov	7: Kurdish pro-SNC dissident Meshaal Temmo murdered.
	8-9: Joint opposition congress in Stockholm, Sweden.
	Negotiations between SNC and NCB in Cairo, sectarian killings in Homs.
Dec	16: Syria suspended from the Arab League.
	12: Regime holds local elections.
	26: Arab League monitors arrive in Syria.
	30: SNC-NCB cooperation deal is signed in Cairo.

By early 2012, the international community seemed to have ruled out a large-scale intervention to topple Bashar al-Assad, after Russia and China demonstrated that they would veto any UN resolution that threatened the regime. Many opposition supporters have instead begun arguing for international support to the FSA. In spring 2012, the main pro-opposition states (Turkey, Qatar, USA, France, Saudi Arabia) began trying secure international recognition for their favored opposition coalition, the Syrian National Council, and link it to the FSA resistance groups. An *ad hoc* group of sympathetic governments, the 'Friends of Syria', was assembled to hold meetings in support of the Syrian uprising.

Long road ahead

In late April 2012, the regime is still standing, but it seems probable that Bashar al-Assad will eventually lose control over most or all of the country, unless the regime finds an exit in the form of a negotiated solution. Protests and international sanctions are bleeding the state economy. Unless it can acquire sustained outside funding, which is unlikely, the regime will eventually be forced to contract and abandon hostile territory, giving the opposition a chance to regroup in 'liberated' areas. On the other hand, a state collapse will not necessarily mean the end of pro-Assad elements as a fighting force, rather a deepened state of civil war.

At the same time, the opposition is weak and lacks central leadership. The revolutionary activists on the ground tend to be locally organized, with little real coordination between cities or regions. The armed opposition is divided into a myriad local militias, only some of which are affiliated to the FSA leadership in Turkey. The political opposition – the focus of this report – is split into two major blocs: the exile-dominated, pro-FSA and pro-intervention Syrian National Council (SNC) and the mostly Syria-based, nonviolent and noninterventionist National Coordination Bureau (NCB), in addition to the Kurdish National Council (KNC), some smaller groups, and individual dissidents.

This fragmentation of the opposition, in combination with the stubborn refusal of the government to surrender power, and the hardening sectarian divides, seem to have put Syria on the path towards a protracted civil war.

There is still some hope that the situation can be turned around. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 2042 on April 14, supporting the six-point peace plan proposed by Kofi Annan (a joint Arab League and UN envoy), which authorizes international monitors to

investigate breaches of an Annan-mediated ceasefire.²⁸ The plan has had some limited success in reducing violence, but neither Assad nor the leading opposition and guerrilla groups seem to fully support a negotiated solution, except as a diversionary tactic. Presently, no side is willing to compromise on fundamentals: they either believe that time works in their favor, or, more probably, fear that any serious concession would fatally split their own support base.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION — 2012

Jan	3: SNC Executive Board rejects the recent Cairo deal with NCB. 22: Arab League proposes transfer of power and unity government. 24-28: Gulf States withdraw their Arab League monitors from Syria. 28: Arab League formally suspends its monitoring mission.
Feb	4: Russia and China veto a UN Security Council resolution on Syria. 23: Kofi Annan appointed peace envoy by UN and Arab League. 24: First 'Friends of Syria' meeting in Tunis, Tunisia. 27: Syria adopts new constitution.
Mar	Major government offensive in Homs and Idleb. 16: Kofi Annan proposes a six-point peace plan. 24: FSA enters into agreement with SNC. 26-27: Pro-SNC opposition meeting in Istanbul.
Apr	1: Second 'Friends of Syria' meeting in Istanbul, Turkey. 14: UN Security Council passes SCR 2042 authorizing monitors in Syria. 19: A smaller, third 'Friends of Syria' meeting in Paris, France.

The tansiqiya groups

'Both the traditional opposition and the regime are equally shocked by what has happened', says 'Maryam', a Syrian demonstrator and political activist. 'They needed time to understand what was happening, that this is a revolution, and while they were busy thinking about it, the people took to the streets.'²⁹

The outbreak of revolution left the traditional Syrian opposition trailing events, trying to catch up with new forms of spontaneous popular mobilization. Initially, the revolution was almost entirely leaderless, but in a matter of weeks, local councils and committees began to crystallize. These rarely had organizational ties to the old political groups, although party members were often present in their individual capacity, sometimes in influential roles. As the uprising dragged on, 'liberated' areas formed more permanent structures, replacing the Baathist bureaucracy. By the end of 2011, for example, a 'Homs Revolutionary Council' had been set up in those areas of the city that had broken free from regime control, and acted as a kind of revolutionary government of the area.

The so-called *tansiqiya* (coordination) groups began to be formed early on in the uprising, inspired by similar networks in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. The term is loosely used to describe number of different movements dominated by Syrian youth activists. They are mainly engaged in media activism, and often include young Syrian activists in exile who use

²⁸ Text of UNSCR 2042, April 14, 2012, www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10609.doc.htm

²⁹ Interview with 'Maryam', the pseudonym of a Syrian activist, in a location outside Syria, October 2011.

the Internet to relay information from contacts inside Syria. Most *tansiqiya* groups try to connect local demonstrator networks (normally organized in a single neighborhood, village or city) to each other, by distributing information to and from them, and by passing it on to the organized opposition groups and world media. They generally do not initiate demonstrations themselves.

'No, *no one* organizes the demonstrations', claims 'Maryam', the activist. 'That is the real dilemma in Syria. It is the young people in the neighborhood who talk to each other and go out in the street.' According to her, the traditional opposition plays 'no role' in organizing protests, and neither do the *tansiqiya* groups: 'The people who go out into the streets in large numbers, they obey no one. Sure, there are some who call themselves *tansiqiya* groups. They say that they can determine when people will go out in the street or stay at home, but that's not true.' She does acknowledge, however, that the *tansiqiya* groups play an important role in spreading information and organizing the revolution's media work.³⁰

Hozan Ibrahim, the Germany-based spokesperson of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), provides a long list of *tansiqiya* groups. Apart from the LCC, which claims to represent 14 local *tansiqiya* sub-committees on the city or governorate level,³¹ he mentions the April 17 Youth, the Syrian Revolutionary Council, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, and 'the Kurdish Coordinating Union, the Revolutionary Command in Deraa, in Homs, Idleb, and other areas.' Ibrahim describes amicable relations between most of these groups, including some formalized alliances:



لجان التنسيق المحلية
Local Coordination Committees

Some groups are local, others are country-wide. The differences are in geographic location and sometimes in the reading of events and reactions to it. Anyway, you can't join them all in these terrible circumstances, but we do have good connections to all of them. We have formed a coalition with some groups, like April 17, and others are our partners in the Syrian National Council, like the [Syrian Revolution General Commission], and we are connected and coordinating on many levels.

Nevertheless, no one is the street, all of us are organizing and supporting. People are ready to demonstrate and say their demands without any help, and all groups have emerged after the popular revolution, so we do have a real impact, but we can't say we're steering it.³²

Their role as a conduit for information to and from Syria put the *tansiqiyas* in a very visible role, and they quickly drew the attention of the media and of traditional opposition groups, both seeking to get in touch with the new wave of activism. Old-school Syrian opposition parties have reacted to the revolution by trying to highlight their concern for youth issues, and forming alliances with *tansiqiya* groups and media activists. Many individual dissidents also joined *tansiqiya* groups early on, recognizing that this was a more effective way of supporting the revolution.

³⁰ Interview with 'Maryam', the pseudonym of a Syrian activist, in a location outside Syria, October 2011.

³¹ 'About the LCCS', LCC, <http://www.lccsyria.org/about>

³² Interview with Hozan Ibrahim, LCC spokesperson and SNC General Secretariat member, e-mail, October 2011. Slightly amended for clarity.

For example, the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) is one of the biggest *tansiqiya* alliances. It was created in August 2011 by 43 different activist groups in addition to a previous alliance, the Union of Syrian Revolution Tansiqiyas, which comprised a further 56 groups.³³ Most of these were certainly led by local demonstrators or media activists, but there is a certain overlap with the older opposition groups. Among the people involved in the SRGC's creation was Soheir al-Atassi, a famous opposition activist from a political family, who now functions as its spokesperson. Another veteran dissident in exile, Mohammed Khalifa, sits on its governing board.³⁴

The quest for opposition unity

During 2011, a large number of conferences were held, aiming to unify the Syrian opposition and enable it to play a more constructive role in support of the revolution. Several of these conferences took place in Turkey, which began supporting the exiled opposition at an early stage. No two conferences gathered exactly the same participants, although many overlapped to some extent, often depending on the location. Some were rival events, others complementary.

The conferences helped opposition activists become acquainted with each other, but they also complicated matters by producing a number of competing steering committees, leaderships, councils, etc., all of which tended to regard themselves as the core group around which unity should be built.

LIST OF MAJOR SYRIAN OPPOSITION MEETINGS IN 2011

April 26-27, Istanbul, Turkey: A first meeting, informally supported by the AKP government, gathers opposition members in conjunction with a Syrian-Turkish academic congress.

May 31-June 3, Antalya, Turkey: Organized by Syrian activists (including Ammar Qurabi and Abderrazaq Eid), and financed by Syrian expatriates from the wealthy Sanqar family. The MB played a central role, but many others including the DD are present, although Kurds are poorly represented. A final statement ups the ante by refusing compromise or reform solutions, stating that the regime must be overthrown. A 31-member leadership is elected.³⁵

June 4-5, Brussels, Belgium: An Islamist-dominated meeting spawns the 'National Coalition to Support the Syrian Revolution'.³⁶

June 27, Damascus, Syria: 'The Semiramis Meeting.' An unprecedented opposition meeting in Syria, including some 200 independent dissidents, mostly affiliated with secular, leftist and nationalist groups. A strong final statement considering the location, but no clear call for the fall of the regime.³⁷

June 30, Damascus, Syria: The 'National Coordination Bureau for the Forces of Democratic Change' (NCB) is established, by leftist-nationalist Syrian groups and some Kurdish parties.

³³ 'al-bayan al-tasisi: tasis al-haya al-'amma lil-thawra al-souriya' ('Founding Statement: Founding of the Syrian Revolution General Commission'), SRGC, August 18, 2011, www.srgccommission.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59&Itemid=74

³⁴ Interview with Mohammed Khalifa, member of the SRGC political bureau, Stockholm, Sweden, March 2012.

³⁵ Joshua Landis, 'The Final Declaration of the Antalya Opposition Conference', *SyriaComment*, June 4, 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=10087>.

³⁶ 'Closing Statement of the National Coalition's Conference to Support Syrian Revolution', *IkhwanWeb*, June 6, 2011, www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28683

³⁷ Joshua Landis, 'Syrian Opposition Conference: Semiramis Hotel: 200 members – First Impressions', *SyriaComment*, June 27, 2011, www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=10504; 'al-bayan al-khitami wal-'ahd lil-liqa al-tashawuri fil-semiramis', *Kulluna Shuraka fil-Watan*, June 27, 2011, all4syria.info/web/archives/15351

July 16, Istanbul, Turkey: 'Syrian National Salvation Congress' called by dissidents including Islamists Heitham al-Maleh, Imad al-Din al-Rashid, and Jawdat Said. Receives a strong MB contingent, and, for the first time, some high-level Kurdish participation, including Meshaal Temmo. Burhan Ghalioun also participates. The congress calls for the creation of a 25-member leadership.³⁸

August 23, Istanbul, Turkey: Plans for a 'Syrian National Council' (SNC) are announced by the 'Istanbul Group', a coalition of independents and some pro-MB Islamists. Membership will be at about 120 people, but confusion reigns and few details emerge.

August 29, Ankara, Turkey: Announcement of the formation of a 94-member 'Transitional National Council' to be headed by Burhan Ghalioun, by dissidents including youth and *tansiqiya* organizations. The council comes to nothing, but Ghalioun's endorsement by these groups helps raise his profile within the traditional opposition.³⁹

September 5-8, Doha, Qatar: Palestinian intellectual Azmi Bishara hosts a 'Consultative Meeting' in Doha, Qatar, where NCB, DD, MB and the Istanbul Group try to iron out their differences. Agreement reached between NCB, DD and MB, but not implemented.

September 15, Istanbul, Turkey: SNC is formally established by the Istanbul Group with a partially declared list of 140 members, mostly independents, but also including some DD and MB members.⁴⁰

October 2, Istanbul, Turkey: SNC is re-established in its present form, expanded to some 300 members. It includes many participants from previous opposition meetings, effectively superseding them, and joins DD, MB, ADO, LCC, and other groups. The press conference is chaired by Burhan Ghalioun, who will later be elected president.

The creation of the NCB

In parallel to the conferences, a group of activists within the secular Arab opposition had begun a more structured unification project. A working group was established in April 2011, including Burhan Ghalioun (a leftist/liberal academic in exile), Michel Kilo (a Marxist civil society activist and writer), Hussein al-Oudat (an ex-Baathist journalist), Aref Dalila (a dissident economist), Habib Issa (an Nasserite human rights lawyer), Hazem al-Nahar (of the leftist-nationalist WRAP party), and Abdelaziz al-Khayyer (formerly a leading member of the Marxist CAP).⁴¹ According to Hazem al-Nahar:

We had to stop the flow of irresponsible and maverick statements and initiatives, stem the tide of conferences and pronouncements by the Syrian opposition in exile, and simultaneously persuade Syrians at home that there was a political organization capable of managing a post-regime transitional period. We also had to send a message to the international community that there was a viable alternative to post-revolutionary chaos (as the saying goes: a revolution without a head grows a thousand heads once it has succeeded).⁴²

³⁸ Joshua Landis, 'Syrian "National Salvation" Opposition Meeting in Istanbul: Opening Remarks and Mr Maleh (17 July 2011)', *SyriaComment*, July 16, 2011, www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=10787; Basheer al-Baker, 'Burhan Ghalioun: Opposition from Exile or at Home?' *al-Akhbar*, September 13, 2011, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/burhan-ghalioun-opposition-exile-or-home>

³⁹ 'majlis intiqali li-souria bi-riyasat ghalioun' ('Transitional Council for Syria, led by Ghalioun'), *al-Jazeera*, August 29, 2011, <http://aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8C282DB5-6EDA-421A-B3F7-3C6686D7FA6E.htm>

⁴⁰ David Gollust, 'US Applauds Founding of Syrian Opposition Coalition', *Voice of America*, September 15, 2011, www.voanews.com/english/news/middle-east/Syrian-Opposition-Creates-National-Council-129882363.html

⁴¹ Hazem Nahar, 'The Discourse and Performance of the Syrian Opposition Since the Beginning of the Revolution', *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, January 2012, <http://www.lb.boell.org/web/52-788.html>. While all members are secular, the heavy minority representation in this group is worth noting: Dalila, Khayyer and Issa are Alawites, Kilo is a Christian. The group is also heavy on former political prisoners: Kilo, Dalila, Issa and particularly Khayyer – who spent 14 years in jail – are among Syria's most celebrated former prisoners of conscience.

⁴² Hazem Nahar, 'The Discourse and Performance of the Syrian Opposition Since the Beginning of the Revolution', *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, January 2012, <http://www.lb.boell.org/web/52-788.html>

Invitations were sent out to the main opposition blocs: the National Democratic Assembly (NDA), the Damascus Declaration (DD), the Marxist Left Assembly (TYM), the various Kurdish party alliances, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), and nearly 100 independent figures.

What emerged out of this initiative, on June 30, did not quite live up to expectations. The National Coordination Bureau for the Forces of Democratic Change (NCB) claimed to include 14 political parties, although some of these were very small. It included the bulk of the leftist-nationalist NDA, its natural allies within the TYM, a few Kurdish parties, some recently created groups, and a number of famous independent dissidents, mostly from inside the country. But the exiled congress leaderships, the MB, DD and most other Kurdish parties refrained from joining it. This meant that while the NCB had a good representation of 'internal' Syrian dissidents from the traditional opposition, it lacked support from the exile and youth groups to which the world's attention was directed.

The creation of the SNC

Meanwhile, conferences continued to be held in the diaspora community, particularly in Turkey, which seemed to be quietly supporting some groups, particularly the MB. The MB and DD viewed these conferences as an alternative route towards opposition unity, in a climate more conducive to their own ideologies and influence.

However, the main push for unity came from the independent dissidents on the congress circuit. Among the exile groups that took form during the spring/summer were the mixed Islamist-nationalist National Action Group for Syria, led by Ahmed Ramadan and allied to a faction within the MB,⁴³ and the Democratic Coordination Meeting, a small group of about 25 mostly independent academics, including Basma Qodmani, Abdulbaset Sieda, Adib al-Shishakli,⁴⁴ Wael Mirza, Louai Safi, Najib Ghadbian, and others.



Basma Qodmani

These two groups formed a joint alliance, and began pulling in other dissident networks. Discussions were initially held with a group led by Noufal al-Dawalibi, the son of a former Syrian prime minister, but no agreement was reached. By August, the National Action Group for Syria and the Democratic Coordination Meeting had joined forces with the Independent Islamic Current (a non-MB Islamist organization led by Imad al-Din al-Rashid, Fida Majdhoub and others, later reorganized as the Syrian National Current). Together, they became known as the 'Istanbul Group'. At a press conference on August 23, they declared their intention to form a 'Syrian National Council'.⁴⁵ Its first congress was scheduled in Istanbul for early September.⁴⁶

⁴³ The faction is seen as very close to the former MB leader Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, although it also includes non-MB members and non-Islamists. Bayanouni's 'Aleppo faction', considered politically moderate, was ousted from the leadership in the MB by a more hardline faction of Islamists mainly from Hama in 2010, causing factional strife within the group. Most leading members of the National Action Group for Syria are from Aleppo, including Ramadan and Obeida Nahhas, both of whom are tied to the MB.

⁴⁴ Grandson of Adib al-Shishakli, Syria's military ruler 1949-1954.

⁴⁵ 'After Istanbul meeting, Syrian dissidents form "national council" to oust Assad', al-Arabiya, August 23, 2012, www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/23/163729.html. The press conference was led by Ahmed Ramadan, Khaled al-Hajj Saleh, Hassane al-Hashemi, Hassane al-Shalabi, Louai Safi, Abdulbaset Sieda and Adib al-Shishakli.

⁴⁶ Interviews with Abdulbaset Sieda, SNC Executive Board, Uppsala, Sweden, October 2011, May 2012, and telephone, May 2012.

As the conference drew near, the Istanbul Group unexpectedly received an invitation to a conference in Doha, sponsored by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), a Qatari think tank.⁴⁷ The ACRPS is led by the Palestinian intellectual Azmi Bishara, whose point man for Syrian affairs appears to have been the Qatar-based WRAP member Hazem al-Nahar, who at this time was a member of the NCB. The ACRPS now sponsored a 'Consultative Meeting' in early September, gathering about 25 representatives from some major factions in the Qatari capital, including the NCB, the DD, and the Istanbul Group, as well as various independents. The MB was kept up to date with the proceedings, which began on September 5.

During the negotiations in Doha, the Arab League issued a Qatar-backed initiative to solve the Syrian crisis. The text of the initiative made specific reference to the NCB, and the core idea was that Bashar al-Assad would serve out his term before stepping down in 2014.⁴⁸ This angered some of the groups present in Doha, who suspected that Bishara and/or Qatar wanted them to submit to NCB leadership and abandon their hopes for immediate regime change. The organizers denied that the Doha meeting and the Arab League initiative had been coordinated, but the incident still caused some irritation.⁴⁹ There were also disputes about how to formulate the goal of the planned alliance. The hardline exiles of the Istanbul Group pushed for a clear-cut 'overthrow the regime' statement, while the NCB was at the opposite end, preferring a more ambiguous formula of 'national democratic change',⁵⁰ and Burhan Ghalioun suggested to 'turn the page on the dictatorial regime', and so on.

The Istanbul Group decided to pull out of the negotiations, to focus on its own upcoming National Council conference. The Doha meeting still produced an agreement between the NCB, DD, and – in a last minute addition – the MB. As the participants returned home, the deal failed to materialize. This was due to internal disagreements in both the DD, where the SDPP (which had not been included in the DD delegation to Doha) opposed an alliance with the NCB, and in the MB, where the 'Aleppo faction' resented the deal, preferring to let its allies in the Istanbul Group launch their National Council first. There existed a deep mistrust between both these groups and the leftist-nationalist camp in the NDA/NCB, ever since the Damascus Declaration disputes of 2007-2009.

The Doha agreement was therefore not implemented. About a week later, the Istanbul conference went ahead as planned, with representatives of the MB and DD present. It produced a new body called the Syrian National Council (SNC), which was announced on

⁴⁷ <http://english.dohainstitute.org>

⁴⁸ "'al-hayat" tanshur nass al-mubadara al-arabiya fi souriya: tahyid al-jeish wa-intikhabat riasiya fi 2014' ('al-Hayat publishes the text of the Arab Initiative in Syria: Neutralizing the army and presidential elections in 2014'), al-Hayat, September 6, 2014, international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/304457

⁴⁹ Hazem Nahar, 'The Discourse and Performance of the Syrian Opposition Since the Beginning of the Revolution', Heinrich Böll Stiftung, January 2012, <http://www.lb.boell.org/web/52-788.html>. Note that the English translation of this text mistranslates 'September' as 'July' in several places, implying that the Doha meeting took place earlier in the summer. The Arabic original has the timing correct, and can be found here:

<http://www.mokarabat.com/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A9%20%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8%20%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%88%D9%83%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%85-%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A.pdf>.

⁵⁰ 'al-taghyir al-watani al-dimouqrati': This phrase has a history in Syrian opposition politics, and is identified with the 'old' secular opposition. It is intended to imply an internal Syrian solution without foreign involvement ('national'). It also states that there must be 'change', but it should be 'democratic', which hints at the NDA's vision of an inclusive, peaceful transition, where both regime and opposition elements partake. Since its creation in 1979, this has been the main slogan of the NDA ('National Democratic Assembly'), which brought it along into the original 2005 DD statement ('Damascus Declaration for *National Democratic Change*'), although the DD organization has since adopted a more radical 'regime change' rhetoric.

September 15 by four dissidents from the Istanbul Group: Ahmed Ramadan, Basma Qodmani, Abdulbaset Sieda, and Imad al-Din al-Rashid.⁵¹ Their initial statements indicated that the DD and MB were already on board, but both groups appeared to be wavering, having just returned from the Doha talks. 'On September 15, the National Council was announced in Istanbul,' says Tarif al-Sayyed Issa, of the MB. 'That meant we had two coalitions to choose from. We said: merge them into one.'⁵²



Abdulbaset Sieda

A second, enlarged unification meeting was therefore convened in Istanbul on September 29. The list of participants included: The newly created SNC (i.e. the former Istanbul Group, itself composed of the Independent Islamic Current, the National Action Group for Syria, and the Democratic Coordination Meeting); the MB; the DD; some *tansiqiya* networks including the LCC, the SRGC, and the HCRS; some Kurdish groups including the Future Party and al-Parti; the Assyrian-Christian ADO; and independents such as Burhan Ghalion.

The NCB was also invited, and Hazem al-Nahar arrived as its representative – but he then found out at the last minute that the Syria-based leadership around Hassan Abdelazim had decided to pull him back. According to Nahar, '[t]he real reason for the [NCB]'s withdrawal was that the conference was to be held in Istanbul, a place they viewed as tantamount to the devil's back yard. Had it been held in Cairo, they would have gone.'⁵³

The conference went ahead anyway. 'There were marathon discussions to 1 AM, and then we went on Skype, and it carried on that way', says Abdulbaset Sieda, one of the negotiators for the Istanbul Group. 'But finally, we succeeded!'⁵⁴

Most of the attendees agreed to join the SNC, which was expanded and given a new leadership structure. Its core was the 'old SNC' (ex-Istanbul Group) from September 15, to which had been added the MB, the DD, the ADO, and some youth groups, such as the LCC *tansiqiya*. Burhan Ghalion also joined alongside the *tansiqiya* activists. This was when the SNC was finally established in its present configuration. A hardline political formula was chosen: 'to overthrow the regime' including 'the head of the regime', i.e. Bashar al-Assad.

On October 2, the expanded SNC held its first press conference in Istanbul, where Ghalion made the opening statement. He was flanked on the podium by Mohammed Riad al-Shaqfa (MB), Basma Qodmani (independent liberal, old SNC), Abdulbaset Sieda (independent Kurdish leftist, old SNC), Ahmed Ramadan (pro-MB Islamist, old SNC), Abdelahad Steifo (Assyrian Christian, ADO) and Samir Nashar (liberal, DD). The event received heavy media coverage, and sent the impression that the Syrian opposition had finally unified its ranks.

However, there were still pieces missing. The expanded SNC didn't include the NCB, and it had only a minor contingent of Kurdish dissidents. 'It's a step forward, but a step which doesn't include everyone', commented Nasser al-Ghazali, a dissident close to the NCB.⁵⁵

⁵¹ David Gollust, 'US Applauds Founding of Syrian Opposition Coalition', Voice of America, September 15, 2011, www.voanews.com/english/news/middle-east/Syrian-Opposition-Creates-National-Council-129882363.html

⁵² Interview with Tarif al-Sayyed Issa, MB, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2012.

⁵³ Hazem Nahar, 'The Discourse and Performance of the Syrian Opposition Since the Beginning of the Revolution', Heinrich Böll Stiftung, January 2012, <http://www.lb.boell.org/web/52-788.html>.

⁵⁴ Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, leading SNC member, Uppsala, Sweden, October 2011.

⁵⁵ Interview with Nasser al-Ghazali, telephone, October 2011.

Indeed, the SNC itself was at this stage careful to point out that it didn't encompass the entire opposition, although it claimed to represent a majority. Sieda, just home from the October 2 press conference, argued that the SNC represented about 60 percent of the political opposition, saying that the NCB represented another 20 percent, with the final 20 percent distributed over smaller independent groups and individuals. In his reading, this was good enough:

We knew from the start that we would never be able to gather the entire opposition, but if we could get 50 or 60 percent, that would be fine. It's a start, it will help break the vicious circle. Now we have a group which can influence world politics and which can try to organize aid for the people, because they need it. And that requires an organization.⁵⁶

The foreign factor

Since October 2011, the Syrian opposition has been divided into two main camps: the SNC and the NCB. While there are some small groups and many individual dissidents outside these coalitions, the SNC and NCB are undoubtedly the dominant camps in Syrian opposition politics.

What led to this division? 'The main question is about foreign intervention and foreign support. A big group is against this, another group has no objections to it', claims Mohammed Merei, a Nasserite NCB member and chairman of the Arab Organization for Human Rights.⁵⁷ This is largely true: the question of international alliances has been decisive. Not only because foreign support may determine the outcome of the conflict, and decide the international alignment of post-Assad Syria, but also because the Syrian revolution has become inextricably tied up with regional power politics. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the USA, France, Iran, and Russia are all intimately involved in a struggle over Syria's future, not to mention Lebanese political factions, Kurdish militias such as the PKK, PUK and KDP, and Islamist groups like the international Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, and many others.

The two opposition camps have responded very differently to this situation. As an astute observer of Syrian opposition politics points out, the SNC has 'clearly sided with one side of this proxy-war', namely that made up by the West, Turkey and the Gulf Arab states. The SNC is based in Turkey, funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and has expressed its desire for a Western-led military intervention.⁵⁸ Although this is a sensitive subject, and not many want to discuss it openly, there was always a current in the SNC that drew inspiration from recent events in Libya. Some are quite frank about it: 'Everyone expected that when the SNC formed, we'd have a similar dynamic as in Libya', says Malik al-Abdeh of the MJD, a DD member group. 'When the National Transitional Council [in Libya] formed, before you knew it, you had NATO coming in.'⁵⁹

The NCB, by contrast, strongly opposes a foreign-led regime change and military intervention. It was created partly as a kind of pre-emptive reaction against those exile groups who sought a 'Libyan path' for Syria, and it is fiercely critical of Turkey, the Gulf states and of Western influence in the Middle East.

