



THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION'S LEADERSHIP PROBLEM

Yezid Sayigh

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Summary

Syria's opposition still lacks political leadership two years after the start of the country's uprising. In exile, the Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (National Coalition) professes to provide a representative framework for diverse civilian councils and rebel groups operating within Syria's borders, but it does not lead them. It must empower the grassroots structures to become the opposition's real political leadership inside Syria and shift its focus to frankly engage key political constituencies and state institutions to split them from the regime if it hopes to bring about lasting, democratic change.

Key Themes

- The opposition's first representative framework in exile, the Syrian National Council (SNC), reacted to diplomatic initiatives rather than shaping them, espoused militarization without being able to direct or support it, and failed to incorporate local leaders inside Syria.
- Expecting funding and political recognition from the international community, opposition figures and factions in exile competed for status and resources rather than uniting under a common banner.
- The National Coalition, which has supplanted the SNC, has proved no more effective in providing strategic political leadership, empowering local civil administration, asserting credible authority over armed rebels, delivering humanitarian relief, and devising a political strategy to split the regime. The resignation of National Coalition Chairman Moaz al-Khatib on March 24, 2013, placed its future in doubt.
- Local civilian and military councils inside Syria cannot assert effective authority on the ground in the absence of credible political leadership.
- Competing rebel groups and Islamist militants have filled the void, addressing growing needs for security, dispute resolution, food and fuel supply, and shelter.

Recommendations for the National Coalition

Exercise political leadership of military operations. The National Coalition must stake out a clear position on the conduct of major combat operations in Syria's cities, especially the looming battle for Damascus, in order to assert political direction and authority over military decisionmaking.

Govern the liberated areas and empower local political leadership. The coalition should empower the provisional government it has announced in liberated areas to make strategic policy decisions. Otherwise the government will fail to deliver effective administration, services, and humanitarian assistance or to assert civilian control over the armed rebels.

Devise a political strategy and prepare for negotiations. The coalition leadership should propose a concrete framework that offers principal political and institutional actors currently supporting the regime, other than President Bashar al-Assad and his inner core, the opportunity to play a direct, formal role in negotiating Syria's democratic transition.

The Opposition's Missing Leadership

Two years after the start of the Syrian uprising, the opposition still lacks effective political leadership. The principal opposition umbrella frameworks, the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (National Coalition), enjoy considerable domestic legitimacy and widespread international recognition. But they represent rather than lead. They have articulated the political ethos and goals of the uprising authentically, but neither has effectively set the uprising's agenda, determined strategy on the ground, or taken decisions on critically important issues of war and peace. They remain based in exile and lack an organizational base inside Syria—a serious additional obstacle.

The lack of leadership has impeded the consolidation of initiatives undertaken by “insiders”—civilian activists and rebel officers inside Syria. It has dashed hopes of replicating successful models of organization throughout the country, leaving functioning structures localized, vulnerable, and even reversible. And it has enhanced the role of de facto or “traditional” social constructions—based on ethnicity, confession, and tribe or clan—that in turn bear heavily on political agendas and modes of action, at times dominating them.

The potential for a significant shift in dynamics appeared on March 18, 2013, when the National Coalition appointed U.S.-based information technology expert and activist Ghassan Hitto to head a provisional government located primarily in liberated areas of Syria. The government faces the task of binding local grassroots structures into an effective governing system and of asserting meaningful authority over a majority of the rebel groups on the ground. To do so, it must be empowered to take strategic policy decisions, rather than act solely as an administrative adjunct to the National Coalition. Should it succeed, the provisional government will become the opposition's de facto political leadership.

This would be a major success, but its potential as a contender for political leadership is exactly what the National Coalition fears. The coalition, which only announced the provisional government with great reluctance after coming under severe pressure from its Arab backers to do so, went to great lengths to stress its “technocratic” nature. The ten candidates competing for the post of prime minister had lived in exile for many years, almost as many had been engaged in nonpolitical white-collar professions until the 2011 uprising, and the government's central task was defined narrowly as overseeing services in liberated areas. By enfeebling the provisional government politically, the National Coalition placed both its administrative role and its moral authority

at risk, complicating the challenges facing the grassroots movement and taking the opposition back to square one.

The vista is not open-ended. Consolidation of the grassroots structures has been partial and hesitating, amid competing trends toward greater fragmentation, sectarian polarization, and routinization of violence. The provisional government could transform the picture, but it was hobbled from birth. Although he later retracted it, the resignation of National Coalition Chairman Moaz al-Khatib on March 24, 2013, placed the coalition's own future in serious doubt. It may limp on, but unless the opposition resolves its leadership problem in the course of 2013, the rebellion may fragment into rival armed cantons and the deeper revolutionary transformation now under way in Syrian society could stall.

An Overview

The opposition's problems run deep. Decades of authoritarian rule had all but eliminated autonomous political and social activity in Syria by 2011. Opponents of President Bashar al-Assad were thus denied the preexisting organizational networks and a ready pool of experienced members able to seize the revolutionary moment created by the spontaneous uprising in March 2011 and build on it rapidly. As a result, the coalition of disparate opposition groups, independent figures, and grassroots activists who formed the SNC in October 2011 could not gain traction on the ground, pushing it into a reactive stance from the outset. The SNC took up whatever positions seemed to have popular support among demonstrators and activists inside Syria and did not provide political leadership.

The SNC failed repeatedly over the next year to anticipate developments on the ground in Syria as well as in the diplomatic domain, let alone influence

their direction. It moreover struggled to assert its authority over the constantly proliferating rebel brigades, battalions, and military councils that emerged as the armed rebellion gained momentum in the course of 2012. And it missed every opportunity to develop and incorporate local leaders inside Syria into its fold, making the opposition's internal struggles over status and representation little more than a means of elite circulation within similar circles of veteran dissidents, intellectuals, and exiles.

Expecting the newly formed and untried SNC to provide effective and unified leadership to a spontaneous and decentralized revolution set a very high bar indeed. But

with others creating facts on the ground and driving regional and international diplomacy, it could not afford to be constantly behind events. Scrambling to shore up its standing, the SNC focused on securing external recognition of its status as the principal opposition framework. This was the SNC's method

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of choice to demonstrate its relevance to its constituency inside Syria and to secure the flows of funding and weapons that could bolster its legitimacy among all regime opponents.

But the more dependent it became on external support, the less capable the SNC was of developing effective leadership. The Friends of Syria group of nations and multilateral organizations—including most members of the Arab League, the United States, the European Union, and Turkey—recognized the SNC as the principal opposition framework and a legitimate representative of the Syrian people on April 1, 2012. Only eight months later, the Friends of Syria transferred recognition to the National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, anointing it the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people on December 12.

The National Coalition has struggled ever since to break the patterns set by the SNC, which remains a dominant force within the newer umbrella framework. There was a glimpse of genuine leadership at the end of January 2013 when Chairman al-Khatib proposed a dialogue with the Syrian regime without making the departure of Bashar al-Assad a precondition. His initiative was met with a swell of public support. Yassin Hajj-Saleh, one of the more impressive intellects of the uprising, hailed him for “restoring the word ‘politics’ to circulation” and for “filling a gap, opening the way for the first time since the start of the revolution for a dynamic approach based on revolutionary action on the ground, armed resistance to the regime . . . and besieging the regime politically.”¹

The SNC, conversely, castigated al-Khatib for taking unilateral steps that contradicted the coalition’s founding principles without consulting its decisionmaking bodies and warned him that further unauthorized acts and statements would deepen the internal “schism.”² For good measure, it described a meeting he held with the foreign minister of Iran as “stabbing the Syrian revolution and its martyrs.”³

Al-Khatib’s “restoration of politics” was probably a case of too little, too late to transform the political fortunes of the National Coalition, which appears mired in much the same way as the SNC before it, and for much the same reasons. The exile-based frameworks have played a crucial role in articulating the desire for fundamental, democratic change and a civil Syrian state, and in providing the opposition with a voice abroad. But their claim to provide the opposition with political leadership may have to wane before the civilian and military structures that are emerging painfully and slowly on the ground inside Syria can assume that role, enhancing prospects for democratic transition.

