

The Civil War in Syria

The Civil War in Syria: The Variety of Opposition to the Syrian Regime

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The Ba'ath regime that has ruled Syria since 1963 and been dominated by Hafez (1970–2000) and Bashar al-Assad (2000–present) has tolerated little opposition. Militant opponents, such as Syria's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, were violently crushed and membership outlawed, while rival political parties were banned or co-opted by the regime. Civil society was extremely weak, with trade unions and many religious organisations hollowed out and packed with loyalists. Syrians have been actively depoliticised by government institutions for nearly fifty years, making the uprising against President Assad that broke out in March 2011 all the more unexpected. Yet the decades of repression have taken their toll and as the uprising has evolved into a civil war that now enters its third year, Syria's opposition has failed to form a united and effective front against Assad. This article considers the state of Syria's opposition after two years of conflict; both the political and the increasingly powerful armed elements. It examines the divisions between insiders and exiles, over the role of Islam, the use of violence and the various goals of different international backers. It will be shown that, while the Ba'ath regime has proven more resilient and ruthless than other recently toppled Arab dictatorships, the divisions of its opponents have certainly contributed to its survival until now.

The Failure of Political Opposition

From the outbreak of unrest in March 2011, Syria's political opposition was divided between internal and external players. Hastily formed committees of activists and local notables rather than established opposition groups led the first protests in Deraa and those that followed in Baniyas, Homs, Hama and beyond. Inspired by similar protests in Egypt and Tunisia and reflecting long-term resentment at the indignity of Assad's security forces and short-term economic concerns, these committees – the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) – sprung up all across Syria in a spontaneous and uncoordinated manner. While Assad insisted that protestors were armed to justify his brutal crackdown, most evidence suggests they were peaceful and any violence emanated from the regime's *agent provocateurs*, the Shabiha militias. The leaderless nature of these early protests proved both a blessing and a curse for the opposition. On the one hand, with no central organisation or national leaders, the LCCs' various activities across Syria could withstand the mass detentions, and later executions, of its activists. The first months of the uprising saw thousands detained, yet the protest movement only grew, with Assad unable to locate and eliminate any key leaders that may have posed a threat. On the other hand, from the outset the uprising was parochial and uncoordinated, something that would prove a major obstacle to attempts to channel all opposition into a single, viable movement later on.

The remnants of older opposition groups, many operating from exile abroad, including the Muslim Brotherhood, were as surprised by the uprising as

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the regime itself, and struggled to make themselves relevant to a spontaneous and leaderless movement. In Damascus, largely untouched by early protests, the veteran oppositionists of the short-lived 2000 'Damascus Spring,' created forums similar to those liquidated by Assad a decade before in the hope of offering leadership to the LCCs. Well-intentioned though these democratic and secular efforts were, such as Louay Hussein's *Building the Syrian State* and Michel Kilo's *Syrian Democratic Platform*, they attracted little popular support (Sayigh, 2013).

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The same fate may have faced the first major exile group to emerge, the Syrian National Council (SNC), were it not for the considerable support it received from foreign powers. Arab and Western governments were initially reluctant to condemn Assad's brutality, urging him instead to reform, and then initiating diplomatic and economic sanctions before Barack Obama and several other world leaders eventually called on him to stand down in August 2011. After turning on Assad, foreign governments grew frustrated at the leaderless structure of the LCCs and desired 'an address' for the opposition. At the time NATO, with the blessing of the UN and key regional powers Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, was militarily supporting Libya's coordinated opposition group, the National Transitional Council (NTC), against Muammar Gaddafi. It was hoped a similarly tight Syrian opposition group might be formed as the first step in defeating Assad. Yet the SNC formed in Istanbul in August 2011 was very different to its Libyan counterpart. It held no territory inside Syria and, though some LCCs and individuals pledged allegiance, it was dominated by exiles. Under pressure from Turkey's ruling AK Party, it came to be dominated by their allies the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, despite it having a tiny activist base on the ground after decades of persecution (Phillips, 2012). From

its inception, internal divisions plagued the SNC, particularly between the Muslim Brotherhood and secularists forced together by external powers, and by a lack of credibility among activists on the ground, who criticised the exiles for being out of touch and hijacking their revolution.