⁵⁶ Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, leading SNC member, Uppsala, Sweden, October 2011.

⁵⁷ Interview with Mohammed Merei, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2011.

⁵⁸ Interview with 'Basel al-Hamwi' (pseudonym), author of the *Syrian Revolution* blog (www.syrianrevolution.org), e-mail, February 2012.

⁵⁹ Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, member of the MJD, telephone, May 2012.

But while ideological and political issues are at the heart of the matter, they are also underpinned by old opposition rivalries, rooted in power struggles and personal disputes. The current conflict between the SNC and the NCB is almost a reenactment of the post-2007 intrigues within the Damascus Declaration, which led to a similar split between left/right, secular/religious and internal/exile camps, centered on the issue of foreign support and often involving the same individuals.

'The National Council Represents Me'

Soon after its founding, the SNC managed to gain the support of 'The Syrian Revolution 2011', a Facebook page created in early spring 2011, which has played an important role in the uprising.⁶⁰ The page is run by a *tansiqiya*-style group of young Syrians. It posts pro-revolution news and information, and hosts discussions among opposition activists. The most important function of the page has been to invent a slogan for each of the large Friday demonstrations in Syria, a mobilization method picked up from the revolution in Egypt. This is both intended to inspire recurrent protests and to influence their political line. For example, Friday demonstrations on May 20, 2011, went under the name 'Azadi Friday', using the Kurdish word for 'Freedom' to encourage Kurdish participation. On June 10, a 'Friday of the Tribes' tried to get the Bedouin east moving, while June 30's 'Aleppo Volcano Friday' fizzled out without much effect.

The team controlling the website thus acquired some influence over the revolution's course, but in summer 2011, they relinquished direct control and instead began proposing a selection of Friday slogans for open online voting. The choice of slogan now rests with the community of web activists that visits the page, with thousands voting in each Friday poll, but the nomination process is still controlled by the 'Syrian Revolution 2011' team. Representatives of this group claim that it includes Syrians of all ideological and sectarian backgrounds, mostly young activists in exile without previous political affiliation. (The page itself is affiliated to a large *tansiqiya* union, the SRGC, since August 2011.⁶¹)

However, at least some members have been linked through family ties to the MB. Notably, the former spokesperson of the 'Syrian Revolution 2011' team, Fida al-Din al-Sayyed Issa, is the son of Tarif al-Sayyed Issa, an MB member now based in Sweden. Others in the family are also engaged in supporting the Syrian revolution. For example, Fida al-Din's brother Yasser is a prominent media activist, and also involved with the 'Syrian Revolution 2011' site. Regime media has responded by incitement against the family, and Fida al-Din has received numerous threats to his life, while members of the family still in Syria have been killed by government forces.⁶²

⁶⁰ 'The Syrian Revolution 2011 al-thawra didd bashar al-assad', Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution>.

⁶¹ 'al-bayan al-tasisi: tasis al-haya al-'amma lil-thawra al-souriya' ('Founding Statement: Founding of the Syrian Revolution General Commission'), August 18, 2011, www.srgcommission.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59&Itemid=74; Interview with Fida al-Din al-Sayyed Issa, former spokesperson of the 'Syrian Revolution 2011' group, Eskilstuna, Sweden, October 2011

⁶² Interviews with Mohammed al-Masri, spokesperson of the 'Syrian Revolution 2011' group, e-mail, October 2011; Fida al-Din al-Sayyed Issa, former spokesperson of the 'Syrian Revolution 2011' group, Eskilstuna, Sweden, October 2011; Tarif al-Sayyed Issa, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2011; and conversations with Yasser al-Sayyed Issa, Stockholm, Sweden, March 2012.

With or without Islamist prodding, activism on the page has tended towards hardline opposition, with an eye to the street. While the website initially resisted foreign involvement and violence, it soon took the lead in encouraging the internationalization of the revolution. By autumn, it had begun calling for both armed resistance and foreign intervention.⁶³

On October 7, 2011, i.e. the first Friday after the SNC press conference on October 2, the site recommended activists across Syria to demonstrate under the slogan *al-majlis al-watani yumathiluni*: 'The National Council Represents Me'. News footage from protests later that day showed demonstrators across Syria who had incorporated the slogan on their banners. This gave an immense boost to the SNC's credibility, raised awareness about the group inside Syria, and has allowed it to claim that it is endorsed by the revolutionary masses. From that point on, there was no doubt which was Syria's leading opposition coalition. The NCB had been decisively relegated to second place – but it still could not be ignored.

Radicalization of the SNC

As the uprising grew more violent and bitter over the summer of 2011, the more radical opposition line gained support. By the time the SNC had officially formed in October, old taboos against foreign intervention and armed struggle were breaking down under pressure from the street. The creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the summer of 2011 was hailed by many demonstrators, and armed groups began to spring up across Syria.⁶⁴

The SNC had taken a hard line from the start, and refused any form of dialogue with the regime, but it also opposed foreign intervention and violence. While there were some pro-intervention voices within the group, most of the SNC leadership had publicly argued against armed struggle and foreign support. For example, Basma Qodmani – who would later become an SNC Executive Board member – wrote in August 2011 that 'a militarization would place the revolution on an arena where the regime enjoys clear superiority, and it would erode the moral high ground which has characterized the revolution since it began.'⁶⁵

However, soon after its creation, the SNC began to adapt to the militant attitudes of the demonstrators and media activists, eager not to lose support on the revolutionary street. At first, the SNC's calls for intervention were couched in vague demands for 'international protection' or 'help in stopping the killing machine', and curious requests for a 'no-fly zone' (despite the fact that the Syrian regime was not using its air force). The SNC tried to portray the FSA as fighting only in self-defense and for the protection of unarmed demonstrators, disregarding the FSA's own declaration of war against the Syrian army. But step by step, the code words fell out of use: already by November-December, the SNC made open calls for

⁶³ This development can be followed in the slogans proposed by the page for Syria's Friday demonstrations. Examples during 2011 include Jul. 8: 'No Dialogue', Sep. 9: 'International Protection', Oct. 14: 'The Free [Syrian] Army', Oct. 28: 'No-Fly Zone', Nov. 25: 'The Free Syrian Army Protects Me' Dec. 2: 'Syrian Buffer Zone', and during 2012, Jan. 13: 'Support the Free Syrian Army', Jan. 27: 'The Right to Self-Defense', Mar 2: 'Providing arms to the Free Syrian Army', Mar. 16: 'Immediate Foreign Intervention'.

⁶⁴ Joseph Holliday, 'Syria's Armed Opposition', Middle East Security Report 3, Institute for the Study of War, March 2012. A video of the formal establishment of the FSA is available here: 'ugharit i'lan tashkil al-jaish al-souri al-hurr al-aqid riad al-asaad 2011 7 29' ("Ugarit: Announcement of the formation of the Free Syrian Army. Col. Riad al-Asaad. July 29, 2011."), YouTube video uploaded by UgaritNEWSChannel on July 29, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltzl_AIFUWg

⁶⁵ Basma Qodmani, 'al-khawf min tasalluh al-intifada al-souriya' ('Fear of the arming of the Syrian revolution'), *al-Shurouq al-Jadid*, August 7, 2011, <http://www.shorouknews.com/Columns/Column.aspx?id=519460>.

foreign support, and was seen publicly courting the armed resistance, in the hope of acquiring the FSA as its military wing.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, the NCB refused to budge from its original June 2011 line of non-intervention and non-violence. It has tried to convince demonstrators to stay peaceful even in the face of regime violence. While it encourages defections from the army, it argues against attacking government forces, saying that the Syrian conscript army is not their enemy, and that the regime will always emerge the stronger party in an armed confrontation.⁶⁷ NCB spokesperson Heitham Mannaa has openly criticized the FSA, implying that it is a Turkish puppet group.⁶⁸

This position has been very unpopular among revolutionary groups in hotspots like Homs, Deraa and Idleb, where thousands had been killed and the mood is very militant. By late autumn, activists in these places had begun desperately calling for foreign intervention and armed resistance, and many were thankful for SNC support. While the NCB may or may not have accurately judged the mood of the country at large, their statements were met with disbelief and anger among activists on the frontlines of the uprising.

The Cairo negotiations

As the autumn of 2011 progressed, several developments brought the question of opposition unity into focus. The regime had retained the upper hand and made no sign of giving in, while a growing armed resistance raised the specter of sectarian civil war. Foreign involvement was on the rise, with the US, EU, the Gulf States and Turkey now openly backing the opposition. All these states appear to have repeated the same message in meetings with opposition factions: that unity was a precondition for material support.

The lack of a central opposition voice also meant that anyone could portray himself as a revolutionary leader. For example, in late August, world media reported widely on a statement by the 'Revolutionary Commission of the Coordinating Committees' which proclaimed the commencement of armed struggle.⁶⁹ As it turned out, the person behind this grandly named organization was a Sweden-based blogger, with no apparent ties to any major opposition faction.⁷⁰ The cacophony of opposition voices has made it impossible for the revolution to stay 'on message', and provided the regime with ample ammunition in the war for Syrian hearts and minds. Larger opposition groups could not fail to notice that this situation both hurt the revolution, and diluted their own influence. 'The biggest issue for the opposition is unity', said the SNC's Burhan Ghalioun in October 2011:

At first, there was a feeling that this was certainly important, but only with time did it become apparent *how* important it is that the revolution acquires a single address, where you can go to discuss with it. [...] We must stop these splits, this talk of a

⁶⁶ 'SNC Meets the Free Syrian Army', SNC, November 27, 2011, <https://www1.syriancouncil.org/en/news/item/2-snc-meets-with-the-free-syrian-army.html>

⁶⁷ 'Iimadha nahnu ma' al-silmiya??' ('Why are we with nonviolence?'), NCB, <http://syrianncb.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/why-pacifism.jpg>

⁶⁸ 'Opposition figure criticizes SNC ties to Syrian rebels', *al-Akhbar*, January 13, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/content/opposition-figure-criticizes-snc-ties-syrian-rebels

⁶⁹ Paula Astatih, 'Syrian uprising to get aggressive- Activist', *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 29, 2011, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=26393

⁷⁰ Eva Janzon, 'Här planeras väpnad revolution i Syrien. Arbetslös niobarnsfar leder oppositionsnätverk från Skärholmen' ('Here, an armed revolution in Syria is planned. An unemployed father of nine heads an opposition network from Skärholmen'), *Världen idag*, September 7, 2011, www.varldenidag.se/nyhet/2011/09/07/Har-planeras-vapnad-revolution-i-Syrien/

national and an un-national opposition, an internal and an external opposition. That is the only way we can show the world that a new Syria has already been born.⁷¹

Soon thereafter, a serious attempt to unify the SNC and the NCB was initiated under Arab League auspices in Cairo. While several influential Arab nations were now clearly backing the SNC, the NCB apparently found some sympathy within the Arab League's institutional leadership, and the organization took care to treat both groups as equal negotiating partners.

Negotiations continued through the winter, but by that time, the political polarization within the opposition, like in Syria, had reached dangerous levels. SNC supporters had begun to view the NCB's stubbornly non-interventionist line and refusal to join the council as purely obstructionist. Many pointed to the ex-Baathist background of some prominent NCB members, accusing them of being agents of the regime, while others suspected an NCB plan to negotiate a power-sharing agreement with Assad. Adherents of the NCB line, on the other hand, saw the SNC's drift towards armed struggle and foreign intervention as misguided adventurism at best and foreign-inspired treason at worst, and in either case a recipe for civil war in Syria.

The tensions came to head in an ugly incident in Cairo on November 9. Arriving in central Cairo for talks with the Arab League's Nabil al-Arabi, the NCB leaders were mobbed and beaten by furious Syrian SNC supporters, who accused them of betraying the revolution.⁷² Burhan Ghalioun acted quickly by issuing a strong condemnation of the attack, saying that the NCB members had an honorable history of struggle against the regime, and that 'a loyalty to the SNC which translates into fanaticism and disrespect for other ideas is not a loyalty to the revolution of freedom and dignity'.⁷³

Negotiations then continued in what seemed to be a serious fashion, with the Arab League mediating between the factions.⁷⁴ A compromise deal envisioning a post-Assad transitional period was signed on December 30 by Burhan Ghalioun (SNC) and Heitham Mannaa (NCB).⁷⁵ The agreement decreed that a joint committee would be elected by an opposition congress (involving both the SNC and the NCB) to coordinate the various groups and alliances, and '[t]he parties involved will respect its decisions'. On the main point of contention, the text stated that the opposition would reject all foreign intervention, but coyly added that 'Arab intervention is not considered to be foreign'.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Burhan Ghalioun, opening speech to the congress 'Together for the Unity of Efforts in Support of the Freedom of the Syrian People', sponsored by the Olof Palme International Center, Stockholm, October 8, 2011.

⁷² 'Syrian opposition rivals in Cairo scuffle', BBC, November 9, 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15661382. The group of NCB leaders that was attacked, included Raja al-Nasser, Abdelaziz al-Khayyer, Ahmed Faiz al-Fawwaz, Heitham Mannaa and Bassam Malek (no one was seriously injured), while the NCB General Coordinator Hassan Abdelazim had arrived separately, and managed to reach the Arab League building unnoticed. (Hazem al-Nahar, 'i'tida al-qahira... wa-lahzat tafkir wa-ta'auqul' ('The Cairo attack... and a moment to reason and be reasonable'), Syria Politic, November 17, 2011, syria-politic.com/ar/Default.aspx?opinion=88#.TGXNpL-eet8)

⁷³ 'bayan hamm min al-doktour burhan ghalioun 'ama hadath al-ams fil-qahira' ('Important communiqué from dr. Burhan Ghalioun on what happened yesterday in Cairo'), November 10, 2011, www.ncsyria.com/news.php?action=show&id=146

⁷⁴ 'Preparatory Committee makes progress in unifying Syrian opposition', NCB delegation in Cairo, December 5, 2011, www.ncsyria.com/news.php?action=show&id=262

⁷⁵ David Batty, 'Syrian opposition groups unite to chart roadmap to democracy', *The Guardian*, December 31, 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/31/syria-opposition-plan-democratic-future.

⁷⁶ The full text of the agreement is available on http://www.al-akhbar.com/system/files/Mannaa_English.pdf.

Immediately after the announcement, protests erupted from within the SNC leadership and among some groups of demonstrators in Syria. Burhan Ghalioun faced a storm of criticism, and quickly began backtracking; within days, the SNC Executive Board had disowned the deal.⁷⁷ The affair precipitated a crisis within the SNC. Several leading members blamed Ghalioun, who appeared frustrated and embarrassed by the whole affair, for overstepping his mandate and keeping the Executive Board in the dark about the contents of the Cairo agreement. According to the NCB narrative, the negotiations failed because the SNC is too disorganized and hadn't prepared its stance properly.⁷⁸ 'At the [NCB] we are very well coordinated,' said Manna:

We know what we want. Most of the time, we would be the ones proposing the ideas, while the other side (the SNC) would modify them [...] On the other hand, the SNC is a conglomeration of disparate groups. These groups diverge from each other politically. And when they came together they did not do so on the basis of a program. They came together on the basis of the demand for the fall of the regime. Because of this, establishing a program was very difficult for them.⁷⁹

Another view, aired more informally by members of the NCB, is that the SNC is dominated by an alliance of Gulf- and Western-backed liberals and Islamists. These factions strive to push the conflict towards armed confrontation and foreign intervention, and have no interest in cooperating with the NCB, since a merger would dilute their own influence and make it more difficult to adopt a pro-intervention line.

The SNC, predictably, has a very different view of what happened. Anas al-Abdeh (head of the MJD and the DD, and a member of the SNC General Secretariat) argued that it was the NCB that had torpedoed negotiations by leaking the draft agreement. Abdeh claimed that the two coalitions are too far apart politically: the SNC aims to 'protect civilians by all legal means and also considers the FSA a fundamental part of the opposition, while the NCB absolutely refuses all foreign intervention, yet has not provided an alternative to it.' He cast doubt on the NCB's commitment to bringing down the regime in its entirety, and claimed that the SNC's credibility would suffer if it signed an agreement that ignored the 'revolutionary line' prevailing in the streets.⁸⁰

Opposition disunity therefore persisted. Even if it had been narrowed down to two main political factions, both of them were fractious, prone to defections, and buffeted by minor independent organizations and independent figures – and they seemed increasingly irrelevant in the face of the rapid growth of armed militias inside Syria.

The 'Friends of Syria' endorse the SNC

In February 2012, a meeting of some seventy world governments was called in Tunis, known as the 'Friends of Syria' conference. The list of participants featured opposition supporters such as Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the USA, UK, France and others, while Assad allies such

⁷⁷ Borzou Daragahi & Abigail Fielding-Smith, 'Syria opposition groups fail to reach accord', *Financial Times*, January 4, 2012, www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/f0d2797e-36ee-11e1-96bf-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1rH8uVo99

⁷⁸ The NCB delegation in Cairo, 'NCB Announcement', December 27, 2011, www.ncsyria.com/news.php?action=show&id=354

⁷⁹ Serene Assir, 'Haytham al-Manna: The Politics Behind the Pact with Ghalioun', *al-Akhbar*, January 2, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/content/haytham-al-manna-politics-behind-pact-ghalioun

⁸⁰ Caroline Akoum, 'al-mufawadat tafshul bayna "al-majlis al-watani al-souri" wa-"hayat al-tansiq"' ('Negotiations fail between the Syrian National Council and the Coordination Bureau'), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 15, 2012, www.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=658927

as Iran, Russia or China stayed away. All of the major SNC backers were present, and the meeting seemed designed to raise the profile of the SNC, provide support to it, and grant it some level of international recognition.

The NCB had initially agreed to take part, but pulled out, saying that it feared that the meeting would take a step towards the creation of a sort of government-in-exile, while opening the door to 'militarizing the opposition' and 'foreign intervention'.⁸¹ The SNC did attend, and was the focus of attention. It now publicly asked for 'international recognition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.'⁸² However, there were still widespread doubts about the SNC's representativeness and capacity to deliver, and the governments present contented themselves with referring to the SNC as 'a representative' of the Syrian people.⁸³

A follow-up meeting was called by the 'Friends of Syria' for April 1, in Istanbul. It was preceded by an SNC-dominated preparatory opposition conference in the city on March 26-27. The pre-conference meeting was intended to respond to concerns about the SNC's lack of representativeness and rumors of overdue MB influence. At the meeting, a 'National Covenant' was adopted, sketching plans for a future democratic and nonsectarian Syria.⁸⁴ A committee was also created to restructure and expand the SNC, dominated by pro-Western liberal dissidents.⁸⁵

The NCB would not play ball: it boycotted the March meeting. Heitham Manna said that he had been invited to the conference by 'a Qatari minister and a Turkish ambassador', and complained that its purpose was to impose the SNC as the sole opposition framework. This, he said, was a way of 'creating a new dictatorship and a dictatorial mentality within opposition ranks.'⁸⁶

Some smaller groups did attend and expressed an interest in joining the SNC, mainly the National Change Current (NCC) and some of its allies. On the other hand, the Kurdish nationalist representatives walked out in protest of the National Covenant, claiming that Turkish pressure had led to a weak position on Kurdish rights.⁸⁷ Despite these mixed results, the March conference decided that the SNC should henceforth act as the 'formal

⁸¹ 'Leading opposition group pulls out of "Friends of Syria" meet', *al-Akhabar*, February 24, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/content/leading-opposition-group-pulls-out-friends-syria-meet; 'A Statement from the delegation of the National Coordination Body to the "Friends of Syria" conference in Tunisia', NCB, February 24, 2012, syrianncb.org/2012/02/24/a-statement-from-the-delegation-of-the-national-coordination-body-to-the-friends-of-syria-conference-in-tunisia/

⁸² 'Friends of Syria Meeting: Syrian National Council Statement', SNC, February 24, 2012, www.syriancouncil.org/en/slideshow/item/582-friends-of-syria-conference-in-tunis.html

⁸³ 'Chairman's Conclusions of the International Conference of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People, 24 February', U.S. Department of State, February 24, 2012, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/02/184642.htm?goMobile=0

⁸⁴ 'National Covenant for a new Syria', SNC, March 27, 2012, <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/issues/item/618-national-covenant-for-a-new-syria.html>

⁸⁵ 'bayan sahafi hawl al-lajna al-mushtaraka li-i'adat haykalat al-majlis al-watani' ('Press release about the joint committee to restructure the SNC'), *Kulluna Shuraka fil-Watan*, April 5, 2012, all4syria.info/web/archives/59786; Khaled Yacoub Oweis, 'Liberals challenge Islamist grip on Syrian National Council', March 28, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/28/us-syria-opposition-idUSBRE82R16120120328

⁸⁶ BBC Arabic interview with Heitham Manna, Mohammed al-Saramini and Abdelwahhab Badr-Khan, March 26, 2012, available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKSRXzCQOj0>

⁸⁷ Lauren Williams, 'Kurdish opposition quits Syrian National Council', *Daily Star*, April 6, 2012, www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Apr-06/169407-kurdish-opposition-quits-syrian-national-council.ashx#axzz1rFj4U3IE

interlocutor and formal representative of the Syrian people.⁸⁸ The MB's Mohammed Farouq Teifour said that he thought the international community would now recognize the SNC as the 'only legitimate representative of Syria.'⁸⁹

The 'Friends of Syria' group did not go quite so far, in its own Istanbul meeting on April 1, but it did respond positively by recognizing the SNC as 'a legitimate representative of all Syrians and the umbrella organization under which Syrian opposition groups are gathering'. This fell short of SNC hopes of being labeled Syria's rightful government-in-exile, but it did imply that the SNC is now seen by the 'Friends of Syria' as the only relevant opposition group.⁹⁰

In mid-April, a third and more informal 'Friends of Syria' meeting was held in Paris, France, with a smaller number of nations attending.⁹¹ The discussion centered on UN resolutions and the Kofi Annan mediation mission, and some representatives obliquely hinted at the use of force if the Syrian government did not comply. The meeting did not appear to move further along the road towards full SNC recognition, but many expect this to happen eventually.⁹²



First 'Friends of Syria' conference, Tunis, Feb. 24, 2012. Left to right: Heitham al-Maleh, Tunisian president al-Moncef al-Marzouqi, Burhan Ghalioun.

⁸⁸ Thaer Abbas, 'Syrian opposition unites under SNC', *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 28, 2012, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=29036

⁸⁹ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, 'Arabs, Turkey push Syrian opposition to unite', Reuters, March 25, 2012, uk.reuters.com/article/2012/03/25/uk-syria-opposition-idUKBRE8200FI20120325?feedType=RSS&feedName=everything&virtualBrandChannel=11708

⁹⁰ "Chairman's Conclusions of Friends of Syria meeting", UK Mission Geneva, April 1, 2012, ukmissiongeneva.fco.gov.uk/en/news/?view=News&id=749074282

⁹¹ John Irish & Arshad Mohammed, "'Friends of Syria' say Annan plan is last hope", Reuters, April 19, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/19/us-syria-france-sarkozy-idUSBRE83111520120419

⁹² Edward Cody, 'U.S., France, others hint at use of force against Syria if violence continues', *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2012, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/violence-flares-across-syria-despite-un-observers-visit/2012/04/19/gIQAfZpFTT_story.html

'Sadly, this is the reality,' says Sheruan Hassan, an NCB member and strong critic of the SNC. 'In Tunis, they were recognized as an opposition group, in Istanbul as the main opposition group, and in the future they will be recognized as the representative of the entire Syrian people.' He sees this as a strategy by Turkey, the Gulf states and the USA to empower a more pliant opposition group which, on its own, would be the weaker of the two: 'If al-Jazira, al-Arabiya and the BBC stopped promoting the SNC and the media and financial support was withdrawn, they would fall apart. They have no presence on the ground.'⁹³



Col. Asaad (left) and Brig. Gen. Sheikh read the March 24, 2012 FSA statement

Abdulbaset Sieda, an SNC leader, notes with a touch of sympathy that the NCB's situation is 'really bad now. They only have some support from the old guard of the Arab League, but they are weakened everywhere else.'⁹⁴

However, by late spring 2012, many within the hard core of street activists appeared to have lost interest in the organized political opposition in its entirety, whether SNC or NCB. Some instead put their hope in the FSA or other armed groups, in grassroots Islamist networks, or in the local revolutionary councils, which had begun to spring up in anti-regime villages and neighborhoods.

A couple of statements from the SRGC (a large *tansiqiya* alliance, which officially supports the SNC although it is not a member) capture the mood. On February 29, the SRGC warned 'all parts of the opposition, including the SNC, of the consequences of persisting in their repeated and irresponsible internal struggles and divisions'.⁹⁵ After the April 1 recognition of the SNC by the 'Friends of Syria', the SRGC hailed this as a 'fruit of the blood of the martyrs', but also noted that 'it is now expected' that the SNC will manage to 'reform and reorganize itself so that it deserves the honor of representing Syria.'⁹⁶

The SNC-FSA agreement

The opposition meetings in February-March 2012 also achieved another important result, which may prove of more lasting significance than the SNC's internal reforms. On March 24, the two best-known Turkey-based military commanders of the Syrian resistance, Col. Riad al-Asaad of the FSA and his rival Brig. Gen. Mustafa al-Sheikh, issued a joint video statement where they declared the unification of their organizations under the FSA name.⁹⁷ (The FSA is

⁹³ Interview with Sheruan Hassan, foreign relations spokesperson of the PYD and member of the NCB Central Council in the diaspora, The Hague, The Netherlands, April 2012.

⁹⁴ Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, member of the SNC Executive Board, Uppsala, Sweden, March 2012.

⁹⁵ 'tuhdhir jami' atraf al-mu'arida min al-istimrar fil-inqisamat' ('Warning all parts of the opposition from persisting in their divisions'), SRGC, February 29, 2012, www.srgcommission.org/index.php?view=article&catid=40%3A2011-11-15-21-37-36&id=3136%3A2012-02-29-15-03-17

⁹⁶ 'al-mawqif al-siyasi al-yawmi 2012-4-2' ('The Daily Political Position, 2012-4-2'), SRGC, April 2, 2012, www.srgcommission.org/index.php?view=article&catid=40%3A2011-11-15-21-37-36&id=5527%3A---2-4-2012

⁹⁷ 'al-aqid riyad al-asaad qaid al-jeish al-souri al-hurr 2012 3 24' ('Col. Riyad al-Asaad, commander of the FSA, March 24, 2012'), YouTube clip uploaded by mahmodmmm11 den 24 mars 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfMeV7uivDw&hd=1

the biggest and the best known militia formation in Syria, but it only controls a part of the total armed opposition.)⁹⁸ In conjunction with this, the FSA also entered into an agreement with the SNC, thereby uniting the three groups just in time for the April 1 'Friends of Syria' meeting.

Building on earlier efforts to connect the SNC and FSA,⁹⁹ the deal hinges on Qatari/Saudi sponsorship for the FSA. On the insistence of the donors, the money will be channeled via the SNC through a joint FSA-SNC Liaison Office (*maktab al-irtibat*). The FSA had hitherto been dismissive of the political exiles,¹⁰⁰ but now agreed to join forces with the SNC. The deal helps raise the profile of both the FSA and the SNC as the main frameworks for armed and political resistance to the Assad regime. In practice, however, little seems to have changed in terms of relations between the groups. The FSA will retain its separate structure under Col. Asaad, and continue to manage its network of fighters on the ground.

Brig. Gen. Sheikh, meanwhile, has now accepted that Riad al-Assad, despite his inferior rank, will retain command of all units on the ground. Their joint statement, read to tape by Sheikh, also threatened rival militias by stating that the FSA is the 'army of the people and the nation' and anyone who carries out military operation outside the FSA framework will 'bear the full responsibility'.¹⁰¹ Brig. Gen. Sheikh's group of defected officers (without much armed presence in Syria) has been folded into the FSA, as the 'Free Syrian Army Military Council.' Formally, it will be tasked with drawing up strategy and plans, but this is a mostly a symbolic role. It will also provide salaries for defecting officers at or above the rank of colonel (*'aqid*), which is Asaad's rank. The idea is to keep Col. Assad's formal superiors separate from the FSA, so that he cannot be outranked. Meanwhile, all defecting officers at or below the rank of lieutenant-colonel (*muqaddam*) will be placed under the command of the FSA.¹⁰²

The SNC-FSA agreements were formally separate from both the 'Friends' group, which has not officially endorsed armed struggle, and from the March 26-27 SNC meeting. Still, there is no doubt that these military, diplomatic and political unification processes were coordinated to some degree. The driving forces behind this rapprochement of exiled politicians and military defectors was most likely those states which support and host the factions involved, and which will be footing the bill for their joint military-political struggle: Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, perhaps also the USA and France.