Thrust Into the Spotlight

Officially, Syria has been governed since 1972 by a coalition of political parties—the Progressive National Front—but the Baath Party has monopolized

power. Its coalition partners were not allowed to recruit members of the armed forces or university students among others—that right belonged to the Baath Party alone—nor, until the early 2000s, to publish their own newspapers. The Baath controlled all trade and labor unions and municipal authorities, and the party worked closely with the security services to penetrate and neutralize civil society bodies such as religious networks, charities, and nongovernmental organizations working in the fields of social and economic development.

It was virtually inevitable that the Syrian opposition would coalesce around two forces outside the official party system after the start of the 2011 uprising. One was made up of the public political platforms launched by intellectuals, white-collar professionals, and independent businessmen. Most notable among them were the Damascus Spring that began after the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, the Jamal al-Atassi Forum that was founded in 2001 and shut down by the regime in 2005, and the Damascus Declaration, which was formed in 2005 by opposition groups and individuals demanding a multiparty democracy. The other was the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, which had been outlawed in 1980 and completely eradicated after the Hama massacre of February 1982 in which the regime brutally put down a Brotherhood-led revolt. The group was driven into exile but remained the largest force in the opposition. The few other opposition parties with genuine political and organizational skills that remained in Syria—such as the People's Party, led by “Syria's Mandela” Riad al-Turk—had also been outlawed and driven deep underground.

None of these forces was suited to the task at hand.

The public platforms had served as a focal point for demands for peaceful reform in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule, but they lacked the political organization to take a leading role in the sort of confrontation that unfolded in 2011. Their contribution to the opposition was, according to a leading opposition voice, “individuals with some ideological background that has [sic] never faced practical challenges, that has never had to behave in a responsible way because it never was in a situation to develop a strategy to reach power . . . or to build coalitions.”⁴

The Muslim Brotherhood retained much of its organizational structure and experience but was based exclusively in exile, and aging. The sons of its own leaders and members leaned toward alternative forms of political and social activity, seeking independence from the older generation.⁵

Other potential candidates for leadership of the opposition emerged after the start of the uprising. The National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, led by Hussein Abdul-Azim, emerged from the public platforms of 2000–2005. Formed in September 2011 by thirteen left-leaning parties, four Kurdish parties, and a number of independent figures and youth activists, it has maintained a wary presence in Syria despite the constant threat of regime repression.

Together with the SNC and National Coalition in exile, and other groupings inside Syria that have emerged as the uprising wore on, such as Building the Syrian State led by Louai Hussein, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change constitutes what may be regarded as the “formal” opposition. But it has been the SNC and National Coalition—thanks to their greater freedom to move into total opposition to the regime and espouse the armed rebellion openly—that have dominated the narrative of the Syrian uprising’s first two years.

The Syrian National Council

The SNC was announced in Istanbul on October 2, 2011, following several failed attempts to form a unified opposition framework in response to the start of the uprising. The coalition was formed by signatories of the Damascus Declaration, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, various Kurdish factions, representatives of the grassroots Local Coordination Committees that were set up by peaceful activists who spearheaded the insurrectionary use of social media in dozens of cities and towns, and other political parties and platforms including the Damascus Spring and the National Bloc. Representatives of the Alawi and Assyrian communities and independent figures joined as well. From the outset, the Muslim Brotherhood was widely perceived as dominating the SNC, although it took great pains to deny this.

The ability of the fledgling SNC to lead the opposition was soon put to the test. The intensification of regime violence in early 2012 and its growing humanitarian and political consequences posed a severe challenge, to which the SNC responded in two ways. First, it played “catch-up,” adopting policy issues or skirting others in line with sentiment among activists and rebels in Syria. The SNC hoped to retain acknowledgment on the ground of its leadership and to consolidate its political legitimacy. Second, it strove to persuade regional and international actors that it represented an overwhelming majority of the Syrian opposition, in the hope of securing the funding and other material and diplomatic support that would both assist the uprising and help confirm its own leadership status.

In both cases, the SNC’s response reflected its lack of a thought-out strategy for defeating the Assad regime, addressing the humanitarian crisis that emerged in the country as fighting spread, and providing an alternative governance framework. Instead, it invested most of its political energy in acquiring—and defending—recognition as the principal representative of the opposition and ultimately of the Syrian people. Former SNC spokesperson Bassma Kodmani later argued that this reflected the conviction that external “financial support will be channeled through a political authority that has credible representation . . . of inside and outside.”²⁶ And most of the opposition expected that channeling external financial, humanitarian, and military

support through a single accredited framework “is what will unite groups on the ground.”

But this self-reinforcing, virtuous loop did not materialize. To the contrary, the opposition suffered from a debilitating competitive dynamic. The expectation of external funding—and in some cases of weapons supply—spurred a proliferation of political parties and coalitions and assorted civilian and military command councils instead of encouraging mergers and consolidation in larger formations. Veteran activist Kamal al-Labwani, who broke away from the SNC in February 2012 in frustration with what he saw as its inadequate commitment to supporting the uprising inside Syria, criticized this competition for external resources as the pursuit of a “mirage.” He insisted, “we should work on implementation not representation.”⁷

Lack of a Military Strategy

Playing catch-up led to a major volte-face. Since its formation, the SNC had opposed external military intervention in Syria and arming the opposition, but in February 2012 it reversed its position. Publicly, SNC leaders made this their central demand, but privately, they acknowledged that military intervention would not happen.⁸

There was mounting evidence that governments with the requisite capabilities did not intend to either take military action or send arms. On February 29, for example, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated that the alliance would not intervene in Syria or arm the rebels, or even use its assets to deliver humanitarian or medical aid.⁹ On March 6 the head of the U.S. Central Command, General James Mattis, also emphasized that the Pentagon was not planning military action, an option specifically ruled out a day later by President Barack Obama.¹⁰

Looking back, the former SNC chairman Burhan Ghalioun revealed in February 2013 that some members of the SNC’s executive committee had opposed talk of intervention “so as not to generate illusions about something that was not going to take place in the foreseeable future.”¹¹ But Ghalioun, Abdul Basit Sida (who was elected SNC chairman in June 2012), and George Sabra (who succeeded Sida in November) continued to call for intervention for the rest of 2012 and into 2013.

Unable to devise an alternative approach, the SNC in March 2012 espoused what leading members such as its Deputy Chairman Mohammad Farouk Tayfour, who is also deputy comptroller general of the Muslim Brotherhood, and spokesperson Sabra called “military parity” with the Assad regime.¹² But the SNC was already struggling to make a convincing show of authority over the fractious rebel groups appearing on the ground. Still, it had an incentive to do so. The Friends of Syria held out the promise of funding—and of weapons supply in the case of Qatar and Saudi Arabia—if the SNC could unify the

rebels in a single command, demonstrating its effective control and confirming its claim to represent the bulk of the opposition.

The largest of these rebel groups initially, but also the least structured or cohesive, was the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which had been announced by defecting Air Force Colonel Riad al-Asaad in July 2011. The FSA was not officially affiliated to any part of the Syrian opposition, but the SNC sought repeatedly to assert control over it and over other rebel groups that continued to appear.

To pursue this goal, Ghalioun announced the establishment of a military bureau within the SNC to support and oversee the FSA on March 1, 2011. The bureau, which never became functional, was the first of a series of ephemeral “joint” commands that were announced by one combination or another of FSA brigades, military councils, and independent or Islamist groups over the next seven months.¹³ Driving them all—and dividing them—was the wish to attract external funding and weapons flows.

Faced with renewed pressure from the Friends of Syria to show a unified rebel front, the SNC sponsored yet another Joint Military Command of Revolutionary Military Councils at the end of September. This, SNC Deputy Chairman Tayfour claimed, comprised “all” military and revolutionary councils inside Syria.¹⁴ According to the SNC’s liaison officer with the FSA, the joint command controlled “between 75 and 80 percent of the armed groups on the ground.”¹⁵ But credible commanders, such as Colonels Qassim Saad Eddin and Abdul-Jabbar al-Aqidi, heads of the Homs and Aleppo Military Councils, respectively, were absent. Also missing from the organization’s ranks were the various Islamic brigades that had grown in strength and prominence since the start of the battle for Aleppo, Syria’s second-largest city, on July 20. This joint command proved as ephemeral as its predecessors.