The reasons for the SNC's failure to unite Syria's opposition in the way it and its external backers had hoped are manifold. Firstly, it failed to convince other key oppositionists to join it. The dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood put off many secular Damascus Spring veterans, while it refused to work with the newly formed National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) that favoured negotiation, claiming it was too close to the regime. More importantly, the SNC proved unable to win the mass support of Syria's minority communities such as Assad's own Alawi sect (10% of the population), Christians (10%) and Druze (3%), who largely remained loyal or neutral. Despite a few token appointments, the SNC was perceived as mainly a voice for the Sunni Arab majority (65%), and non-Sunnis feared persecution were they to triumph. When Sunni jihadist militia later emerged using sectarian language, these fears appeared justified. Even Syria's Kurds (10%), despite their historical persecution by the Ba'ath regime, were deterred by the SNC's refusal to countenance Kurdish autonomy in a post-Assad Syria and, again, the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood whom the largely secular Kurds did not trust.

Secondly, the SNC was unable to translate its international support into deliverables on the ground. This became all the more important after autumn 2011 when locally formed armed rebel groups abandoned the peaceful approach of the LCCs and started fighting back. The SNC reacted slowly, endorsing the new violent strategy only after many disputes in February 2012, and it then failed to make itself relevant to the fighters and command their loyalty. It could not secure the armed intervention from its Western backers that had provided Libya's NTC with domestic legitimacy. While allies in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey eventually provided some funds and weapons for the SNC in the hope it could become a channel between external backers and armed rebel groups, even these powers eventually recognised the SNC's impotence and armed militia directly. Finally, it remained plagued by internal divi-

sions, leading to several high profile resignations including veteran activist Haytham al-Manna, spokesperson Bassma Kodmani, and its first President Bourhan Ghalion.

With the SNC proving ineffective, Assad's international opponents sought to reboot the opposition. Following a proposal by SNC member Riad Seif, a new National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) was formed in Kuwait in November 2012, again encouraged by the US, EU, Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. It addressed some of the SNC's weaknesses, such as healing the internal-external divide by giving the SNC only a third of its 63 seats while LCC representatives and others made up the rest. Similarly, they elected an independent moderate Islamist, the former Imam of Damascus' Umayyad mosque, Moaz al-Khatib as President and two secularists, Riad Seif himself and Suheir al-Atassi, as vice-Presidents, to counter claims of domination by the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, unlike the SNC, key fighting groups on the ground, including the Free Syrian Army and Aleppo's Tawhid Brigade, discussed below, immediately announced their support.

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However, familiar problems soon emerged. Despite being offered a third vice presidential position, Syria's Kurdish groups again refused to join, with the most powerful, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), dismissing it as a Turkish and Qatari proxy. Similarly many armed groups, notably the jihadist Jubhat al-Nusra, refused to recognise it, and even those that did pledge support largely operated independently. The continued inability of the SOC to secure Western weaponry for rebels did not help, appearing as impotent as the SNC. Western governments doubted its ability to control any rebels they armed and

were alarmed by the divisions continuing within the coalition. Despite the balanced command structure, members of the LCC still complained that the SNC, and by extension the Muslim Brotherhood, dominated the SOC's executive. On matters of policy divisions remained, such as when Khatib controversially announced in January 2013 that he would negotiate with the regime under certain conditions, something immediately denounced by many SOC members. The influence of external powers was another source of tension. In March 2013, for example, two key patrons, Qatar and Turkey, pushed a reluctant SOC into appointing a government in exile, theoretically to administer territory in northern Syria now held by rebel fighters, and to take Syria's seat at an Arab League summit hosted by Qatar that month. The undemocratic nature of the selection process, and the awarding of the premiership to Ghassan Hitto, perceived to be close to the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar and Turkey, prompted twelve SOC members, including vice-President Atassi, to resign. Days later Khatib himself also quit, officially due to frustration at the West's continued refusal on arms, but rumours suggested his anger at Qatari interference. While Hitto remained and veteran Christian oppositionist George Sabra replaced Khatib as President, by mid-2013 the high hopes that the SOC could finally provide the much need united and effective opposition had faded fast.

The Ascendency of Armed Groups

The inability for the political opposition to offer effective leadership has owed much to developments on the ground. While Assad's forces were reportedly killing civilians from day one, once the opposition started fighting back in organised units capable of causing sustained casualties, in the summer of 2011 Syria's peaceful uprising was transformed into a civil war. Though Assad started with 200,000 troops, defections and casualties had nearly halved this by early 2013. Even so, the remaining government troops remained well-trained and resupplied by Russian and Iranian arms, while up to 20,000 Hezbollah and Iranian Republican Guard fighters were rumoured to have joined them. The armed rebels thus faced a daunting task as the conflict evolved both tactically and ideologically. There now exists in

Syria many different militia with opposing beliefs, loyalties and agendas (Lund, 2012, 2013).

