



CENTRE FOR APPLIED NON VIOLENT ACTION & STRATEGIES
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CANVAS
February, 2013

SUBJECT: Analysis of the situation in Syria, February 2013.

I: Situation

Key Elements of Actual Situation (Political, Socioeconomic, International, and Military)

a) Political

1) The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces

The failure of the Islamist-dominated Syrian National Council (SNC) to coalesce into a unified opposition body led to the creation in November 2012 of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NC). The NC is led by Sheikh Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, the former imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and political opponent of the al-Assad regime. Al-Khatib fled the country in July 2012. The NC has been recognized by the U.S., EU, Turkey and Gulf Arab states, and serves as the political complement to the Free Syrian Army, though the two have no official links. After months of refusing outright the idea of negotiations with an Assad-led government, al-Khatib opened the door to the possibility of conditional talks in late January. This led to sharp criticism from certain quarters of the NC, exposing the rifts between the Islamist-backed faction that is the SNC and the non-SNC members.

2) Regime issues call for dialogue, even those who have taken up arms

The Assad government, too, has recently expressed a desire to engage in dialogue with the opposition. The actual chances of this occurring are quite slim. Assad himself said in early January he would be willing to talk with members of the opposition, but only those who had not taken up arms against the regime. Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem contradicted this message two weeks later, saying that the government would in fact talk with such people. The regime has yet to reply to al-Khatib's recent offer, which pits two conditions – the freeing of tens of thousands of political prisoners and the renewal of all passports held by Syrians abroad - that are likely to be deemed unacceptable to Damascus.

3) Continued support for regime despite territorial losses

Though Assad has lost virtually all control over much of the northern parts of the country, half of Aleppo, several border areas, suburbs around Damascus and has vacated control of the Kurdish areas, he still maintains significant support from his own Alawite community, the majority of Syria's Christians, many Druze, wealthy Sunnis, and those who fear the FSA and jihadist rebels even more than the regime.

4) Kurds staying above the fray



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There are about two million Kurds in Syria. They live mostly in the north and northeast of the country, and inhabit certain neighborhoods in Damascus and Aleppo, but do not have a contiguous chunk of territory that can be easily defined as “Syrian Kurdistan” such as what can be found in neighboring Iraq. At the start of the uprising, about 15 percent of Kurds were considered “stateless,” lacking citizenship of any country. There was a disconnect between the Kurds who identified more with Arabs of their own country, and those who considered themselves closer to another Kurd from Turkey, Iraq or Iran. Wanting to prevent the Kurdish areas from joining in the revolt, Assad offered them citizenship in the first months of the revolution. The majority of Kurds are on neither side of the fight: they are not pro-regime, but nor are they pro-opposition, as they fear the Arab militias will be just as oppressive as the Assads before them.

The Kurds are divided into two main factions: the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The PYD is an offshoot of Turkey-based Kurdish militant group PKK. The KNC is an umbrella political organization whose political loyalties lie with Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, an enemy of the PKK. The PYD and KNC have clashed repeatedly since the start of the uprising, but have worked together at other times as well, united against encroachment from Arab opposition militias. The PYD is the stronger of the two, but has had a reputation since its founding in 2003 of simply being the “Syrian PKK.” This hurts its international credibility. The KNC has the opposite problem. While its international image is good – the “moderate Syrian Kurds,” – it doesn’t carry the same sway in Syria as its PYD rivals.

Shortly after the Syrian uprising began, the Assad regime chose to vacate Kurdish areas to focus on combating the Arab militias elsewhere in the country. Assad may have been hoping to curry favor with the PYD in the hopes that they could utilize their PKK connections to act as a lever against Turkey, which was threatening Syria with sanctions and international intervention at the time. The withdrawal from the Kurdish areas created a vacuum primarily filled by the PYD’s armed wing. However, in recent weeks, Arab militias belonging both to the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra have clashed with the Kurdish militias over control for the area.

Syrian Kurdistan is also home to significant oil deposits, making it a strategically important part of the country.

5) The Free Syrian Army, jihadists gaining in popularity

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is an umbrella organization of ad hoc armed militias that arose in response to the regime’s decision to militarize the initially peaceful Syrian uprising. Like the rebel forces that helped to overthrow Gadhafi in Libya, the FSA lacks a unified command and control, and has no clearly defined leader.

The FSA was formed in July 2011 by defected Syrian army officers who were then taking refuge in Turkey. The group’s originally stated *raison d’être* was to protect peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators who were being killed by Syrian security forces during protests. The violence that began to occur in the summer of 2011 led many of those who supported the initial demonstrations to begin to lose hope in the viability of



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non-violent resistance to work against Assad. The FSA's rise occurred in coincidence with this change in mood. By the following October, many one time pro-democracy activists were openly calling for "international protection," and the FSA became the face of the opposition to Assad.