Implications of the 'Friends of Syria' strategy

In practical terms, the 'Friends of Syria' meetings and the related SNC-FSA deal have meant an important step towards opposition unity, built around Gulf support and a pro-military,

⁹⁸ During a public spat in March 2012, an SNC spokesperson claimed that the FSA controlled 'maximum 5 percent' of the rebel fighters on the ground inside Syria. ('SNC and Free Syrian Army row over military leadership', *al-Akhbar*, March 1, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/node/4718/).

⁹⁹ In early March, the SNC announced the formation of a 'Military Bureau' to handle relations with the armed resistance; this was apparently premature, and the final agreement only came later. ('Syrian National Council Establishes Military Bureau', SNC, March 2, 2012, www.syriancouncil.org/en/news/item/593-syrian-national-council-establishes-military-bureau.html; interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, member of the SNC Executive Board, Uppsala, Sweden, March 2012.

¹⁰⁰ 'SNC and Free Syrian Army row over military leadership', *al-Akhbar*, March 1, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/node/4718/

¹⁰¹ 'al-aqid riyad al-asaad qaid al-jeish al-souri al-hurr 2012 3 24' ('Col. Riyad al-Asaad, commander of the FSA, March 24, 2012'), YouTube clip uploaded by mahmodmmm11 den 24 mars 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfMeV7uivDw&hd=1

¹⁰² Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, member of the SNC Executive Board, Uppsala, Sweden, March 2012.

pro-intervention line. If the agreement functions as intended, the Gulf money will provide ample reason for independent militias and political factions to fall in line with the SNC and FSA. Both money and unity will then aid them in their attempts to topple the government of Bashar al-Assad. Particularly, the deal was a critical lifeline for the SNC, which seemed to be lacking alternative strategies when no foreign intervention had materialized in spring 2012. When allowed up on the FSA bandwagon, the SNC gained a new relevancy to revolutionary activists in Syria.

These developments have been immensely frustrating to rival dissident forces, such as the NCB. The process is also likely to alienate some Syrians from the opposition in general, namely those who prefer a government victory over a civil war and/or foreign involvement. If the armed campaign of the FSA does not prove sufficient to topple Assad, the internationally arranged SNC-FSA marriage may in fact make the conflict harder to resolve, since it has empowered the most uncompromising exile groups and internal militias, and definitively tied the 'political' SNC to armed struggle. On the other hand, assuming that a Syrian civil war is by now an unavoidable fact, an SNC-FSA coalition was probably the most effective coalition realistically available at this stage, for those willing to pursue such a war.

In any case, the situation remains fluid. After more than a month, the Ghalioun-Asaad-Sheikh alliance has changed nothing on the ground. Despite the March 24 agreement, Col. Asaad and Brig. Gen. Sheikh have kept airing their disagreements over military affairs, and neither seems particularly inclined to take orders from the SNC.¹⁰³ Also, the SNC and the FSA have expanded haphazardly since summer 2011, and both are likely to experience internal power shifts over the coming months, which could precipitate splits and infighting.

To add to their troubles, the regime has reclaimed ground from the armed resistance in spring 2012, clearing out the FSA from parts of Homs and Idlib. If Bashar al-Assad can somehow muddle through his financial difficulties, he may prove more long-lasting than either the SNC or the FSA are prepared to handle, not to mention the international community. 'When the regime retook Baba Amr [in Homs in March 2012], that was the point where people said, okay, so that's one-nil to Bashar al-Assad', explains Malik al-Abdeh of the MJD. 'People saw that the revolution wasn't achieving its goals, and there's a lot of head-scratching now. The regime has used this to send a message to Qatar and the USA and others, saying: you can't topple me, so you'll have to deal with me. And that was always Plan B, as far as the USA is concerned.'¹⁰⁴

There is also the possibility that there will be realignments in the regional cold war surrounding Syria, due to renewed Arab uprisings (perhaps in Jordan), Syrian-Israeli clashes, a war between Iran and Israel and/or the USA, or some other upheaval. On the other side of the equation, the opposition may be bolstered by foreign intervention, such as Turkish incursions on the northern border or air strikes. Finally, there is the chance that diplomatic efforts will bear fruit, or that a political deal will calm the conflict.

Only one thing seems clear: the armed struggle on the ground and the international involvement will most likely keep narrowing the political opposition's room for independent action.

¹⁰³ Yousef Diab, 'Free Syrian Army acknowledge internal divisions, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 1, 2012, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=29469

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, member of the MJD, telephone, May 2012.

PART TWO: THE OPPOSITION

Syrian National Council (SNC)

The Syrian National Council (SNC, *al-majlis al-watani al-souri*)¹⁰⁵ is Syria's largest opposition coalition, and far the most successful in attracting foreign support. It gradually took shape from August 2011, with tacit Turkish backing, and was established in its present form on October 2, 2011. It has since picked up Gulf state funding and a measure of formal recognition from parts of the international community.



The SNC is strongly dominated by exiles, mostly with a liberal or Islamist agenda. It is headed by a Burhan Ghalioun, a liberal/leftist writer and professor of sociology at Sorbonne, with no party-political affiliations. Some critics consider the SNC to be 'dominated by the Islamists, with some liberal figures as a facade'.¹⁰⁶ While the Islamist component in the SNC is undoubtedly very strong, this is something of an overstatement; which is not to say it can't happen in the future.

The SNC is a big-tent movement with members of many ideological backgrounds. It includes Syria's biggest opposition movement, the MB, and has gained broad Sunni Islamist endorsement.¹⁰⁷ It also comprises some other relatively significant groups such as the remaining faction of the DD, the Assyrian-Christian ADO,¹⁰⁸ and a host of minor organizations and independents. While the leadership is strongly exile-dominated, groups such as the SDPP (present via the DD) and the *tansiqiya* organizations LCC and HCRS, straddle the border between internal and external. Another major *tansiqiya* coalition, the SRGC, is also publicly supportive of the SNC, although it has opted not to become a member.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, the SNC generally lacks support from Syria's leftist and Arab nationalist groups, which are mostly aligned with the NCB. It has not been able to gain firm backing from the Kurdish political parties, which remain in their own coalition, the KNC. It also has a weak religious minority representation.

The SNC membership structure has not changed significantly since the group's founding in October, although there has been a certain amount of coming and going by individual

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.syriancouncil.org>

¹⁰⁶ Alain Gresh, 'Onde de choc syrienne', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, no. 697, April 2012, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ 'da'wa liqa mumathilin 'an al-teyf al-islami fi souria' ('Invitation to a meeting with representatives of the Islamic spectrum in Syria'), Rabitat al-ulema al-souriyin, October 22, 2011, www.islamsyria.com/news.php?action=details&NID=90

¹⁰⁸ The ADO is often put forth as evidence of the SNC's inclusiveness towards religious minorities, but while it is represented on the Executive Board, it has only 6 out of 273 declared Council members. Also, Assyrians are a small and very particular minority of Syria's Christian population, and the ADO is primarily an ethnic-nationalist organization, which has historically had poor relations with church authorities. To now be portrayed as the political representatives of Christianity must be a novel experience for the ADO leadership.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Mohammed Khalifa, member of the SRGC political bureau, Stockholm, Sweden, March 2012; 'soheir al-atassi - risalat al-hayat al-'amma lil-thawra 2011-10-07' (Soheir al-Atassi - Message of the SRGC 2011-10-07), YouTube video uploaded by SRGCommission, October 7, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqd5QcWyADc.

dissidents and very small groups. A number of independents have joined, sometimes after gathering into a hastily organized 'party', such as the Syrian National Democratic Bloc. SNC spokesmen originally said that they believe the SNC represents around 60 percent of the anti-regime opposition, some going as far as 75 percent. This estimate has since been revised upwards: in spring 2012, the SNC laid claim to being the sole representative of the Syrian people.¹¹⁰

Like other opposition groups, the SNC exercises no real control over events inside Syria, but it has gained symbolic recognition from demonstrators who have supported the SNC in their slogans and banners. In March 2012, the SNC joined forces with the FSA, which represents some of the largest armed resistance factions inside Syria. This added significantly to the SNC's political weight, but also raised the question of who will have the upper hand: the SNC exiles or the FSA guerrillas?

SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL (SNC):

Muslim Brotherhood (MB): The Syrian branch of the Arab world's largest Sunni Islamist movement. Syria's largest opposition group, but mainly active in exile. Led by Mohammed Riad al-Shaqfa, and represented in the SNC leadership by Mohammed Farouq Teifour.

Local Coordination Committees (LCC): A well-known *tansiqiya*-organization formed in 2011, mainly consisting of youth activists.

Damascus Declaration (DD): See the Damascus Declaration Factbox.

Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO): See the Damascus Declaration Factbox.

Future Current: The Kurdish political party created by Meshaal Temmo, a popular Kurdish leader who was assassinated in October 2011.

Syrian National Current: A small, liberal-minded Sunni Islamist movement that was formed in Cairo in December 2011, with origins in a previous group, the Independent Islamic Current. It is led by a former deputy dean of Damascus University's Sharia faculty, Imad al-Din al-Rashid.

Syrian National Democratic Bloc (SNDB): A small group of secular Arab nationalist exiles.

Coalition of Secular and Democratic Syrians: A very small, recently founded group of secular activists, led by Randa Kassis, a Paris-based exile.

Independents: The SNC includes several blocs of independent exile dissidents formed in the spring/summer of 2011, such as the Democratic Coordination Meeting and the National Action Group for Syria, as well as individuals who have joined the council on their own. Among the more prominent independent members are the SNC president Burhan Ghalioun (leftist/liberal independent), Ahmed Ramadan (pro-MB), Basma Qodmani (liberal independent), Abdulbaset Sieda (Kurdish leftist independent), Maashouq al-Khaznawi (Kurdish Islamist), Sadeq Jalal al-Azm (secular intellectual), Anas Airout (Islamist preacher from Baniyas), Ghassan al-Najjar (independent Islamist), and others.

(Partial list.)

Structure of the SNC

The SNC currently consists of around 310 members. They are divided into several factions or 'blocs', listed on the SNC website as:

- Revolutionary Movement (*al-hirak al-thawri*)
- Liberal Independents Bloc (*kutlat al-mustaqillin al-liberaliyin*)

¹¹⁰ 'Syrian council wants recognition as voice of opposition', Reuters, October 10, 2011, www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/10/us-syria-opposition-idUSTRE7993NF20111010 (60%); Interview with Hozan Ibrahim, Local Coordination Committees & SNC General Secretariat, e-mail, October 2011 (75%); Thaer Abbas, 'Syrian opposition unites under SNC', *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 28, 2012, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=29036 and 'Friends of Syria Meeting: Syrian National Council Statement', SNC, February 24, 2012, www.syriancouncil.org/en/slideshow/item/582-friends-of-syria-conference-in-tunis.html.

- Damascus Declaration (*i'lan dimashq*)
- Assyrian Organization (*al-munazzama al-ashouria*)
- Muslim Brotherhood & Allies (*al-ikhwan al-muslimoun wa-hulafai-him*)
- Damascus Spring (*rabi' dimashq*)
- Kurdish National Bloc (*al-kutla al-wataniya al-kurdiya*)
- National Bloc (*al-kutla al-wataniya*)
- National Figures (*shakhsiyat wataniya*)¹¹¹

In practice, these are all *ad hoc* formations. They are composed by both independents and members of political parties, who have been brought into the council on a quota negotiated by the faction leaders during the SNC's formation. According to a declaration by the early September version of the SNC, 60 percent of members would be based inside Syria and 40 percent in exile.¹¹² In reality, nearly all members appear to be exiles, although some fled very recently. Claims that there are undisclosed 'internal' leaders are impossible to verify, although there are certainly sympathizers of the SNC inside Syria.

Some of the SNC factions are more ideologically cohesive than others, particularly those affiliated with a single organization. The 'Muslim Brotherhood & Allies' faction is obviously dominated by the MB, but also includes independent Islamists and some secular allies of the group. The 'Damascus Declaration' bloc includes the organizations and individuals aligned with the DD's exiled post-2009 leadership. Currently, that means mostly the MJD (Islamist) and SDPP (ex-Communist), as well as some independents, like Samir Nashar (a liberal from Aleppo) and Jabr al-Shoufi (a Druze human rights activist). The 'Assyrian Organization' bloc is filled by the ADO. (The ADO is also a member of the DD, but has been allowed to set up a separate quota for itself, presumably to highlight this Christian component of the SNC.)

The 'National Bloc' is derived from the original mid-September version of the SNC, formed by the 'Istanbul Group'. It is made up mostly of nonpartisan dissidents, from all backgrounds, but Sunni conservatives predominate. It includes one bloc of members aligned with a faction in the MB (the Aleppo-centered National Action Group for Syria, of Ahmed Ramadan), as well as the Syrian National Current, a non-MB Islamist group. The 'Revolutionary Movement' faction comprises the LCC and other *tansiqiya*, youth, media and street activists, with a varying degree of connection to the grassroots revolt inside Syria.

The Council (*al-majlis*) is formally the SNC's highest authority, similar to a shadow parliament, but it is not involved in day-to-day decision-making and currently appears to play a very limited role. Council members are however active in the specialized Bureaus, currently numbering eleven (for Policy & Planning, Media & Public Relations, Legal Affairs, etc), but the level of involvement appears to vary considerably among members.

Decision-making is centralized. The Council factions have nominated representatives to a General Secretariat (*al-amana al-'amma*), with 36 members.¹¹³ This body then elects an 8-member Executive Board (*al-maktab al-tanfidihi*), which makes most day-to-day decisions. It includes the President (*rais*), currently Burhan Ghalioun.

¹¹¹ 'haykalat al-majlis al-watani al-souri', SNC, ar.syriancouncil.org/structure/structure.html (note that there are slight discrepancies in the names given on the English website: syriancouncil.org/en/structure/structure.html).

¹¹² About the Syrian National Council, SNC, PDF document dated September 16, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp_uploaded_documents/110916_About%20SNC.pdf

¹¹³ According to the SNC website in early May 2012. It is not up to date, and the real number may have changed – presumably increased.

Burhan Ghalioun's road to the top

Burhan Ghalioun, a respected Syrian intellectual and professor of sociology at Sorbonne, in exile since 1971, was declared the SNC president in October 2011. Ghalioun's leadership over the SNC came as a surprise to many. A nonpartisan, secular democrat with a background on the Syrian left, and historically a strong critic of Western-backed regime change, his ideological profile is closer to the NCB than the SNC.



Burhan Ghalioun

Indeed, Ghalioun was originally aligned with the NCB. He criticized the Antalya congress in Turkey in May/June 2011 for 'serving foreign agendas'. While he did participate in the Islamist-dominated 'National Salvation Congress' in Istanbul, on July 16, he disagreed with the decision to create an externally based opposition leadership.¹¹⁴ He argued instead for the need to draw in the remaining Syrian factions, the internal opposition, the left and the nationalists. He particularly highlighted the role of the youth and *tansiqiya* groups, which he had begun to establish personal contacts with.

When the NCB was launched in late June, it was partly due to Ghalioun's 'personal involvement' as a member of the working group that put together the alliance.¹¹⁵ In the founding statement, he was appointed to the influential post of international coordinator, i.e. as responsible for the diaspora branch and main spokesperson to the media. However, Ghalioun cautiously described the creation of the NCB as only a step on the way to full opposition unity. He continued to stress the need to follow the youth groups rather try to lead them. For him, '[t]he party opposition as well as the non-party opposition are nothing but auxiliary and complementary forces' to the *tansiqiya* groups, which he described as 'the true pioneers of Syria's current revolution':

As for me, even if I greatly appreciate my election as a member in the NCB, I still consider my essential role to be to stand by the revolution's youth, who have placed their trust in me. I will continue to support the democratic revolution, working with them through the NCB, and be in contact with all other segments of the opposition.¹¹⁶

Ghalioun's early and enthusiastic support for the *tansiqiya* organizations, and the fact that he was politically non-aligned and seen as a principled independent, led some of these groups to propose him for leadership of a 'National Council' in Istanbul in August 2011. By now, older opposition movements had come to perceive him as linked to the 'ground forces' of the revolution, which they were themselves eager to connect with. The idea of Ghalioun as leader gained media attention, and picked up steam as the various conference leaderships began merging into the embryonic SNC, through August and September. Ghalioun quietly disassociated himself from the NCB, and stepped forward as primary spokesperson of the finalized SNC at its establishment on October 2. Soon thereafter, he

¹¹⁴ Basheer al-Baker, 'Burhan Ghalioun: Opposition from Exile or at Home?' *al-Akhbar*, September 13, 2011, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/burhan-ghalioun-opposition-exile-or-home>.

¹¹⁵ Burhan Ghalioun, "an hayat al-tansiq al-watani" ('On the National Coordination Bureau'), *Burhan Ghalioun/Critique Sociale*, July 1, 2011, critique-sociale.blogspot.se/2011/07/blog-post_01.html; Hazem Nahar, 'The Discourse and Performance of the Syrian Opposition Since the Beginning of the Revolution', Heinrich Böll Stiftung, January 2012, <http://www.lb.boell.org/web/52-788.html>.

¹¹⁶ Burhan Ghalioun, "an hayat al-tansiq al-watani" ('On the National Coordination Bureau'), *Burhan Ghalioun/Critique Sociale*, July 1, 2011, critique-sociale.blogspot.se/2011/07/blog-post_01.html

was confirmed as president of the SNC Executive Board, a post that he still holds in May 2012.

Conflicts about the presidency

Ghalioun rode to power by linking up with the youth revolution and anti-regime media activism, but once elected, he seems to have retained the post through classic backroom politicking. The presidency was originally intended to rotate within the leadership, to be renewed every three months. Ghalioun's first mandate began in mid-October, after the formal announcement of the SNC, and ended in January. This coincided with a crisis in the SNC after the failed Cairo agreement with the NCB, for which Ghalioun received most of the blame.¹¹⁷ The Executive Board's confidence in Ghalioun seems to have been badly shaken, but as an extraordinary measure, his mandate was extended by one month in January 2012. SNC sources claimed that a method to elect a new president had first to be devised, and that Ghalioun should therefore continue in his post.¹¹⁸ In February, Ghalioun was given another three-month mandate, until April 15. By early May, he is still in the post, after discussions on another extension were postponed until later in the month.¹¹⁹

According to several sources, Ghalioun is backed by the MB and by some important foreign supporters of the SNC, notably Qatar, but the short-term mandates, the last-minute extensions, and recurrent reports of internal discontent indicate that his position is quite precarious. According to one strong critic, Malik al-Abdeh of the MJD, 'Burhan Ghalioun is not qualified to lead the opposition at this stage [...] he's got no previous experience in politics or in organized opposition work.'¹²⁰ Undoubtedly, Ghalioun faces many problems: his secular and Westernized image makes it harder to attract religious conservatives in Syria; pro-interventionists and the FSA criticize his skeptic attitude to armed struggle; opposition hardliners see him as too close to the NCB; some of the SNC's Gulf backers recall his pre-revolution diatribes against royal dictatorships; and many of his colleagues are – quite apart from ideology – interested in the top job for themselves.

Several possible replacements for Ghalioun have been flouted. Heitham al-Maleh, a respected independent Islamist human rights activist on the SNC Executive Board, was one such name, but he left the SNC in March. Other candidates are George Sabra, Samir Nashar, Basma Qodmani, and Ahmed Ramadan. All have their strengths, but also weak points.

George Sabra is perhaps the frontrunner.¹²¹ He recently escaped Syria after doing time in prison, which counts in his favor – but he is a secular Christian. A Christian SNC president would help reassure minorities in Syria and draw positive attention in the USA and EU, but it might be a hard sell to the conservative groups inside Syria who thirst for Sunni leadership after half a century of minority rule; and these groups are the mainstay of the revolutionary street and the FSA's fighting units. The fact that Sabra belongs to the SDPP is also an issue. The party, which is a dominant force within the DD, has poor relations to some other

¹¹⁷ 'He essentially lied', says Malik al-Abdeh, a member of the MJD, which is a faction of the DD. 'The NCB published the document from Cairo, and there was nothing in there about it being a "preliminary draft".' (Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, member of the MJD, telephone, May 2012.)

¹¹⁸ Simon Cameron-Moore & Khaled Yacoub Oweis, 'Ghalioun given month more as Syrian opposition head', Reuters, January 9, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/09/us-syria-opposition-idUSTRE80816220120109

¹¹⁹ 'SNC Re-Elects Burhan Ghalioun as President', SNC, February 15, 2012, www.syriancouncil.org/en/news/item/569-snc-re-elects-burhan-ghalioun-as-president.html

¹²⁰ Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, member of the MJD, telephone, May 2012.

¹²¹ For an interesting interview with Sabra, see Malik al-Abdeh, 'George Sabra: A man for all seasons?', *Syria in Transition*, April 9, 2012, syriaintransition.com/2012/04/09/george-sabra-a-man-for-all-seasons.

opposition groups after the DD infighting of 2007-2009. Last but not least, the MB might be reluctant to admit a strong candidate from the SDPP/DD, which, in case of disagreements, could threaten the MB's dominant position.

As for Samir Nashar, another DD candidate, he's an independent and may not enjoy the full backing of his own group. A recent exile, he is also still quite new to the political game outside the country, and speaks no language other than Arabic. His political profile as a secular liberal is not that different from Ghalioun's own, but more divisive, since he's strongly identified with the DD and the pro-Western camp in Syrian politics. Still, he's a credible candidate, and his role as top responsible for the SNC's finances presumably gives him some valuable insight and influence over the organization.

Qodmani, a liberal independent based in France, appears to be out of the race. In a clip from a French TV show, which was unearthed in early 2012, she is seen discussing her desire for peace between Syria and Israel with a group of Israeli and Jewish intellectuals. This was a public relations disaster for the SNC, in terms of Syrian and Arab public opinion, and she is now more or less unelectable.¹²²

The Islamists paradoxically suffer from their own strength, since the SNC already stands accused of being a front for Islamist forces. The National Bloc leader Ramadan is seen as an MB proxy (opinions differ on whether he is actually a member), and electing him president would make it difficult to deflect the accusations of MB hegemony within the SNC.

For lack of better options, Ghalioun may well continue in the post for a long time, despite his flagging popularity. It will be hard to find a replacement that can match his exceedingly well-balanced background: he is an independent intellectual and a secular Sunni Muslim Arab, who has good relations to the MB, but also Western backing, and at the same time a historic association with the anti-imperialist left. And while discontent with Ghalioun is a growing problem, the short-term disruption of an open rift in the leadership could be difficult to deal with for a brittle coalition such as the SNC.

Finally, there is the question of foreign backing. The March 2012 agreements between the SNC, the FSA and the 'Friends of Syria' saw Qatar step forth publicly as a main financier of the revolution. It pays millions of dollars every month to the SNC/FSA. According to Malik al-Abdeh, 'it's [Burhan Ghalioun] and Samir Nashar of the Damascus Declaration who sign off on the checks. People are now courting [Ghalioun] to get money for their parties, for aid into Syria, local projects, media work, and so on', concluding that Ghalioun 'enjoys Qatari support, and he is now stronger than ever.'¹²³

The Executive Board

The SNC Executive Board currently consists of:¹²⁴

- **Burhan Ghalioun** (Liberal Indep. Bloc, secular democrat, Sunni Arab, b. Homs 1942)
- **Mohammed Farouq Teifour** (MB & Allies, MB, Sunni Arab, b. Hama)

¹²² The clip is reproduced here, unfortunately framed by some nasty anti-Semitic commentary in Arabic: 'bil-video: basma qodmani 'amilat israil fil-majlis al-watani' ('Basma Qodmani: The Israeli agent in the National Council'), YouTube clip uploaded by user MrAA9911, February 17, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDALKgkPBYI

¹²³ Malik al-Abdeh, member of the MJD, telephone, May 2012.

¹²⁴ Current as per May 2012. The SNC website has a different membership list, but it is not up to date.

- **Abdulbaset Sieda** (Kurdish Bloc, Kurdish-nationalist leftist, Sunni Kurd, b. Amoude 1956)
- **Basma Qodmani** (National Bloc, secular liberal, Sunni Arab, b. Damascus 1958)
- **Abdelahad Steifo** (Assyrian Org., ADO, Christian Assyrian, b. Hassake 1957)
- **Ahmed Ramadan** (National Bloc, MB/Islamist, Sunni Arab, b. Aleppo)
- **Samir Nashar** (Damascus Declaration, DD, Sunni Arab, b. Aleppo 1945)
- **Mutie al-Butein** (National Bloc, HCRS *tansiqiya*, Sunni Arab, Deraa 1968)
- **Tawfiq Dunia** (National Bloc, SNDB, Alawite Arab, b. Hama 1942)
- **George Sabra** (n/a, DD & SDPP, Christian Arab, b. Qatana/Rif Dimashq 1947)
- **Nadhir al-Hakim** (MB & Allies, Islamist, Sunni Arab, Mumbij/Aleppo 1950)¹²⁵

The Executive Board was originally created as a smaller body with seven members, but it has expanded as new members were brought in by internal agreement on the Executive Board. Formally, their participation should to be approved by the General Secretariat, but it's not clear that this process is followed scrupulously.¹²⁶

The Executive Board is where most decisions in the SNC are taken, although they are sometimes sent back to the General Secretariat for approval, or referred to branch organs. In practice, the Executive Board is very dominant within the SNC. Former members portray it as reluctant to delegate decisions or consult the larger membership, with little transparency or accountability towards the larger Council, or even towards the General Secretariat.¹²⁷ There are numerous reports of discontent within the SNC over this situation, tied in with a separate complaint: the influence of the MB.

The role of the Muslim Brotherhood

One of the most common criticisms of the SNC is that it is dominated from behind the scenes by the MB.¹²⁸ SNC representatives respond that the MB does not have a majority in either the Council, General Secretariat or Executive Board.¹²⁹ This is true, but the SNC is a disparate collection of unconnected individuals and minor parties, and the MB has a reputation for being well-organized. A disciplined minority could plausibly achieve outsized influence through simple voting tactics. '90 percent of the decisions rest with the Executive Board, which is headed by Burhan Ghalioun, and he is backed by [the MB]', says Malik al-Abdeh, a member of the MJD. 'There are others, like Samir Nashar and George Sabra [both DD members], but generally, the MB can swing things their way. They can rely on four or five people on the Executive Board, and that's usually enough.'

¹²⁵ Note that the SNC also claims that there are non-disclosed Executive Board members inside Syria. This is impossible to confirm, but if such members exist, they can hardly be very active in SNC politics.

¹²⁶ Some of the present members may not have been officially confirmed by the General Secretariat yet, possibly including both Mutie al-Butein and Nadhir al-Hakim, but they participate in meetings and are for all practical purposes Executive Board members.

¹²⁷ Khaled Yacoub Oweis & Ayla Yackley, 'Walkouts spoil Syrian opposition's bid for unity', Reuters, March 27, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/27/us-syria-opposition-annan-idUSBRE82Q0TC20120327?feedType=RSS&feedName=everything&virtualBrandChannel=11563

¹²⁸ Anne Barnard, "Disagreements Among Syrian Rebels Over Foreign Arms Shipments", *The New York Times*, March 30, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/03/31/world/middleeast/syrian-fighting-flares-ahead-of-talks.html; "Anti-Assad front under fire as three break away", AFP, March 14, 2012, www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALEqM5hNNR2Y0QJzVDtzKuVSHKJVm3KozQ?docId=CNG.14de6ae2a8ab7df107dee8993010e459.3e1; Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, MJD member, telephone, May 2012.