The most high-profile armed group is the Free Syrian Army (FSA), although it is far from being a conventional militia. It is best understood as an umbrella organisation loosely holding together a diverse range of militia with a similar purpose, perhaps akin to the French Resistance, although it does also have an organised core. It was founded in July 2011 by a defected colonel in exile in Turkey, Ri'ad al-Asaad, declaring his intention, by online video messages, to topple Assad by military force. However, though militia quickly formed inside Syria declaring themselves to be members of the FSA, Colonel Asaad exercised very little control from his Turkish base, where the Ankara government initially restricted his movements. Instead, the evolution of the armed opposition followed the same pattern as the LCCs months earlier: spontaneous and local units forming with little centralised control. Consequently, the early clashes between these self-declared FSA units and the regime's well-armed professional army were one-sided, with crushing defeats meted out to the rebels in Rastan and the Bab Amr district of Homs in late 2011. However the FSA's numbers and organisation grew nevertheless, with tens of thousands defecting from the Syrian army and new local FSA brigades forming, particularly in the Homs, Hama and Idlib governorates.

By mid-2012 the FSA was enjoying significant success. Aided materially and logistically by allies in Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, through channels over the Lebanese and Turkish borders, rebel units were able to overrun Syrian army bases to capture more sophisticated weapons. In the late summer they were able to launch a major assault on the second city of Aleppo, and by year-end large stretches of northern Syria were in rebel hands. However, the decentralised nature of the FSA proved a problem. As the conflict escalated, the different militia became more overtly Islamist. For some this was a tactic to gain much needed weaponry and support from conservative donors in the Gulf, for others, most of whom were already pious Sunni Muslims, the brutality of the conflict led to radicalisation. Islamism itself was no problem for the mostly Sunni FSA, after all Colonel Asaad aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated SNC in December 2011. However questions over the type of Islamism a militia adhered

to, from moderate (often Muslim Brotherhood) to Salafist to Jihadist created ideological differences that opened further divisions within the already highly localised structure of the FSA. While cooperation continued against the common enemy of Assad's regime, by late 2012 most groups referred to as the FSA in Western media had little to do with Asaad and his command structure.

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The absence of a single rebel military leadership, like the failures of the political leadership, alarmed the rebels' external backers. With outside encouragement, the FSA command structure was therefore reorganised in December 2012 in an attempt to impose some kind of centralised command on the militia. Asaad was sidelined into a figurehead role and the FSA's Chief of Staff, Salim Idriss, given effective command. Idriss claims to command all armed groups fighting Assad, and certainly enjoys international recognition as the top rebel commander, but analysts estimate he actually only has direct control over around 10,000 fighters. This small well-disciplined body of defectors consists of the 'moderate rebels' that the SOC has been pushing to be armed by Western powers fearful of sending weapons to extremists. However, most of the successful fighting against Assad in the past year has been done by other groups, some allied to and occasionally fighting under the name of the FSA, but well out of Idriss' direct control, and others totally opposing the FSA and its SOC allies. Importantly, the more successful a certain group is, the more young militant Syrians are likely to join them, often depleting the more moderate militia.

The most significant group allied to Idriss is the Jabhat al-Tahrir al-Souriya al-Islamiya (Syrian Islamic Liberation Front - SILF). This is an umbrella group, formed in summer 2012 with a clear Salafist ideology

and contains some of Syria's largest and most successful militia, including the Farouq Brigades, originally from Homs, and the Tawhid Brigade, originally from Aleppo. Reportedly, they have approximately 37,000 fighters, aided by some foreign fighters, particularly from Libya, Jordan and Iraq. While some of these commanders sit on the FSA command councils created in December 2012 nominally under Idriss, they are essentially independent. This was seen during the assault on Aleppo in July 2012, when the head of the FSA's local military council opposed an attack, but was unable to prevent the Tawhid Brigade's planned assault, and then felt obliged to support it once launched. Early 2013 has seen a continuation of this trend, with well-drilled SILF fighters, particularly the Farouq and Tawhid brigades, enjoying multiple successes capturing regime air bases and border posts. While they still fight under the three-starred *Istiqlal* originally associated with the FSA (and their political allies the SNC and SOC), today this seems primarily to set them apart from more radical groups operating instead under a black jihadist banner.