In this [anarchic situation](#), jihadists militias first began to gain popularity. Foremost among them was the al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. By early 2012, Nusra had begun its steady rise in Syria's cluttered landscape of armed militias. According to a U.S. government assessment released later that year about the effects of the armed struggle on the Syrian people, Washington feared that extremist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra were on track to "turn into the 'savior' for Syrian people from the warlords." It seems that the U.S. government's decision to officially label the group – which Washington says is merely the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) operating on Syrian soil – as an official terrorist organization did not have the desired effect of diminishing its importance on the battlefield. Instead, Jabhat al-Nusra has developed an image in the public eye of a sort of Robin Hood type group. Media reports have described Nusra fighters giving villagers free essential materials like propane gas tanks, forbidding the looting or violating of civilian properties, or creating localized sharia courts to settle disputes justly. Their support comes predominately from wealthy Sunni Gulf Arabs in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Jabhat al-Nusra is estimated to contain between [6,000 and 10,000](#) fighters, though no one really knows the exact number. It is composed primarily of Syrians, but also has a significant number of foreign fighters. Many of these fighters are experienced jihadists who spent years in the Iraqi insurgency. Their rise coincided with the introduction of suicide bombings in the Syrian conflict. Jabhat al-Nusra has also been responsible for several large suicide VBIED's in Damascus and Aleppo. This group represents potentially the biggest challenge to the possibility of the non-violent movement making a comeback in Syria, as they make no secret of the fact that they view the Alawite enemies as apostates who will not be spared should the Assad regime fall.

The relationship between jihadist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and the Free Syrian Army is not clearly defined. Though at times it proclaims itself a part of the FSA, there have been several clashes between Nusra and other more secular FSA militias. In addition, their bases of support differ between Turkey and the Gulf. Jabhat al-Nusra has also come out strongly against the legitimacy of the National Coalition, as it does not espouse Salafist ideology. The reality is that there is a great divide between the jihadists fighting against Assad and those with more secular agendas. They are cooperating today, but would likely clash in a future post-Assad environment.

6) The status of the non-violent movement

The non-violent resistance movement is not dead in Syria, but it has been [severely curtailed](#) in the past 18 months. Activists continue to communicate with media outlets via Skype and email, but due to media restrictions in the country, messages of their activities are not widely disseminated. Many have moved out of the country (primarily to Beirut) after mass arrests that began in the summer of 2011 coupled with a general radicalization of the opposition. As the security situation in the country deteriorated, so did their followings. Large demonstrations are no longer possible in Syria due to the violence that ensues, but other



tactics can still be employed, such as graffiti messages, the use of humor or [individual acts of public protest](#). Many activists have described a [general sense of disillusionment](#) among a growing segment of the populace brought about by the behavior of both the regime and also of the FSA or Islamist militias. As the death toll rises, the cycle progresses. The bright side of this phenomenon is that eventually, it could reach a point in which it lays the groundwork for a potential revival of the nonviolent movement in the future, as people begin to realize that the path of violent struggle has failed them.

b) Socioeconomic

1) The utility of traditional economic indicators

Unemployment figures and traditional economic data are quickly becoming irrelevant in Syria, as the revolution has completely disrupted normal life in almost all corners of the country. Pockets of Damascus are still functioning, albeit with regular power interruptions and occasional attacks, while things in the Alawite heartland around Latakia are also functioning semi-normally. Kurdish areas, too, are relatively stable, though periodic clashes have occurred between Kurdish militias and Arab rebel forces.

2) The folly of waiting for the economy to turn the tables

The Syrian economy is in a constant state of deterioration, but Assad is still standing. Even those who believe his fall inevitable can never be sure that it is imminent. Assad's staying power – especially in comparison to that displayed by his former compatriots in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya – is a testament to the determination of the ruling elite's core supporters to stay in power, combined with the inability of the opposition and international community to effectively tip the balance against them.

Tourism, a major driver of the Syrian economy, is at zero, while Assad has been pressured politically to implement populist spending measures aimed at social security and military spending.

3) How the poor economy affects daily life

The effects of sanctions are now affecting urban areas in visible ways, as fuel shortages are leading to power outages. Damascus had its first city-wide power outage since the revolution began this past Jan. 21. As it is currently winter, the obvious downside is that it prevents people from heating their homes properly. (One side effect of this is the [return of woodcutting](#) to the list of viable professions.)

Inflation is rampant, as the value of the Syrian pound has plummeted on the black market, forcing the government to spend resources to raise it.

Aleppo has been hit especially hard by the war. The [price of propane](#) has increased by a factor of eight; heating fuel and gasoline are up tenfold; while bread prices have risen eightfold.