The SNC had hoped to underpin its claim to leadership and consolidate its standing among the opposition’s grass roots in Syria by espousing militarization of the struggle against the Assad regime. But it sought acknowledgment of its political primacy by forces it had neither brought into existence nor could support with arms, supplies, and pay. It hoped to acquire meaningful control after the Friends of Syria pledged in April to channel funding through the SNC’s military bureau to pay FSA salaries, but the funds for a partial payment arrived only once, in October.

Ultimately, the SNC was unable to bring greater coherence or structure to the armed rebellion. Indeed, by setting a political premium on military action while lacking the means to direct or support it, the SNC contributed to the continuing disunity and proliferation of rebel groups—and legitimized its Islamist competitors, who were proving more effective.

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The SNC had other options. At a closed workshop to assess its performance in February 2012, it considered a draft action plan for a domestic economic boycott of the regime, gradual civil disobedience, and preparing the local civilian grassroots movements to assume public administration following the regime's downfall. But this was swiftly abandoned as a majority of members of the executive committee threw their weight behind the pursuit of military parity with the regime.

Reorienting to confront regime violence was both understandable and legitimate. But the SNC allowed the militarization of the Syrian crisis to divert it from addressing other arduous challenges that had to be overcome in order to create a viable insurrectionary strategy. These included building broad political coalitions and empowering grassroots organizations, as well as developing local structures capable of providing a basic level of essential services—including law enforcement—and humanitarian relief for civilians in areas under rebel control and for the ever-growing number of internally displaced persons. Intensifying regime violence only made this all the more imperative.

An insurrectionary approach moreover required a considerable degree of cooperation with other opposition groups inside Syria. One of these was the Damascus-based National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, which also envisaged calling on Syrians to refuse to work or pay taxes and building up peaceful protests into a comprehensive civilian insurrection. But the SNC vetoed cooperation, leaving it predominantly an exile-based organization. The legacy weighed heavily.

A Problem of Confidence

The political parties and platforms forming the SNC lacked membership networks that extended into every urban neighborhood, town, and village in Syria—a problem for the opposition generally. The SNC might have compensated by working to set up local administrative structures, representative bodies, or the rudiments of a provisional government wherever possible around the country. Some SNC voices urged a shift of material resources and political energy toward building operational structures on the ground from an early stage. In February 2012, al-Labwani urged the SNC to turn itself from a larger, representative body in exile into a smaller, operational one inside the country. It could then lead the uprising until “the regime falls and an expanded national conference can be convened inside.”¹⁶ In March he additionally proposed forming a transitional national assembly that would in turn establish a government in exile as its executive arm, “responsible for organizing all local and external events abroad.”¹⁷

But the SNC did not make the attempt to shift inside Syria. And it was wholly reluctant to form a transitional authority, fearing this would supplant its own role as representative of the Syrian opposition.¹⁸ Its reluctance was understandable, but that meant it could not develop itself into anything more than a

representative shell, lacking genuine leadership capacity and operational capability. It had in fact already announced the creation of a long list of “executive bureaus” that gave it the appearance of a government-in-exile by early March 2012, but almost none were staffed or ever made fully operational.¹⁹ The only important exception was the Relief and Development Bureau, which benefited from being headed by the Muslim Brotherhood’s Tayfour and to some extent acted as a cover for the latter organization’s own networks.

The lack of capacity was reflected in the SNC’s published financial accounts. According to its November 2012 statement, of the \$40.4 million in official donations received by the SNC from Libya, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates over the preceding year, it had spent \$26.4 million, or 65 percent, on humanitarian relief. This was commendable, but it revealed the unwillingness of the Friends of Syria to commit more considerable resources to an untried and politically troubled body. The Friends of Syria had designated the SNC as a principal channel for humanitarian assistance on April 1, but major donors such as the United States and United Kingdom, which between them donated some \$200 million in that period, did not show much confidence in its capacity to manage and deliver large-scale aid effectively. They preferred instead to channel their contributions through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

The same was true of U.S. and UK nonlethal assistance worth some \$50 million, which was spent on communications equipment and training for civilian activists from Syria. The SNC, or rather some of its component factions, could influence which local councils or grassroots committees were selected for training, but they did not handle the funds or manage the programs. In some cases donors sent representatives into liberated areas to deliver cash directly to local councils that would use it to purchase items such as power generators.

Indeed, the SNC’s own factions also preferred to raise and disburse funds outside its framework. This was especially notable in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, which allowed its members and sympathizer networks to channel donations directly to social welfare and relief committees they favored inside Syria. Much the same was true of the Syrian Business Forum, which came into the SNC fold in May 2012. The forum’s declared aim was to create a \$300 million support fund for the opposition, but a review of its advertised activities, as well as the SNC accounts, show that it was either ineffective at fundraising or else opted not to disburse its funds through the SNC.

The Representation Game and Its Political Discontents

Inability or unwillingness to devote itself to these tasks exposed the SNC to increasing criticism within its own ranks and to growing disillusionment among activists, rebels, and the general public in Syria. Its characteristic response to this—and to unexpected and potentially threatening developments in the diplomatic domain—was to reassert its representative status. This took the form

of periodically announcing internal organizational reviews and restructuring, with the declared aim of making itself more effective and inclusive. But little actually changed, generating continuing dissent and repeated splits.

The SNC gave an early indication of its “representation game” when it announced an imminent reorganization of its “internal household” in mid-February 2012. Ostensibly this was in order to include new opposition groups in its ranks, but the timing clearly anticipated gaining international recognition at the first Friends of Syria meeting, scheduled for February 24. Behind the curtain, they clearly did not have enough control to direct a restructuring of that sort. The announcement coincided with a damaging split—a significant bloc of dissidents broke away under veteran human rights activist Haytham al-Maleh on February 19 to form the Syrian Patriotic Group. By mid-March the SNC had lost roughly one-third of its 270 members.

The SNC was still reeling when the United Nations Security Council released a presidential statement endorsing the six-point peace plan for Syria proposed by the joint special envoy for the United Nations and the Arab League, Kofi Annan. This called for the start of an “inclusive Syrian-led political process” without excluding Assad or requiring his departure as the SNC demanded. The SNC immediately characterized the Annan plan as offering the regime “the opportunity to push ahead with its repression in order to crush the revolt by the Syrian people.” But the Security Council vote had been unanimous and supported by the leading Friends of Syria members, so the SNC grudgingly added its endorsement.

In what was becoming a pattern, the SNC responded to this diplomatic setback by inviting the rest of the opposition to Istanbul to discuss a “National Pact for a New Syria” at the end of March. Unifying the opposition was indisputably important, but the SNC’s purpose was to demonstrate its own relevance and unity ahead of the second Friends of Syria meeting on April 1. The opposition factions based in Damascus had not been consulted and predictably refused to attend. The Kurdish National Council in Syria, at the time comprising twelve parties, showed up but then withdrew in protest at being “marginalized and excluded” over its demands for unequivocal recognition of Kurdish national rights and a decentralized state in a post-Assad Syria.

Clearly, the SNC could not live up to the claim of Riad al-Shaqfeh, the comptroller general of the Muslim Brotherhood who also sat on the SNC executive committee, that “90 percent of the opposition parties will be united by April 1, under the umbrella of [the] Syrian National Council.”²⁰ The Friends of Syria nonetheless recognized it as “a legitimate representative of all Syrians and the umbrella organization under which Syrian opposition groups are gathering” and, in addition to making the SNC the humanitarian aid conduit, designated it the channel through which international political and diplomatic consultation would go.

Increased recognition came at a price, as the SNC came under renewed pressure to broaden its ranks. It responded by promising once again to restructure in order to accommodate a wider range of the opposition. Several weeks of talks followed under the supervision of the Arab League, but they foundered on all-too-familiar disputes over the status of leading personalities and quotas for factional representation.