¹²⁹ The MB & Allies quota accounts for 61 out of 273 declared Council seats, as per the SNC website. There are a number of MB sympathizers in the 71-member National Bloc quota as well, and some MB members and informal allies of the group scattered across the other blocs.

There are also questions about the links of certain independent opposition figures to the MB, and to pro-Islamist state backers. For example, Executive Board member Ahmed Ramadan is very close to one faction of the MB, although he is formally seated on behalf of his own coalition of independents (the National Bloc). While there's little evidence to confirm or deny such speculation, critics of the SNC sometimes assign great importance to Ramadan. PYD and NCB member Sheruan Hassan even mockingly calls the SNC 'the Ramadan Council', saying that 'the strength of the SNC rests on funding and media support coming from Turkey and the Gulf, and the one controlling these resources is Ahmed Ramadan.'¹³⁰ Others point to, for example, Mutie al-Butein and Nadhir al-Hakim as informal MB allies.¹³¹



Ahmed Ramadan

SNC President Burhan Ghalioun is accused by rivals of acting as a 'secular face' to conceal the MB's influence, in return for keeping his seat. A video of remarks by Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni (Syrian MB leader 1996-2010) has been used by enemies of the SNC to support this allegation. In the clip, Bayanouni says that while Ghalioun is a liberal and former communist whose opinions differ from his own, 'we put him up as a candidate for this post to function as a front [*wajh*]', noting that Ghalioun is 'acceptable to the West and to the [Syrian] interior, and we do not want the regime to be able to use the fact that an Islamist heads the SNC.'¹³² The short, 33-second clip may have been taken out of context. For example, it is not obvious to whom Bayanouni refers when uses the form 'we': it could be the MB, or Islamists, or the SNC, or the entire opposition. Moreover, Bayanouni's remarks do not prove that the MB controls the SNC, only that the MB prefers a universally acceptable candidate to head the its visible leadership – which is in itself not surprising. Still, the allegations that Ghalioun has been retained as president because of MB support are so numerous that they are not likely to be totally unfounded.

Another secular Executive Board member who has been accused by the SNC's rivals of relying on MB support is the Kurdish representative Abdulbaset Sieda.¹³³ However, Sieda's background is in the Kurdish communist movement, and he is certainly no Islamist. He strongly denies the accusations, and while he acknowledges that the Islamists play a major role within the SNC due to their numerical strength and access to funding, he rejects the view that the MB exercises authoritarian control. For him, they are the strongest group, but ultimately one group among many. Sieda claims that the SNC's internal fissures are more related to unresolved personal rivalries, with too many members seeking high-profile posts, and a weak delineation of organizational competences. He suggests that complaints about Islamist dominance are sometimes used as a cover by members pursuing other grievances, e.g. to demand additional resources or power.¹³⁴

However, in trying to ascertain the extent of Islamist influence over the SNC, one should not focus only on the numbers: one also needs to follow the money. 'The seats thing is

¹³⁰ Interview with Sheruan Hassan, leading member of the PYD and NCB, The Hague, The Netherlands, April 2012.

¹³¹ Interview with SNC sources, May 2012.

¹³² 'Muslim Brotherhood: "We elected Burhan Ghalioun"', YouTube clip uploaded by user SyriansWorldwide, March 13, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVLptdjg0EY

¹³³ "There is no agreement between the Syrian National Council and the Turkish government", *KurdWatch*, November 18, 2011, kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview7.html; Interview with Sheruan Hassan, leading member of the PYD and NCB, The Hague, The Netherlands, April 2012; Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, telephone, May 2, 2012.

¹³⁴ Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, member of the SNC Executive Board, Uppsala, Sweden, March 2012.

secondary, decisions aren't made by votes', says Malik al-Abdeh of the MJD.¹³⁵ Since the SNC's main foreign supporters (Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and expatriate Syrian-Sunni businessmen in the Gulf) are all more or less pro-Islamist, it is possible that some Islamist members may wield personal influence over funding decisions, or enjoy other types of support that enhance their role within the SNC. The Turkish AKP government, in particular, has very good relations with the Syrian MB. Although the MB doesn't have overall control over SNC finances (Samir Nashar of the DD runs the Finance & Economy Office), it does control the Relief & Development Office of the SNC, giving the Islamists influence over how to apportion financial aid to revolutionaries inside and outside Syria.

Details of such matters are scarce, but one SNC defector, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Aqil Hashem, claims that the MB has tried to obstruct plans to unify financing of armed groups in Syria, since that would decrease the importance of their own funding channels.¹³⁶

Heitham al-Maleh and the 'Patriotic Action Front'

The SNC has seen some defections, which, while they do not by themselves threaten the coalition's existence, have highlighted the power struggles within the group. In some cases, defectors have indicated a willingness to reenter the group, should their demands be met. Often, it will be hard to tell a significant split from a minor defection. 'It's easy for anyone to arrange a press conference these days,' notes Executive Board member Abdulbaset Sieda. 'There are so many satellite channels that one of them is bound to show up.'¹³⁷

In February 2012, timed for the 'Friends of Syria' conference in Tunis, about 20 members of the SNC – some of them quite important – formed a 'Patriotic Action Front', ostensibly to demand more support for the FSA. Three leading SNC members fronted the group: Heitham al-Maleh (Executive Board), Kamal Labwani (General Secretariat), and Catherine al-Tell (General Secretariat).¹³⁸ In March, before the second 'Friends' conference in Istanbul, the split was formalized.¹³⁹

Maleh's defection from the SNC was a serious matter. The 81-year old human rights lawyer is a highly respected opposition veteran, and he was on the SNC's Executive Board. According to Maleh, his decision to leave was a protest against Burhan Ghalioun's refusal to consult with members, and the undue dominance of the MB.¹⁴⁰ SNC sources have in turn alleged that the disagreements were more about personal differences and Maleh's ambition to succeed Ghalioun as SNC president.

¹³⁵ Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, member of the MJD, telephone, May 2012.

¹³⁶ Anne Barnard, "Disagreements Among Syrian Rebels Over Foreign Arms Shipments", *The New York Times*, March 30, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/03/31/world/middleeast/syrian-fighting-flares-ahead-of-talks.html. I have been unable to track down the Aqil Hashem interview referred to in the article.

¹³⁷ Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, member of the SNC Executive Board, Uppsala, Sweden, March 2012.

¹³⁸ "Splinter group splits from Syrian National Council", *al-Ahram Online*, Feb. 27, 2012, english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/0/35556/World/0/Splinter-group-splits-from-Syrian-National-Council.aspx

¹³⁹ Thaer Abbas, 'Syrian opposition unites under SNC', *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 28, 2012, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=29036.

¹⁴⁰ Anne Barnard, "Disagreements Among Syrian Rebels Over Foreign Arms Shipments", *The New York Times*, March 30, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/03/31/world/middleeast/syrian-fighting-flares-ahead-of-talks.html; "Anti-Assad front under fire as three break away", AFP, March 14, 2012, www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hNNR2Y0QJzVDtzKuVSHKJVM3KozQ?docId=CNG.14de6ae2a8ab7df107dee8993010e459.3e1

The breakaway 'Patriotic Action Front', which for a while also included another General Secretariat defector, Walid al-Bunni, soon disintegrated after internal conflicts among the members. At the moment, it does not appear to be a functioning movement.¹⁴¹

Structural reform in spring 2012

The March 26-27, 2012 meeting in Istanbul had one primary function: to make the SNC look more attractive in the eyes of the 'Friends of Syria', which were meeting on April 1. The group had just experienced a number of high-level defections, by Maleh and other members, and the SNC seemed to be at a make-or-break moment. It would either prove its inclusiveness and ability to expand, or lose the chance of international support.

At the meeting, the SNC adopted a 'National Covenant' outlining a basic political program,¹⁴² invited some minor opposition groups to join, and promised to effect structural changes to make room for new members. A 'Joint Committee' was formed to propose a new internal organization and prepare a new congress. It included both SNC members and prospective members, but both sides were heavily dominated by pro-Western and liberal voices, with the MB conspicuously absent.¹⁴³ From the SNC, the committee included Anas al-Abdeh of the MJD, George Sabra of the SDPP, the liberal dissident Samir Nashar, Abdelahad Steifo of the ADO, and others. All are connected to the DD's post-2009 leadership, which was previously in severe conflict with the MB. The non-SNC members of the Joint Committee generally appeared to belong to the same political camp, and some, like Nawwaf al-Bashir and Abderrazzaq Eid, are in fact former DD leaders.

Had the MB been out-manuevered by the DD? One MB member stated to the media that their critics 'are mistaken if they think that a few individuals with little political weight can subvert the will of the majority.'¹⁴⁴

Malik al-Abdeh, MJD member and brother of Anas al-Abdeh (head of both the MJD and the DD), claims that Burhan Ghalioun and some of his non-MB allies have been wanting to build up the DD's presence within the SNC, to offset MB pressures on Ghalioun. Ghalioun is also eager to minimize the risk of a clash with the DD, which could challenge his leadership by launching either George Sabra or Samir Nashar as a replacement candidate.¹⁴⁵ The DD would most likely lose such a conflict, given the MB's strong position and Turkish/Qatari influence, but a split on that level would be devastating for the SNC. Malik al-Abdeh therefore sees the Joint Committee as mainly 'a decoy' invented to help bring the SNC past the crisis of March 2012, stop the flow of defections, and coopt dissidents inside and on the fringes of the SNC. Speaking in early May, he says that enough money has changed hands since then to calm the situation: 'The SNC is entering a delicate phase now, and can't afford to crack. It has to appear united. There's going to be horse trading and tough decisions, there's going to be negotiations with the regime.'¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Interview with SNC source, telephone, 2012.

¹⁴² 'National Covenant for a New Syria', SNC, April 4, 2012, www.syriancouncil.org/en/issues/item/618-national-covenant-for-a-new-syria.html

¹⁴³ 'bayan sahafi hawl al-lajna al-mushtaraka li-i'adat haykalat al-majlis al-watani' ('Press release about the Joint Committee to Restructure the SNC'), *Kulluna Shuraka fil-Watan*, April 5, 2012, all4syria.info/web/archives/59786

¹⁴⁴ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, 'Liberals challenge Islamist grip on Syrian National Council', March 28, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/28/us-syria-opposition-idUSBRE82R16120120328.

¹⁴⁵ The DD has three Executive Board members: Steifo, Sabra and Nashar. The latter two have both been mentioned as possible replacements for Ghalioun.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, MJD member, telephone, May 2012.

National Coordination Bureau (NCB)

The National Coordination Bureau for the Forces of Democratic Change (NCB, *hayat al-tansiq al-wataniya li-quwa al-taghyir al-dimouqrati*)¹⁴⁷ was formed at a meeting near Damascus on June 30, 2011. It's basic message is that the Syrian regime must be replaced by a democratic government, but that the revolution must also abide by principles it refers to as the 'three nos': *la unf, la taifiya, la tadakhul*: 'No violence, no sectarianism, no intervention.'



هُيئة التنسيق الوطنية
لقوة التغيير الديمقراطي

In some ways, the creation of the NCB simply represented the natural outcome of attempts to unify the leftist-nationalist flank of Syrian dissidence. In other ways, its creation filled the perceived need for a counter-coalition, intended to rival the still-emerging SNC. The groups who came together to form the NCB shared a fear of Western military intervention, believing that it could only lead to sectarian warfare and a long-term loss of national independence. The radical anti-regime line of the Turkey conferences in the spring and summer of 2011 (which led to the creation of the SNC) had convinced them that pro-intervention exiles were busily preparing a government in exile, which would call for NATO intervention along Libyan lines.

Moderate opposition and the Semiramis Congress

Very early in the uprising, there were attempts by dissidents inside Syria to avoid this course, by engaging the government in talks about reform. These initiatives included some well-known opposition figures, such as Salim Kheir-Bek and Ahmed Faiz al-Fawwaz. They tried to argue that the regime should avert disaster for both itself and for the Syrian people by accepting democratic reform.¹⁴⁸ The regime agreed to a series of meetings, led by presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban, which went on for 13 sessions over a period of two months. The talks were ultimately discontinued, as the mood of the country had shifted away from reform and towards confrontation.¹⁴⁹ However, moderate opposition voices continued to try to encourage reform, while avoiding open confrontation with the regime.

On June 27, 2011, just before the NCB's founding, an unprecedented opposition conference was held at the Semiramis Hotel in Damascus. It was organized by several people, but identified particularly with Louai Hussein, Mondher Khaddam and Michel Kilo, three former prisoners-of-conscience on the opposition's left wing (Hussein and Khaddam are former members of the CAP, Kilo is an independent Marxist).

For the first time in decades, the Syrian government allowed an openly oppositional meeting to take place with no intervention; instead, Syrian television showed up to interview some of the attendants. The government was eager both to show its good faith and to allow moderate, non-interventionist dissidents some room for maneuver. And obviously, it preferred to see an opposition leadership take form inside Syria rather than abroad, where

¹⁴⁷ <http://syrianncb.org> & <http://www.ncsyria.com>.

¹⁴⁸ Ahmed Faiz al-Fawwaz & Salim Kheir-Bek, 'risala ilal-raisa' ('Letter to the President'), March 22, 2011, and Salim Kheir-Bek et al, 'risala maftouha ilal-sayyed rais al-jumhuriya' ('Open Letter to the President of the Republic'), April 25, 2011, both documents provided to the author by Salim Kheir-Bek.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Salim Kheir-Bek, e-mail, August 2011.

the security services can't reach them. Still, the government apparently prevented some well-known opposition figures from attending. Also, to avoid running up against the regime's ban on 'unregistered' organizations, the congress only invited independent dissidents, and did not involve the parties of the NDA.

The Semiramis Conference was viewed with great suspicion by more radical groups, particularly among the exiles, but also by some dissidents inside Syria.¹⁵⁰ In the end, it made a surprisingly strong statement against the regime, while distancing itself from all talk of foreign intervention or armed violence.¹⁵¹

The establishment of the NCB

The NCB was founded at a meeting outside Damascus three days later. While separate from the Semiramis Conference, there was some overlap among the participants, and a strong correspondence of worldview. Both events reinforced the moderate, secular opposition camp inside Syria.

The NCB consisted primarily of the parties of the NDA. Out of the six NDA parties, five joined the NBC, led by the DASU of Hassan Abdelazim. (The other main NDA party, the SDPP of Riad al-Turk, preferred to stick with its other coalition, the DD, which eventually helped create the SNC. In October 2011, the NDA's tiny WRAP party also left the NCB, but it has not joined the SNC.¹⁵²) To this core of NDA leftists and nationalists was added a few newer movements, some formed during the revolution. There were three Kurdish parties (originally four, but one, Yekiti, broke away), including the PYD, a PKK front group that is very influential in Syrian-Kurdish politics. Minor other factions also joined, including a small Islamist group. In total, the NCB stated that it consisted of '14 political parties, four political gatherings and tens of cultural, social and Islamic figures', in addition to some feminist, youth and minor *tansiqiya* groups.¹⁵³

NATIONAL COORDINATION BUREAU FOR THE FORCES OF DEMOCRATIC CHANGE (NCB):

Democratic Arab Socialist Union (DASU): See the National Democratic Assembly factbox.

Arab Socialist Movement (ASM): See the National Democratic Assembly factbox.

Democratic Baath Arab Socialist Party (DBASP): See the National Democratic Assembly factbox.

Communist Action Party (CAP): See the National Democratic Assembly factbox.

Democratic Union Party (PYD): Hardline pro-PKK party, single strongest organization in the Kurdish opposition. Led by Saleh Muslim Mohammed.

The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria/al-Parti: A minor Kurdish splinter group led by Nasruddin Ibrahim, not to be confused with other parties by the same name.

The Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Party: A minor Kurdish group, led by Jamal Mohammed Baqi.

Marxist Left Assembly (TYM): A small far-left alliance formed in 2007, by the CAP, the Kurdish Left Party in Syria, Abdelaziz al-Khayyer, and others.

¹⁵⁰ 'al-liqa al-tashawuri lil-mu'arada al-souria fi dimashq yuthir 'asifat intiqadat' ('The Consultative Meeting of the Syrian Opposition in Damascus Stirs Up a Storm of Criticism'), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 27, 2011, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=628440&issueno=11899>

¹⁵¹ 'al-bayan al-khitami li-ijtima' "semiramis" ('Final statement of the Semiramis meeting'), *al-Haqiqa*, June 28, 2011, alheka.com/index.php/opinion/1284----qq.html

¹⁵² 'hezb el-umm al-thawri al-arabi .. qarar insihab min hayat al-tansiq al-watani' ('Workers' Revolutionary Arab Party ... Decision to withdraw from the National Coordination Bureau'), *al-Nida*, October 16, 2011, nidaasyria.org/ar/?p=649

¹⁵³ 'hayat al-tansiq al-watani tu'lan asma a'da muassasati-ha al-qiyadiya' ('National Coordination Bureau announces names of the members of its leadership institutions'), *al-Hewar al-Mutamaddin*, July 3, 2011, www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=265687

Democratic Islamic Current: Small Sunni Islamist group.

Harakat Maan: 'The Together for a Free and Democratic Syria Movement', Harakat Maan, is a group formed inside Syria in 2011 to promote a peaceful, nonsectarian revolution and social activism. The members are mainly intellectuals and veteran dissidents, but also include some youth activists.

April 17 Youth Movement: A *tansiqiya*-style movement formed early in the uprising, mainly among activists from the Deraa Governorate, supported by Heitham Manna and other leftist exiles.

(Partial list.)

There was also a large contingent of individual dissidents, mainly traditional allies of the NDA. Many of the Semiramis Congress attendees went on to join the NCB. Of the three leading figures at Semiramis, Louai Hussein formed a separate group (Building the Syrian State, BSS), but Mondher Khaddam ended up on the NCB Executive Board. Michel Kilo was also listed as an NCB Executive Council member in the June declaration, but did not accept the post and says he was never really a member: 'I was working for opposition unity, but when the NCB formed I didn't join. I would have liked a broader unity, not to deepen divisions by forming a new group.' He has remained close to the NCB's political positions.¹⁵⁴ Other well-known dissidents who joined the NCB included Aref Dalila (an economist and celebrated Damascus Spring prisoner), Fayez Sara (a leftwing journalist) and Ahmed Faiz al-Fawwaz (a Marxist human rights campaigner). Originally, Burhan Ghalioun was also intended to be a leader of the NCB, but he pulled out after gaining leadership of the SNC.

In sum, the NCB was strongly supported by the secular leftist, and Arab nationalist groups, and had some Kurdish representation, but it generally lacked support from Sunni Islamists and liberals. Liberal movements are of marginal importance outside intellectual circles in Syria, and perhaps expendable from a coalition-building standpoint, but the weak Islamist participation has severely limited the NCB's chances of popular outreach. On the other hand, the secular NCB has a stronger record of minority participation than the overtly Sunni-dominated SNC. A number of high-profile Alawite activists participated in its founding, like Aref Dalila and Abdelaziz al-Khayyer. While they do not represent a large body of opinion within the minority communities, their visible presence adds a great deal to the NCB's message of anti-sectarianism, communal tolerance and secularism.

The NCB structure and leadership

On October 6, the NCB's Central Council gathered to elect a new and expanded 28-member Executive Council, replacing the temporary version announced in June. Of the original 18 members, 12 stayed on, while 16 names were new. The three leading posts were unchanged (except for Burhan Ghalioun).¹⁵⁵ In March 2012, a third Executive Council was announced, now cut down to 23 members. Of them, 14 remained from the October 2011 version; 9 of these had hung on since June. Some important changes in March 2012 were the exclusion of Hussein al-Oudat, the former deputy coordinator, and the inclusion of Heitham Manna,

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Michel Kilo, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2011.

¹⁵⁵ 'hayat al-tansiq al-watani tu'lan asma a'da muassasati-ha al-qiyadiya' ('National Coordination Bureau announces names of the members of its leadership institutions'), al-Hewar al-Mutamaddin, July 3, 2011, www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=265687; 'wathaiq al-dawra al-ula lil-majlis al-markazi li-hayat al-tansiq' ('Documents from the First Session of the Central Council of the Coordination Bureau'), NCB, http://syrianncb.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/6_10_2011.pdf

who had since October served as the NCB's international coordinator without having a seat on the Executive Council.¹⁵⁶ The top posts, elected in March 2012, are as follows:

- General Coordinator: **Hassan Abdelazim**
- 1st Deputy General Coordinator: **Aref Dalila**
- Deputy General Coordinator: **Saleh Muslim Mohammed**
- Deputy General Coordinator: **Mays Kreidi**
- Deputy General Coordinator for the Diaspora: **Heitham Mannaa**
- General Secretary: **Raja al-Nasser**
- Deputy General Secretary: **Akram al-Akrami**
- Treasurer: **Bassam Malek**

General coordinator' (*al-munassiq al-'amm*) Hassan Abdelazim is an opposition veteran in his early eighties, born in al-Tell north of Damascus, now a lawyer in the capital. He joined the Nasserite movement in the 1960s, and was briefly a member of the Syrian parliament before breaking with the Assad regime.¹⁵⁷ For the past twelve years, he has been spokesperson of the NDA and the DASU party. He led the charge against pro-Western liberal and Islamist influence in the DD coalition circa 2007, contributing to the breakup of the original DD alliance. Rivals often accuse Abdelazim of being too concerned with foreign policy issues (such as Palestine and Iraq), and of hedging his bets in the struggle with the regime. Some claim that he has tacitly cooperated with the state to secure his central role in the opposition. On the other hand, others argue that this cautious line has kept the NDA alive inside Syria through difficult times, and that Abdelazim's rigid nationalist stance has helped dispel popular prejudice against the opposition as agents of the West. He was arrested in early summer 2011, but quickly released.¹⁵⁸



Hassan Abdelazim

As his deputy (*naib al-munassiq al-'amm*), the NBC at first appointed Hussein al-Oudat, an elderly journalist from Deraa. Oudat, a former Baathist, founded the Syrian state news agency SANA in 1966, and later served as a media adviser to the Syrian government, but by the time of the Damascus Spring in 2000, he had joined the opposition. The present deputies are Aref Dalila, an Alawite economist who was famously imprisoned by Bashar al-Assad during the Damascus Spring; Saleh Muslim Mohammed, the Kurdish leader of the PYD; and Mays Kreidi, a female writer and activist in a human rights group with ties to DASU and the Nasserite movement.¹⁵⁹ All live in Syria.

From late 2011, the NCB has found it difficult to organize events inside Syria. Consequently, Abdelazim's Paris-based international deputy (*naib al-munassiq al-'amm bil-mahjar*), Heitham Mannaa, has assumed a much more prominent role, to the extent that he is now often erroneously perceived as the NCB's leader.

¹⁵⁶ 'hayat al-tansiq al-wataniya wa-maktab tanfidh jadid: al-jaysh al-souri al-hurr zahira min zawahir al-thawra' ('NCB and new Executive Bureau: the Free Syrian Army is one of the revolution's phenomena'), Kulluna Shuraka fil-Watan, April 1, 2012, all4syria.info/web/archives/5922; 'hayat al-tansiq al-mu'arida al-sourian tusammi maktaba-ha al-tanfidhi' ('The oppositional NCB names its Executive Bureau'), *Elaph*, April 9, 2012, www.elaph.com/Web/news/2012/4/728363.html

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Hassan Abdelazim, Damascus, Syria, January 2008.

¹⁵⁸ 'al-sulutat al-souriya ta'taqil al-mu'arid al-souri al-bariz hasan isma'il 'abdelazim' ('The Syrian authorities arrest the prominent Syrian dissident Hassan Ismail Abdelazim'), National Organization for Human Rights in Syria (NOHR-S), May 1, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ The Arab Organization for Human Rights, <http://www.aohrs.org>

The charismatic Mannaa is a forceful but polarizing figure within the Syrian opposition. An independent human rights campaigner of strong anti-imperialist conviction, he has no qualms about attacking ideological opponents publicly, and seems to be involved in a few running vendettas at any given time. Mannaa's repeated clashes with Islamist and Western-backed opposition groups, and his denunciations of the Arab oil monarchies, has made him a hero to many secular leftists and nationalists, but led some of his rivals to accuse him of acting as an agent-provocateur for the regime. Critics point to the fact that the Assad regime let him travel to Syria from 2003 onwards, in recognition of his strong opposition to the Iraq war. He visited the country as late as July 2010.



Heitham Mannaa

Under Mannaa, a special Diaspora Executive Council has been set up, with thirteen members based mainly in the EU: Heitham Mannaa, Nawar Atfa, Khaled Eissi (all three in France), Fadi al-Masalema, Mohammed Zakaria al-Saqqal, Mohammed Jumaa, Nawwaf Salama (all four in Germany), Khaldoun al-Aswad (USA), Osama al-Tawil (Italy), Abderrahim Khalifa (Romania), Majed Habbou (Sweden), Khalaf Dahoud (UK) and Mamoun Khalifa (Czech Republic).¹⁶⁰ There is also a 30-member Central Council, elected at a congress in Paris in April 14, 2012.¹⁶¹

Other important names on the NCB's main Executive Council are General Secretary (*amin al-sirr*) Raja al-Nasser, a high-ranking member of Abdelazim's DASU party. The leftist dissident Abdelaziz al-Khayyer has also assumed a very active role, while Mohammed al-Ammar of the Democratic Islamic Current represents the NCB's weak Sunni Islamist component. The NCB Treasurer (*amin al-sondouq*), Bassam Malek, stands out from the other Executive Council members. As a trader in the generally pro-regime Damascene business community, he represents a sector where the socialist-leaning, anti-government NCB parties have historically enjoyed very little support.

Moderate opposition or regime creation?

The NCB is dominated by groups who have long sought to present themselves as Syria's 'patriotic' and 'internal' opposition, in contrast to allegedly pro-Western exiles. Many Arab NCB members share some elements of the Baath Party's nationalist ideology (as do many ordinary Syrians), and e.g. the DASU consistently seeks to insert pro-Palestinian positions in opposition platforms. Some of these groups and leaders have historically sought an understanding with the regime, seeking legalization in return for certain reforms, while others have been uncompromisingly hostile to Assad's rule.

Virtually all NCB member groups are ideologically opposed to Western influence in the Middle East, as well as to armed struggle, whether out of principle or for fear of civil war and occupation. The regime to some extent respects this position. It has certainly tolerated the growth of the NCB, and even allows its Executive Council members to travel abroad and

¹⁶⁰ 'haykalat hayat al-tansiq al-watania fil-mahjar' ('Structure of the NCB abroad'), NCB, available on www.syrianncb.org.

¹⁶¹ Interview with Sheruan Hassan, foreign relations spokesperson of the PYD and member of the NCB's diaspora Central Council, Hague, Netherlands, April 2012.

return, although they are constantly watched and sometimes pulled in for questioning. (Most of them are in any case veteran activists, well known to the authorities.)

The reasons for this relative lenience are clear. Not only does the regime see a common interest with the NCB in agitating against foreign intervention; it also wants to convince Syrians that those who play by the book and stay clear of foreign ties will be able to express themselves freely. Most of all, it wants to bolster the NCB as a rival to the SNC. The mere existence of the NCB makes it difficult for the SNC to claim that it represents the entire spectrum of the opposition, and the constant infighting in the opposition camp has been of great benefit to the regime.