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Several other powerful radical Islamist armed groups have emerged since mid-2012. One coalition is al-Jabha al-Islamiya al-Souriya (the Syrian Islamic Front – SIF), stricter Salafists than the similarly sounding SILF, and dominated by the Ahrar al-Sham militia. Analysts estimate their militias have 13,000-25,000 fighters. While one member of the coalition, the Haqq Brigade of Homs is within the FSA umbrella, indicating the often-blurred nature of allegiances in this multi-faceted civil war, the other militias have refused association with the FSA and SOC. At an even further extreme jihadist groups have emerged, the most prominent of which, Jubhat al-Nusra (the

al-Nusra Front), openly declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda in April 2013 (Benotman and Blake, 2013). Swelled by Iraqis and Syrians who fought for al-Qaeda in Iraq during the Iraqi civil war, al-Nusra has an estimated 5-10,000 fighters, but boasts superior discipline and cohesion than theoretically larger groups. This has brought some stunning victories, including capturing the first governorate capital, Raqqa, in March 2013. Refusing to recognise the SOC, rejecting its pluralist approach in favour of establishing an Islamic State, they have won some support on the ground by distributing aid to war-torn parts of Aleppo and abstaining from the property looting employed by many FSA-affiliated militia. Thus far al-Nusra, SIF and the FSA/SILF alliance have largely cooperated against Assad, but tensions have risen. Clashes between the SILF's Farouq Brigades and al-Nusra were reported in Raqqa soon after its capture, while the SOC and FSA have complained that the radicalism of the jihadists and Salafists is deterring foreign powers from sending arms to any rebels. Many expect that once Assad falls, or even before, these tensions may boil over into open conflict between the jihadists and other rebel groups.

Further complicating the diverse range of armed fighters are the Kurdish militias. As Assad suffered losses elsewhere he strategically withdrew from Syria's north-eastern Kurdish region. While the Kurds have long suffered under Ba'athist rule, Assad correctly estimated that the rebels' Islamism would prove no more appealing to the secular-minded Kurds. As such, while Kurdish militia have formed and filled the power vacuum following the regime's withdrawal, they have refused to align with any rebel groups. Yet the Kurds are far from united. Dominating the region is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Turkish-Kurdish separatists, the PKK. Before 2011, this was Syria's most organised and best-armed Kurdish group and inevitably moved to take control of most military and civil targets after Assad's forces withdrew. However, it has historically been opposed by many smaller Syrian Kurdish groups that were able to put aside their own differences in 2011 to form the Kurdish National Council (KNC), under the close supervision of the President of Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government, Massoud Barzani. Barzani has also helped train the Popular Protection Units (YPG),

theoretically a joint PYD-KNC civil force, but effectively the KNC's militia. Barzani also brokered an agreement in July 2012 between the PYD and KNC to effectively power share in the regions vacated by Assad. However, this truce may not hold, especially if the PYD's PKK allies resume conflict with Barzani's key ally, Turkey. Moreover, even if the PYD-KNC truce is sustained, both groups may clash with the rebels or Assad's troops, should either attempt to reassert central control. The Kurdish region has been relatively peaceful in the first two years of Syria's civil war, but it seems unlikely to last.

Conclusion: While Damascus Burns

In the two years since demonstrations erupted, a peaceful protest movement against President Bashar al-Assad has descended into a vicious civil war that has killed over 100,000 and left more than 3 million displaced. With the opposition failing to provide a united front, but Assad's forces too weakened to achieve outright victory, it is hard to see either side triumphing and bringing the war to an end any time soon. Moreover, given the fractious nature of the different armed groups operating in Syria today, and the inability for the political opposition to exercise control over them, civil conflict could continue between rebel groups even if Assad is somehow defeated. The collapse of Syria into a failed state looks a distinct possibility.

While Assad and his murderous regime are most responsible for this grim forecast, the opposition shares some blame. The political opposition's inability to overcome divisions between exiled and internal actors, secularists and Islamists, and between those backed by different foreign powers has caused all attempts to create a viable and effective united political leadership to fail. These divisions have deterred an already reluctant international community from direct military intervention or

from sending significant weaponry to the armed rebels. In turn, this inability to unite and attract foreign weaponry has dissuaded the various armed groups fighting in Syria from becoming loyal operatives, and in the absence of this, radical alternatives have thrived.

In fairness, the task facing the opposition has been huge. After decades of suppression, few opposition groups were in a position to lead the spontaneous uprisings that occurred independently in 2011. Moreover, the localised nature of the uprising – because of this history of suppression – gave the opposition, both in its political and armed elements, a decentralised and parochial character that no leader has yet been able to surmount. Nevertheless, the circumstances have required Assad's opponents to rise to the occasion, which they have largely failed to do. The opposition may have been dealt a very tough hand, but it needs to play its cards far better if it is ever to defeat Assad and, after that, hold Syria together.

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