5) Commodity prices rising



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The potentially most destabilizing event has been the recent spike in commodity prices. Basic foodstuffs are becoming extremely expensive. Wafa Ghazzi, Director General of the Prices Department at the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection, has [blamed](#) the fluctuation in foodstuffs prices on the weakening Syrian pound, increasingly difficult transport and international sanctions. Inflation was around [48 percent](#) in 2012. As a means of combatting this phenomenon, a committee headed by Qadri Jamil, deputy prime minister for economic affairs, pushed through a [decision](#) that will begin to lift tariffs on many basic commodities. The vice president of the Damascus chamber of industry [indicated](#) that the proposed measures would affect 17 basic commodities including sugar, rice, tea, wheat, soy, vegetable ghee and barley.

Despite the high prices, the [bulk of the imports](#) coming into Syria's ports today are actually foodstuffs, an indication both that the country's agricultural production has been disrupted, as well as the fact that normal economic activity has broken down.

6) Effect of sanctions on oil industry

Sanctions targeting imports on petroleum products are now causing [long lines at gas stations](#) in Damascus, something we saw in Libya much earlier on in their conflict. The government has fixed gasoline prices at about 75 cents per liter, but shortages mean residents must wait up to six hours in lines to fill up. There are limits to how much a person can buy as well - gasoline is rationed to no more than 20 liters (5.2 gallons) per person per day.

With the loss of European export markets due to the U.S. and EU oil import ban, Syria has been denied a major source of revenue and hard currency (25-30 percent of total government revenue, which amounts to over \$4 billion a year). Iranian and Russian support has helped prop up the economy, but it's hard to replace an export source that brings in a daily average of roughly \$8 million. Syria had about \$17 billion in forex reserves before the revolution began. Though Damascus won't say how much is left, the Economist Intelligence Unit estimates it to have fallen to just over \$4.5 billion.

c) International

1) Battleground between Sunni and Shiite Islam

Syria is the battleground in a proxy war between Sunni and Shiite Islam. Its geographic placement ensures that whatever happens inside Syria will have reverberations throughout the Middle East. Countries that desire stability in the region must therefore tread extremely carefully when considering whether or not to intervene in Syria. The case for foreign intervention in Libya, by contrast, carried much less risk of triggering a regional conflagration, as that country sits in a relatively isolated stretch of desert and sparsely populated territory. Already in Syria we have seen how internal tumult can affect neighboring Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon with its massive outflows of refugees (a total of roughly 700,000 by the most



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recent estimates). Israel, too, watches the situation in Syria with a careful eye, fearing what instability there may mean for its own security.

A) Iran

Iran is the Assad regime's biggest supporter, and views its survival as critical for its ability to project power throughout what is known as the Shia Crescent: the stretch of territory running from the Persian Gulf all the way through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 created a rare historical moment for Iran to consolidate its influence throughout this arc by eliminating Sunni rule of its western neighbor. The last thing Tehran wants is to suddenly see its influence in Syria vanish with the fall of its longtime ally Assad. If Syria falls, Iran would also suddenly lose its easy access to Shiite militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is a key lever for Iran against Israel. For example, the Jan. 29 Israeli [airstrike](#) in Syria was reportedly aimed at a Syrian convoy transporting weapons across the Lebanese border, with some reports saying the shipment contained SA-17 anti-aircraft missiles for use by Hezbollah. Naturally, the strike caused Iran to [threaten retaliation](#) against Israel.

B) Turkey

Turkey is an emerging Sunni power that sees an opportunity to re-exert its former influence in Syria and combat Iranian expansion in the process. Ankara has been the strongest international ally of the Syrian opposition since the uprising began, and has been integral in the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Syrian National Council (SNC) and the current National Coalition as well. Though Turkey's Islamist-rooted AKP government shares spiritual roots with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Ankara also has close ties with secular opposition forces in the country. Indeed, Turkey provides safe haven to all these groups.

Bilateral relations between Turkey and Syria have been strained throughout the uprising, and several times have led Ankara to threaten military intervention. A fear of getting embroiled in a Syrian quagmire, with additional concerns about the ripple effect on its own Kurdish problem, has prevented war from erupting. The two neighbors reached a critical point in October 2012 when Turkey shelled Syrian targets after a series of cross-border mortar attacks. As a deterrent measure, NATO recently agreed to supply member state Turkey with an advanced Patriot missile system to defend against Syrian attacks.

Turkey has also implemented a raft of economic and financial sanctions on Syria, something that Turkish business elites oppose due to the adverse effects they would levy upon their cross-border trade ties.

C) Gulf Arab nations



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Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab Sunni states, most notably Qatar, are allied with Turkey in the mission to curb Iranian influence in the region. Wealthy individuals from these two countries have flooded Syria with weapons bound for militias fighting the Assad regime. The majority of materiel from the Gulf is directed to Islamist and jihadist militias, contributing to the rise in radicalization of the Syrian opposition. As the U.S. and other Western powers who support the Syrian opposition have expressed reservations about sending weapons to groups they do not know well enough, Washington's fear about the rise of armed Islamist militias has become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, as more secular-minded rebel forces have begun to turn to the Saudis and Qataris for weapons.