'These guys are in Syria, but they're not being arrested, they can travel and go to Russia, and so on,' says Malik al-Abdeh, a member of the MJD, a rival group. 'The regime is obviously happy to have them, it needs an opposition like the NCB. It can coopt the NCB. It can't do that with the SNC, because it calls for intervention and supports the FSA – things which are beyond the pale, as far as the regime is concerned.'¹⁶²

The NCB is of course aware of the regime's self-interested motives, but eagerly exploits this newfound room for maneuver. Still, it is careful not to be seen to repay the favor. The NCB has not responded to government suggestions that it should join the official political system, and avoids any gesture that could confer legitimacy on the regime. It has boycotted Assad's 'national dialogue' sessions and the state-controlled elections, and the NCB parties refuse to apply for legal recognition under Syria's new party law.¹⁶³ In January, Heitham Mannaa quashed rumors that he would be appointed prime minister by Bashar al-Assad, by demanding that the president resign first.¹⁶⁴

Even so, many SNC supporters accuse the NCB of working on behalf of the intelligence apparatus, and point to the presence of ex-Baathist element and others who uphold working relations with regime officials. But while police infiltration may have succeeded at some level, and some member parties are certainly less enamored of the uprising than others, the NCB leadership is filled with activists who have sacrificed enormously for the opposition: Khayyer was a prisoner of conscience for 14 years, Fawwaz for 15 years, Khaddam for 13 years, Dalila for 7 years, and so on. During the current uprising, several members have been jailed and mistreated, some killed. A brother of Heitham Mannaa who helped organize demonstrations in Deraa was arrested and tortured, went underground to escape the secret police, but was finally shot to death by regime forces in August 2011.¹⁶⁵

Whenever the NCB directs a specific challenge against Assad, the state responds just like it does to any other opposition group – only that the NCB tends to be more vulnerable than the SNC, since its leadership resides in Syria. For example, when Abdelazim met with the US ambassador in September 2011, to the great displeasure of the regime, Assad supporters stormed the embassy convoy and Abdelazim's Damascus law office.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, MJD member, telephone, May 2012.

¹⁶³ 'al-mu'arid abdelazim: narfu taqdim talabat al-tarkhis lil-ahzab wal-musharaka fil-intikhabat', ('Opposition member Abdelazim: We refuse to present requests for permission and running in the elections'), *ChamPress*, October 2, 2011, <http://www.champress.net/index.php?q=ar/Article/view/102561>

¹⁶⁴ Tarek Abd al-Hayy, 'Syrian Opposition Cynical of Proposal for Broad-Based Government', al-Akhbar, January 17, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/content/syrian-opposition-cynical-proposal-broad-based-government

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Heitham Mannaa, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2011.

¹⁶⁶ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, 'Syrian crowd stones U.S. envoy's convoy', Reuters, September 29, 2011, www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/29/us-syria-idUSTRE78S5TD20110929; 'A Note from Ambassador Ford', U.S.

At heart, the NCB is no doubt an authentic opposition movement. While some members may be secretly collaborating with the government, as must be expected in a police state like Syria, the group's general political line is not the result of 'treachery', as some SNC members claim. It would be better explained by anti-imperialist ideology, a gradualist approach rooted in its fears of civil strife, and a pragmatic respect for regime 'red lines', due to the severe security constraints on its Syria-based leadership.

Tough times ahead for the NCB

The NCB has several strengths, compared to its main rival, the SNC. Most importantly, it draws legitimacy from the fact that it is based inside Syria. While the SNC has been mired in constant internal struggles since its creation, the NCB also appears more cohesive, at least for the time being. It has managed to hold a number of meetings to elect/reelect leaders in an orderly fashion. There are several reasons for this: The NCB is smaller, was formed after lengthy internal deliberations (April-June 2011), is made up of largely compatible ideological blocs with a common agenda, and is dominated by experienced political operators who often have a long-standing relationship to each other. The weakest link in this chain is the Arab-Kurdish collaboration, which is of more recent date and opportunistic in character; it remains to be seen how well it will hold together.

The NCB's strong secularist, nonviolent and anti-imperialist credentials are a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they make it unattractive to conservative Sunni opinion and the hardcore street and militia opposition, which now supply most of the revolution's manpower. On the other hand, it helps reassure the secular/minority communities, whose support will be key to any imaginable peaceful transition. For example, in the case of an internal coup or if Assad steps down, the NCB would most likely be a more acceptable partner to the new regime than the SNC. There are also signs that the Syrian government's international allies are interested in the NCB – delegations from the group have been invited to China,¹⁶⁷ Russia,¹⁶⁸ and, reportedly, Iran.¹⁶⁹ These states have opposed the uprising, but they are also uniquely well-placed to exert pressure on the Syrian regime, should they decide that certain changes are in order.

Some critics of the NCB see its behavior in precisely this light, as a cynical strategy to gain influence through the revolution's expected failure. According to Malik al-Abdeh of the MJD, the NCB leadership has simply made a calculated bet on the conflict's outcome: 'Their reading of the political situation in Syria has been more accurate than that of the SNC. The NCB believes Bashar al-Assad will not fall because of demonstrations alone – it will take military intervention. They figure this is unlikely, since Russia opposes it and the US has no stomach for it. As experienced politicians, they decided that they will therefore have to enter a dialogue [with the regime] and start a long-term process of reform.' While the SNC

Embassy Damascus, Facebook, September 30, 2011,

www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=10150315569616938.

¹⁶⁷ 'Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun Meets with the Syrian Opposition Delegation', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 9, 2012, www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t904722.htm.

¹⁶⁸ Olga Semina, 'Moscow to receive Syrian opposition delegation', *The Voice of Russia*, March 23, 2012, english.ruvr.ru/2012_03_23/69394627/

¹⁶⁹ Kamal Saqr, 'teheran tanfi da'wat hayat al-tansiq al-souriya al-mu'arida li-ziyarati-ha wa-liqa masouli-ha' ('Teheran denies inviting the Syrian oppositional Coordination Committee for a visit and meetings with its officials'), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, October 15, 2011; Richard Spencer, 'Iranian officials meet with Syrian opposition', *The Daily Telegraph*, November 14, 2011, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8889824/Iranian-officials-meet-with-Syrian-opposition.html.

has bet everything on foreign intervention, the NCB is quietly waiting in the wings for the international community to instead endorse a negotiated solution.¹⁷⁰

On the other hand, many would argue that the Syrian conflict has passed the point of no return, and is now headed for violent resolution with or without foreign intervention. In that case, the moderate, secular NCB and its old-guard intellectuals may be swept away by the revolutionary tide. The NCB is very poorly equipped to deal with a radicalizing opposition movement, armed struggle and sectarian mobilization. And should a foreign-backed regime change occur, the NCB is likely to be punished by being excluded from transitional arrangements geared to favor the SNC.

Furthermore, international backing for the SNC-FSA tandem is hard to match. For one thing, the NCB lacks the financial resources provided to the SNC by foreign donors. It often appears to be hard pressed to fund even basic operations. According to Sheruan Hassan, a Kurdish member of the NCB's Central Council in the diaspora:

We all travel on our own expenses, or that of our organizations. When Heitham Manna came to Brussels recently, he slept at the apartments of his friends. SNC conferences are hosted in five-star hotels, but when we had our Paris conference [in April 2012], we booked seven rooms at an Ibis Hotel for the leaders, and they slept two in each room.¹⁷¹

Whatever interest the NCB may have stirred in Beijing or Moscow, or indeed in some Western capitals, the fact of the matter is that the SNC enjoys vastly superior international backing. This is partly a consequence of the NCB's own hostile stance towards these countries, and partly of its lack of connection to the revolutionary mainstream: outside actors will try to link up with the strongest opposition faction, and the NCB isn't it.

Losing the media war

The NCB's low international profile also stems from its failure in communicating with the international media, perhaps partly as a result of its poor youth participation. Most NCB leaders are aging intellectuals, representing even older political movements, whose ideological platforms resonate poorly in today's Syria. While they are skilled operators in the opposition's traditional environment, of semi-clandestine conferences and backroom politics, they have had great problems adapting to today's revolutionary landscape. As one young anti-NCB exile puts it: 'They're people I'd describe as dinosaurs.'¹⁷²

The NCB has not connected well with the youthful street activism of the Syrian revolution, and it has signally failed to communicate with Arab and world media, which almost exclusively focuses on the SNC. This is a serious shortcoming, since the Syrian revolution is largely driven by media narratives. It is not entirely the NCB's own fault: active Gulf ownership of most major Arabic media outlets skews coverage in favor of the SNC. 'Basel al-Hamwi', a blogger specialized in tracking the Syrian opposition, notes that SNC members 'are given near exclusive attention on Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and are favored by most international media outlets.' NCB members, meanwhile, 'do appear on some Arabic channels but to a lesser extent and they hardly appear on the Saudi owned channels, such as

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, MJD member, telephone, May 2012.

¹⁷¹ Interview with Sheruan Hassan, foreign relations spokesperson of the PYD and member of the NCB Central Council in the diaspora, The Hague, The Netherlands, April 2012.

¹⁷² Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, member of the MJD, telephone, May 2012.

Al-Arabiya.’ In his view, ‘this is partly due to the critical stance of [Heitham Mannaa] against many [Gulf] countries and specifically the Saudi monarchy’.¹⁷³

But media strategy matters. The SNC is supported by major *tansiqiya* groups who promote it online and among anti-regime Syrians, and it has access to a number of skilled English and French speakers to communicate with international news agencies (which feed back into the Arabic media). It runs a good bilingual website, and issues short and snappy press releases in several languages. Meanwhile, the NCB keeps churning out long-winded written statements in Arabic only, and makes little visible effort to communicate with the world media. It would be virtually ignored if not for Heitham Mannaa’s many high-paced interviews and public appearances. The result is a very low international profile, from which follows decreased opportunities to communicate with relevant political actors and media institutions, and consequently a slackening of interest in the Arabic and Syrian opposition media as well. It’s a vicious circle of neglect, which has contributed strongly to the marginalization of the NCB.

Syrian Democratic Platform (SDP)

In February 2012 a group of prominent dissidents mostly associated with the NCB formed the Syrian Democratic Platform (SDP, *al-minbar al-dimouqrati al-souri*). They included Michel Kilo, Aref Dalila, Fayez Sara and Nasser al-Ghazali, as well as some party activists, such as Hazem al-Nahar of the WRAP.¹⁷⁴

The SDP and NCB appear to be very similar in goals and methods. ‘I could not find a single difference between the proposals of the SDP and the proposals of the NCB’, noted the Syrian writer Mohammed Ahmed al-Zoubi, who attended an SDP congress in Cairo in April 2012, along with some 200 dissidents. He points out that while there are SDP members of different ideological stripes, the SDP and the NCB share an opposition to the MB, the SNC and foreign intervention, as well as to the regime’s repressive measures.¹⁷⁵

The SDP declares that it does not see itself as an addition to existing organizations and alliances, and there is indeed an overlap in membership between SDP and NCB. For example, Dalila is a leading figure in both groups. According to the SDP itself, it is ‘open to all Syrians and those ruling them, who share its principles and goals’, listing among those goals ‘to overthrow the present system including all its symbols, using every method of civil resistance, and to dissolve its structural foundation so that tyranny cannot be reproduced in another form’.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Interview with ‘Basel al-Hamwi’ (pseudonym), author of *Syrian Revolution* (www.syrianrevolution.org), e-mail, February 2012.

¹⁷⁴ ‘al-minbar al-dimouqrati al-souri’ (‘Syrian Democratic platform’), founding statement, *Mokarabat*, March 11, 2012, www.mokarabat.com/s8604.htm

¹⁷⁵ Mohammed Ahmed al-Zoubi, ‘khawater hawl mutamar al-minbar al-dimouqrati al-souri’ (‘Thoughts about the SDP congress’), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, April 25, 2012, www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\25qpt476.htm&arc=data\2012\04\04-25\25qpt476.htm

¹⁷⁶ ‘huwiyat al-minbar al-dimouqrati al-souri’ (‘Identity of the Syrian Democratic Platform’), *Mokarabat*, March 11, 2012, www.mokarabat.com/s8605.htm

Building the Syrian State (BSS)

Building the Syrian State (BSS, *tayyar bina al-dawla al-souriya*)¹⁷⁷ was formed in Damascus in September 2011 by a mixed group of Syrian activists, including both well-known dissidents and apolitical, pro-reform independents. Its chairman is Louai Hussein, flanked by Mouna Ghanem as secretary-general.



Hussein, a secular Alawite writer formerly active in the leftist CAP, and a political prisoner between 1984 and 1991, played a prominent role in the early phase of the revolution. He was a main organizer of the June 2011 Semiramis Congress. In keeping with the moderate line of the congress, the BSS rejects armed struggle and seeks a peaceful and orderly dismantlement of the regime. Its program labels the current regime 'totalitarian', but the group 'absolutely rejects any foreign military interference whatsoever because this will result in a fierce war with devastating human and financial costs for the Syrians'.¹⁷⁸ Louai Hussein also strongly protested the formation of the SNC, saying that 'the country is not undergoing a struggle about power, we are in a struggle for freedom', and declaring that he cannot support attempts to form an alternative government at this stage, since that would be to rob the Syrian street of its rightful place in the revolution.¹⁷⁹

While the BSS and the NCB share many views, the BSS seems to be taking a somewhat more moderate course. Still, like the NCB, it has refused to join the regime-sponsored reform process, and called for a boycott of the local elections in December 2011.¹⁸⁰ Unusually for an unlicensed opposition group, Syrian state media has been reporting on the activities of the BSS in a quite neutral tone, perhaps trying to raise the profile of the group and its moderate message.¹⁸¹ This lends some credence to accusations that the regime has allowed it to emerge as a wedge to split the opposition, perhaps despite the best intentions of its founders. To date, however, the BSS remains small and of marginal significance.

National Change Current (NCC)

In February 2012, a group of dissidents held a press conference in Turkey announcing the creation of the National Change Current¹⁸² (*tayyar al-taghyir al-watani*). This liberal group declared itself supportive of the SNC, but would not initially join it, despite some overlap in

¹⁷⁷ Website: <http://binaa-syria.com>

¹⁷⁸ "The final statement of the general committee meeting of Building The Syrian State current", BSS, Oct. 12, 2011, binaa-syria.com/B/en/content/statment-1st-meeting

¹⁷⁹ "mu'aridoun suriyoun yushakkiloun tayyaran jadidan bi-sm 'tayyar bina al-dawla al-souriya'", *Syria-News*, Sep. 13, 2011, syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=137279

¹⁸⁰ 'bayan bi-khusous intikhabat al-idara al-mahalliya' ('Communiqué on the local elections'), BSS, December 12, 2011, binaa-syria.com/B/ar/content/pr25

¹⁸¹ "Building the Syrian State' Movement Inaugurated", SANA, Sep. 13, 2011, www.sana.sy/eng/21/2011/09/13/369228.htm

¹⁸² <http://www.nccsy.com/>

membership.¹⁸³ For example, one member of group, a London-based Alawite regime defector by the name of Wahid Saqr, was also an SNC council member.¹⁸⁴

The most prominent member of the NCC is Ammar Qurabi. A pharmacist by profession, with a background in a soft-opposition splinter faction of the ASM, Qurabi rose within the opposition as leader of the National Organization for Human Rights in Syria (NOHR-S), which was the most effective Syrian human rights group during the mid-to-late 2000s.¹⁸⁵ In 2011, Qurabi left the country and was prevented from returning by an arrest warrant.¹⁸⁶ While in exile, he emerged as an effective early spokesperson for the rebellion on Aljazeera and other networks. Qurabi then helped organize the Antalya Congress (May-June 2011), and was elected to its nine-member Executive Council.¹⁸⁷ He was included on a draft membership list for the SNC, but withdrew from the process in late August, complaining that it didn't take the results of earlier congresses into account.¹⁸⁸



Ammar Qurabi

After its creation in February 2012, the NCC quickly formed an alliance with four small groups on the fringes of the SNC: the Liberation and Construction Block of Nawwaf al-Bashir (an Arab tribal leader); the Movement for the Fatherland, which is an Islamist group; the Turkmen National Bloc, led by Bekir Atacan; and the Kurdish Movement for a New Life.¹⁸⁹

Their alliance was timed for the SNC's March 26-27 Istanbul conference, itself aiming to impress the international 'Friends of Syria' congress on April 1. It seemed that these dissidents, some of whom had been negotiating for posts in the SNC earlier, had joined forces to improve their bargaining position. Among their demands was a restructuring of the SNC leadership, and at the conference both Qurabi and Bashir were elected to a joint committee tasked with expanding the SNC. The NCC and its allies now seem set to join the SNC, after a successful game of coalition-building brinksmanship.¹⁹⁰ However, this is not likely to add much to the SNC's capabilities: 'They made a lot of noise in the media, but they have nothing on the ground', complains an SNC insider.¹⁹¹

¹⁸³ İpek Yezdani, "Syrian dissidents establish new bloc", *Hürriyet Daily News*, Feb. 22, 2012, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-dissidents-establish-new-bloc.aspx?pageID=238&nID=14283&NewsCatID=352; conversation with NCC members Shadi al-Khesh and Jumana Youssef, Stockholm, March 2012.

¹⁸⁴ 'Wahid Saqr', SNC, <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/members/item/402-wahid-saqr.html>; 'nahwa taghyir 208' ('Towards Change 208'), Barada TV broadcast available on www.barada.tv

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Ammar Qurabi, Damascus, January 2008.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Ammar Qurabi, e-mail, August 2011.

¹⁸⁷ 'The Antalya Conference: A Brief Report', Tharwa Foundation, June 23, 2011

¹⁸⁸ 'Unified Syrian opposition council hit by delay', *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 25, 2011, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=26346

¹⁸⁹ İpek Yezdani, "Five Syrian groups to act together", *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 19, 2012,

www.hurriyetdailynews.com/five-syrian-groups-to-act-together.aspx?pageID=238&nID=16311&NewsCatID=352

¹⁹⁰ "bayan sahafi hawl al-lajna al-mushtaraka li-i'adat haykalat al-majlis al-watani", NCC, March 29, 2012,

www.nccsy.com/arabic/index/news_entity.php?lang=2 & field_id=15 & id=65

¹⁹¹ Interview with SNC source, telephone, 2012.

The 'loyal opposition'

Bashar al-Assad has responded to the uprising by launching several reform projects, including a 'national dialogue', and a new constitution, adopted by referendum in February 2012.¹⁹² The constitution strips the Baath Party of its privileged position (Article 8 of the 1973 constitution declared it 'the leading party in the society and state'),¹⁹³ and new laws allow the creation of political parties outside the Baath's National Progressive Front (NPF).

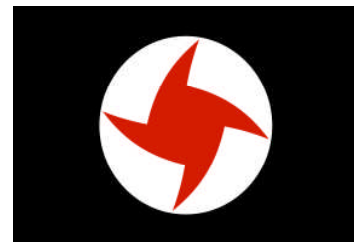
Several such officially approved groups have formed since the uprising began. By March, there were eight new political parties.¹⁹⁴ It is conceivable that some of them represent (or may come to represent) sectional interests within the pro-regime community, but they are highly unlikely to act as real opposition parties.

The Popular Front for Change and Liberation (PFCL)

In August 2011, the Popular Front for Change and Liberation (PFCL, *al-jabha al-shaabia lil-taghyir wal-tahrir*) was founded by two officially tolerated but unlicensed political groups, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party/Intifada (SSNP/i, *al-hezb al-souri al-qawmi al-ijtima'i jinah al-intifada*) and the National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists (*al-lajna al-wataniya li-wihdat al-shiyou'iyin al-souriyin*), in addition to various independents.¹⁹⁵

The SSNP is a fascist-style party advocating the creation of 'Greater Syria'. It is secular and non-confessional, but the membership is disproportionately Christian, particularly Greek Orthodox. The main faction of the SSNP is led from Lebanon by Asaad Hardan, and represented in Syria by his 96-year old deputy, Issam al-Mahayiri. While the SSNP was historically an enemy of the Baath Party, this group has been seen as reliably pro-Assad for group decades now. Its main strength lies in Lebanon, where it doubles as a pro-Syrian militia since the 1975-1990 civil war. The Hardan-Mahayiri branch of the party joined the NPF in 2005 and has been represented in successive governments.

Another faction, Ali Heidar's SSNP/i, lacks formal permission to operate in Syria and considers itself an opposition movement, although it has some ties to the regime. This is the faction in the PFCL. During the uprising, Heidar's SSNP/i has called for reforms and a more inclusive government, but it continues to support Bashar al-Assad.¹⁹⁶ Heidar's son Ismail and another party member were assassinated outside Homs in early May 2012, presumably by anti-regime militias.¹⁹⁷



SSNP flag

¹⁹² 'Syria: new constitution, 2012', *al-Bab*, www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/syria/syria_draft_constitution_2012.htm

¹⁹³ 'Syria - Constitution', International Constitutional Law, www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000_.html

¹⁹⁴ 'Parties Affairs' Committee Gives License to Syria Al-Watan Party', SANA, March 25, 2012, sana.sy/eng/21/2012/03/25/408318.htm

¹⁹⁵ 'ta'sis al-jabha al-shaabia lil-taghyir wal-tahrir fi souria .. da'm al-islah wa-rafd al-tadakhul al-khariji wal-istiqlal bil-ajnabi' ('Foundation of the Popular Front for Change and Liberation in Syria. Support for reform and refusal of foreign intervention and reliance on the foreigner.'), *ChamPress*, July 10, 2011, www.champress.net/index.php?q=ar/Article/view/95429

¹⁹⁶ 'al-souri al-qawmi al-mu'arid ytalib bi-muqata'at al-jami'a wa-yad'ou li-tashkil hukuma wihda watania' ('The oppositional Syrian Nationalist [Party] calls for a boycott of the League and calls for the creation of a national unity government'), *al-Watan*, November 28, 2011, alwatan.sy/newsd.php?idn=112753

¹⁹⁷ 'Son of SSNP leader slain in Syria', *al-Akhbar*, May 3, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/content/son-ssnp-leader-slain-syria

The National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists, a splinter from the state-sanctioned Syrian Communist Party' Bagdash faction, is headed by Qadri Jamil. While Jamil is a reformist of a kind, he has strong regime connections, and has long hovered on the outskirts of the NPF. He urges Syrians to participate in the official 'national dialogue', state-controlled elections, etc. Since the uprising began, he has been featured in Syrian, Iranian and Russian state media as an important opposition leader.¹⁹⁸ All signs point to Jamil being prepared for the role as a leading member of Assad's 'loyal opposition'; he is seen by many as 'Russia's man' in Syrian politics. In December 2011, Jamil's group formed the Party of the Popular Will (PPW, *hezb al-irada al-shaabiya*), which then applied for official recognition.¹⁹⁹

In early May 2012, as parliamentary elections approached, the two main PFCL-members (PPW and SSNP/i) and several other pseudo-opposition groups formed a larger 'Coalition for Peaceful Change Forces'.²⁰⁰

The National Initiative for Syria's Future

The National Initiative for Syria's Future (*al-mubadara al-wataniya min ajl mustaqbal souria*) is a similar movement, created in 2011. It has called for extensive liberalization, but stopped short of regime 'red lines' and in effect works to mobilize support for the regime's project of controlled reform.²⁰¹

Its coordinator Mohammed Habash is a member of parliament – and an Islamist, of a curious sort.²⁰² Habash has long enjoyed considerable latitude in running religious projects, criticizing societal ills and proposing reforms. Before the uprising, there was some speculation that he would be allowed to create a state-backed Islamist party, as part of the Assad regime's attempts to appease and coopt Sunni religious opinion. But while he has long advocated political reform and upholds contacts with some opposition groups, Habash has always defended the regime at critical junctures.

However, the National Initiative has made little headway since its establishment, and Habash's relations with the government appear to have grown strained over the course of the rebellion. In an interview with an Emirati newspaper in April 2012, he criticized the

¹⁹⁸ Eg. 'Syria's Qadri Jamil in Moscow to promote opposition demands', October 11, 2011, *The Voice of Russia*, english.ruvr.ru/2011/10/11/58552287.html; 'Qadri Jamil: Popular Front Supports National Dialogue away from Foreign Intervention', SANA, April 26, 2012, sana.sy/eng/22/2012/04/26/415045.htm; 'Lavrov Discusses with Popular Front for Change and Liberation Delegation the Situation in Syria', SANA, April 27, 2012, sana.sy/eng/22/2012/04/27/415250.htm.

¹⁹⁹ Ismail Jaradat, 'a'adat awraq "al-mubadara al-wataniya" wal-irada al-sha'abiya li-istikmal wathaiqi-hima... lajnat al-ahzab turakhis li-hizbay "al-shabab al-watani asl-souri" wa-"al-shabab al-watani lil-'adala wal-tanmiya"' ('Paperwork of the National Initiative and the Popular Will was sent back for completion of their documents... The Committee for Parties registers the National Syrian Youth and National Youth for Justice and Growth parties'), *al-Thawra*, March 15, 2012.

²⁰⁰ The other members were, according to Syria's state news agency, 'the Third Movement for Syria, the Peaceful Change Path Popular Movement, the Democratic Marxist Assembly, the National Work Movement, and various popular committees from Deir Ezzor and Lattakia.' ('Coalition of Peaceful Change Forces Launched', SANA, May 3, 2012, www.sana.sy/eng/21/2012/05/03/416485.htm.)

²⁰¹ 'Syrian opposition, independent figures hold "national initiative" meeting', Xinhua, July 3, 2011, news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-07/03/c_13963408.htm

²⁰²; Thomas Pierret, 'Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba'thi Syria', in Fred Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, Saqi, 2009.

regime in unusually strong terms, praised anti-regime Sunni clerics such as Osama and Sariya al-Rifai, and claimed that he had been banned from teaching and speaking in mosques.²⁰³

The National Initiative for the Syrian Kurds

In early 2011, the pro-government Kurdish politician Omar Ossi began to appear as a spokesperson of Kurdish nationalism in Syrian regime media, in his capacity as head of the newly formed National Initiative for the Syrian Kurds (*al-mubadara al-wataniya lil-akrad al-souriyin*). Ossi openly criticized government policy, but also stated that the problems of the Kurds 'are solved in Damascus, not in any other capital'. He said that the opposition should not expect a rising of 'the Kurdish street'.²⁰⁴ This belated attempt to mold a pro-regime Kurdish movement does not appear to have been very successful, and the old Kurdish nationalist parties have barely bothered to respond. Nevertheless, as elections approached in early spring 2012, Ossi was working for official approval of his group as Syria's first legal Kurdish party.²⁰⁵

Syrian Sunni Islamism

Sunni Islamism represents the single strongest force in the Syrian opposition, after several decades of visibly growing religious observance.²⁰⁶ However, the Islamist movement is internally divided into a number of different theological and political strands, and many of these are informal groups led by individual scholars or preachers. This makes it difficult to get a clear understanding of Syrian Islamist politics.



Mohammed Riad al-Shaqfa

The Muslim Brotherhood

The most important organized Islamist group in Syria is the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-ikhwan al-muslimoun*, MB), a pan-Islamist movement loosely tied to an international leadership in Egypt. The Syrian branch was created in 1944.²⁰⁷ It is presently headed by General Inspector Mohammed Riad al-Shaqfa, who succeeded Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni (1996-2010).

²⁰³ 'mohammed habash lil-jarida: al-nizam masoul'an al-jaraim wa-ladei-hi barnamaj la yurid al-rujou' 'an-hu' (Mohammed Habash to al-Jarida: The regime is responsible for the crimes and it has a program it will not back away from'), *al-Jarida*, April 19, 2012, aljarida.com/2012/04/19/2012474747/

²⁰⁴ Jumblat Shkai, 'ossi: nahnu ashab tarikh musharref wa-na'tabir souria watana-na wa-bashar al-assad raisa-na' ('Ossi: We have an honorable history and we consider Syria our homeland and Bashar al-Assad our president'), *al-Watan*, March 16, 2011, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=97825>

²⁰⁵ Ismail Jaradat, 'a'adat awraq "al-mubadara al-wataniya" wal-irada al-sha'abiya li-istikmal wathaiqi-hima... lajnat al-ahzab turakhis li-hizbay "al-shabab al-watani asl-souri" wa-"al-shabab al-watani lil-'adala wal-tanmiya"' ('Paperwork of the National Initiative and the Popular Will was sent back for completion of their documents... The Committee for Parties registers the National Syrian Youth and National Youth for Justice and Growth parties'), *al-Thawra*, March 15, 2012,

thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_print_veiw.asp?FileName=103492788420120314235605

²⁰⁶ Sami Moubayed, 'The Islamic Revival in Syria', *MidEast Monitor*, vol. 1, no. 3, September-October 2006, http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0609/0609_4.htm

²⁰⁷ On the MB: interview with Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, then leader of the MB, and Zoheir Salem, official spokesperson of the MB, London, UK, November 2009; Feisal Derraj & Mohammed Jamal Barout (eds.), *al-ahzab wal-harakat wal-jama'at al-islamiya (The Islamic Parties, Movements and Groups, 2 vols.)*, Arab Centre for Strategic Studies, Damascus, Syria, no date of publication; Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood. The Burden of Tradition*, Saqi, 2010; website on www.ikhwansyria.com.

