

The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went Wrong?

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ABSTRACT *The uprising against the decades-long Assad rule in Syria started as a series of peaceful demonstrations; however, the brutal crackdown of the Assad regime transformed the uprising into an armed rebellion. The opposition has been characterized by disunity, power struggles, and lack of direction, while half-hearted international backers with conflicting agendas have deepened the divides within the opposition, directly or indirectly empowering the Assad regime. Three main shortcomings have hindered the political opposition from creating a meaningful bloc which could independently advocate for the rights of the Syrian people and enjoy widespread legitimacy at home and abroad: representation deficit, dependency on outside actors, and the irrelevance of the political track.*

Evolution of the Opposition

In 2011, when civilian unrest broke out against the decades-long Assad rule in Syria, I penned an article for *Insight Turkey* in which I attempted to make sense of the opposition movement that was in the making in Syria. The opposition, then mostly confined within the scope of the political arena and manifesting itself via peaceful street demonstrations, was an unharmonious body sharing little more than a distaste for Assad rule. The opposition was anything but a unified body; its diverse members were still trying to figure out what they were in for. It was a liquid formation which was shaped

mostly by external factors, especially by Assad's brutal dealing with the protests. In other words, Assad's brutal handling of the peaceful protests played a key role in transforming both the protests and the opposition. Still clueless about how to force Assad either to reform or to leave, the opposition wandered around trying to unify its ranks and join together to find a viable roadmap. Their key dilemma then was, "how to deal with a violent crackdown by state actors through peaceful means and without foreign help." The group within the opposition that was suspicious about Assad's will and capability to reform, I continued, "may come to a point where they resort to

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armed struggle, actively seek foreign help, or both.”

Needless to say, the continuation of brutal crackdowns by the regime, facilitated by the early arrival of Iranian anti-riot forces, morphed the peaceful protests into a quest for survival, which would eventually devolve into armed struggle and a search for foreign help. The opposition therefore started to operate in two distinct yet intertwined spheres: military and political. The political opposition, starting from the Antalya Conference for Change in Syria in April 2011, brought together myriad groups with varying ideological, religious and ethnic confessions, and formed the political structures which would represent anti-Assad Syrians in the international arena. The Syrian National Council (SNC) and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces have been seeking legitimacy and conversing with the international community to find a political solution for the Syri-

an quagmire, so far with no tangible results.

Meanwhile, defectors from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), including high-level officers, established the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the flagship of the moderate armed opposition since July 2011. Independent units formed by locals with varying political and ideological stances have also entered the picture. Some of them brought finances, others personnel, and some others experience in fighting. The Free Syrian Army has enjoyed relative legitimacy among the international community and consequently was awarded military aid, starting with non-lethal weapons and ending up with low- to mid-level arms. The FSA, however, has never been equipped with game-changing weapons which could tip the balance in the opposition's favor on the ground. The regime, on the other hand, has maintained its military edge over the opposition thanks to an incessant influx of weapons, and later personnel, from Russia and Iran. The military opposition has been as divided as the political opposition, and similar problems to those plaguing the political opposition have also crippled the military opposition in Syria. With the arrival of Jihadi-Salafist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the formation of moderate Jihadi battalions such as Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, and Liwa al-Taaweed, the military dynamics on the ground have become even more complicated, and disagreements and even clashes have occurred among



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry speaks as Syrian Opposition Coalition President Ahmad al-Jarba listens as they make remarks to the media May 8, 2014 at the State Department in Washington, DC. Secretary Kerry had a meeting with President al-Jarba to discuss the current situation in Syrian.

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different pro-opposition military groups.