2) EU

The European Union purchased \$4.1 billion worth of Syrian oil export in 2010. Since the uprising began, however, this money has dried up. The EU has passed more than a dozen rounds of sanctions on the Assad regime, including asset freezes and travel bans on top members of the Syrian military and government, the establishment of an arms embargo, sanctions on the Syrian central bank, and bans on the import of Syrian oil and the export of equipment for the petro industry.

3) Russia and China

Aside from Iran, Russia and China remain Syria's two biggest foreign supporters. Syria presents yet another opportunity to oppose the U.S. in foreign policy, as Moscow and Beijing have blocked countless measures at the UN Security Council which sought to censure Damascus for its actions in suppressing the uprising. Both countries remember vividly the Western-led military intervention in Libya in 2011, and will use their veto power on the UNSC to ensure that this cannot be repeated in Syria.

Russia has closer relations with Damascus than China, with intimate ties that date back to the Cold War. The Russian Navy maintains a military base on Syria's Mediterranean coast, and fears losing access to the Mediterranean in the event of regime change. Moscow also supplies the Assad regime with weapons and training.

4) Arab League

The Arab League suspended Syrian membership and imposed economic sanctions on Damascus in November 2011, unprecedented moves by the 22-nation bloc. In February 2012, the Arab League sent a peacekeeping mission to Syria, and it called in Arab nations to sever diplomatic relations with Damascus in an effort to pressure the government to end the violence there. More recently, the Arab League has welcomed the formation of the NC, and has called on other opposition forces to join it.

d) Security Forces

1) State security forces



Syrian state security and intelligence forces are known as the mukhabarat. This is an umbrella for many apparatuses, including State Security (Amn al-Dawla), Political Security (Amn al-Siyasi) and Military Security (Amn al-Askari). Abdel-Fatah Qudsiyeh, a close adviser to Bashar Al Assad is the current head of the Syrian Military Intelligence Directorate (one of several officials sanctioned directly by the United States and the European Union for their actions against protesters participating in the uprising).

2) Ethnic composition

Syria's military is conscription-based and largely Sunni, yet most of the military leadership are Alawites. Making up 12 percent of the Syrian population, Alawites are estimated to make up to 70 percent of the career soldiers in the Syrian Army. The military's most elite divisions, the Republican Guard and the 4th Mechanized Division, which are commanded by Bashar's brother, are exclusively Alawite. Because of the Alawite composition of the armed forces, its interests are closely aligned with those of Assad and the regime. As a way of decreasing the chances of mass defections, the regime partitions the army into smaller units.

3) Key leaders killed

In July 2012, Syrian Defense Minister Dawoud Rajha, former Defense Minister Hasan Turkmani, and the president's brother-in-law General Assef Shawkat were killed by a bomb attack in Damascus.

4) Role of Maher

Maher al-Assad is the symbolic head of the Syrian military. Has shown no signs of dwindling loyalty to his family's regime.

II: Bashar al-Assad's Pillars of Support

(Key Institutions and Organizations Supporting the Regime)

1. Security forces/secret police

Iranian security forces are widely believed to be aiding the Assad regime. Outgoing U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in her final media interview as secretary that Tehran had recently [increased the number of personnel](#) sent to Syria, specifically to "support and advise [Syrian] military security forces."

Shabbiha, a term used to describe plainclothes Syrian civilians working as regime security forces, are widely used when needed to commit acts of violence as a complement to the work performed by professional security forces. Shabbiha were particularly effective at the demonstrations that were occurring regularly in the first few months of the uprising, as they can more easily mix in with the crowd and then attack demonstrators, allowing the regime to more credibly blame protesters for starting violence. They have also been used often in the ongoing battle of Aleppo.



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2. Alawites

Members of Bashar al-Assad's minority sect enjoy privileged status under the Ba'ath regime, and alongside a moneyed Sunni class, dominate political life in Syria. The army is heavily infiltrated with Alawites as well. Historically seen as apostates by Sunnis due to their unorthodox religious beliefs that are loosely affiliated with Shia Islam, Alawites owe their privileged position to Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez, who mounted a coup in 1966 that brought his people to power for the first time in Syria's history. They view the current fight as an existential struggle, and are less inclined to defect or negotiate. Alawites originally hail from the northwestern part of the country, in the mountainous coastal region surrounding the city of Latakia.



There is a widespread belief amongst Syrian rebels that the regime's [military strategy](#) for a worst case scenario is to maintain a corridor of control running southeast from Latakia to Damascus, enveloping Homs and Hama. If Damascus were to fall into rebel hands, Alawites could then theoretically retreat back into the elevated regions of their ancestral homes, and defend it as a last redoubt against Sunni encroachment. There has yet to be any real fighting in this area, but signs of the war are encroaching, with Jabhat al-Nusra fighters reportedly having reached an area only 20 km away from Latakia.