The MB draws strength less from its size than from the popularity of its doctrine, which has a far wider audience than the group's membership. The combination of traditional moral conservatism and pragmatic politics appeals to many religiously minded Sunnis, particularly in the urban middle class. Another factor in the MB's favor is its strict internal discipline, but this may be less true of the Syrian group than of many other MB branches.

The Syrian MB is led from exile – mainly in the UK, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, to some extent Yemen and formerly Iraq – and has split several times over the past decades. Although the main rifts had healed by the 1990s, the group is still plagued by tension between an 'Aleppo' and a 'Hama' faction. While the entire leadership is in exile, the conflict retains a strong geographic dimension, although overlaid with ideological and personal disputes. The Aleppo faction is seen as very moderate by international MB standards, and appears to have strong connections to the AKP through the Syrian diaspora in Turkey. It is identified with the previous General Inspector Bayanouni, who hails from an influential family in Aleppo's religious establishment. The Hama faction is led by figures from the MB's former paramilitary wing and is considered more conservative and hawkish, although there appears to be a broad consensus about the general political line.²⁰⁸ It includes Shaqfa and his powerful deputy in the SNC, Mohammed Farouq Teifour, as well as the MB's Shoura Council chairman, Mohammed Hatem al-Tabashi.²⁰⁹

A main bone of contention between the factions in recent years has been the MB's many failed alliances with ideological rivals. The most controversial case was the MB's 2006-2009 collaboration with the exiled Baathist politician Abdelhalim Khaddam. Some also protested the MB's 2009 decision to announce a 'suspension' of opposition activity, and other attempts by Bayanouni to appease the regime, the West, or both. The MB's strategy has been perceived as improvised and opportunistic, which is a damaging charge to a group that claims to be guided by religious faith.



**Ali Sadreddine
al-Bayanouni**

When Bayanouni stepped down in August 2010, respecting a constitutional three-term limit, leadership was won by the Hama faction. Most of Bayanouni's allies within the Aleppo faction were kicked off the MB's Shoura Council and other leading organs. Although he officially remained a leading member of the Syrian MB, Bayanouni is said to have kept some distance to the new leadership. The factions have continued to snipe at each other through the Arabic press.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Omar al-Ezzi: "al-ikhwan al-souriyoun: thalathoun 'amman bahthan 'an madkhal", printed copy, originally published by *IslamOnline's* Islamiyoun section, Sep. 17, 2009, islamiyoon.islamonline.net; Mohammed al-Masri, 'al-muhariboun al-qudama yasta'idoun maqalid al-sulta. al-bayanouni yataqa'ud fi khitam wilayati-hi al-thalitha wa-shaqfa muraqiban 'amman lil-ikhwan al-souriyin' ('The veteran fighters retake the reins of power. Bayanouni retires at the end of his third term and Shaqfa becomes general inspector of the Syrian Brotherhood'), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 8, 2010; "'The Syria Muslim Brotherhood: Leadership Transition from Bayanouni to Shaqfa" by Aron Lund', *SyriaComment*, August 21, 2010, www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=7037

²⁰⁹ Mohammed al-Masri, 'al-muhariboun al-qudama yasta'idoun maqalid al-sulta. al-bayanouni yataqa'ud fi khitam wilayati-hi al-thalitha wa-shaqfa muraqiban 'amman lil-ikhwan al-souriyin' ('The veteran fighters retake the reins of power. Bayanouni retires at the end of his third term and Shaqfa becomes general inspector of the Syrian Brotherhood'), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 8, 2010, p. 1; Ahmed al-Masri, 'shura ikhwan souriya yasta'idd lil-itaha bi-shaqfa wa-tansib teifour muraqiban 'amman' ('The Syrian Ikhwan Shoura prepares to remove Shaqfa and install Teifour as general inspector'), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 4, 2011, www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\04z499.htm&arc=data\2011\07\07-04\04z499.htm

²¹⁰ Ahmed al-Masri, 'shura ikhwan souriya yasta'idd lil-itaha bi-shaqfa wa-tansib teifour muraqiban 'amman' ('The Syrian Ikhwan Shoura prepares to remove Shaqfa and install Teifour as general inspector'), July 4, 2011, www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\04z499.htm&arc=data\2011\07\07-04\04z499.htm; Ahmed al-Masri,

During the summer of 2011, the Aleppo faction took a leading role in pushing for the creation of the SNC, apparently on its own initiative. This was accomplished through Ahmed Ramadan (a Bayanouni ally) and his bloc of mostly Aleppine nationalists and Islamists within the Istanbul Group, which established the SNC on September 15. The official MB leadership under Shaqfa was only brought on board later, in the enlarged October version of the SNC. Since then, according several sources, Bayanouni has fallen back in line with the new leadership. Some claim that a power-sharing deal was struck in early 2012, whereby Shaqfa agreed to step down at a future date, to make Teifour the new leader of the MB and Bayanouni his deputy.²¹¹

The MB lacks an organized base inside Syria, ever since it was rooted out by Hafez al-Assad in the throes of its failed 1979-1982 uprising. Membership is banned on pain of death since 1980, which has prevented the group from reorganizing effectively. While it is the single largest opposition group in terms of membership, the MB is therefore very weak on the ground in Syria.

Another obstacle is a widespread fear of the MB among Syria's minorities, secularists and some others in the general public, who recall its sectarian violence in 1979-1982. The regime has exploited this, and tries to portray the MB as the hidden force behind virtually every Syrian opposition project – because while the group does enjoy significant support in the Sunni religious community, it has at least as many enemies in the general population.

In recent years, the MB has tried to address this issue, by recalling Islamist participation in secular party politics in pre-Baathist Syria. The leadership has tried to distance the MB from the 1970s-1980s uprising, stating that this was an aberration from the group's true political line, provoked by the Assad regime's violence. Under Bayanouni, the MB participated with secular dissidents in a pro-democracy conference in 2002,²¹² issued a detailed political program of its own in 2004²¹³, and signed the Damascus Declaration in 2005, each time committing itself to respect minority rights. Bayanouni has repeatedly stated that he would accept a female, Christian or Alawite president in Syria, placing him ahead the international MB, where these positions are not generally accepted.²¹⁴ But many skeptics remain unconvinced, and believe that this is



**Mohammed Farouq
Teifour**

'al-muraqib al-'amm li-ikhwan souriya riad al-shaqfa li-"al-quds al-arabi": nahnu munfatihioun 'ala al-gharb wal-sharq wa-lasna tullab sulta wal-anzima al-diktatouriya istakhdamat al-jama'a ka-"faza'a" wal-khilaf dakhil al-jama'a tanzimi wa-laysa siyasiyan aw fikriyan' ('General inspector of the Syrian Brotherhood Riad al-Shaqfa to al-Quds al-Arabi: We are open to the west and the east, we do not seek power, the dictatorial regimes have used the group as a "bogeyman", the dispute inside the group is organizational and not political or ideological'), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 8, 2011, alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today/08z498.htm&arc=data/2011/07/07-08/08z498.htm

²¹¹ Interviews with non-MB sources, spring 2012.

²¹² 'al-mithaq al-watani fi souriya' ('The National Pact in Syria'), congress statement on August 25, 2002, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Media Office, <http://www.ikhwansyria.com/ar/default.aspx?xyz=U6Qq7k%2bcOd87MDI46m9rUxJEpMO%2bi1s7cH9JGRnrwQwSEIAfklxlv6h3fPMYBXLBOG%2fygX%2bZit9dVVNJDDWla27m8Juu0xm9LTfntOIHj6DFS%2fxc0%2fhFuFdu0zRlyMN YDYSJDWUknr6U%3d>

²¹³ 'al-mashrou al-siyasi li-souriya al-mustaqbal' ('The Political Project for a Future Syria'), Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Media Office, 2004, <http://www.ikhwansyria.com/ar/DataFiles/Contents/Files/word+pdf/mashro3-syasy.pdf>

²¹⁴ Interview with Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, London, UK, November 2009.

simply a tactical shift out of necessity. Even those secular dissidents who came to see Bayanouni as a possible partner worried about whether his tolerant line really had support from the broader MB membership.²¹⁵ However, despite their hawkish reputation, Shaqfa and Teifour have stayed on message. In March 2012, the MB issued a new political declaration where they again announced their support for religious equality and formally stated that 'every citizen has the right to reach the highest of positions'.²¹⁶

During the uprising, the MB has made good use of its connections in the Middle East and the wider Sunni Islamic world. MB factions in other Arab countries, as well as independent pro-MB preachers all over the world, have joined in support of the Syrian uprising. For example, the Qatar-based theologian Yousef al-Qaradawi, a very influential proponent of MB-style Islamism, quickly broke with the Assad regime and endorsed the Syrian revolution in 2011. He then began pushing for the delegitimization of Assad's rule through his organization, the International Union of Muslim Scholars.²¹⁷ In this way, Qaradawi supported the interests of both his state sponsor, Qatar, and his Syrian MB allies.

To capitalize on its strengths (Sunni popular support, international ties), and neutralize its weaknesses (weak organization in Syria, minority resistance), the MB needs to secure foreign sponsorship and ally with independent Islamists inside Syria, as well as with non-Islamist groups. The SNC, where Teifour represents the MB, has enabled it to do this.

Syrian Salafism

In some areas of Syria, Salafist groups have made rapid inroads since the 1990s. Salafism is an ultra-orthodox school in Sunni Islam, inspired and often financed by the 'Wahhabi' religious institutions in Saudi Arabia. In Syria, Salafism has spread particularly in some poor Arab tribal areas, where social values mesh more easily with those of the Arabian Peninsula than in urban milieus; these areas have become connected to the Saudi religious scene through guest workers in the Gulf and religious satellite TV channels. These regions include parts of the Deraa countryside and the Syrian east around Deir al-Zor, but Salafis tend to be active at some level in all Sunni areas of Syria, certainly including the large cities.

Salafism is more strict and intolerant than the MB's pragmatic Islamo-conservatism, but Salafist movements tend to be very loosely organized. Most Salafists focus on *daawa* (preaching), and aim to convert other Sunni Muslims from their traditionalist 'folk Islam' to the Salafis' own rigid pattern of rituals, dress codes and behavioral rules. They also oppose the spiritual sects known as Sufi Brotherhoods, which are very influential in some areas of Syria, particularly among rural Sunni groups (including the Kurds).

Many Salafists are politically quiescent, and prefer to focus on personal morality rather than to get involved in society. On the other hand, there are those who view the struggle for Islamic law to be a duty, and most Salafists regard the Syrian regime as anti-Islamic because of its secularism. They specifically resist the 'heresy' of Alawite rule. Many rely on ancient

²¹⁵ This opinion was stated by several secular and/or minority-background dissidents, in interviews in Syria and Europe, 2008-2010.

²¹⁶ 'ahd wa-mithaq min jama'at al-ikhwan al-muslimin' ('Covenant and Charter from the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria'), Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Media Office, March 25, 2012, <http://www.ikhwansyria.com/ar/default.aspx?xyz=U6Qq7k%2bcOd87MDI46m9rUxJEpMO%2bi1s730Vi2uPZymeC3dQ0Mjko9XSNb1%2b%2f2mTR%2beoYEH3PMEr5AWIqS3vabSTmobEdOmMrwK3nhDUYbPPaXFzF8Z4WPBzMEcrsW7wVx1T%2ftX9B2tg%3d>

²¹⁷ See numerous statements on the International Union of Muslim Scholars website, at <http://www.iumsonline.net>

fatwas by medieval scholars such as Ibn Taymiya, where Alawites are described as enemies of Islam who should be annihilated.

Hezb al-Tahrir

The most well-known and well-organized Syrian Salafist group is the Hezb al-Tahrir, or Liberation Party. Like the MB, it is a pan-Islamic movement with branches in many countries. Its main goal is to reestablish the Sunni Islamic caliphate, but it takes a long-term approach to that goal. For the foreseeable future, Hezb al-Tahrir simply wants to spread the Salafi ideals and slowly strike roots in Muslim societies around the world, rather than undertake any overt political action. While not a pacifist movement in principle, Hezb al-Tahrir therefore refuses to participate in armed violence. Still, the Syrian wing has been involved in demonstrations and protests against the government, arguing that Syrian Muslims 'are obliged to overthrow the regime in Syria because first and foremost, it is a regime which does not rule by Islam'.²¹⁸

Jihadi groups

A radical minority among the Salafists, the 'Salafi-Jihadi' movement, regards itself as being at war with secular Muslim governments and with the West. This is the ideology of al-Qaida and like-minded groups. They view other Salafists with mild contempt, and are quite hostile to the MB. The international Salafi-Jihadi community has taken an intense interest in the Syrian uprising, seeking a role in the armed resistance. al-Qaida's top leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has called on Muslims to join the rebellion.²¹⁹

A shadowy group called the Jabhat al-Nusra ('Support Front') announced its existence in early 2012, and has claimed responsibility for several suicide bombings.²²⁰ While many Syrian opposition members claim that Jabhat al-Nusra is a government creation, most signs point to it being a spinoff from the al-Qaida affiliated 'Islamic State in Iraq'. There are also other armed groups with Jihadist leanings in Syria, often locally organized. Some examples are the Dhu al-Nourain Brigade and the Ansar Brigade in Homs. Some such groups have stated their allegiance to the non-Jihadi FSA leadership, but most do not; some of them may be in the process of joining Jabhat al-Nusra.

²¹⁸ 'A Statement from Hizb ut-Tahrir Syria to the Muslim Scholars', Hezb al-Tahrir/Syria, February 15, 2012, www.khilafah.com/index.php/analysis/middle-east/13476-a-statement-from-hizb-ut-tahrir-syria-to-the-muslim-scholars

²¹⁹ Aaron Y. Zelin, 'As-Sahāb Media presents a new video message from al-Qā'idah's Dr. Ayman al-Ẓawāhirī: "Onward Oh Lions of Syria"', *Jihadology*, February 11, 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/02/11/as-sa%E1%B8%A5ab-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qaidahs-dr-ayman-al-%E1%BA%93awahiri-onward-oh-lions-of-syria/>

²²⁰ Aaron Y. Zelin, 'al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents: "Declaration of the Victory Front (Jabhah al-Nuṣrah): For the People of Syria from the Mujāhidīn of Syria in the Fields of Jihād"', *Jihadology*, January 24, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/01/24/al-manarah-al-bayda-foundation-for-media-production-presents-for-the-people-of-syria-from-the-mujahidin-of-syria-in-the-fields-of-jihad-jabhah-al-nuṣrah-the-front-of-victory; Aaron Y. Zelin, 'al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nuṣrah: "Battle of Revenge for the Free of ash-Shām (Syria)"', *Jihadology*, February 27, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/02/27/al-manarah-al-bayda-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nuṣrah-battle-of-revenge-for-the-free-of-ash-sham-syria/; Lee Keath, 'Islamists seek influence in Syria uprising', AP, March 23, 2012, www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gLHmWOLjOxrJsYQ4bHTZmQr1I2eA?docId=2a1546879d6f4c45acb7b7f3faffe194; Mohammed Al Shafey & Paula Astatih, 'FSA and Islamists express doubts about Al-Nusra Front', *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 22, 2012, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28956

Syrian Islamists during the uprising

The role of Islamists in the uprising has been a hotly debated issue. The American journalist Nir Rosen, who has travelled extensively in Syrian rebel territory, sums up the situation on the ground as follows:

Syria's uprising is not a secular one. Most participants are devout Muslims inspired by Islam. By virtue of Syria's demography most of the opposition is Sunni Muslim and often come from conservative areas. The death of the Arab left means religion has assumed a greater role in daily life throughout the Middle East. A minority is secular and another minority is comprised of ideological Islamists. The majority is made of religious-minded people with little ideology, like most Syrians. They are not fighting to defend secularism (nor is the regime) but they are also not fighting to establish a theocracy. But as the conflict grinds on, Islam is playing an increasing role in the uprising.²²¹

Secular Syrians and minority groups are deeply worried by the rising Islamic fervor in parts of the street opposition, including FSA units and other armed militias. '[W]e know that the Islamic movements will grab any chance to ride the wave of popular protest,' said Randa Kassis, leader of a small secularist group in the SNC, when interviewed in October 2011, 'especially since they have grown and thrived in Syria with the financial support of Saudi clerics and politicians and other countries.' Still, she argued that secularists must participate in the revolution, since this is the 'best moment to impose our secular view and find a way to force the Islamic movement to accept some compromises.'²²²

While some secularists and most religious minority members have backed the regime, Syria's Sunni Islamists have generally sympathized with the protest movement – although there are exceptions. The regime has a number of influential state-supported preachers and theologians on its side, such as the Grand Mufti Ahmed Badreddine Hassoun from Aleppo, the influential Damascene scholar Mohammed Said Ramadan al-Bouti, or Salah Kuftaro (son of the former grand mufti Ahmed Kuftaro, d. 2004), a Naqshbandi Sufi who leads the Abu Nour Islamic center in Damascus.²²³ The government has tried to keep these Islamic leaders at its side by granting concessions to religious opinion, eg. creating an Islamic TV channel.²²⁴ Some opposition groups have reacted by putting pressure on the pro-regime Islamists, sometimes using threats and violence; Grand Mufti Hassoun's son was murdered in early October 2011.²²⁵

However, grassroots Sunni religious opinion tends to sympathize with the opposition, and Islamist preachers either push their followers in that direction out of ideological conviction, or follow the street, anxious not to lose support. In October 2011, a meeting was held in

²²¹ Nir Rosen, 'Islamism and the Syrian uprising', *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/08/islamism_and_the_syrian_uprising.

²²² Interview with Randa Kassis, leader of the Coalition of Secular and Democratic Syrians, e-mail, October 2011. Slightly amended for clarity.

²²³ Thomas Pierret, 'Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba'thi Syria', in Fred Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, Saqi, 2009. It is worth noting that the Kufaros and Bouti are of Kurdish origin, as is the case with a disproportional number of the most influential pro-regime Sunni preachers. (See Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds. History, politics and society*, Routledge, 2011.)

²²⁴ 'Minister of Awkaf: New Religious Satellite Channel to be Launched Soon', SANA, June 23, 2011, <http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/23/354428.htm>.

²²⁵ Nir Rosen, 'A conversation with Grand Mufti Hassoun', Aljazeera English, October 3, 2011, english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/10/201110312588957185.html

Istanbul where several Islamic groups came together to support the revolution, and decided to endorse the SNC.²²⁶ Many well-known Islamist leaders have also backed the uprising – see the list of individual dissidents at the end of this report.²²⁷

The Kurdish opposition

Syria's Kurds, who are Sunni Muslim like the Arab majority, make up some 8-10 percent of the population, yet they have long been marginalized by the government.²²⁸ The Baath Party instituted a number of repressive measures specifically targeting the Kurdish minority. These included a ban on the Kurdish language and literature, on Kurdish names, on the Kurdish new-year's celebration (Newroz), and, most damaging, refusing citizenship to tens of thousands of Kurds since the 1960s, on the spurious grounds that their ancestors immigrated from Turkey (a rule not applied to any other segment of the population).

This treatment has created a seething hostility towards the Baath regime, but the Kurdish political opposition has been ineffective. It is divided into a large number of competing political parties, currently about 15. Many of them are very small and have little activity. Among the larger and most effective are the Democratic Union Party (PYD; affiliated with Turkey's PKK, led by Saleh Muslim Mohammed), the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (affiliated with Iraq's PUK; led by Abdelhamid Hajji Darwish), the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (affiliated with Iraq's KDP; commonly referred to as 'al-Parti'; led by Abdelhakim al-Bashar), the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria ('Azadi'; led by Kheireddine Mourad), the Future Current ('Peseroj' or 'Mustaqbal'; led until his death in October 2011 by Meshaal Temmo), the Syrian Kurdish Popular Union ('Yekiti'; led by Ismail Hami), and others. Of these parties, the PYD, Yekiti, Future Current and Azadi parties have tended to be more outspokenly nationalist and confrontative. Many other parties prefer a more moderate line, with Abdelhamid Hajji Darwish often portrayed as the most cautious Kurdish leader.

The Iraqi issue dominated Syrian-Kurdish politics until the 1960s, while the PKK rebellion in Turkey absorbed attention from the 1980s onwards. Hafez al-Assad supported the PKK (until 1999), ensuring that Syrian Kurds kept their attention fixed on developments outside Syria. In this way, Kurdish developments in the neighboring countries have sapped Syrian Kurdish energies and contributed to splits in the local movements, rather than strengthening their position vis-à-vis the government.

It is important to note that no Syrian-Kurdish party demands independence. Many Kurds may privately dream of a Kurdish state, but most feel that this is not a realistic proposition

²²⁶ 'da'wa liqa mumathilin 'an al-teyf al-islami fi souria' ('Invitation to a meeting with representatives of the Islamic spectrum in Syria'), Rabitat al-ulema al-souriyin, October 22, 2011, www.islamsyria.com/news.php?action=details&NID=90

²²⁷ Line Khatib, 'Syria's Islamic Movement and the Current Uprising: Political Acquiescence, Quietism, and Dissent', *Jadaliyya*, February 21, 2012, www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4415/syrias-islamic-movement-and-the-current-uprising_p

²²⁸ Information on Syria's Kurds is largely drawn from Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria. An existence denied*, Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005; Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds. History, politics and society*, Routledge, 2011; KurdWatch, Report 8: 'Who is the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition? The Development of Kurdish Parties', 1956-2011, December 2011; Interviews with Abdulbaset Sieda, Uppsala, Sweden, 2009 and 2011, Khelil Kerro of Azadi, Uppsala, Sweden, 2009; Siruan H. Hossein, Stockholm, Sweden, 2009; Kamiran Hajo of the KDPS/al-Parti and the Damascus Declaration, Västerås, Sweden, 2009; Sheruan Hassan of the PYD, e-mail, 2009, and in Stockholm, Sweden, 2011.

for the scattered Syrian-Kurdish enclaves. The Kurdish movement in Syria has instead focused on language rights, the citizenship issue, permission to celebrate Newroz, etc., and demanded recognition of historical injustices. Many Kurdish parties would also like Syria's constitution to explicitly recognize the Kurdish presence in Syria, and, beyond that, to endorse the notion of a historic Kurdish nation (Kurdistan) and the principle of Kurdish self-determination. They insist that this is not an attempt to lay the groundwork for separatism, but the Arab majority tends to view such rhetoric with suspicion. A few parties, but far from all, seek autonomous self-rule for Kurdish-majority areas inside Syria. This is wholly unacceptable to most Arab dissidents, who argue that it would open a Pandora's box of similar demands from other ethnic groups (Assyrians), religious communities (Druze, Alawites), or tribal communities (such as in the Syrian far east).

Most Arab dissident groups were historically disdainful of Kurdish demands, and some actively supported the Baath's anti-Kurdish legislation through the 1960s, 1970s and even 1980s. The NDA's Arab nationalist mainstream, including the DASU party, has had understandably strained relations to the Kurdish groups. While some leftist dissident groups have been very supportive of Kurdish rights (the CAP even argued for self-determination), others have been closer to the Arab nationalist position (including the SDPP). The MB, while formally anti-nationalist, is in practice an Arab organization. It has had tense relations with the Kurdish movement, which is overwhelmingly secular. During the 1980s, most Arab groups began to shift their stance, and by the early 2000s most had come out in favor of Kurdish demands. Still, mutual suspicions persisted, and there was very little active cooperation.

In 2004 Kurdish-Arab riots erupted in Qamishli, partly inspired by events in Iraq. This set off a series of protest marches and demonstrations around Syria, involving thousands of Kurds. About 30 Kurds were killed in the government crackdown. The ferocity of the Qamishli riots (Assad statues were torn down, Baath Party offices burned to the ground) took both the government and the Arab opposition by surprise. It demonstrated that while the organized Kurdish opposition remained weak, Kurdish nationalism had a disproportionate capacity for spontaneous street mobilization – because ironically, decades of Baathist ethnic discrimination had helped to thoroughly politicize Kurdish society.

Since then, the Arab and Kurdish opposition groups have begun cooperating much more closely than was previously the case. This was exemplified by the signing of the 2005 Damascus Declaration by seven Kurdish parties. While the Kurds were inspired by the Qamishli riots to try to put their house in order, e.g. through the 2009 formation of the Political Council, an alliance gathering most Syrian-Kurdish parties – the regime was slow to respond. In early 2011, the state had not realized a single one of Bashar al-Assad's repeated promises of Kurdish citizenship, language rights, etc.

The Kurds and the 2011 uprising

Fearful of the Kurds' ability to ramp up unrest, the Syrian regime responded to events in Tunisia and Egypt by immediately caving in to Kurdish demands. The citizenship issue was suddenly resolved by presidential decree, after half a century of procrastination. Newroz celebrations were not only allowed, but featured as a festive popular holiday in state media.²²⁹ Government representatives held a series of discreet meeting with Kurdish

²²⁹ 7. 'Damascus: President again announces solution to the problem of the stateless,' *KurdWatch*, April 2, 2011, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1373>; 'Syria: Newroz 2011 more peaceful than ever', *KurdWatch*, March 23, 2011, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1328>.

notables to convince them that further changes were in the pipeline, and urged Kurds to stay on the sidelines to be able to enjoy these gains. This has had some effect. Two important Kurdish party alliances held meetings in late January and early February 2011, before the eruption of Syria's revolution, and 'called for their constituents to control themselves, to be wary and careful, and to avoid being influenced by irresponsible media.'²³⁰

Some demonstrations did appear in Kurdish areas during the spring, generally organized by independent youth groups. The established party leaderships mostly tried to calm the situation and prevent rioting. Government forces in Kurdish areas also kept a low profile, to minimize the risk of clashes. 'I think the Kurdish tactic was to avoid being drawn in at an early stage, so the regime would not be able to claim that Syria will be divided', says Ismail Kamil, a Syrian-born Kurd who is now a member of the Swedish parliament, but remains involved with Syrian-Kurdish politics. 'To let Arab activists take the lead was, I think, a good move by the Kurds.'²³¹

Kurdish areas in Syria remained conspicuously calm throughout 2011. While demonstrations did regularly occur in most areas, they remained small and orderly, with some exceptions. According to the human rights and advocacy organization KurdWatch, the number of arrests of Syrian Kurds was not exceptional compared to previous years: 209 Kurds were arrested by government forces in 2009, 137 Kurds in 2010, and 200 in 2011.²³² Unlike other Sunni areas of Syria, there have been very few armed clashes in Kurdish areas. The FSA and similar groups do not appear to have a foothold there.

This does not mean that Kurdish grassroots opinion of the regime, shaped by decades of racist repression, has shifted. The political parties came under intense criticism both from the Arab opposition, and from within the nationalist movement. In June, Bashar al-Assad invited most Syrian-Kurdish parties for discussions with him personally, on the urging of local notables in northeastern Syria. When the regime demanded that party representatives should attend only in their individual capacity, the Kurds refused. Assad then backtracked, and took the unprecedented step to extend an official invitation to the Kurdish political parties, despite the fact they are formally illegal. Even then, after some deliberation, the parties decided to refuse the invitation, anxious not to alienate Kurdish public opinion.²³³

The Kurdish National Council (KNC)

On October 26-27, 2011, all Kurdish parties except the PYD (of which more below) held a joint meeting to create the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a party alliance.²³⁴ Members remained free to align themselves with the larger Arab alliances as they saw fit, and there are some sympathizers of both the SNC and the NCB within the coalition. The first congress of the KNC decided to stick with the Kurds' cautious line, and voted not to explicitly demand the downfall of the Assad regime, restricting itself to a more general call for democracy.²³⁵

²³⁰ 'The Reality of the Syrian Opposition and Current and Future Challenges', Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, October 16, 2011, english.dohainstitute.org/Home/Details/5ea4b31b-155d-4a9f-8f4d-a5b428135cd5/20dab3f0-2f8c-47a3-83a6-730d777c5ce2#4

²³¹ Interview with Ismail Kamil, e-mail, August 25, 2011.