Disunity, power struggles, and lack of direction have characterized the opposition, and half-hearted international backers with conflicting agendas have deepened the divides within the opposition, directly or indirectly empowering the Assad regime. The political opposition's representation power has always been debated by Syrians inside the country, and the opposition's political bodies have often been criticized for self-interest, disconnection from the realities on the ground, and ties to foreign governments. For most Syrians, the political bodies of the Syrian opposition were enmeshed in power games, and have categorically failed in defending the rights of the Syrian people. The military opposition on the other hand –despite its wrongdoings–

bears less blame. As a matter of fact, the military opposition has been fighting against the Assad regime, Iran and its proxies, and Russia with limited international help for the past five years, and still holds and even occasionally gains portions of territory inside Syria. Nevertheless, regardless of the cold reality of abandonment by the international community, both the political and military opposition has thus far been far removed from delivering the original promises of the Syrian Revolution. So, what really went wrong for the Syrian political opposition?

Since there is no single body through which one can discuss political activism against the Assad rule, the very term 'political opposition' requires further elaboration. Generally speaking, the Syrian National Coalition, the latest incarnation of several attempts

to unify the ranks of the anti-Assad crowd, should be understood as “the” political opposition. However, the Syrian National Coalition has by no means had a monopoly over anti-Assad sentiment in the political arena. What makes the SNC the centerpiece in our discussion of the political opposition are its ties, albeit complicated, with the FSA; its traceable succession from the earlier forms of political opposition such as the Syrian National Council (the Council withdrew from the SNC on January 2014 in protest at the Coalition’s decision to participate the Geneva Talks); its relatively wider representation of various ideologies, ethnicities and religious affiliations; and last but not least, its recognition among the international community. Other groupings such as the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, Building the Syrian State, or the Popular Front for Liberation and Change have a much narrower base; some of these bodies have even been criticized for their ambiguous stance towards the Syrian Revolution and for their ties to the regime and/or to Russia.

Three main shortcomings have hindered the political opposition, centered around the Syrian National Coalition, in creating a meaningful bloc which could independently advocate for the rights of the Syrian people and enjoy widespread legitimacy at home and abroad: representation deficit, dependency on outside actors, and the irrelevance of the political track. These three interrelated shortcomings have made the political

opposition weak at best, and the Syrian National Coalition or its various incarnations have yet to sit at the negotiation table in Geneva as a unified and strong bloc.

Disconnection from Syrians

As mentioned above, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) arguably has the broadest political base that any Syrian opposition group ever got. The Coalition has Sunnis as well as Christians, Alawites, Assyrians etc.; there is considerable participation among Syrian Kurds and Turkmens as well as Arabs; it has the Muslim Brotherhood in its ranks as well as staunch secularists. In other words, theoretically speaking, the Coalition has considerably high representative power. However, one can also point to a representation deficit which derives from two main problems. First, the Coalition could never establish a strong rapport with Syrians inside Syria as well as those spread all over the world. Although many Syrians leaning towards the opposition acknowledge and to a certain degree respect the SNC, the low delivery rate of the SNC has made the Coalition look rather weak and more than often irrelevant in the eyes of Syrians. This problem is also related to the ontology of the Syrian opposition; that is to say, the Assad autocracy has had an absolute grip on dissent in the country, and not many figures within the opposition have stood out as champions of anti-Assad politics. In other words, many of the key opposition figures

were absolutely unknown or negligible to the majority of Syrians before the Syrian Revolution started. Even those who stood out as veteran opposition figures were individuals lacking a strong and organized political constituency. Furthermore, oppositional activities have not been adequately institutionalized, at least since the Hama Massacres of 1982, which forced many Syrians who engaged in organized anti-Assad activities out of Syria, and they have since then been living abroad. The Damascus Declaration of 2005 was an aberration in this sense; however, many of its signatories ended up in jail after the government crackdown. Overall, the Syrian political opposition, although living under constant need of opposition to the Assad tyranny, has had little experience in institutionalized oppositional activity. Political leadership, management of ideological differences, maintenance of ties with people inside Syria, creation of doable and sustainable political strategies and dealings with international actors require a certain level of political experience which most of the Syrian political opposition does not have.

