



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~

OPPOSITION GROUPS IN SYRIA: MYTHS AND REALITIES

By Andrew Spath

Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.

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Revolutionary periods have a way of compressing history. Events unfold so quickly, and the flow of information is so dense, that our ability to comprehend them is diminished. This condition pervades the present political situation in Syria, fostering numerous popular fictions that contribute to miscalculating strategies of action. Two related popular fictions stand out in assessing the prospects of prolonged civil conflict or outright civil war. The first fiction insinuates a clear bifurcation between regime supporters and regime opponents. The second fiction, related to the first, suggests that sectarian divisions define clear lines of support and opposition to the Ba'ath regime.

Fears abound among analysts and onlookers, including the Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi, that Syria is moving closer to a civil war that would include drastic consequences for its neighbors.¹ The protocol between the Arab League and the Syrian government to send observers to Syria² has thus far failed to stem the violent repression of on-the-ground activists. Opposition groups in and out of Syria³ and some of the Arab League observers themselves⁴ have little faith in the mission as currently constituted. Amid intense debate in and out of Syria over the internationalization of the crisis and outside intervention, there is consensus among opposition groups on the desire for a change in governance. However, there is little programmatic unity over how to change it and what will follow it.

Much of the commentary on the situation in Syria – as was the case in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, and elsewhere – pits the government and its supporters against “the opposition.” United in the desire to see traditional Ba'ath Party dictatorship give way to some form of pluralism in “the Syria of tomorrow,”⁵ opposition groups otherwise diverge on crucial issues pertaining to both the short-term strategies of resistance and long-term political and ideological commitments.⁶ Identifying and discussing “the opposition” in monolithic terms reifies the notion that there is a single voice to which opposition positions and statements can be attributed,⁷ ignoring clear and consequential differences among its diffuse parts.

The Arab League and international community have made clear the importance of a cohesive opposition with diverse representation. In a meeting with representatives of the Syrian National Council (SNC), the most visible coalition of opposition groups outside the country, Hillary Clinton stated directly that “the future and legitimacy of the opposition depends on its... ability to organize and unify its ranks,” prompting efforts to work toward consolidation.⁸ Yet the ability to coalesce around shared interest in ending autocratic rule in Syria remains elusive.

The challenge is most apparent among the two most prominent and internally diverse umbrella organizations – the SNC and the National Coordinating Body (NCB). While disagreements within the SNC have been apparent since its genesis,⁹ in-fighting flared recently over a draft agreement between the two organizations, signed by SNC leader Burhan Ghalioun and NCB representative Haytham al-Manna, that was summarily rejected by the SNC executive council.¹⁰ The most contentious points of disagreement are support of foreign intervention, dialogue with Assad's government, and relations with the Free Syrian Army.¹¹ Fissures within the opposition in general, and within the SNC itself, are exacerbated by a lack of coordination and clarity in public statements. Contradictions between personal views of the Council's members and its stated positions on international intervention plagued the effort to bring together the SNC and NCB in December.¹²

The divisions among regime challengers do not end there. There are, of course, significant differences between secularists and

Islamists.¹³ But even among the Islamists, as seen recently in Egypt, different views persist about the direction of the revolution and visions of a post-Assad Syria. Only recently have leading Muslim scholars from various Islamic trends come together in search of a formula to unite in support of the revolution.¹⁴ Moreover, growing feelings of frustration toward the larger opposition organizations persist among many protesters on the ground. With a growing power vacuum on the ground, divisions are sharpening between the activists on the ground and the opposition in exile.¹⁵ Bearing the immediate threats of the government's violent tactics to suppress the uprising, it is not surprising that some protesters feel the dissident parties in exile are "in one valley and the [domestic] revolutionaries in another valley."¹⁶

The oversimplification of a singular "opposition" suggests that there is a coherent and coordinated government waiting in the wings that will facilitate a smooth transition upon Assad's downfall. The model reflects the Libyan experience of creating an internationally recognized transitional council as the legitimate representative of the opposition, a designation sought by the SNC since October and one that may facilitate international intervention.¹⁷ While the Libyan opposition became decidedly militarized, the Syrian National Council is treading a fine line between advocating military intervention and its commitment to "safeguarding the non-violent character of the Syrian revolution" that bolsters its domestic and international legitimacy.¹⁸ Recently, the SNC began direct coordination with the Free Syrian Army, though the body has been careful to convey that the FSA is not its "armed wing."¹⁹ Unlike the Libyan Transitional Council, however, the Syrian National Council has yet to gain international recognition as the sole representative of the Syrian people partly because of the challenges to coordinate and unite the various opposition factions.

Identifying these lines of difference within the Syrian opposition is not to suggest that integrating these disparate groups is unlikely or imprudent. It instead requires that observers confront realistically the complexities of unifying a wide array of political organizations, warns against actions that may exacerbate divisions, and questions the relevance of the Libyan model in the Syrian context.