The SNC also could not meet the critical challenge of deciding what to do about members of the Assad regime. In June, then SNC chairman Sida rejected dialogue with Assad “or his group” but stressed that the SNC did not want to eradicate the Baath Party completely.²¹ The SNC then tacked in the opposite direction and at an opposition gathering in Cairo on July 3 agreed to a National Pact, which asserted the principles upon which a democratic Syria would be based, and a Joint Political Vision, which pledged to dissolve the Baath Party at the start of the transition. Just over a month later, Sida changed positions again, reiterating that although there could be no dialogue with “those with blood on their hands,” “the rest, whether in the Baath Party, the government or other institutions . . . can play a role in Syria’s future.”²²

The Cairo documents supposedly constituted a common political platform, but the opposition remained as disunited as before. This was largely because the Joint Political Vision, especially, left the opposition without a detailed program for action through which the capacity of competing factions for leadership could be tested and performance measured. Instead, the formal opposition in general, consisting of the better-known platforms and figures like the National Coordination Committee, and the SNC in particular, remained mired in an unending loop of rivalry over personal status and factional representation that perpetuated organizational instability and political incapacity.

More significantly still, the Cairo documents did not contain specific demands and concrete proposals for the interim process. Nor did the opposition seek to split the regime by offering the major institutional actors and social forces allied with it a formal role in negotiating the transition or the shape of post-Assad Syria.

A similar cycle of political theater followed the publication of the Geneva communiqué on June 30 by the Action Group, comprising the permanent members of the UN Security Council, the Arab League, European Union, Turkey, and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. It called for the “establishment of a transitional governing body . . . exercising full executive powers [that] could include members of the present Government and the opposition and other groups.” The expectation that the body should “be formed on the basis of mutual consent” moreover raised the prospect of negotiation with the regime, making it all the more urgent for the SNC to demonstrate its ability to lead a united opposition.

Once again, the SNC responded to an awkward diplomatic development by holding unity talks with other opposition factions, but predictably these stalled

by the end of July. SNC discomfit deepened as France and Turkey pressed it to establish a transitional government in August. It responded by announcing plans to expand its membership, a process that was twice delayed. By then, Syrian activists were speaking increasingly openly of what some deemed the SNC's "catastrophic failure of leadership."²³ SNC leaders, such as Tayfour, meanwhile reiterated confidently that the SNC would represent 90 percent of the opposition after bringing more groups into its fold.

This dithering came to an abrupt halt when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly stated on October 31 that the SNC could "no longer be viewed as the visible leader of the opposition." SNC spokespeople decried what they described as "direct tutelage" by the United States, which they argued was "trying to make up for its shortcomings and impotence to stop the killings and massacres in Syria." More concretely, the SNC hurriedly convened an assembly of its full membership on November 4–8. But by then the United States and Qatar, in particular, were determined to promote a new structure providing greater representation to the grassroots movements and city or provincial councils in liberated areas of Syria. Their plan was based on the Syrian National Initiative proposed by SNC executive committee member Riad Seif.

The National Coalition: A Brief Interlude?

Seif published his proposal on November 1, 2012, but he had been discussing it with close associates and U.S. officials since early August. He presented it to the SNC executive committee in September, but his colleagues were deeply divided and delayed making a decision. Their resistance was not unreasonable. The Syrian National Initiative was virtually indistinguishable from the SNC in its political goals and proposed objectives, structures, and membership. And the body to which it gave rise—the National Coalition—has replicated the SNC's political and organizational dynamics.

Politically, the eleven-point framework agreement that established the National Coalition contained no surprises. It pledged to work for the complete downfall of the Assad regime, rejected dialogue or negotiation with it, and reaffirmed the political platform agreed by the opposition gathering in Cairo on July 3. The National Coalition promised to form a provisional government once it obtained international recognition; this would give way, after the regime's fall, to a transitional government to be selected by a "general national conference." The founding document was indistinguishable in all but minor detail from the "national initiative" approved by the SNC's full general assembly only four days earlier.

Organizationally, the similarity was just as strong. The National Coalition set up an executive committee, a governing general assembly, and an intermediate political assembly, mirroring the SNC's own governance structure. It was meant to have three main bureaus—for humanitarian relief, military,

and judicial affairs—and thirteen technical and expert committees, corresponding to the SNC’s own executive bureaus. Just as with the latter, most of the National Coalition’s bureaus and committees have remained largely on paper—with the significant exception of its Aid Coordination Unit and, to a lesser degree, its relief and provincial councils committees. In forming seven “emergency” committees to tackle pressing diplomatic, political, and logistical tasks on January 21, 2013, the coalition reproduced the SNC tendency to work through ad hoc committees instead of fully activating its formal bodies.

The National Coalition is not simply an SNC clone, but it has replicated the representation game that the SNC and the Friends of Syria had already played over the preceding year. A central assertion in Clinton’s critique of the SNC was that it was insufficiently representative of those opposing the Assad regime. The National Coalition claims to represent the Syrian opposition more broadly than the SNC—but that is a stretch.

Current or former members of the SNC and close associates account for roughly half the National Coalition’s membership, not counting dissenters such as al-Maleh and Seif. But the SNC did not dissolve itself in the new coalition. It continues to exist in parallel. And other elements of the formal opposition, such as the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change and Building the Syrian State, stayed out of the new coalition as well. The principal umbrella frameworks for the opposition have continuously played musical chairs, reshuffling membership without changing their internal dynamics. Some 85 percent of the National Coalition’s members had attended most, if not all, of the larger opposition gatherings since June 2011.

Moreover, the National Coalition does not represent the opposition inside Syria to a significantly greater degree than the SNC did, if at all. The grassroots movement occupies 35 percent of the 41 seats in the SNC’s intermediate leadership body, the general secretariat, compared to about 20 percent in the National Coalition’s equivalent decisionmaking body, the general assembly. Much was made of the allocation of fourteen seats in the National Coalition to the provincial councils in Syria, however, all but two of their representatives were based in exile, including the coalition’s chairman, Moaz al-Khatib. Two of the most significant grassroots civilian networks, the Local Coordination Committees and the Syrian Revolution General Commission, which joined the National Coalition in November, reportedly objected in writing to the coalition’s executive committee over the unbalanced selection of provincial representatives.²⁴

Perversely, the National Coalition also followed the SNC closely in failing to represent Syrian Kurdish opposition parties. The gap between the two wings of the opposition had widened after the Kurdish National Council in Syria broke off unity talks with the SNC in April 2012. Reflecting this, the Kurdish National Council joined the People’s Council of West Kurdistan in

The National Coalition claims to represent the Syrian opposition more broadly than the SNC—but that is a stretch.

forming the Supreme Kurdish Council as a separate Kurdish umbrella framework on June 11. The People's Council of West Kurdistan was a front for the Democratic Union Party, Syria's largest Kurdish movement, which has close historic ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and is a member of the SNC's main rival coalition inside Syria, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change. Although three smaller parties of the Kurdish National Council joined the National Coalition in November, the majority remained within the Supreme Kurdish Council. In December, the coalition announced the creation of the position of third deputy chairman to represent the Kurdish opposition, but it remained vacant. The appointment of the head of the Syrian Tribal Council, Salem al-Maslat, to the post on March 20, 2013, signaled that the National Coalition, like the SNC before it, had relinquished hope of bringing the principal Kurdish alliances into a common political framework.

The SNC and its backbone faction, the Muslim Brotherhood, quickly assumed a leading role in the affairs of the National Coalition, followed by the SNC's other main grouping, the National Bloc. This highlighted the political ineffectiveness and organizational weakness of much of the rest of the coalition's membership. When its general assembly met in Cairo on November 29 to activate its operational and administrative committees and approve its statutes, for example, SNC members and associates accounted for 60 percent of those present. They have represented the National Coalition at planning workshops on transition, at discussions on the Kurdish question, and on the committee that negotiated a ceasefire between the FSA and Kurdish militias fighting for control over the strategic border town of Ras al-Ayn in February 2013. And when the National Coalition appointed a committee to consult with the Friends of Syria over establishing a provisional government on January 21, four of its five members came from the SNC executive committee.

There was a large element of make-believe, therefore, when the Friends of Syria conferred the label of sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people on the National Coalition on December 12, 2012, having denied it to the SNC previously.

Meeting the Challenges

The National Coalition's endurance as a contender for leadership depends on its ability to take command of the opposition's response to three principal challenges. It must decide whether, when, and how to take the battle to Syria's main cities or other population centers. It must prove capable of providing humanitarian relief and civil administration in rebel-controlled areas. And it has to deal with diplomatic initiatives or political proposals that may bring about forms of transitional government or power sharing that fall short of complete regime change.