3. Army generals (especially Alawites)

Though there were several defections early on in the revolution, the core of the officers corps remained intact. Those that remain loyal to Assad are officers close to the regime, and fear retribution for war crimes in the future. These are some of the people that should be soothed by promises from a truth and reconciliation committee to absolve them their crimes in exchange for turning against the regime.

4. Elite business community

U.S. and EU sanctions on Syria have combined with a breakdown in normal business activity due to over nearly two years of instability to send Syria's economy into a steep decline. Aleppo, Syria's second most important city and home to a cosmopolitan populace which largely supported the regime before the



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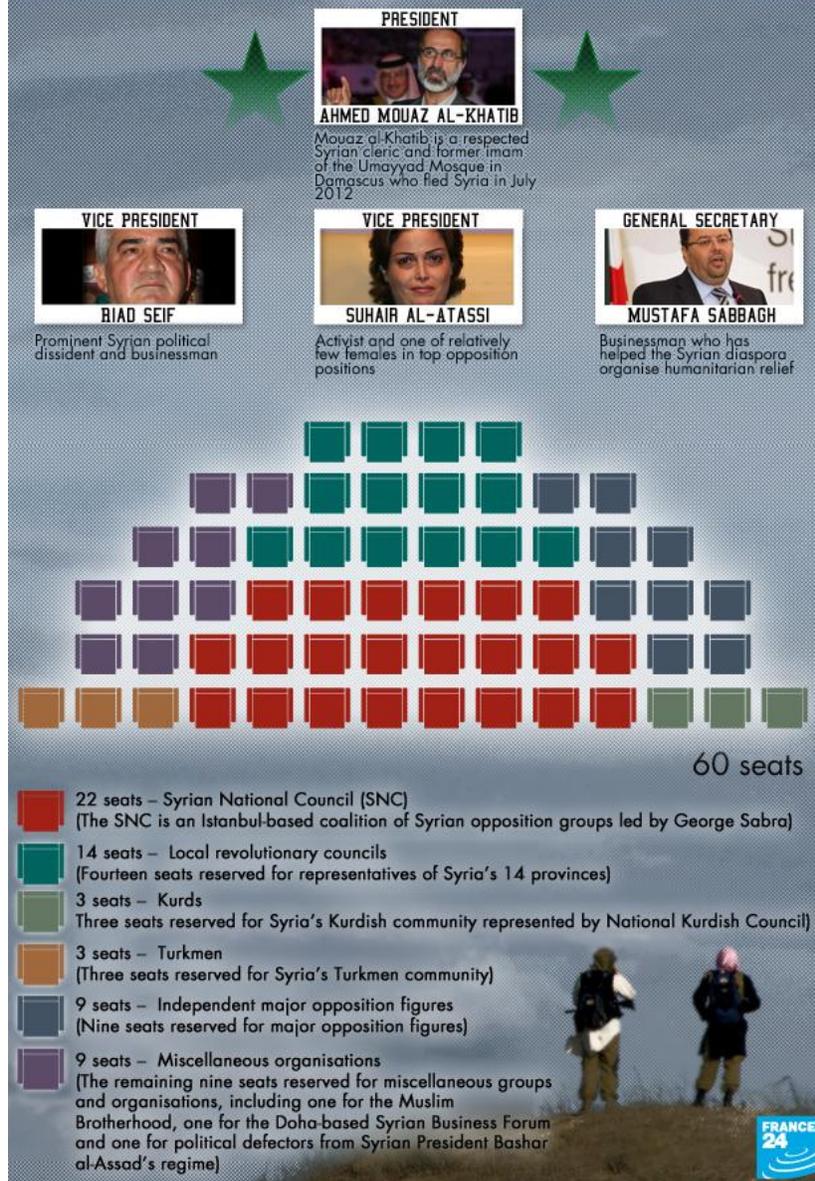
uprising, has been all but destroyed, with neither rebel forces nor the Syrian Army able to establish complete control. The backbone of Ba'ath Party supremacy is the marriage between the Alawite political and military elite and the wealthy Sunni business class that primarily reside in Damascus. So far this dynamic has held, but with guerrilla pressure rising on the capital, more and more wealthy Syrians are deciding to leave the country (as Cairenes paying higher rent on their apartments can attest to).

III: Key Players and Potential Allies

1. National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NC)

November 2012 saw the formation of the newest opposition body tasked with not only culling international support in the fight against the Assad regime, but also developing into a viable political alternative to the current regime in the immediate wake of its eventual overthrow. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NC) thus seeks to accomplish what its predecessor, the Syrian National Council (SNC), could not. The SNC was subsumed into the larger NC, and with 22 seats out of the 63 overall, currently serves as the Islamist influence in the NC. (A graphic portrayal of the NC's seat allocations can be seen below, or at [this link](#).)