Second, the SNC's ties with the military opposition have always been very complex, and these two branches of the opposition have not created an interdependent and synchronized relationship as of yet. For example, the Supreme Joint Military Command (SMC) was established a month after the inception of the SNC to operate as the military wing of the SNC like a Ministry of Defense.

One should admit that there was an asymmetry in terms of the capabilities of the two conflicting sides since the beginning. On one side of the conflict, the Assad regime received incessant support from Iran and Russia. However, on the opposition side, the picture has been very bleak

However, the chain of command and bureaucratic hierarchy were never delineated clearly, and the SMC has enjoyed enormous operational independence from the SNC since then. So, although certain factions of the military opposition have theoretically worked under the SNC, in practice the SMC never pledged their allegiance to or operated under the supervision of the SNC. When one combines this complexity with the demise of the SMC-related groups' power on the ground and the rise of non-FSA groups, it would be fair to argue that the SNC, especially during Ahmad Al-Jarba's presidency, lived in disconnection from the military groups and realities on the ground in Syria. One exception here would be the High Negotiation Committee (HNC) which was established to represent the Syrian opposition in the Geneva Talks in December 2015 in Riyadh. The HNC is composed of representatives from numerous political and as well as military groups,



Syrian opposition body (HCN) members (From L-R): Syrian Chairman of the National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change Hassan Abdel Azim, member of the Syrian National Coalition and the National Coordination Body Safwan Akkash, Head of the High Negotiation Committee (HNC) Riad Hijab, HNC spokesman Salem al-Meslet and HCN delegation

including Jaysh al-Islam, and various FSA factions throughout Syria.

Overdependence on Outside Help

Overdependence on international actors has also haunted the Syrian political opposition much like the military opposition. On the one hand, inexperience in political institutionalism, the need for financial help, the pursuit of legitimacy and previous engagements with international actors pushed the political opposition towards international actors to mobilize support and gain legitimacy. The very fact that the political opposition has been mostly operating outside Syria has also furthered

dependency on outside actors. On the other hand, the nature of the Syrian conflict necessitated the backing of the international community, as the conflict spiraled into a proxy war on both the regional and global level early on. The Syrian problem ceased being a problem which could be handled solely by Syrians in the early days of the conflict. Iran stepped in with its advisors, military support, proxies and finally its army; Russia honored arms sales deals, buttressed Syrian defense capabilities and eventually began military intervention in Syria. In other words, the proxy war mutated into direct military involvement on the part of one regional powerhouse, Iran, and a global superpower, Russia. Hence, a powerful

bloc emerged siding with the Assad regime. In response, the Syrian political opposition sought help from regional countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Jordan, and Western countries such

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as the United States, France, and Britain.

One should admit that there was an asymmetry in terms of the capabilities of the two conflicting sides since the beginning. On one side of the conflict, the Assad regime received incessant support from Iran and Russia, maintained UN representation in New York, was deemed a sovereign state according to international law, and absolutely enjoyed UN Security Council coverage by Russia. In the later phases of the conflict, the battleground began to be dominated by Russia, Iran and Iranian proxies rather than the SAA. However, on the opposition side, the picture has been very bleak. Many of the Friends of

Syria Group had reservations about the SNC, tried several times to shape the structure of the Coalition to a point where it became impossible to operate, refused to deal with the military opposition through the SNC to empower the SNC's oversight on the military opposition and delayed on taking necessary steps to delegitimize the Assad regime by implicating the regime for its war crimes and crimes against humanity.

International rivalries and power struggles also played out within the SNC, and the divided nature of the international community was echoed in the Coalition, creating further and deeper divisions within the SNC membership. Turkey, for example, hosted the SNC and maintained close ties with specific factions within the Coalition. Saudi Arabia and Qatar financed and competed for control of the Coalition. The U.S., Britain and France also have their proxies inside the Coalition, and in many cases the conflicting agendas of the above-mentioned countries led to further divisions within and secessions from the SNC. This asymmetry, coupled with the shortcomings of the political opposition, defined the boundaries and delivery capacity of the opposition, and created a political body that remains excessively dependent on outside help.