The SNC failed to overcome these challenges. It played no role in taking the battle to the cities, it inadequately addressed the relief effort, and it was put visibly on the defensive by the idea of dealing with the regime or its principal constituencies. Should the National Coalition prove no more successful in meeting these challenges, leadership of the popular uprising and the armed rebellion will pass to a variety of other actors inside Syria. Whether the baton would pass to a unified structure or be dispersed in a fragmented field is unclear.

Taking the War to the Cities

The decision to initiate major combat, especially in densely populated areas, is never purely military or tactical. Rather, it is primarily political, with significant ethical implications. Urban combat inevitably results in severe physical damage, economic dislocation, and massive displacement. And it burdens combatants with the obligation of providing basic administration and food supply for large civilian populations and generating resentment when they fail to live up to expectations. The Syrian regime indisputably initiated large-scale violence, prompting the opposition to take up arms to protect peaceful demonstrators. But as some activists recognized, “even if arming was not a choice we made, limiting its negative consequences is our moral responsibility.”²⁵

The opposition’s offensives began in July 2012, but the decision to take the war into the heart of Syria’s cities was not made by any umbrella opposition framework. It has repeatedly been made by disparate rebel groups, few of which owe more than nominal allegiance to the FSA, let alone to the SNC or National Coalition. The rebel offensive in Aleppo that started on July 20 is a case in point. The head of the local military council, the FSA’s Colonel Abdul-Jabbar al-Aqidi, opposed major combat in the city, Syria’s second largest with a population of 2.5 million and its economic powerhouse.²⁶ But he felt unable to stand in the way of the Tawhid Brigade, an Islamist rebel group formed only eight days earlier that insisted on launching the offensive. By joining in once the battle started, the FSA ceded much of the initiative to Tawhid and other mostly Islamist rebel groups that later followed it, such as the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra. Together, those groups control many of the rebel areas in the city.

Visitors to Aleppo as late as November reported that its large industrial zone had been spared regime bombardment, but entire factories were stripped or dismantled when rebel groups subsequently overran it. According to an assessment submitted to the U.S. State Department by unnamed Syrian sources working with the FSA in early January 2013, “There are hundreds of small groups (10–20 fighters) spread all over the area of Aleppo. . . . The FSA has been transformed into disorganized rebel groups, infiltrated by large numbers of criminals.” The assessment explained that “rebel violations are becoming a normal daily phenomenon, especially against civilians, including looting public and private factories, storage places, houses and cars.”²⁷

That the rebels are committing abuses of this kind is widely acknowledged across the opposition. The Front of Aleppo Islamic Scholars objected in January 2013 to “the seizure of the strategic stockpile of wheat, sugar, cotton, petroleum, and basic needs of the people,” part of which was resold across the border in Turkey at slashed prices.²⁸ An opposition think tank meanwhile described much of the pillage of industrial plants and damage to public infrastructure as “destruction for destruction.”²⁹

By January 2013, some local activists were attributing the civilian exodus from certain liberated areas to looting, profiteering, and extortion by rebels rather than to combat or difficult humanitarian conditions.³⁰ FSA commanders were aware of the impact on public support, especially among urban populations. In an interview at the end of October 2012, Colonel Qassim Saad Eddin, head of the Homs Military Council, ruefully acknowledged that “the people of Aleppo feel a grievance against the FSA, as do the people of Homs [city].”³¹

It was clear that neither the SNC and National Coalition nor the FSA could control the disparate rebel groups. This left decisions about how to conduct the fight wholly in the hands of local rebel groups, which acted on a mix of often counterproductive impulses. The perception among many civilians-turned-rebels, who came mainly from the surrounding *rif* (countryside), that urban populations had been slow to join the uprising was one such impulse. This built on long-standing resentment of the gains made by urban businessmen and middle classes during the previous decade of economic liberalization. The belief that all areas should bear the burden of fighting the regime equally prompted an Islamist rebel coalition to start combat operations in Raqqa Province in late October 2012. Because Raqqa had been quiet, large numbers of civilians displaced by the violence in Aleppo had sought refuge there; the National Coalition's Aid Coordination Unit estimated their number at just over 900,000 by January 2013. And so opening a new battlefield—and eventually taking the provincial capital in early March—threatened to displace the refugees once more and make the delivery of relief harder still.

But despite the consequences of these actions, the SNC, and in turn the National Coalition, failed to formulate a clear position on taking the battle to Syria's cities. Nor did they assert political leadership in relation to the clashes between opposition rebels and Kurdish fighters in Aleppo in late October

2012 and periodically in the border town of Ras al-Ayn between November and February 2013, although these directly threatened the opposition's political alliances.³²

Perhaps most ominously for the future course of the conflict, the lack of strategic leadership has also been evident in the struggle for Syria's capital. The “Damascus volcano,” a battle waged in mid-July 2012, was an ad hoc

affair launched by local groups with only the loosest affiliation to the FSA, and it resulted in heavy rebel losses. The much-hyped “Battle for Damascus”

The lack of strategic leadership has been evident in the struggle for Syria's capital.

that built up from late October onward followed a similar pattern: the initiative was taken by local rebels, spearheaded by the jihadist Ahrar al-Sham Battalions, but eventually petered out as regime forces inflicted heavy casualties and regained dominance in mid-January 2013.

Damascus poses a particular challenge for the National Coalition. If it cannot assert control over the timing, pace, and conduct of the battle for the capital—and whether to have one at all—then it will certainly be no more than one among many contenders for political supremacy in the aftermath of the regime’s defeat or retreat from the city. But there has been little evidence of any ability or will to exercise such authority in the National Coalition, nor even of awareness that it is needed. Indeed, when fighting intensified in Damascus in December 2012, it was the Local Coordination Committees—rather than the National Coalition—that called on opposition fighters to ensure that the capital was spared the destructive fate of “all other Syrian cities.”²³³

Humanitarian Relief

Revolutionary movements and armed rebellions invariably face a significant challenge in providing the civilian population under their control with effective civil administration and a reliable supply of essential commodities such as food, fuel, and medicine. Those that fail on those fronts almost inevitably stall. This requires ceaseless effort and organization, as does the delivery of international aid, which also requires effective management and distribution networks.

In Syria, independent or Islamist rebel groups have often been quicker to recognize the need and address it than the SNC or National Coalition. The Salafist Tawhid Brigade was the first to address the need for a functioning security apparatus and court system in Aleppo, for example. The jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra has spearheaded efforts since late 2012 to provide food and fuel, adjudicate in disputes, and prevent looting in Aleppo city neighborhoods and outlying villages under its control. In addition, on March 10, 2013, Islamist groups including Jabhat al-Nusra formed a “religious authority for the Eastern region in Syria” to administer daily life in Deir ez-Zor, with bureaus for humanitarian relief, services, and reconciliation and dispute resolution—as well as religious *da’wa* and fatwas—as well as an executive police force.

The SNC, in contrast, never devoted itself sufficiently to the task. It provided such funding as it commanded to individuals or committees inside Syria to use for relief, but as various activists noted bitterly, failed to establish a significant logistical support base in southeastern Turkey. The opportunity was there: the SNC had good working relations with the Turkish authorities, which have allowed virtually unfettered movement into Syria since the rebels wrested control of border crossings in July 2012. Yet by November, eighteen months after the first wave of refugees fled the city of Jisr al-Shughur in northwest Syria, the SNC had still not set up permanent aid offices or a

supply structure to deliver the most urgently needed commodities to liberated areas—such as fuel to run power generators for field hospitals, bakeries, and water pumps, and for heating. Nor had it attempted systematic surveys of needs and data collection.