THE SYRIAN NATIONAL COALITION FOR OPPOSITION AND REVOLUTIONARY FORCES



Though all of its work is being conducted from abroad, the NC quickly gained recognition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by all member states who support the toppling of the Assad regime – a list that includes France, Turkey, the Gulf Arab countries and the United States. The NC has tried and failed twice now to come together in the establishment of a [transitional government](#). This highlights the internal



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divisions that will beset any Syrian opposition body that seeks to include members from all walks of Syrian life: Islamist and secular, Arab and Kurdish, Christian and Druze.

The selection of Sheikh Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib to head the NC was a calculated decision designed to appease the spectrum of the NC's international supporters, in addition to those fighting on the ground against the regime. Al-Khatib is a well-known Sunni Islamist who once served as imam at Damascus' Umayyad Mosque, but who is just as comfortable in a Western setting as any other. He is described in the media as a "moderate preacher." Al-Khatib is able to brandish his Islamist credentials when he goes on fundraising trips to Gulf Arab states, and he can use his advanced English and Western style of dress when dealing with the French, British and Americans.

Al-Khatib's [Islamist credentials](#) run deep. His family is famous in Syria, as his father, Sheikh Mohammed Abu al-Faraj al-Khatib, was also once imam at the Umayyad Mosque. The NC head also has credibility within the opposition due to his distinction of being an imam who was once banned from preaching by Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez due to his statements critical of the regime. Al-Khatib was also a supporter of the Damascus Declaration in 2005, a statement of principles criticizing the regime penned six years before the Arab Spring. Al-Khatib fled Syria in July 2012 due to the increasingly tense political environment for those considered a potential enemy of the state.

Al-Khatib's public statements prior to his selection as NC head paint the picture of a man intent on moving past ethno-sectarian divisions in Syrian society, which is key to the successful establishment of any sort of democracy post-Assad. Shortly after his election to lead the NC, he issued a [statement](#) demanding "freedom for every Sunni, Alawite, Ismaili (Shia), Christian, Druze, Assyrian ... and rights for all parts of the harmonious Syrian people." These words mirrored a [speech](#) he had given in the northern Damascus suburb of Douma only a month into the eruption of the pro-democracy protests in 2011. Appearing at a rally alongside two other prominent opposition figures – one Alawite, the other Christian – al-Khatib spoke in favor of freedom for "every human being in this country, for every Sunni, for every Alawite and for every Ismaili (Shia) and Christian from the Arab or from the great Kurdish nation."

It was speeches like this one that landed al-Khatib in prison multiple times before his eventual decision to flee the country last summer.

Al-Khatib's past speeches show that he prefers the use of non-violent tactics. But they also make clear that he is pragmatic about what tactics he considers justified in the face of the assault the Assad regime has levied against the opposition since the use of violence against non-violent protesters began in the summer of 2011. Al-Khatib disagrees wholeheartedly with the jihadists who use violence as a primary tactic, but also disagrees with the notion that passive resistance is the proper course of action in the revolution. In Sept. 2012, a few months before the establishment of the NC, he gave a [speech](#) that denounced the Syrian opposition for having fallen into the "trap" laid for it by the regime in militarizing the revolution in the months following the initial pro-democracy protests. But in the very same speech, al-Khatib went on to absolve the opposition for its actions. The blame, he said, should be placed on the regime for forcing that choice upon the opposition. Al-Khatib also circulated an open letter shortly before his election to head the NC in which



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he argued that the actions of rebel fighters should not be equated with those of regime security forces. In the letter, al-Khatib said that Syrians “are required to act peacefully and justly,” but that they “cannot employ Platonic idealism to judge those who risk their lives against a barbaric campaign.”

Recent offers to negotiate

From the NC’s inception, all of its officials spoke with one voice on the issue of negotiating with the regime. They were [against it](#). Only the resignation of Assad and his inner circle would be enough for the opposition to begin talks about the peaceful resolution of the conflict. This was tantamount to an outright refusal to talk, which reflected a widespread expectation among the group’s members that regime collapse was inevitable.

The regime has displayed staying power, however, and the violence has apparently begun to weigh on al-Khatib in particular. Over the span of two weeks in January, both Assad himself and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem publicly issued invitations to the opposition for a [dialogue](#). Though Assad’s offer would exclude anyone who had taken up arms in the struggle (which is the vast majority of the active opposition), al-Moallem’s was explicitly addressed to those who had met the regime’s violence with violence. This offer gained actual significance on Jan. 30, when al-Khatib suddenly reversed course from the NC’s previously stated position and announced his willingness to sit down and talk with representatives of the Assad regime. Though he placed impossible conditions on the offer – that the regime release the 160,000 prisoners he claimed were being held by the government, and that all Syrians abroad have their passports renewed – it was a significant gesture by the face of the internationally recognized opposition.