²³² 'Human-rights violations since 2009', *KurdWatch*, March 18, 2012, kurdwatch.org/statistics.php?z=en.

²³³ 'Al-Qamishli: Kurdish parties refuse dialogue with Bashar al-Assad', *KurdWatch*, June 11, 2011, <http://kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1651>; interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, Uppsala, Sweden, July 1, 2011.

²³⁴ 'Al-Qamishli: Kurdish Patriotic Conference in Syria founded', *KurdWatch*, November 1, 2011, www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2151; 'Al-Qamishli: Four parties join Kurdish Patriotic Conference', *KurdWatch*, March 4, 2012, kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2471&z=en&cure=245

²³⁵ *KurdWatch*, Report 8: 'Who is the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition? The Development of Kurdish Parties', 1956-2011, December 2011

The KNC is currently the most important framework for Kurdish politics, dominated by the traditional party establishment. At the same time, it is plagued by internal conflicts, and does not appear to be effective in organizing revolutionary action on the ground (in so far as it wants to). The KNC also has an uneasy relationship to the Kurdish youth and *tansiqiya* groups that have sprung up in support of the revolution.²³⁶ While the parties generally endorse and support their work, they have tried to coopt and gain control over the new generation of activists. By the end of 2011, some of these revolutionary groups appeared to have come under the sway of established parties. This in turn created party-political divisions among the activists, hampering cooperation among the organizers of demonstrations and street actions. It is not uncommon for Kurdish cities to have several small, rival anti-regime demonstrations every Friday, rather than a single large one.

The SNC and the Kurds

The SNC's political program, adopted in late 2011, envisions a transitional constitution for the post-Assad era that 'guarantees national rights for the Kurdish people and a resolution to the Kurdish question in a democratic and fair manner within the framework of the unity of Syrian territory and people, as well as the exercise of rights and responsibilities of equal citizenship among all citizens.'²³⁷ In April 2012, the SNC expanded on this theme, demanding 'the abolition of all discriminatory policies, decrees, and measures applied against citizens, addressing their effects and implications and compensating those affected.'²³⁸

While the SNC documents do fulfill the basic Kurdish demands, such as language rights and an end to government discrimination, they fall far short of the more radical Kurdish nationalists' dreams for a federal state. The SNC's appeal to Kurdish groups has also been hampered by its close ties to Turkey, traditionally considered a primary enemy of the Kurdish cause. Kurdish groups stayed away from most of the Turkey-based congresses leading up to the SNC's formation, and the well-organized Syrian-Kurdish pro-PKK community (currently aligned with the NCB) has acted as a pressure group on this issue. Some Kurdish groups are also suspicious of MB influence within the SNC, given the poor historic relations between secular Kurdish nationalism and Arab Islamism.

Most Kurdish parties have consequently avoided any public association with the SNC. Some have sent representatives to the SNC, and even sit on the Council, but they have generally kept a low profile. The main exception has been the Future Current, which threw its support behind the SNC already from the start, and was outspoken about its desire to overthrow Assad. Probably as a consequence of this, its leader Meshaal Temmo was assassinated in October 2011.²³⁹

²³⁶ In May 2012, these networks had coalesced into a smaller number of Kurdish *tansiqiya* alliances. The two biggest are the Tansiqiya Union of the Kurdish Youth [*ittihad tansiqiyat al-shabab al-kurdi*] and the Avahi ('Construction'), while Sawa ('Together') also plays a prominent role. In the Aleppo and to a lesser extent Afrin region, the Kurdish Fraternity Tansiqiyas [*tansiqiyat al-ta'akhi al-kurdiya*] are active. (Interview with Abdelbaset Sieda, Uppsala, Sweden, May 2012.)

²³⁷ 'SNC Political Program', SNC, December 2, 2011, www.syriancouncil.org/en/slideshow/item/136-snc-political-program.html. The exact same formula is employed in the program with regard to the Assyrians in Syria. No other ethnic minority is mentioned by name.

²³⁸ 'National Charter: the Kurdish Issue in Syria', SNC, April 2, 2012, www.syriancouncil.org/en/issues/item/620-national-charter-the-kurdish-issue-in-syria.html

²³⁹ Phil Sands, 'One leading Syrian dissident murdered, another assaulted', *The National*, October 8, 2011, www.thenational.ae/news/world/one-leading-syrian-dissident-murdered-another-assaulted; 'Al-Qamishli: Mish'al at-Tammu assassinated', *KurdWatch*, October 10, 2011, kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2077

Of the members on the SNC Executive Council, the leftist academic Abdulbaset Sieda officially represents Syria's Kurds, and of the 273 SNC Council members listed on its Arabic website, 19 are members of the 'Kurdish Bloc' – about 7 percent of the total. This is slightly below the Kurdish share of Syria's population, but several Kurds have also been appointed to the Council on behalf of Arab-majority movements, such as Hozan Ibrahim, one of two Local Coordinating Committees (LCC) representatives on the SNC General Secretariat,²⁴⁰ and Murshid al-Khaznawi, an Islamist from a prominent Kurdish family in the Naqshbandi Sufi order, who was seated in the Muslim Brotherhood quota.²⁴¹ The Kurds would therefore seem to be adequately represented in the SNC purely in terms of numbers, but the weak participation of organized Kurdish groups tells another story.

The SNC has tried to coopt some Syrian-Kurdish parties by contacting their foreign sponsors directly. For example, Ghalioun has negotiated with Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, who is also chairman of the Iraqi KDP (which bankrolls Abdelhakim Bashar's wing of KDPS/al-Parti, one of the biggest Syrian-Kurdish groups).²⁴² So far, with limited success.

In March 2012, a minor crisis erupted when invitees from the KNC and the SNC's own Kurdish Bloc walked out of the proceedings at the SNC's Istanbul opposition conference. The Kurdish dissenters complained of the SNC's weak position on Kurdish rights, which some attributed to Turkish pressure.²⁴³ After the adoption of an expanded text on the Kurdish question, the Kurdish Bloc returned, but the KNC keeps its distance.²⁴⁴ Protocols allegedly leaked from the Executive Board have since noted that the SNC will not compromise further with the Kurds, and that '[t]hey have to decide whether to come back or not, based on our current position.'²⁴⁵ Burhan Ghalioun has since reiterated his refusal to use the term 'Kurdistan' and stated in an interview that while he supports Kurdish minority rights and a more decentralized system, the SNC will not endorse federalism or autonomy for Kurds in Syria.²⁴⁶ This caused renewed protests from the KNC and in Kurdish areas of Syria.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁰ Interview with Hozan Ibrahim, Local Coordination Committees & SNC General Secretariat, e-mail, October 2011.

²⁴¹ The murder of Murshid al-Khaznawi's father, the popular Islamic and Kurdish nationalist figure Maashouq al-Khaznawi, provoked major Kurdish protests in 2005. (Nicholas Blanford, 'A murder stirs Kurds in Syria', *Christian Science Monitor*, June 16, 2005, www.csmonitor.com/2005/0616/p01s03-wome.html)

²⁴² Sirwan Heji Berko, 'Burhan Ghalioun: There Is No Such Thing As Syrian Kurdistan', *Rudaw*, April 17, 2012, www.rudaw.net/english/interview/4643.html. Barzani's influence is not restricted to one party alone; according to critics, he has tried to buy influence among other politicians as well ('Al-Qamishli: Salih Gado resigns from the Kurdish Patriotic Conference's Executive Committee', *KurdWatch*, December 24, 2011, www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2317).

²⁴³ Lauren Williams, 'Kurdish opposition quits Syrian National Council', April 6, 2012, www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Apr-06/169407-kurdish-opposition-quits-syrian-national-council.ashx#axzz1rFj4U3IE; 'Istanbul: Kurds leave meeting of the Syrian opposition', *KurdWatch*, March 31, 2012, kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2493&z=en&cure=245; Katja Magnusson, "'Sista chansen för den syriska regimen'", *Sveriges Radio Ekot*, April 1, 2012, sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=5046483

²⁴⁴ Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, SNC Executive Board, telephone, May 2, 2012.

²⁴⁵ Hassan Illek, 'Syria's Email Wars: The Opposition Leaks', *al-Akhbar*, April 18, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/content/syria's-email-wars-opposition-leaks

²⁴⁶ Sirwan Heji Berko, 'Burhan Ghalioun: There Is No Such Thing As Syrian Kurdistan', *Rudaw*, April 17, 2012, www.rudaw.net/english/interview/4643.html

²⁴⁷ 'Erbil: Chairman of the Syrian National Council comments on the Kurdish question', *KurdWatch*, April 23, 2012, kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2512&z=en&cure=245; Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, SNC Executive Board, telephone, May 2, 2012.

The NCB and the Kurds

The NCB's public statements on the Kurdish issue differ only slightly from those of the SNC. At its formation, the NCB demanded 'a just solution to the Kurdish question [which] must be worked out within a patriotic framework and be based upon the unity of the country and the people. In order to achieve this, constitutional guarantees are required. Herein lies no contradiction to the reality that Syria is an indivisible component of the Arabic nation.'²⁴⁸ This is in essence identical to the SNC's line: full Kurdish minority rights, and an end to discrimination, but no special self-rule for Kurds and no use of nationalist terminology such as 'Kurdistan' or 'self-determination'.

On April 14, 2012, a congress in Paris reworked the NCB's views of the Kurdish question, presenting a more sensitively phrased statement. The new text includes all the common promises of language rights etc, and adds 'constitutional recognition of the national identity of the Kurdish people', and compensation for those disadvantaged by anti-Kurdish laws over the years. It also makes a brief mention of the democratic role of local authorities. While it may be a notch above what the SNC offers, it does not amount to anything resembling self-rule.²⁴⁹ The timing of the new program indicates that the NCB may have been trying to capitalize on the SNC's recent conflicts with the Kurdish opposition.²⁵⁰

The NCB is closely identified with the Arab nationalist camp in the Syrian opposition, which has always had strained relations with the Kurdish movement, but it also contains leftist groups which have historically been sympathetic to Kurdish concerns. Criticism of Turkey's role also seems to work in the NCB's favor, and it has so far managed to avoid public clashes with the Kurdish movement. Still, formal Kurdish participation in the NCB is limited to only a few groups, and they do not appear to play an important role within the coalition. That said, the NCB does include one very important Kurdish member party – the PYD.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD)

No Kurdish party can credibly claim to represent a majority of the population, but the Democratic Union Party (PYD) is the single most important organization in Syrian Kurdistan.²⁵¹ It is a charter member of the NCB, represented on the Executive Council by its leader, Saleh Muslim Mohammed. While the PYD plays a limited role inside the NCB and national opposition politics, it is central to local Kurdish affairs – despite being the party least integrated into Syrian-Kurdish politics.



²⁴⁸ 'Damascus: New opposition coalition with Kurdish participation', *KurdWatch*, July 4, 2011, kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1753

²⁴⁹ A PYD member of the NCB Central Council claimed that the congress also accepted the PYD's concept of 'democratic self-administration', which is a plan for a confederacy of self-ruling ethnoreligious enclaves, complete with separate flags, court systems and police. (Interview with Sheruan Hassan, foreign relations spokesperson of the PYD, The Hague, The Netherlands, April 2012.) While the words 'democratic self-administration' do appear in the congress statement, it seems highly unlikely that other NCB members share the PYD's interpretation of this phrase, if they are even aware of its significance in PYD vocabulary.

²⁵⁰ PUKmedia, 'hayat al-tansiq al-wataniya takshuf 'an tasawwuri-ha li-hall al-qadiya al-kurdiya fi souria' ('The NCB reveals its vision of a solution for the Kurdish question in Syria'), *Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria*, dimoqrati.info/?p=11189. Apart from the Kurds, the document also mentions the rights of the Syriac, Assyrian, Chaldean, Turkmen, Armenian and Circassian minorities.

²⁵¹ <http://www.pyd.se> & <http://www.pydrojava.net>

The PYD was formed in 2003 to act as a front organization for the Turkey-focused militant group Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has a strong following among Syrian Kurds (both the PKK and the PYD deny this relationship, and claim to simply cooperate and share a common philosophy, but there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary). Baathist authorities had long supported the PKK at the expense of local Kurdish groups, from the early 1980s until 1999, when it was sacrificed to improve relations with Ankara. The PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was then expelled from Syria, and eventually captured by Turkish authorities. Thereafter, Bashar al-Assad and the AKP government in Ankara developed their economic cooperation and found common ground on various regional issues, which led to a rapid improvement in Syrian-Turkish relations.

This made Syria an enemy of the PKK, and soon after its creation, the PYD switched from a Turkey-focused struggle to local nationalist agitation. For this, it paid a heavy price. For example, two thirds of the Kurds convicted of illegal party work in Syria in 2009 stood accused of collaborating with the PYD, and more than three fourths of all reported cases of torture among Kurdish activists concerned sympathizers of the PYD.²⁵²

The government crackdown did not improve the PYD's relations to other Syrian-Kurdish organizations. Most of them were historically fearful of and hostile to the PKK, which they accused of working hand-in-hand with Syrian intelligence, and of intimidating and murdering members of rival Syrian-Kurdish groups. They view the PYD as simply the successor to this legacy, as a threat to their interests, and as an insincere representative of Syrian-Kurdish interests. Many also disapprove of the PYD's tough and sometimes violent protest tactics.²⁵³

The PYD, in turn, has remained a party apart, often choosing to demonstrate for obscure causes such as the release of Öcalan from Turkish prison, rather than the concerns of the local Syrian-Kurdish population. Even so, it is well organized, commands a disciplined cadre of members, and is the clearly dominant group in the northwestern Afrin and Kobane enclaves – historically, regions with a strong PKK presence.

After Syrian-Turkish relations again soured in 2011, the PYD has adjusted its strategy accordingly. The group now appears to try to play both sides of the game. At the outset of the revolution, PYD chairman Saleh Muslim Mohammed returned from the movement's camps in northern Iraq along with a contingent of armed members to reinforce activity in northern Syria.²⁵⁴ Over the summer, the PYD helped create the NCB and pushed it to take a more radical stand on the Kurdish question. As for national politics, the PYD has at times avoided direct calls for the regime's downfall, like many other Kurdish groups. But according to a spokesperson, the party is now fully committed to overthrowing the regime, 'including its head, which is Bashar al-Assad'.²⁵⁵

That said, the PYD's basic argument is that the Kurds should not waste their energies on rearranging Arab elite politics in the capital, but rather focus on bolstering their position on the ground in Syrian Kurdistan. According to Saleh Muslim Mohammed, '[t]he ruling powers in Damascus come and go. For us Kurds, this isn't so important. What is important is that we

²⁵² 'Human-rights violations since 2009', *KurdWatch*, 14 september 2011, http://kurdwatch.org/statistics/statistics_en.html

²⁵³ Interviews and conversation with several Syrian-Kurdish activists, 2009-2012. See also: 'Our goal is the self-government of the Kurds in Syrian Kurdistan', *KurdWatch*, September 17 2011, www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview5.html.

²⁵⁴ "'Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here'", *KurdWatch*, October 20, 2011, www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html

²⁵⁵ Interview with Sheruan Hassan, PYD, The Hague, The Netherlands, April 2012.

Kurds assert our existence. The current regime does not accept us, nor do those who will potentially come into power.²⁵⁶ This type of hard-headed Kurdish particularism has not gone down well with more dedicated anti-regime activists, and much of the Arab opposition takes particular offense. SNC chairman Burhan Ghalioun says that 'in Öcalan's party, there are elements who have not yet cut off their line of communication with the Assad regime.'²⁵⁷ Similar complaints can be heard from many Kurdish dissidents.²⁵⁸

Rival Kurdish groups also accuse the PYD of harassing, kidnapping and even killing anti-government activists in areas under its control. The PYD responds that it has simply been cracking down on local crime. 'The weakening of the regime in Kurdish areas has opened the path for a lot of movements, people who loot and steal,' explains Shiruan Hassan, the PYD's international spokesperson. 'Our groups are trying to defend their areas, it's not about opposing the revolution.'²⁵⁹ However, there is some evidence of PYD attacks against demonstrators, particularly in the Kurd-Dagh/Afrin region, a 'core' PYD area where the other parties are very weak. Numerous reports claim that the PYD's Afrin branch has brutally cracked down on Kurdish youth groups trying to demonstrate against Bashar al-Assad.²⁶⁰ Shiruan Hassan admits to instances of violence by members of his party in Afrin, but says it is not directed at anti-government activity *per se*. Rather, he says, PYD interventions took place after Arab demonstrators raised a Turkish flag, breaching a taboo for the PYD.²⁶¹

Another serious allegation concerns the October 2011 murder of Meshaal Temmo, leader of the Future Current, which had opted to join the SNC. Some critics of the PYD insist that the group had a hand in his murder, and Temmo had apparently received threats from PYD activists. The PYD leadership vehemently denies this, and states that whatever their political differences, Temmo died a martyr to the Kurdish cause.²⁶²

The PYD's curious behavior seems to stem from several factors. The Turkey-focused but Iraq-based mother organization, PKK, is most likely trying to use the PYD to bolster its own position. Ultimately, it hopes to regain Syrian and/or Iranian government sponsorship, now that both states are again in conflict with Turkey. At the same time, the PKK/PYD wants to exploit the upheaval to strengthen their position in Syria, whether or not the regime falls. Northern Syria may be unsuited for guerrilla warfare, but the Kurdish-majority border towns would still provide the PKK with useful strategic depth and resources. The PYD itself already has a base in northern Iraq, which may or may not serve as a paramilitary training camp.

²⁵⁶ "'Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here'", *KurdWatch*, October 20, 2011, www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html

²⁵⁷ Sirwan Heji Berko, 'Burhan Ghalioun: There Is No Such Thing As Syrian Kurdistan', *Rudaw*, April 17, 2012, www.rudaw.net/english/interview/4643.html

²⁵⁸ Interview with Kurdish dissident, 2012.

²⁵⁹ Interview with Shiruan Hassan, PYD international spokesperson, Stockholm, Sweden, March, 2012. See also 'Ayn al-'Arab: Another activist kidnapped and mistreated by PYD', *KurdWatch*, 20 September 2011, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2014>; E-mail from Saleh Muslim Mohammed, October, 2011.

²⁶⁰ Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, SNC Executive Board member, Uppsala, Sweden, March 2012. See also the string of videos posted by *KurdWatch.org*, depicting what is allegedly Kurdish victims of PYD attacks in Afrin, eg. 'Victims of PYD attack 2', YouTube video uploaded by *KurdWatch* on February 7, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaVL8IQ0sAM

²⁶¹ Interview with Shiruan Hassan, PYD international spokesperson, Stockholm, Sweden, March, 2012.

²⁶² Phil Sands, 'One leading Syrian dissident murdered, another assaulted', *The National*, October 8, 2011, www.thenational.ae/news/world/one-leading-syrian-dissident-murdered-another-assaulted; 'Al-Qamishli: Mish'al at-Tamru assassinated', *KurdWatch*, October 10, 2011, kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2077; 'Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here', *KurdWatch*, October 20, 2011, www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html. Anecdotally, PYD activists did participate in large numbers in a demonstration held in memory of Meshaal Temmo in Stockholm, Sweden. (Author's observation, October 8, 2011.)

The party contains numerous Syrian-Kurdish PKK veterans, while many Syrian-born Kurds still today serve in the PKK's armed wing. Therefore, while the PYD has always insisted that it is a nonviolent movement, there is little doubt that it could switch to armed struggle in Syria, should it decide to do so.

The group also has a more immediate interest in bolstering the NCB, which is simply to weaken the SNC. The party routinely disparages the SNC as 'the Istanbul council', portraying it as a Turkish puppet which ignores the plight of Syrian Kurds: 'The regime that they are trying to force upon Syria with the help of Erdogan has absolutely no Kurdish presence', according to Saleh Muslim Mohammed.²⁶³ The issue of Turkish influence seems to weigh heavily on the minds of PYD leaders,²⁶⁴ and the PKK itself has been jittery, accusing Ankara of planning a military intervention in northern Syria and stating that it would respond by turning 'all of Kurdistan into a warzone'.²⁶⁵

By the end of 2011, the PYD appeared to be stepping out of the shadows, marking its territory through increasingly muscular tactics. PYD activists have organized local councils and home guard units, and in some cases retaliated violently against local Baathists after Kurdish demonstrators were killed. In March 2012, armed PYD militants briefly drove out government forces from Sheikh Maqsoud, a majority-Kurdish district in Aleppo, and set fire to homes belonging to pro-regime Arab families.²⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the PYD increasingly organizes its own demonstrations against the government, and it has opened cultural and language centers throughout Kurdish-populated areas, meeting little resistance from the government. While rivals argue that this is further proof of Baath-PYD collaboration, the party simply points to the weakening of the Syrian state. According to Saleh Muslim Mohammed, 'the regime has had no possibility to attack us. If it does attack us, it will see what happens. We are profiting from the unrest. It is a historical chance for us. [...]. We are preparing our people and ourselves for the period after the fall of the regime.'²⁶⁷

Other Kurdish dissidents view the rise of the PYD with apprehension, their fear of its ruthless methods mixed with a reluctant admiration for its efficiency. 'Whether we want it or not, the PYD is currently the strongest force in al-Qamishli,' says Azad Muhiyuddin, a member of a Kurdish youth group. 'Without the PYD nothing works. What the PYD has accomplished in fifteen days, the [KNC] could not achieve in five months.'²⁶⁸ While its long-term position remains precarious, the PYD seems well placed to tap into the Kurdish minority's thirst for strong and effective leadership. If it can continue to fill the vacuum where the state weakens, with or without active government collaboration, and absent Turkish intervention, the influence of the PYD is likely to grow further.

²⁶³ E-mail from Saleh Muslim Mohammed, PYD chairman, October, 2011.

²⁶⁴ "'Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here'", *KurdWatch*, October 20, 2011, www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html

²⁶⁵ 'Kurd PKK rebels threaten Turkey if it enters Syrian Kurdistan', *E-Kurd*, March 22, 2012, www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/3/turkey3851.htm

²⁶⁶ 'Aleppo: One dead following gunfight in the district of Shaikh Maqsud', *KurdWatch*, March 15, 2012, kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2478&z=en&cure=245

²⁶⁷ "'Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here'", *KurdWatch*, October 20, 2011, www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html

²⁶⁸ "'The Kurdish Patriotic Conference is nothing more than a name. Compared to the PYD it has accomplished nothing.'", *KurdWatch*, March 21, 2012, kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2484&z=en&cure=240

Independent dissidents

Below follows a list of individual Syrian dissidents who are not mainly known for their involvement in the groups discussed above, but who may still play a role in the revolution, one way or another. It is not a comprehensive list.

Ayman Abdel-Nour

A former personal friend of Bashar al-Assad, this computer engineer from a Christian family was also a well-known figure on the reformist wing of the Baath Party. Since 2003, he has run the *Kulluna Shuraka fil-Watan* ('We are all partners in the homeland', www.all4syria.info) news site, which is widely read among politically involved Syrians in the regime and the opposition alike. His work with *Kulluna Shuraka* led to trouble with the government, and Abdel-Nour eventually decided to leave the country.²⁶⁹ Currently he resides in Dubai and continues to run the website, which now espouses strong anti-regime views.

Ammar Abdelhamid

The US-based activist Ammar Abdelhamid is active on the pro-Western, liberal-secularist fringe of the Syrian opposition. He has no direct ties to the main opposition groups, but communicates effectively with Western media and political actors, and is frequently quoted in the US press. He blogs at <http://syrianrevolutiondigest.blogspot.com>.

Adnan al-Arou

The Hama-born Islamist Adnan al-Arou left Syria in 1974, and has lived in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia ever since. He was not widely known before the revolution erupted, but his appearances on the Wisal and Safa satellite TV channels have earned him a large audience among religious-minded Syrian Sunnis. Known for his frugal lifestyle, and not personally involved in the messy factional disputes of the Syrian opposition, his supporters view him as an honest and principled enemy of the regime.²⁷⁰ Others disagree. Arour's fiery Salafist rhetoric is not only directed against the regime, but also against religious minorities and secularists. In one widely-cited broadcast, he threatened that any Alawite who does not quickly distance himself from the regime will be 'chopped up and fed to the dogs' by the Sunni majority once the revolution is victorious.²⁷¹



Adnan al-Arou

²⁶⁹ Interview with Ayman Abdel-Nour, e-mail, November 2009.

²⁷⁰ Kamal Qubeisi, 'akhtar muharrir 'ala isqat al-assad: law-la rasail-i lil-souriyin la-talat al-dima al-rukub' ('The most dangerous agitator for the fall of Assad: If not for my messages to the Syrians, the blood would reach to the knees'), *al-Arabiya*, August 15, 2011, www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/15/162334.html

²⁷¹ A slightly edited version of that statement can be seen here, with translation: 'Adnan Al-Arou Says that They will Chop the Alawites who Oppose the Syrian Revolution', YouTube clip uploaded by TruthSyria, January 2, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NliidUq4Mgnk; Abigail Fielding-Smith, 'Firebrand risks playing into Assad's hands', *Financial Times*, September 7, 2011, www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/33fd178e-d94a-11e0-884e-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1rgoXG6TO.

Refaat al-Assad

Former Vice President Refaat al-Assad was Syria's second-most powerful politician during much of Hafez al-Assad's rule, acting as his brother's iron-fisted enforcer and promoting Alawite sectarian interests. He led the campaign to eradicate Islamism in the 1970s and early 1980s, and personally supervised the Hama massacre of 1982. In 1983-1984, he attempted to seize power, but failed and was exiled. After many years in Spain, he now alternates between Paris and London.



Refaat (left) and Hafez al-Assad

Refaat still enjoys some lingering support among Syrian and Lebanese Alawites, but the vast majority of the population remembers him chiefly for his corruption, sectarianism and brutality. All mainstream opposition groups refuse to deal with him. To offset his isolation, Refaat – who is immensely wealthy – funds a cluster of tiny political parties (gathered in the 'United National Assembly'), a satellite TV station (the Arab News Network, ANN), and several other front groups, most of them directed by his sons and employees. UK Foreign Secretary William Hague met with Refaat's son Ribal al-Assad in June 2011. He also enjoys strong ties to Saudi Arabia, and is related through marriage to King Abdullah. Refaat's unique links to the regime's inner core of Alawite military officers and the Assad-Makhlouf clan make him valuable both to the regime and to its enemies, but his toxic reputation and overt ambitions for personal power have stood in the way of effective cooperation.

It appears likely that Refaat is now trying to carve out a niche role as defender of pro-regime Alawite interests in any future transition, as a stepping-stone towards power for himself or his family. In November 2011, Refaat and a small coterie of allies formed the 'National Democratic Council' in Paris. He stated that the transition from dictatorship in Syria requires a strong leader with financial backing, who can guarantee the safety of former regime members. Asked if he had anyone in particular in mind, he responded that it 'should be someone from the family ... me, or someone else.'²⁷²

Soheir al-Atassi

Soheir al-Atassi was among the arrested in a demonstration in Damascus on March 16, 2011, and became an early symbol of the revolution. She is the daughter of Jamal al-Atassi, former chairman of the DASU and NDA (predecessor of Hassan Abdelazim), hailing from an influential Sunni elite family in Homs. Now in exile, she acts as a representative of the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC), one of the biggest *tansiqiya* networks.