The National Coalition has struggled to get a handle on the situation as well since it was formed in November 2012. The scale of the challenge, and its political complexity, were highlighted when the Syrian government authorized the United Nations World Food Program in mid-January 2013 to work with local nongovernmental organizations to distribute food aid worth \$519 million. The program was already delivering aid for up to 1.5 million Syrians a month through the government-controlled Syrian Arab Red Crescent, but the new agreement allowed it to reach an additional one million Syrians in need. The National Coalition protested vociferously against giving assistance to “the regime that destroyed cities and shelled hospitals and bakeries and displaced inhabitants, to help it to fix what its own hands have perpetrated.”³⁴ Noting that rebel areas, “in which over ten million people reside, or nearly half the Syrian population,” were receiving only 10 percent of what they needed, its Aid Coordination Unit offered itself as a more effective and equitable alternative for aid distribution.³⁵

Syrian activists acknowledge that the Friends of Syria lack confidence in the operational capacity of the National Coalition to deliver international aid on a large scale, and resent this. Its ability to provide security is an added concern, as United Nations food and fuel convoys have come under rebel attack. In late January, National Coalition Chairman al-Khatib acknowledged that “much of the relief aid has been stolen or looted by gangs exploiting the security anarchy.”³⁶

Consequently, direct assistance to the National Coalition has remained small in scale. All international humanitarian aid until mid-February—including \$230 million and \$477 million from the United States and European Union, respectively, by the start of 2013, and new commitments including \$1.5 billion pledged at a donor conference in Kuwait on January 30—were earmarked for disbursement through the United Nations and related agencies. By January 19 the National Coalition had received only \$8 million from Qatar, which it distributed to the fourteen provincial councils in Syria, and smaller amounts from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for refugee relief.

But the coalition's Aid Coordination Unit received financial and technical assistance from the UK and international nongovernmental organizations, enabling it to complete the first detailed study of humanitarian needs in the whole of northern Syria in early 2013. The announcement by Qatar on February 20 that it had contributed \$100 million to the Aid Coordination Unit signaled a significant shift, although leading coalition members denied that anything had been received by mid-March. This was followed by the pledge of \$60 million in civilian assistance to the opposition—in addition to increased

humanitarian aid—by the United States at the Friends of Syria meeting on February 28.

The National Coalition, like the SNC before it, has argued repeatedly that it could be more effective operationally—and could prove its capacity for leadership—if donors gave it significant aid. The increased contributions from the Friends of Syria were welcome but underlined the need for effective and empowered local civilian structures that can manage and use aid effectively. And this is where the National Coalition still faces an uphill struggle.

Political Challenges

The Syrian opposition will likely have to face the prospect of dealing with members of the regime. Michel Kilo, an independent writer and co-founder of the Syrian Democratic Platform, is among those who have recognized the need for the National Coalition to develop a plan for a negotiated solution so as to be in a better position to impose its own terms “or else find itself compelled to surrender to what is proposed from the outside.”³⁷

The crumbling of the existing order is unlikely to resemble the hasty flight of U.S. diplomats and marines at the fall of Saigon to Vietnamese forces in April 1975; the last Russian adviser will not escape Damascus clinging to the skids of a helicopter taking off from the embassy roof. More likely is a realignment within the regime—once al-Assad and his inner circle are no longer able to prevent or deter it—as significant sectors of the state apparatus, Baath Party, and army propel a decisive shift toward a negotiated solution to the conflict.

Syrian Vice President Farouq Sharaa indicated the existence of a “third force” of this kind during an interview in mid-December 2012, in which he said that “many in the [Baath] Party and the [governing National] Front and armed forces have believed from the start of the crisis, and still do, that there is no alternative to a political solution, and that there can be no return to the past.”³⁸ A third force could offer credible hope of stabilizing the transition by managing the country, securing chemical weapons, and preempting further growth of the jihadist wing of the armed rebellion.

Most governments with a stake in the outcome—especially the United States and Russia, but also the regional powers including Iran—would welcome such a development. And they would press the National Coalition to engage fully with the third force, severely testing the opposition body’s cohesion and unity.

Even if a third force does not appear or seize the initiative, the National Coalition still faces the thorny question of how to persuade significant swathes of Syria’s 1–1.5 million civil servants, 2–2.5 million members of the ruling Baath Party, and the 2.5–3 million strong Alawi community, who provide

A third force could offer credible hope of stabilizing the transition by managing the country, securing chemical weapons, and preempting further growth of the jihadist wing of the armed rebellion.

the backbone of the security services and armed forces, to abandon the Assad regime. As an opposition activist argued at the end of February 2013, the National Coalition:

should address the large segment of Syrian society that still belongs to state institutions, whose members wonder what their fate will be and that of their institutions. The same applies to segments of the army, Baath Party, syndicates and unions, and so on. . . . All this comes within a purposeful political program to dismantle the regime by dividing its ranks and cutting it off from its social base, and separating the state and state institutions from it.³⁹

The SNC previously evaded this challenge, and the National Coalition has yet to meet it head-on. The opposition has drafted commendable “day after” plans to restore basic services and government institutions, provide transitional justice, and build a democratic system once the regime falls. But it has failed to develop a political strategy for defeating the regime in the here and now.

Alternative Leadership on the Ground?

The failure of the formal opposition to provide the uprising with strong leadership raised the possibility that this would instead be provided by activists and rebels inside Syria. By March 2012 rudimentary opposition councils and grassroots committees were emerging in some Syrian cities to address daily challenges of providing humanitarian relief, organizing basic services, and responding to regime violence. More bodies appeared at the provincial, town, and village levels in following months. Varying widely in competence and coherence, they offered a means to develop a parallel governing structure in liberated areas and demonstrated the possibility of building leadership bodies on the ground.

There have been notable successes, but the development of local leadership structures has been uneven and erratic, slowed in part by the regime's repressive capacity. As significant has been the lack of sustained investment by the umbrella frameworks in exile in providing an unambiguous model or lending clear authority and resources to particular approaches and policies. Civilian councils at provincial, city, and town or village levels have additionally struggled to assert meaningful authority over rebel groups operating in their areas, which often provide their own services to local communities.

Hesitant Political Leadership on the Ground

Local bodies have been slow to acquire greater political salience, but it is virtually inevitable that they will increasingly articulate policy preferences and seek to shape the opposition agenda. The Local Coordination Committees, generally regarded as the most extensive grassroots network inside Syria, showed signs of political autonomy as early as May 2012, when they secretly planned to

organize elections to select a clandestine opposition parliament and leadership inside Syria. The sharp rise of violence later that month thwarted the initiative, but the effort indicated a significant potential for independent action. In mid-May the Local Coordination Committees publicly protested the reelection of Ghalioun as SNC chairman and threatened to pull out of the council over the “monopolization” of power by its leadership outside of Syria.

The significance of the Local Coordination Committees waned in following months as violence intensified and militarization of the opposition quickened, prompting some of its activists to withdraw and others to join the armed struggle. But the group continued to exert important influence, playing a key role in drafting a code of ethical conduct for the armed rebels that was announced in early August and committed them to observing human rights principles.

Some rebel commanders also showed signs of political independence. The rebel code of ethical conduct was announced by Homs Military Council head Saad Eddin, who lobbied other military councils and rebel battalions to join. On August 20 he also proposed an “internal charter” committing rebel groups not to join political or religious factions or to engage in politics in a post-Assad Syria. In the meantime, he published a “national salvation draft” plan for governing Syria in a post-Assad transition. This proposed a supreme defense council comprising the heads of the rebel military councils and representatives of the civilian opposition and grassroots networks, which would create a presidential council of six military and civil leaders to run the state in the interim phase.

The national salvation draft was the boldest political bid by any opposition figure or body inside Syria, military or civilian. But still, the SNC was not ready to form a transitional government.

The Lack of an Administrative Framework

Grassroots activists such as Ali al-Amin Sweid of the Syrian Revolution General Commission had already recognized as early as summer 2012 that “a state designed to be tied symbiotically to the Assad family will fall with its fall.”²⁴⁰ This necessitated the construction of provisional revolutionary structures to replace those of the state that dissolved, until a legitimate Syrian state could be reestablished. Sweid went on to propose an eight-bureau structure—headed by an executive and covering financial, relief, security, municipal, medical, legal, and military responsibilities—that could be replicated in every locale.

This and similar models proposed by other activists in following months offered an alternative framework for political organization and leadership. However, the administrative councils that had started to appear in contested areas of the country, such as Homs in early 2012, evolved in disparate ways as rebel-held areas expanded from July onward. No effective overarching political framework was created that could provide greater coherence and reduce the costs of learning through trial-and-error. The SNC was in a position to

promote and deepen the process of administrative consolidation, helping to replicate positive models and experiences and assist learning. But it did not prioritize this.