Irrelevance of the Political Track

Another factor that has defined the political opposition's boundaries has been the very nature of the Syr-

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ian conflict. It turned into an armed struggle after months of peaceful demonstrations, and the moment the armed struggle began, the political opposition began losing blood both domestically and internationally. The SAA defectors, civilians-turned-soldiers, incoming foreign fighters, and radicalization on the ground shaped the discussions regarding Syria, and the political opposition had a side role in these discussions. In other words, the militarization of the conflict pushed the political opposition to the sidelines, and brought the armed groups to the center of calculations regarding Syria.

While the regime's military crackdown was going on, aided by the regime's allies, for most Syrians as well as outside watchers, the political track started to become irrelevant. Both sides, the regime and the opposition, have been loath to negotiate, and the opposition has been highly skeptical of Assad's understanding of a political solution. For most Syrians, Assad seeks a practical surrender of the opposition and

any meaningful compromise is out of the question for him. Indeed, for a long time, those on both sides of the conflict thought they could win through military means. Arguably, this idea is no longer shared by many opposition members, while the Assad regime still believes it can rule over all of Syria once again after crushing the opposition. This consideration has made the regime dismissive toward political negotiations, while the opposition remains caught between expectations and realities. The political track of the Syrian opposition seems unlikely to produce a positive outcome unless either side comes to an understanding that there is no way to win the ongoing conflict militarily. While the Assad regime maintains its military edge, feels positive about the continuation of Russian and Iranian military support, and sees that the Friends of Syria Group will not provide the opposition with necessary arms and international backing, it is no wonder that the political negotiations in Geneva are not moving ahead. The Syrian political opposition, on the other hand, is caught in a vicious circle. They do not have the power to persuade and lead the military groups on the ground; since they do not have the final say in military affairs, i.e. cessation of hostilities, POW swaps etc., they are not empowered at the political negotiation table. Now they are not only dependent on the international community, but also on numerous pro-opposition military groups who have the final say about the military aspect of the Syrian conflict, which is currently the predominant aspect. In a nutshell, as

long as military force dominates the Syrian conflict, the political opposition will be doomed to remain an auxiliary component whose boundaries and capabilities are determined by outside factors.

Conclusion

The outright failure of the Syrian political opposition, i.e. the Syrian National Coalition, has been not only a failure of Syrians; it was made possible partly by the international community which claims to support the Syrians' legitimate struggle. The complex nature of the Syrian conflict, involving many regional and international actors, has created dilemmas for the political opposition who could not draw a line between seeking international help and overdependence on international actors. The history of Syrian political development has also hindered organized oppositional activities, and stifled the transformation of widespread resentment against the Assad regime into a harmonious and strategically oriented political bloc, representing Syrians in both civilian and military spheres, inside Syria and abroad.

To make the political track of the Syrian opposition relevant once again, both the Syrians and the internation-

al community should find ways to persuade both sides that they should compromise to reach a political solution. For those actors who believe that Assad has lost his legitimacy to rule Syria, this would have to involve degrading Assad's military superiority over the opposition in order to persuade the regime to compromise at the negotiation table. Previous efforts to find a political solution in Syria have demonstrated that the regime will not bargain as long as it maintains its military edge. Alternative to this scenario is the opposition's surrender to the demands of the regime. This would of course not guarantee that the bloodshed would stop once the opposition surrenders, as a witch-hunt by government forces is very likely. However, considering the wide spectrum of the armed opposition, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to persuade or force some powerful groups such as Ahrar al-Sham or Jaysh al-Islam, let alone Jabhat al-Nusra, to surrender and comply with the demands of the regime. The Syrian conflict has turned into a war of attrition, and both sides seem poised to continue their fighting until they exhaust all of their ammunition and support, or the military balance on the ground shifts dramatically. In short, realistically speaking, military arrangements will have to predate any political solution in Syria. ■

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