Al-Khatib spoke without first consulting other members of the NC, however. The Islamist-dominated faction of the coalition - that is, [the SNC](#) – reacted immediately with remonstrations that the group’s leader would be willing to talk with a “criminal regime.” Al-Khatib responded by insisting that the offer was just an expression of his own opinion, rather than official NC policy, but also asserted that he would not cower to the “[intellectual terrorism](#)” of some of his fellow NC members (which means the SNC).

The fallout over this incident will not have any real effect on the prospect of negotiations, because the Syrian regime will never accept the conditions that al-Khatib laid down. It does illustrate two things, however: 1) The NC is less unified (publicly, at least) now than it was in November, and 2) Significant members of the opposition are realizing that the armed struggle is not going to lead to success long term. (The fact that al-Khatib spoke shortly after the revelation of the [dozens of executed bodies](#) found along the banks of a river just outside of Aleppo provides a bit of context to his words.)

A change coming?

This has the potential to augur a change in mentality down the line. When that will blossom into a reemergence of nonviolent tactics against the regime, if ever, is impossible to forecast. The regime had been steadily losing territory over the previous several months before the creation of the NC, and it was reasonable to assume that the downward slide would continue unabated. That does not appear to have



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happened, however. As the death toll climbs, more and more members of the opposition become radicalized, undercutting the NC's own legitimacy. This weakens the very body that is supposed to be the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and creates more reasons for the U.S. in particular to avoid increasing its support for the body, and for the FSA as well. Al-Khatib had already shown his pragmatic side on the question of whether or not the use of violence against regime troops was justified, and he displayed it once again on the issue of negotiations in late January.

The problem is that despite a seemingly never-ending trend of weakening, including loss of all northern territory and control of much of its borders, as well as half of Aleppo, the Kurdish areas and several suburbs outside of the capital, the Assad regime seems impervious to complete disintegration. (It should be noted that this was also the widely held assumption for several months in the Libya campaign, when a military stalemate between east and west, as well as west and southwest, suddenly broke in favor of the Libyan rebels, leading to the fall of Tripoli and the subsequent capture and execution of Moammar Gadhafi.)

Free Syrian Army (FSA)

To discuss the Free Syrian Army as a unified body is misleading. Though it has nominal leaders and all the trappings of an institutionalized opposition force, there are in fact hundreds of brigades across the country that fall under the aegis of the FSA. The newly created Supreme Military Council does not actually direct the operations of these brigades, creating challenges for foreign powers that wish to exert influence over the fight against Assad.

Though the FSA has a reputation of being the secular alternative to jihadist militias such as Jabhat al-Nusra, there are many FSA brigades which have become increasingly radicalized as the conflict has dragged on. The vast majority of FSA fighters are Sunni Arabs, and they often view the struggle against the Alawite enemy in religious terms.

Minorities

Religious and ethnic minorities are crucial potential allies in the Syrian conflict, as they account for 26 percent of the population, and are quite influential in certain arenas. However, the Assad regime encourages fears of an outcome similar to Iraq's, in which the fall of a dictator led to civil war between religious sects. Also, the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion of the late 1970s, in which the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to rally the Sunnis into a violent sectarian battle with the Alawi, eventually leading to civil war, remains in the national conscience. For these reasons religious minorities are extremely wary of becoming involved in the conflict.

The Alawites do not necessarily oppose a negotiated removal of the al-Assad clan from power, but they do oppose any deal that would lead to a weakening of their sect's hold on power. There is no obvious replacement for Assad, however. The next largest religious minority is the Christians, who constitute 10 percent of the population and have also historically been loyal to the Assad regime. They tend to work in white-collar occupations and live in urban areas, making their populations quite concentrated and easily



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accessible. Christians in Syria fear the rise of Sunni Islamists, but could be more amenable if a secular Sunni opposition were to take power.

A more likely potential ally for the opposition is the Druze population, some groups of which have supported the regime and others, the opposition. Although they only make up 3 percent of the population, they are influential in the southwestern part of Syria and in Golan Heights, the areas where they are concentrated.

Ten percent of the population identifies as the Kurdish ethnic minority, most of them religiously Sunni. Though they are no regime supporters, they also do not identify strongly with the opposition, preferring to remain out of the conflict as much as possible.

V: Possible Scenarios

The South African model

The surest way to bring about the toppling of the regime is to cause the Alawites to turn on Assad. Clearly, this can only happen if the Alawites do not fear being killed or persecuted in the situation that arises afterwards. This will be an enormous challenge, as those Alawites fighting to preserve the Syrian regime view the current conflict as an existential struggle. This is the natural byproduct of a minority regime battling against a majority opposition. The siege mentality becomes more entrenched the longer fighting goes on, as desire for revenge on each side fuels the cycle of violence. As neither side has been able to overwhelm the other with force, and with no prospect of foreign military intervention on the horizon to tip the balance in favor of the opposition, the likelihood of mass defections from Alawite ranks remains remote. Until something in this dynamic changes, the chances of an imminent peaceful solution will also remain distant.