In practice, how local communities dealt with the challenge varied widely from one village or neighborhood to the next. Some embraced Salafist Islamist models, and many effectively came under military administration by one or another rebel battalion. By September, a handful of Western states were also working to promote a distinct civic model of local administration. A U.S.- and UK-funded Office for Syrian Opposition Support trained a modest number of civilian activists in Istanbul, and French agents delivered cash to villages in liberated areas to purchase equipment, provide public services, and develop civil administration.

Donor support inevitably prompted renewed competition among opposition networks and nongovernmental organizations represented in Turkey. But the Western donor-funded civic training approach achieved some successes nonetheless; the northern village of Khirbet al-Joz gained prominence in October as a model in which an elected civilian council oversaw training workshops and attended to public needs. Syrian activists described an admirable model of local civilian councils exercising full authority over local rebel battalions through designated liaison officers.

In reality, application of the model has proved erratic, and reversible. Accounts from the field confirm that the local civilian councils still varied widely in capability and autonomy by March 2013. In many places, local rebel groups have continued to wield decisive power. In the border town of Tal Abyad, the election of a local civilian council in October 2012 attracted considerable media attention, but barely a week later the council members went on strike to protest their loss of real authority to the area rebel commander. Civilian councils have struggled to assert meaningful authority over rebel groups operating in their areas, which often provide their own services to local communities. More often than not, the desired civil-military relationship has been reversed, as rebel groups create their own civilian solidarity and media support bodies.⁴¹ And in some cases, donor-funded civic programs collapsed “because local commanders couldn’t agree.”⁴² Even in towns such as Tal Abyad, Jabhat al-Nusra and the “sharia authority” had become a dominant influence by March 2013.

An Emerging Success Story?

The establishment of the National Coalition seemed to offer new hope of prioritizing and consolidating the construction of local administrative structures inside Syria. Former SNC spokesperson Kodmani, a vocal advocate of this approach, described the emergence of local councils in November 2012 as “a very interesting and promising development . . . because the whole revolution is organized at the local level; that is the only way it can organize itself to face

the regime.” Kodmani added that “the local councils have grown into real entities. They are trying to develop democratic mechanisms to have representation. And they are in the process of aggregating their different units to develop representation at the level of each governorate in Syria, and there are 14 of those.”⁴³

Accounts from the field confirmed the emergence of a “sophisticated civilian governance structure” in Aleppo.⁴⁴ A first layer consisted of the Aleppo Transitional Revolutionary Council with 23 civilian members; a second of district (*mantaqah*) and neighborhood (*hayy*) councils; and a third of the courts and police.⁴⁵ The Transitional Revolutionary Council oversees twelve committees that manage law enforcement, bakeries, hospitals, and education among other sectors.⁴⁶ Although its main focus is on the city, the council provides an “embryonic” level of governance in the province as a whole; in mid-January 2013 it decreed that services paid for with \$1 million in Qatari aid it had received from the National Coalition would be shared across the province.

However, it is evident that the National Coalition has played a small role in coordinating these emerging structures. There were positive steps. Coalition Deputy Chairperson Suhair al-Atassi oversaw the election of an executive bureau for the Idlib provincial council in the Turkish border town of Rihaniyeh on January 13; the assembly also reelected its representative in the National Coalition. A first general assembly of provincial councils was held in Istanbul on January 23–24, and on January 25 the Aleppo Transitional Revolutionary Council announced that it was preparing a proposal to regulate trade across the common border with Turkey. Most impressive was the three-day process in which 224 delegates were selected to represent city neighborhoods and towns in Aleppo and its province in early March, culminating in their election of a 29-member provincial council.

But a thoughtful assessment published in mid-January by Ghayyath Bilal, a founding member of the Syrian Revolution General Commission and of the revolutionary command council in Damascus, argued that the involvement of the National Coalition in establishing local councils “has occasionally had an adverse effect in many provinces.”⁴⁷ As the authors of another account from the field reported the local councils in liberated areas generally “are far from being well established; they are not completely separate from armed groups, lack resources, and their coordination with national institutions, the [SNC] and the National Coalition ... remains largely theoretical.”⁴⁸ Preliminary reports from Raqqa, which fell to the rebels on March 4, paint a welcome picture of an orderly transition and functioning public administration, but this only highlights further the discrepancy between the National Coalition and the Salafist groups that actually took and now run the city.

Moreover, the National Coalition hypothetically works closely with the Higher Military Council that was announced on December 14, 2012, as a unified military command nominally comprising the FSA, military councils,

and a two-thirds majority of the rebel battalions inside Syria. On paper, the council differs positively from all previous command structures, with an elected 30-member command council comprising eleven rebel officers and nineteen civilian activists. But as with all preceding joint military commands, the Higher Military Council has been incapacitated by its inability to pay salaries to the rebels, once again highlighting the problematic logic by which the National Coalition—and the Friends of Syria—hope to generate leadership and legitimacy. By March 2013, members of the National Coalition's executive committee were privately acknowledging that the Higher Military Council was essentially inactive.

Furthermore, the development of a genuinely capable governing authority loyal to the opposition is still heavily contingent on sustained donor funding. This is not assured, as the demand to increase international aid to Syrian registered refugees, internally displaced persons, and others in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria—numbering over 1.1 million (including individuals awaiting registration), 2–2.5 million, and 4 million, respectively, by mid-March—is intensifying and may result in a diversion of resources. Ironically, the Syrian government has also partially eased the problem of local administration by continuing to pay salaries to public sector employees in liberated areas, permitting them to maintain very basic levels of garbage collection, power supply, and education as of Spring 2013.

More problematic, from the opposition's perspective, is that even where the delivery of aid and basic services has improved distinctly, as in the northern town of Manbaj, this has been largely due to the increasing presence of international nongovernmental organizations. Seeking to shore up the National Coalition's domestic standing, some Western governments have pressured their aid agencies to transfer their successful local operations to it or give the National Coalition credit for their performance.

Activist writer Hajj-Saleh, who remains in hiding in Damascus, offered a bleak assessment of the local civilian structures at the start of March 2013. The grassroots movement provided a “multifaceted creativity” that the formal opposition lacked, he noted, but

This is not to say that conditions in the society of the revolution or its various local communities are promising. In reality we can speak of widespread signs of dissolution, damage to social ties even at the local level, the spread of violence and use of violence to settle diverse scores or for private profit. The forms of self-organization do not meet needs in most areas, as the elements of dissolution, fragmentation, and selfishness are more present and influential than those of healing, cooperation, and joint action.⁴⁹

The Necessary Shift Inside Syria

As the second anniversary of the Syrian uprising came around on March 15, the Syrian opposition remained uncomfortably suspended between the representative frameworks in exile, which have failed to provide effective leadership, and the dynamic and expanding but problematically diverse mélange of grassroots structures inside Syria. These remain unable to assert sufficient control on the ground to resolve their dysfunctional aspects.

The real dilemma for the National Coalition is that it cannot fend off challenges to its political leadership indefinitely unless it relocates to Syria. Opposition writer Abdul-Naser al-Ayed reflected the feeling of many activists in arguing, “Had the Syrian political opposition been innovative, dynamic, and sufficiently free internally, it would have . . . taken the historic decision to return inside, merge with the revolutionary forces, and negotiate with the regime and its regional and international backers from that superior position, instead of compromising with the regime and pleading for the support of this or that actor.”⁵⁰

The National Coalition cannot fend off challenges to its political leadership indefinitely unless it relocates to Syria.

The National Coalition needs to set up a functioning transitional government or a politically empowered executive authority inside Syria if it is to respond to the conclusion reached by an opposition think tank in January 2013 that “the first and the most important consideration should be the protection of civilians and to protect the public ownership.”⁵¹ Otherwise an overarching governance structure that eventually emerges from the grassroots movement needs to displace the National Coalition and do so.

Political organization would enable learning and adaptation. It is the key to effectiveness (achieving goals) and efficiency (doing so at minimum cost)—and can be a game-changer. The Syrian opposition has struggled in the absence of an effective nationwide structure to deepen social mobilization, construct effective administrative and military command structures, and establish clear national leadership. Without political organization, costs mount and defeat is possible.