Issam al-Attar

A former leader of the MB (1961-1971), Issam al-Attar has lived in exile in Germany since the mid-60s. He and a group of Damascene members broke away from the Syrian MB in the 1970s, but Attar remained an influential figure in international MB politics. Since the 1990s, he has resumed working relations with the Syrian branch, although he never rejoined it.²⁷³

²⁷² Deborah Pasmantier, 'Exiled Assad uncle wants to lead transition', AFP, November 14, 2011, www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jkbato_vAprn6HrqU3Txs-jToR6g?docId=CNG.f8a1357252414e391fa429a67d8b9601.3c1

²⁷³ Interview with Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, London, United Kingdom, November 2009.

Attar sent a representative to the October 2011 Istanbul meeting of Syrian Islamists, which gave full support to the revolution and the SNC, but frail health prevented the 85-year old from participating in person.²⁷⁴ It's worth noting that not all members of the Attar family pull in the same direction: Issam's sister Najah was appointed Syria's first female vice president in 2006.

Nawwaf al-Bashir

Nawwaf al-Bashir is a leader of the large Baggara tribe in Deir al-Zor, in the Syrian east. He has a background in the radical anti-regime faction of the DD, although he drifted away from the group around 2009. He surprised Syrians by making pro-Assad statements in late 2011, but has since fled Syria and claims that he spoke under threat.²⁷⁵ Bashir previously led a group called the Future Party, but now appears as head of the Liberation and Construction Block; however, his real relevance is due to his status among the Baggara. In March 2012, Bashir joined forces with Ammar Qurabi of the NCC, to negotiate his way into the SNC.

Walid al-Bunni

Walid al-Bunni, a medical doctor, was a prominent figure during the Damascus Spring and a leading activist within the Damascus Declaration. He spent 2001-2006 and 2007-2010 in prison. In August 2011 he was again arrested with two of his sons, but pardoned a few months later. He then went into exile and joined the SNC as a member of its General Secretariat. In December, Walid al-Bunni announced that he had 'suspended' his membership in the SNC,²⁷⁶ briefly joined Heitham al-Maleh's breakaway 'Patriotic Front', but left again. His current relation to the SNC is unclear.

Aref Dalila

The economist Aref Dalila was one of ten activists imprisoned at the end of the Damascus Spring in 2001, and the one who remained the longest in jail – seven years. Many attribute this to his symbolic importance as a well-known Alawite dissident. Following his release, he has remained active in the opposition, and is now involved with the NCB and the SDP.

Noufal al-Dawalibi

In late April 2012, Noufal al-Dawalibi announced his intention to form a government-in-exile in Paris, criticizing the SNC and calling for military intervention in Syria.²⁷⁷ Dawalibi is the son of Maarouf al-Dawalibi, an Islamist-leaning Syrian politician (briefly prime minister in 1961-

²⁷⁴ 'da'wa liqa mumathilin 'an al-teyf al-islami fi souria' ('Invitation to a meeting with representatives of the Islamic spectrum in Syria'), Rabitat al-ulema al-souriyin, October 22, 2011, www.islamsyria.com/news.php?action=details&NID=90

²⁷⁵ 'I praised Assad at gunpoint, says Syrian tribal leader', Reuters, January 17, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/17/us-syria-tribal-idUSTRE80G20J20120117

²⁷⁶ Statement from Walid al-Bunni reprinted at 'Dr. Walid al-Bunni suspends his membership in the National Council after the refusal to expand it', NCB, December 1, 2011, www.ncsyrria.com/news.php?action=show&id=246

²⁷⁷ Jamey Keaten, 'Syrian wants to form "government" in exile', AP, April 26, 2012, www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5h3HGnxKSfi689y6uJiSafNnnnKYg?docId=b4f3ac9cb4c049c0ac4b44366bb2c3fd; John Irish, 'New Syrian group claims legitimacy to rival SNC', Reuters, April 26, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/26/us-syria-opposition-idUSBRE83PORF20120426; Sinem Cengiz, 'SNC dismisses rift within anti-Assad opposition after launch of new group', *Today's Zaman*, www.todayszaman.com/news-278826-snc-dismisses-rift-within-anti-assad-opposition-after-launch-of-new-group.html

1962) with a power base in the Sunni bourgeoisie of Aleppo. After the Baathist takeover, Maarouf al-Dawalibi fled to Saudi Arabia with his family, and was appointed an advisor of the Saudi king. His son has thus grown up in exile, and while the Dawalibis are wealthy and well connected in Gulf political circles, Noufal al-Dawalibi has little independent credibility as an opposition figure and lacks a network inside Syria.

Habib Issa

The human rights lawyer Habib Issa, from an Alawite family in the Misyaf region, functioned as a spokesperson of the NDA's Atassi Forum during the Damascus Spring. He is a strident Arab nationalist. He was arrested and sentenced to prison in the regime crackdown in 2001.²⁷⁸ He now resides in Damascus, and was involved with the creation of the NCB.

Farid al-Ghadry

The US-based exile Farid al-Ghadry heads the Reform Party of Syria, mostly a one-man operation. While Ghadry is shunned by the mainstream Syrian opposition, he has acquired a small core of partisan support in Washington by tailoring his message to right-wing tastes – he is strongly pro-Israel, dabbles in anti-Muslim rhetoric, and denounces the Obama administration as pro-Assad. Ghadry was promoted by the US government as an opposition leader during the early years of the Bush administration, but now seems reduced to advocacy on the fringes of US conservatism.

Mamoun al-Homsi

The ex-parliamentarian Mamoun al-Homsi was an important figure in the Damascus Spring, and a prisoner-of-conscience in 2001-2006, but unlike his former colleague Riad Seif, Homsi's influence within the opposition has now virtually evaporated. After his release, he lived mostly in Lebanon and was invited to the White House for a meeting with President Bush; he is now based in Cairo. Homsi has not played a major role in the current uprising, but he gained some notoriety after a sectarian rant in December 2011, where he threatened that Syria would become a mass grave for Alawites.²⁷⁹

Abdelhalim Khaddam

A Sunni Muslim from Baniyas, Abdelhalim Khaddam acted as Hafez al-Assad's top foreign envoy for nearly three decades (as minister of foreign affairs 1970-1983, and vice president with a foreign affairs portfolio 1983-2005). Under Bashar, he was seen as a leader of the regime's anti-reform 'old guard', and gradually lost influence. He defected in late 2005, after being stripped of all influence following the Hariri affair in Lebanon – Khaddam had been (and remains) a close ally of the Hariri family and its sponsor, Saudi Arabia. Most of the opposition keeps its distance to Khaddam, who has a reputation for corruption and opportunism, but in 2006, he formed an alliance with the MB, called the National Salvation Front (NSF). It broke apart



**Abdelhalim
Khaddam**

²⁷⁸ Interview with Habib Issa, Damascus, Syria, January 2008.

²⁷⁹ 'risalat al-mu'arid mamoun al-homsi ila al-taifa al-'alawiya 2011-12-18' ('Message from the dissident Mamoun al-Homsi to the Alawite sect, 2011 12 18'), YouTube video uploaded by TheSyrianmc, December 18, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBfFs74zIFg

in 2008-2009.²⁸⁰ During the uprising, Khaddam initially kept a low profile, but in November 2011 he transformed the NSF into a 'Commission for Supporting the Syrian Revolution'. It appears to be little more than a front for Khaddam, his family and some close allies.²⁸¹

Salim Kheir-Bek

A former union activist, Salim Kheir-Bek spent 1980-1993 in prison for arranging a peaceful protest against Hafez al-Assad. Following the Damascus Spring, he was a spokesperson of the Atassi Forum, a debating club run by the NDA. He advocates a long-term strategy to build up the opposition and democratize the country step by step. In March and April 2011, Kheir-Bek – who hails from a very powerful Alawite clan within the Assad family's own tribe – tried to open negotiations with the government, but the talks soon petered out.²⁸²

Michel Kilo

The leftist journalist Michel Kilo, a secular Christian from Latakia, is a veteran among Syria's opposition leaders. First detained in the 1980s, Kilo emerged as one of Syria's most respected dissident intellectuals during Bashar al-Assad's rule. He played a prominent role in the Damascus Spring, as the driving force behind the Committees to Revive Civil Society (an independent activist group), and later in the Damascus Declaration. During the 2011-2012 uprising, he has worked with the NCB, but is not formally a member.²⁸³ In February 2012, he was one of the creators of the SDP.

Kamal Labwani

A liberal dissident and activist in the Damascus Spring, Labwani was arrested in 2001 and imprisoned until 2004. After his release, he went on a tour of Western capitals, and was received at the White House. At his return to Syria in November 2005, he was again arrested and not released until November 2011. After exiting Syria, he joined the SNC and was appointed to its General Secretariat. In March, however, he split from the SNC alongside Heitham al-Maleh and other dissidents.

Heitham al-Maleh

The 81-year old Heitham al-Maleh is among the best-known names in the Syrian opposition. An independent Islamist, he has been active in Syrian politics since long before the Baathist takeover, and was first imprisoned in 1951. In 1980 he was again arrested after leading a lawyers' protest against the regime. He then helped organize a human rights group during the Damascus Spring of 2000, and supported the Damascus Declaration of 2005.²⁸⁴ In 2009, he was arrested again, after criticizing the regime on Barada TV, the DD's satellite channel. Maleh decided to leave Syria after his release by presidential pardon in March 2011. In exile, he took part in organizing the 'National Salvation Congress' in Istanbul on July 16, 2011. He eventually became a member of the SNC's top leadership, the Executive Board, but along with Kamal Labwani led a group of dissidents who quit the SNC in March 2012, to form a rival 'Patriotic Front'.

²⁸⁰ Interview with Abdelhalim Khaddam, Brussels, Belgium, April 2009.

²⁸¹ John Irish, 'Syrians will take up arms if not protected: Khaddam', Reuters, November 2, 2011, www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/02/us-syria-khaddam-idUSTRE7A14WC20111102; <http://www.free-syria.com>.

²⁸² Interviews with Salim Kheir-Bek, Damascus, Syria, January 2008, and via e-mail, August 2011.

²⁸³ Interview with Michel Kilo, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2011.

²⁸⁴ For more on Maleh, see <http://Heithammalehfoundation.org/>

Osama & Sariya al-Rifai

These sons of the Syrian Islamic leader Abdelkarim al-Rifai (d. 1973) were previously exiled by the government, but allowed to return in the 1990s. The brothers, Sariya and Osama, have inherited their father's religious following through the Zeid Islamic society, as well as his troubled relationship with the Baath Party. The Zeid society runs a network of some twenty to thirty mosques in Damascus, and is 'by far the most popular religious trend' in the city.²⁸⁵ The Rifai Mosque in the Midan neighborhood of Damascus became an early site of protest against the regime in 2011, but in August, Osama al-Rifai was attacked by pro-regime thugs, angering religious leaders both inside and outside Syria.²⁸⁶

Jawdat Said

Jawdat Said, a Circassian Islamist from the Golan Heights, has had several run-ins with the Baathist authorities. He signed the Damascus Declaration in 2005. Now in his 80s, Said has written extensively in favor of pacifism as an Islamic principle, and is sometimes cited as an influence on a younger generation of Sunni opposition activists.²⁸⁷ Said was involved in organizing some early opposition meetings, notably the 'National Salvation Congress' in Istanbul in June 2011. Since then, he has signed some statements condemning regime violence, but does not appear to play a prominent role in the opposition.²⁸⁸

Yassin al-Hajj Saleh

The former communist dissident Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, from a family of leftwing activists, spent 16 years in prison under Hafez al-Assad. After his release, working as an independent journalist and writer, he has emerged as an influential voice within the opposition. Saleh has generally aligned himself with liberal forces, while avoiding membership of any group.²⁸⁹ During the 2011 uprising he has gone underground to avoid arrest, but continues to write and give interviews.

Fayez Sara

Fayez Sara is a well-known opposition journalist from a village in the Damascus countryside. He was first imprisoned in 1978, for belonging to an illegal Marxist dissident network, and most recently in 2007-2009, for his work in the DD. He has been involved with the NCB, and in early 2012, he helped form the SDP.

²⁸⁵ Thomas Pierret, 'Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba'athi Syria', in Fred Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, Saqi, 2009, p. 73.

²⁸⁶ Mustapha Ajbaili, 'Six more protesters killed in Syria, Arab League says force "pointless"', *al-Arabiya*, 27 augusti 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/27/164273.html>; 'al-ittihad al-'alami lil-'ulema al-muslimin yastanker bi-shidda inthak hurmat al-masajid min qabl al-nizam al-souri' ('The International Union for Muslim Scholars strongly condemns the violations of the sanctity of mosques by the Syrian regime'), IUMS, August 29, 2011, <http://www.iumsonline.net/ar/default.asp?contentid=3115&MenuID=7>

²⁸⁷ Interview with Malik al-Abdeh, then editor of Barada TV and member of the Movement for Justice and Development, London, UK, November 2009. See also 'Al-Assad steps up deadly crack down', *al-Sharq al-awsat*, February 6, 2012, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28388; and, for an optimistic review of Syrian non-violent strategies, Donatella Della Ratta, 'Syria: The virtue of civil disobedience', *Aljazeera English*, April 6, 2012, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/04/20124283638298672.html

²⁸⁸ Mustapha Ajbaili, 'Syrian Islamic scholars hold Assad responsible for "chaos"', *al-Arabiya*, August 3, 2011, english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/03/160584.html

²⁸⁹ Interview with Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, Damascus, Syria, January 2008.

Riad Seif

A former Syrian parliamentarian, Riad Seif broke with the regime to become a leading figure in the Damascus Spring. He was imprisoned, but then elected a leader of the DD after his release in 2006.²⁹⁰ He was jailed again in early 2008, reportedly in poor health on his release in 2010 (he suffers from cancer), and resigned his posts in the DD. During the uprising, Seif has kept a low profile, although he was badly beaten by security forces during a demonstration in spring 2011. A liberal-leaning Sunni Muslim with a background as a major industrialist, he has links to powerful Damascene business families, and some within the opposition see Seif as a potential future leader of Syria.



Riad Seif

Abu Moussaab al-Souri

This Syrian Jihadist, whose real name is Mustafa Sitt-Maryam Nassar, participated in the Islamist revolution against Hafez al-Assad's regime. After the uprising was crushed in Hama in 1982, Abu Moussaab found his way to Afghanistan, where he emerged as an influential strategist and theorist in the 'Arab Afghan' Jihadist milieu around al-Qaida.²⁹¹ In 2005 he was arrested by the CIA and handed over to Syrian authorities. Reports indicate that Abu Moussaab was most likely released in early 2012, presumably as a way for Assad to spite Western enemies of his regime. His current whereabouts are unknown.

Fadwa Suleiman

The charismatic Alawite actress Fadwa Suleiman initially joined the demonstrations in Damascus, and took part in creating the moderate dissident group BSS. She rose to superstar status within the opposition when she visited Homs during the city's sectarian troubles in November 2011: appearing on the podium to preach unity and anti-sectarianism in the struggle against Assad, she was cheered by the crowds, and her speech went viral on opposition web forums. By spring 2012, however, Suleiman was forced to flee Syria. She is now based in Paris, and still strongly supports the uprising, although she has expressed concern about its increasingly sectarian and violent tendencies.



Fadwa Suleiman

Abu Basir al-Tartousi

A Salafi-Jihadi theologian based in London, whose real name is Abdelmoneim Mustafa Halima. As his *nom-de-plume* indicates, he is from Tartous on the Syrian coast. Even though he is a strong proponent of armed struggle, Tartousi has made the unusual (among Jihadists) argument that suicide attacks are impermissible on religious grounds. He enthusiastically supports the Syrian uprising, but in another unexpected move, he has publicly backed the FSA and refuses to endorse the overtly Jihadist group Jabhat al-Nosra. Despite these quirks, he remains a very important religious authority in the contemporary Salafi-Jihadi movement.

²⁹⁰ Interview with Riad Seif, Damascus, Syria, January 2008.

²⁹¹ Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri*, Columbia University Press, 2008

al-Tayeb Tizini

A Homs-born academic and secular human rights activist, teaching at Damascus University, al-Tayeb Tizini was briefly arrested on March 16, in one of the demonstrations that set off the revolution. He has since opted for a cautious reformist course. Almost alone among Syria's opposition figures, he agreed to take part in the regime-sponsored 'national dialogue' sessions held in 2011.

Riad al-Turk

83-year old Riad al-Turk is known as 'Syria's Mandela', after spending nearly two decades in prison. He is one of the most influential figures in the Syrian opposition. In the late 60s, he founded the Syrian Communist Party/politbureau as a splinter from the Moscow-backed SCP. Turk's SCP/p helped create the NDA and organized civil protest to topple Assad in the late 1970s, but he was imprisoned in 1980 and severely tortured. After 18 years in a secret prison camp, he was released in 1998, only to be locked up again in 2001-2002.²⁹² The former Marxist-Leninist now describes himself as a liberal socialist, and appears single-mindedly focused on overthrowing the Syrian regime.



Riad al-Turk

In 2005, Turk stepped down as chairman of the SCP/p, which was renamed the SDPP, but many still describe him as the party's real leader. Turk helped launch the Damascus Declaration in 2005, and then kept the SDPP on top of the DD's internal intrigues from 2007 onwards. He helped steer the DD towards an aggressive regime change line, discarding one ally after the other in a series of splits along the way. Today, the SDPP remains the leading faction within a considerably reduced DD. Turk has kept a very low profile during the uprising, but he is widely believed to retain influence over the SDPP.

Mohammed al-Yaaqoubi

Mohammed al-Yaaqoubi, Imam of the Hassan Mosque in the affluent Abu Roummaneh district of Damascus, gave his support to the uprising from an early date. Arguing that 'Islamic law teaches us that a leader must be deposed when he oppresses his people', he used his Friday sermons to condemn regime violence. The government responded by sending militiamen to the mosque, attacking and abusing visitors.²⁹³ Yaaqoubi hails from an influential Islamic family – his father was Imam of the famous Umayyad Mosque in Damascus – and is a prominent figure within the Shadhili Sufi Brotherhood, which has many adherents in Syria.²⁹⁴ In October 2011, he endorsed the SNC at an Islamist meeting in Istanbul.²⁹⁵

²⁹² Interview with Riad al-Turk, Damascus, Syria, January 2008.

²⁹³ Unpublished article by Hanin Shakrah, e-mail to the author, October 2011.

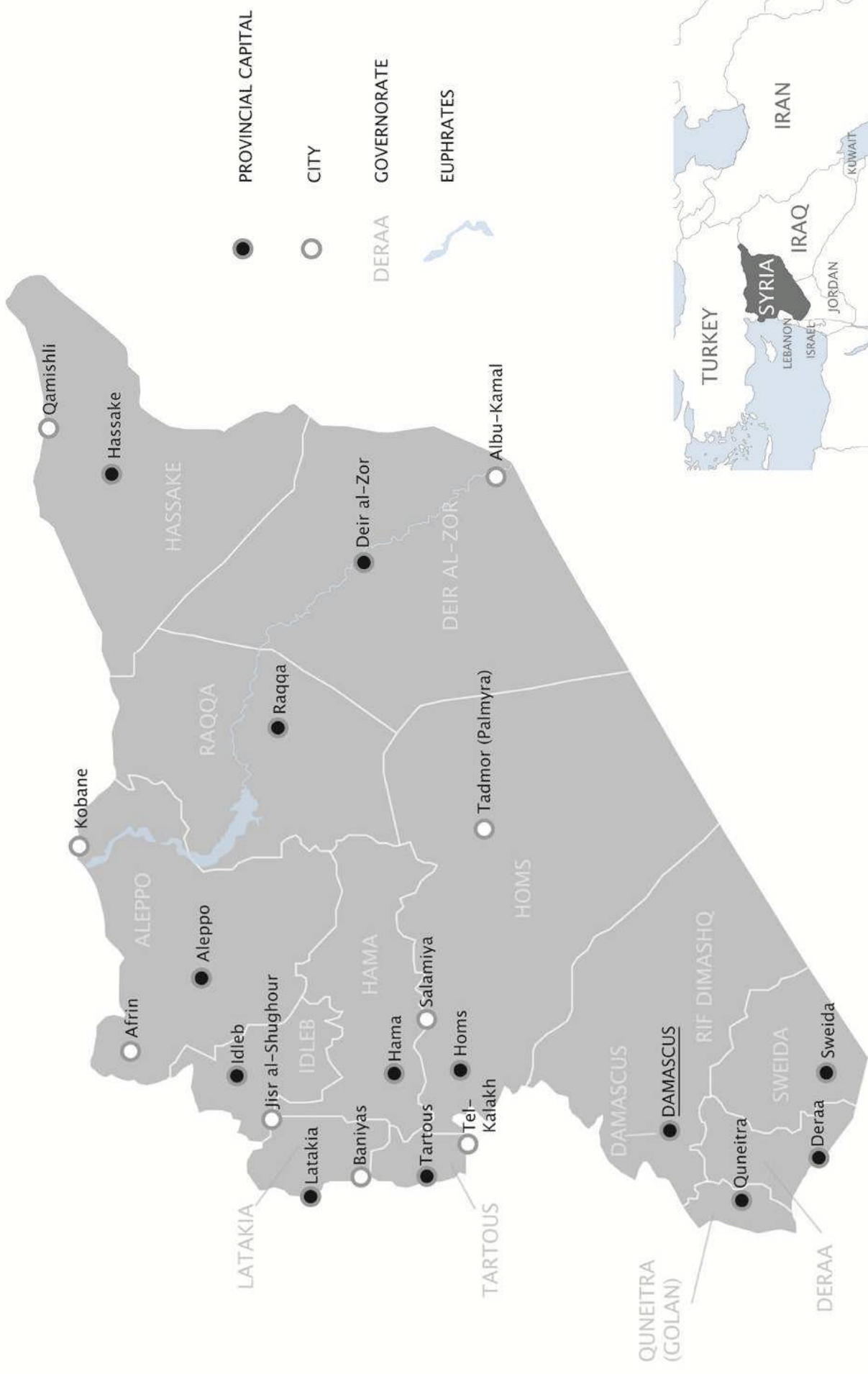
²⁹⁴ See Sacred Knowledge Trust, <http://www.sacredknowledgetrust.co.uk>

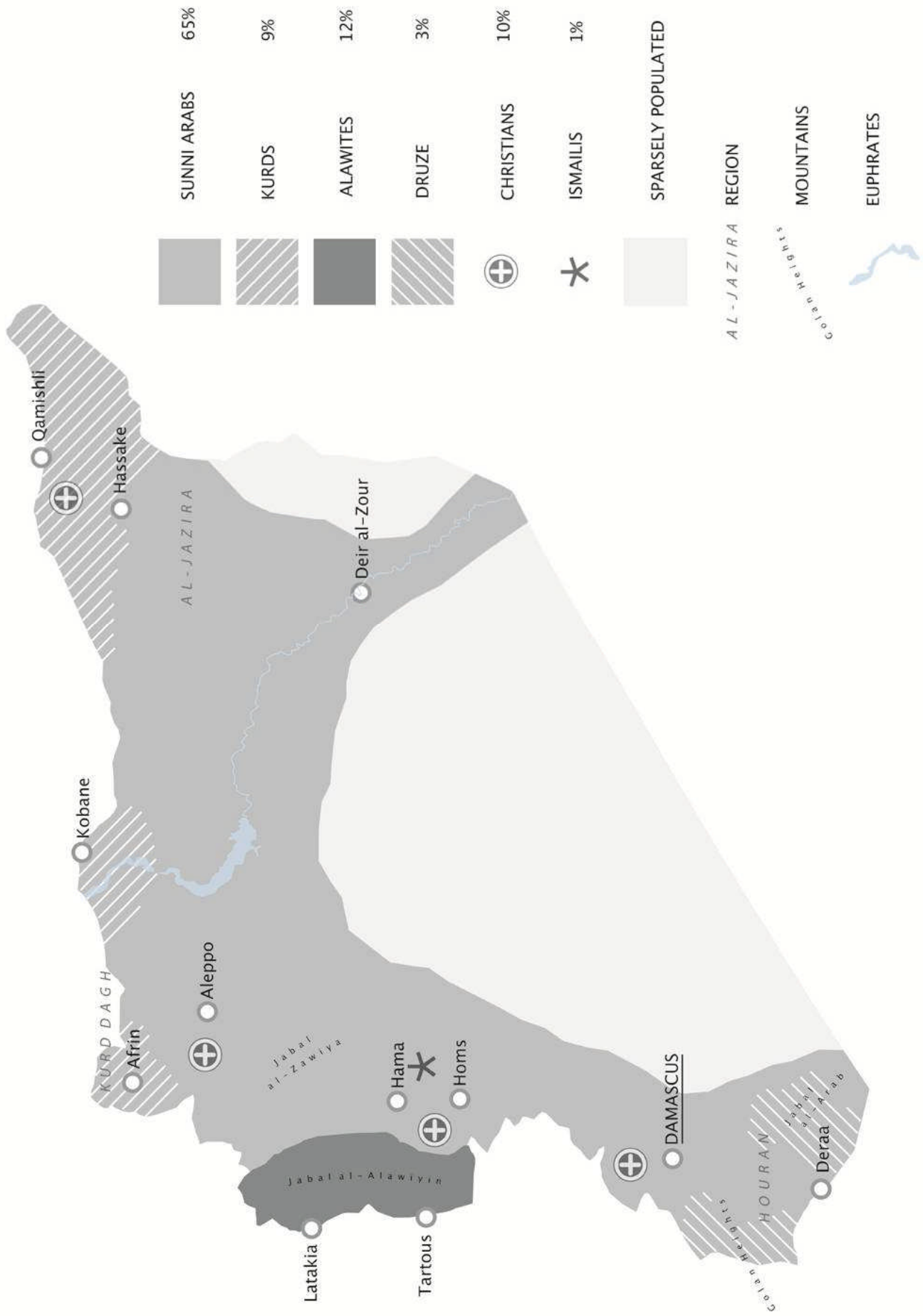
²⁹⁵ 'da'wa liqa mumathilin 'an al-teyf al-islami fi souria' ('Invitation to a meeting with representatives of the Islamic spectrum in Syria'), Rabitat al-ulema al-souriyin, October 22, 2011, www.islamsyria.com/news.php?action=details&NID=90

Louai al-Zoubi

A Salafist from Deraa in southern Syria, Louai al-Zoubi is historically associated with the Salafi-Jihadi movement. He fought in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation, and in Bosnia against the Serbs, and spent time around Osama bin Laden in Sudan during the 1990s. He now leads a small Salafist group in Syria called 'al-Mouminoun Yusharikoun' (Believers Participate), but gained wider influence when he was interviewed on a major pan-Arab TV station as the public face of Syrian Salafism in October 2011. Curiously, for a Salafi, he then called for religious tolerance and national unity.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ 'amin 'amm harakat al-muminoun yusharikoun al-salafiya fi souriya al-sheikh louai al-zoubi 10 20 al-arabiya' ('The General Secretary of the Salafist Believers Participate movement in Syria Louai al-Zoubi. al-Arabiya 20/10'), YouTube clip uploaded by ShameeForever on October 21, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=k17X-fatZhc





The uprising that erupted in Syria in March last year has become the most protracted and destabilizing of all the revolutions now sweeping the Arab world. The Baath Party-led government of President Bashar al-Assad has been weakened by popular protest and international isolation, but the military core of the regime has remained largely intact. With their hopes for a split in the regime fundamental unfulfilled after more than a year of conflict, the opposition has little hope of defeating Assad on its own. He, in turn, seems equally unable to extinguish the protests. As the conflict grinds on, the anti-regime movement has increasingly turned to armed struggle, while sectarian sentiment is inflamed by conflict and violence. As Syria slides into civil war, Syria's political opposition has a key role to play – but it has so far failed to effectively do so, due to its internal disagreements and structural weaknesses.

"Divided They Stand - An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions" is the most detailed description of Syria's political opposition movement published to date. It describes the dynamics between the different groups and personalities, and explains the emergence of Syria's main opposition coalitions, such as the Syrian National Council, as well as their complex internal tensions. The first part chronicles the history and development of the opposition before and during the revolution, while part two describes all the leading opposition factions and alliances, in addition to some thirty leading individual dissidents.