The challenges of coordination and unification generate a justified fear of extended civil war and increased sectarian violence. But contrary to some analysis, the distinction between Syrians who support the government and those who oppose it does not follow a strict dichotomy between the Sunni majority and Syria's minority communities. Nor does it follow a dichotomy between Alawi (the minority Shi'a sect of the Assads that dominates the government's security apparatus) and non-Alawi Syrians. Prominent Alawi member of the SNC Munther Majos emphasizes that many in the Alawi community have been "vulnerable to the injustice of the Syrian regime," especially in the last two decades as the regime has become more personalized and family-centered.²⁰

Across the board, opposition organizations have worked to dispel the fears of minorities and challenge the framing of the crisis in sectarian terms.²¹ They have charged the government with provoking sectarian conflict and have made it a point to highlight the significant involvement of Alawis, Druze, Kurds, and Christians in their ranks and on the street, particularly in highly heterogeneous cities like Tartous and Baniyas.²² Since the beginning of the revolution, concerted displays explicitly against sectarian discord demonstrate the alternative narrative of national and confessional tolerance and the shared plight of life under autocracy.²³ Protest chants, official stances of opposition groups, and online Facebook pages²⁴ explicitly reject the politicization of Syria's diverse ethnic and religious identities. Prominent Druze leader Walid Jumblatt called on the Druze forces in the Syrian military not to participate in the suppression of the opposition.²⁵ Prominent Christians like Michael Kilo and Fayeza Sara are notable members of the opposition, and some Christian leaders have recently stated that they "stand with the demands of the Syrian people."²⁶

At the same time, should a power vacuum, military intervention, or other sources of violence escalation add to fears of anarchy and chaos – an image Bashar al-Assad refers to frequently²⁷ – a convergence of people into their respective ethno-confessional social groups is very possible. Recent months have not been absent of explicitly sectarian attacks and rhetoric, particularly in areas of Homs.²⁸

A nuanced view of the situation displays that sectarianism is "not merely a scarecrow wielded by despots to resist change... but is also not an undying and eternal fact."²⁹ Across the board, opposition groups have maintained strong nationalist and anti-sectarian language in their founding documents and public statements. Comparisons with Syria's neighbors in Iraq and Lebanon, and the vast sectarian violence that were part of civil wars in each country, provide little leverage for anticipating what will unfold in Syria. Iraq's sectarian crisis was exacerbated by foreign military intervention, and Lebanon's ethno-confessional composition is more balanced than the Sunni-majority Syrian society. Despite representation of the various minority communities in both the active support and active opposition to the government, many Syrian minorities are taking a more passive "wait and see" approach to the crisis. The challenge is that the longer people wait and the more they see, the more likely it is that fears of violence will increase and sectarian divisions will harden. Simply, sectarian violence is an open question rather than a foregone conclusion.

The declared anti-sectarian nature of the revolutionaries across organizations provide a better model for post-Assad governance than the prospect of smaller insurgent groups that may seek to exploit sectarian identities for political or material purposes. A turn to violent opposition of any kind plays directly into the hands of the government as it attempts to divide, and

thereby weaken, the opposition by exploiting fears of “leaping into the unknown.”³⁰

More careful assessments of the situation in Syria will consider the complexities of both opposition politics and dynamics of sectarianism. Questions remain as to whether the leading opposition organizations can allay sectarian anxieties. Their best chances of doing so are through further inclusion of the many segments of Syrian society, sustained inclusive rhetoric, and coordination among the opposition bodies in the absence of unification.

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¹http://www.addustour.com/ViewTopic.aspx?ac=%5CArabicAndInter%5C2012%5C01%5CArabicAndInter_issue1549_day14_id383971.htm#.TxdPjG-m9V4

² Story here: <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12075&article=655173&feature=>

Full text of the protocol here: <http://tinyurl.com/762cvga>

³ <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12104&article=659484&feature=>

<http://tinyurl.com/7q54mc8>

⁴ <http://www.daralhayat.com/portalararticlendar/349578>

<http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAE80B0JA20120112>

⁵ <http://www.alkhaleej.ae/portal/b237989b-6043-48b7-ad33-102cd2923e08.aspx>

⁶ For a brief look at some of the competing factions, see <http://www.majalla.com/arb/2012/01/article55230617> and <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/346998>. A more comprehensive list of Syrian political parties is here:

<http://www.syrianparties.info/>

⁷ <http://www.alqabas.com.kw/Article.aspx?id=762542&date=11012012>

⁸ <http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=2033&articleId=2379&ChannelId=48248&Author=%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF+%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7>

⁹ <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2011/10/691388.html>

¹⁰ <http://tinyurl.com/83pm8wz>

¹¹ <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12091&article=657538&feature=>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=oUqvaJ2Zilk#%21

¹² http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=gOfmJonblCs&fb_source=message

¹³ <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/349476>

<http://tinyurl.com/7nefhv9>

¹⁴ <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/351519>

¹⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/E260A9C3-76F8-4E93-8692-3C100DD4221E.htm?GoogleStatID=9>

¹⁶ <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2012/1/706398.html?entry=newsmostvisitedtoday>

¹⁷ <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/503810>

¹⁸ <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/02/169799.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12100&article=658879&feature=>

²⁰ <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/10/181868.html>

²¹ <http://www.lccsyria.org/751>

<http://syria.alsafahat.net/?p=14266>

<http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12098&article=658615&feature=>

<http://tinyurl.com/7n2t8no>

²² <http://www.alqabas.com.kw/Article.aspx?id=762542&date=11012012>

<http://tinyurl.com/7s76e4z>

<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12100&article=658901&feature=>

²³ <http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=124165>

²⁴ <http://tinyurl.com/7h23t8z>

²⁵ <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/03/186156.html>

²⁶ <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12094&article=657923&feature=>

²⁷ <http://www.sana.sy/ara/2/2011/06/22/pr-353679.htm>

<http://tinyurl.com/84ybxsx>

²⁸ <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/352210>

²⁹ For analyses presenting and refuting such binaries in the case of Syria, see: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/EXERES/F766F8E0-EFE8-4F0A-8853-C478175395FB.htm>; and <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/21322>; and <http://syria.alsafahat.net/?p=15256>

³⁰ <http://www.sana.sy/ara/2/2011/06/22/pr-353679.htm>