A deteriorating economy is an ever-present wild card in the list of potential tipping points in the Syrian Revolution. But the opposition – armed or not – cannot pin their hopes on economic collapse to provide the final impetus for Assad's supporters to abandon the fight. So long as the Assad regime continues to display a determination to fight, the most realistic hope for an imminent peaceful resolution lies in the establishment of a peace and reconciliation program.

The most obvious model that the Syrian opposition can draw from is post-apartheid South Africa. South Africa in the early 1990's bore certain similarities with Syria today. Both countries had experienced struggles between a minority government and the majority population, one that contained different ethnic groups with different agendas. In each case, decades of oppression led certain segments of the oppressed majority to take up arms against the respective regimes. Violence failed in South Africa, just as it is failing in Syria today. Many Western countries placed economic and diplomatic sanctions on South Africa that weakened its government in the final years of apartheid, just as EU and U.S. sanctions have hurt the Syrian government today. And most importantly, like is the case with Alawites in Syria, many white South Africans supported apartheid because they viewed the conflict against their black countrymen as an existential one.



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This perception was subsequently proven incorrect, a fact which can provide hope for the Syrians who have been trying to topple the Assad regime since March 2011. But the similarities between apartheid South Africa and modern day Syria begin to fade there. It would be extremely difficult to achieve the same level of social reconciliation through an equivalent program in a post-Assad Syria, primarily due to the level of violence that Syria has undergone in the last 22 months. What is happening in Syria is a civil war; nothing on this scale occurred in South Africa. The Syrian opposition also lacks a body with the same level of organization and discipline that the African National Congress (ANC) possessed. The ANC was synonymous with the struggle against apartheid, and commanded the loyalty of a far greater percentage of the South African opposition than the FSA or Jabhat al-Nusra commands in Syria today. The ANC also was far more organized and disciplined as an organization than anything the Syrian opposition has been able to produce, and had years to prepare for the post-Apartheid era.

Only one organization has come out publicly with recommendations that this course of action be taken. The Syrian Support Group (SSG) is U.S.-based non-profit organization incorporated in April 2012. Its leaders [claim](#) to have originally been proponents of non-violent tactics, and state that the regime crackdown in 2011 is what changed their minds about the tactics necessary to overthrow Assad. The SSG serves as a roundabout conduit for the U.S. government to provide support for members of the Syrian armed opposition, specifically the FSA. It was awarded a license from the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control in July 2012 to raise money for rebel forces opposed to Assad. Though U.S. law restricts direct arm sales to rebel forces in Syria, there are ways around such legalities. Through its relationship with the SSG, Washington can send money to rebel military commanders it claims have been "vetted," or have weapons routed through neighboring countries such as Turkey.

The SSG comprises Syrian expatriates from the U.S. and Canada with connections to opposition figures on the ground in Syria fighting the Assad regime. Its members are reportedly in regular contact with U.S. State Department officials, including U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, who has been based in Washington since leaving Syria.

The biggest challenge is getting regime members to believe that any promises made by the SSG are credible. The Alawites which prop up the Assad regime need to be able to trust the promises made by any truth and reconciliation program. Grants of amnesty are only as credible as the ability of those who extend them to guarantee their enforcement. The NC is currently unable to provide this. Jihadist militias have no desire to extend amnesty to Alawites, of course. And the FSA's secular militias do not speak with a common voice. The potential significance of the SSG is in giving the FSA a common voice, which will likely be shaped by Washington.

As of now, the SSG carries very little weight. But if it were to build influence with the FSA, it could potentially leverage that in the future, depending on the military situation at that time. An enduring stalemate between rebel fighters and the regime could eventually lead to the conclusion that the best course of action is just to end the fighting. And it is in such a scenario that popular support for a peace and reconciliation program could arise.



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The value of the non-violence movement at the current moment is in constantly reminding Syrians who may be losing hope that non-violence is the most viable strategy in the long term. Fighting will continue for the foreseeable future, but the danger is getting lost in the cycle of violence, and forgetting what the end goal is: a unified, democratic Syria, where all ethno-sectarian groups are respected. The example of Iraq is a good reminder for the majority Sunni population in Syria of how hard a minority group that has been ousted from power can make life for them. Pro-democracy activists in Syria need to continue to remind people of this. Economic boycotts, solidarity strikes and propaganda campaigns to rally the populace against the regime can be waged in coincidence with the armed struggle, with the medium-term goal of phasing out of the violent stage.