The resort by the Assad regime to intense, large-scale violence certainly made it much harder for the opposition to build new political organizations inside Syria after the start of the uprising. But this did not relieve it of the urgent need to overcome its inherent handicap. Far from it, militarization of the uprising made the building of political parties “not simply compatible with the current Syrian revolutionary situation, but rather an urgent necessity.”⁵²

Just how critical this is for the opposition can be seen from the very different patterns in areas controlled by the Kurdish opposition. The fact that these have been spared large-scale violence and destruction by the regime indisputably facilitated the establishment of functioning local administration and basic security. But what ensured this was the prior existence of the Democratic

Union Party, Kurdish Democratic Party (Syria), and other forces within the Kurdish community long before the start of the 2011 uprising.

Coalition Chairman al-Khatib acknowledged the deteriorating conditions and security anarchy elsewhere in Syria on several occasions. In January 2013 he noted that humanitarian aid was being siphoned off and that “many oil fields have fallen into the grip of armed groups, some of which protect [the fields] while others loot them.”⁵³ When he announced the appointment of Ghassan Hitto to head the provisional government on March 19, al-Khatib returned to the theme, arguing that “many areas need regulating, there are gangs that steal and loot and assault.”⁵⁴ Prominent grassroots activists inside Syria, such as human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, complained that the regime was exploiting rebel chaos and added that critics of the chaos were being harassed and arrested by various rebel brigades.

And as al-Ayed argued in late February 2013, “the problems of the inside are mounting due to the absence of leadership and political vision in the revolutionary arena; there is no voice there but that of the guns, conditions for civilians are critical.”⁵⁵ An article in the Muslim Brotherhood newspaper *al-'Abd*, which was re-launched inside Syria on February 15, acknowledged this. “The chaos of armament, weakness of organization, disputes among battalions, and spread of corrupt elements in the ranks of the Free [Syrian] Army and absence of an institution capable of preventing violations and punishing perpetrators,” the authors wrote, “are the most glaring gaps through which the doubters gained access to shake the confidence of the revolutionaries in their blessed revolution.”⁵⁶

The opposition's disunity can of course be a boon in some ways. Many opposition activists regard the inchoate nature of much of the Syrian revolutionary grassroots movement, in both its civilian and military forms, as an essential feature and its most valuable asset. Reflecting on this at the end of 2012, Hajj-Saleh observed that “the inability of the regime to achieve victory over the armed resistance is largely due to its scattered formation, because there is no head to decapitate or defined front to break.” “But,” he added, “this ‘advantage’ also limits the effectiveness of the armed resistance by weakening its coordination and methodical action.” The consequence, he concluded, was that the “effective, vital force” now driving the uprising is multi-headed, anarchic, destructive.⁵⁷

Writing at the end of January 2013, Zuhair Salem, senior spokesperson for the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, offered an exceptionally frank and equally comprehensive critique of the civilian wing of the opposition. “This great revolution,” he wrote

has not been able to produce a political leadership that rewards its revolutionary action and that oversees, guides, and helps bear its responsibilities.... Not a single conventional opposition faction ... has met the revolution's administrative, political, humanitarian, or even relief entitlements—not all of these entitlements, not

even a tenth of them. . . . I have not heard of any political faction, whether Islamist or civil secular or religious, that replaced someone because he did not meet the requirements of this phase or failed to anticipate them.⁵⁸

The exile leadership, he added dismissively a few weeks later, is made up of “amateurs,”⁵⁹ a label also used to describe it in mid-March by Suhair al-Atassi, the National Coalition’s second deputy chairperson and head of its Aid Coordination Unit.

The opportunity exists to transfer effective leadership inside Syria. The opposition holds large swathes of the north, most of the border crossings with Turkey and Iraq, over half of Aleppo, and has tightened the noose around Damascus since November. The liberated areas are normally home to some ten million people, or 40 percent of Syria’s population. Buoyed by rebel gains and the apparent inability of regime forces to retake lost ground, opposition leaders have moreover routinely declared the regime’s fall “imminent.”

However, opposition leaders were all too evidently unwilling to return to Syria. Former SNC chairman Ghalioun crossed the border briefly in June 2012, followed in October by his successor Sida and by al-Atassi. But these were little more than photo opportunities—for which al-Atassi posed in a combat uniform—described caustically by fellow activist al-Labwani as “farcical.”⁶⁰ In February 2013 SNC Chairman Sabra and a significant delegation including Sida, Tayfour, and Ahmad Ramadan, among others, spent four days in liberated areas. National Coalition Chairman al-Khatib briefly visited Manbij and Jarablus on March 3, and three weeks later provisional government head Hitto followed with an equally brief visit to Aleppo’s outskirts.

It will take much more than day trips to dispel the view of some that opposition leaders are “eager to enter Syrian territory but then leave like tourists.”⁶¹ The establishment of a provisional government inside Syria could make a fundamental difference, but only if it is politically empowered with the authority to devise policies, set agendas, and chart a course for the civilian and military structures actually waging the daily struggle against the Assad regime.

What Comes After the National Coalition?

Little wonder that those fighting to redirect the Syrian uprising perceive an opportunity. Whether the Syrian crisis evolves toward greater violence and fragmentation or a negotiated transition, it will favor other claimants to leadership. In the early 2013 assessment of a field commander in Jabhat al-Nusra, for example, the National Coalition “is very fragile, and faces many internal disputes and divisions, and despite how it has been marketed lacks presence on the ground.”⁶²

At the other end of the spectrum, on January 29 components of the formal opposition that had refused to join the National Coalition—led by the

National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change and Building the Syrian State—launched a new political initiative for a negotiated solution with the regime without preconditions, based on a revised version of the June 2012 Geneva communiqué. A follow-on action committee published a detailed plan for the transitional process and announced the formation of a Civil Democratic Alliance on March 6, 2013, to pursue a “Syrian-based solution.”

The National Coalition has been unable to seize the political and diplomatic initiative or to direct mass mobilization and the armed rebellion inside Syria, as it must if it is to exercise leadership. Its reluctance to move into liberated areas and form a provisional government or executive authority—at least until March—moreover impeded the ability of local councils to provide effective civil administration and military command and to evolve into an alternative political leadership. The National Coalition has had only the briefest of windows to assert itself, but its time had already run out even before al-Khatib's resignation. The question now, as an opposition activist asked a mere two months after the body's establishment, is “what comes after the National Coalition?”⁶³ Might this be the provisional government?

Both the Syrian opposition and the Friends of Syria must confront this question. The National Coalition would not have come into being were it not for the far-from-subtle shoehorning—led, despite its public denials, by the United States—of the SNC and other opposition groups and figures into joining it. This was not, as some Syrian activists darkly suspected, a sinister plot to create a pliant body that would strike a tainted deal with the Assad regime. Rather, it reflected the continual striving by the Friends of Syria to help bring an effective and legitimate opposition leadership into being while betraying their extremely limited means of doing so.

The United States and the UK, especially, have discreetly tried since then to nurture local structures with leadership potential inside Syria, such as Aleppo's military council and elected civilian provincial council. But although they have correctly diagnosed the need and identified a viable alternative, they have no real ability to bring it about. The attempt to induce desired behavior and outcomes by providing funding and other resources to preferred recipients has reinforced dysfunctional competition and proven counterproductive. Leadership is acquired, not bestowed.

This is a lesson the National Coalition would also do well to take to heart. The central challenge facing it remains first and last to demonstrate political leadership. It has good reason for frustration with the various Friends of Syria, who are committed at one and the same time to a political solution to the Syrian crisis, the departure of Assad, and the armed rebellion against him. But the international coalition's principal shortcoming has been to indulge the National Coalition's belief that it can effect lasting, democratic change in Syria without frankly engaging the principal political and institutional actors on the opposing side in formal negotiation over the contours and path of the transition.

The National Coalition must bite this bullet before Syria's state and infrastructure are damaged beyond repair. It must also acknowledge the provincial councils inside Syria as partners in political leadership and seek to empower and privilege them in this role, rather than treat them as an exclusively executive arm or mere political adjunct. If it cannot entrust the councils with this level of power and responsibility, then why should the armed rebels submit to their authority—or that of a provisional government—and why should the Syrian people trust the National Coalition with their future?

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