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## THE POLITICAL OUTLOOK OF THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION: A RESTROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS

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The popular demonstrations in Syria that began in March 2011 transformed into a civil war and have been going on. The political movements in Syria suppressed for more than forty years have been reinvigorated with the Arab Spring. Several factors have been effective in the failure of the popular movements and the spread of the conflict into the region. This brief examines the emergence and transformation of the political opposition in Syria and also aims to shed light on debates about the contemporary Syrian opposition. The lack of organization among opposition movements and the importance of the representation issue for its stagnancy are important points underlined in this brief. The brief focuses on such issues as how opposition movements, which are disconnected from the people, did not emerge out of them and did not take the people's demand into consideration; as well as the regional and global dynamics of the representation problem

This brief, which examines the founding and transformation of Syrian political opposition, is built on the issue of representation, adopting a critical perspective. The Syrian political opposition emerged with the claim that it represents the Syrian popular opposition. However, none of them completely held the political representation. In this context, we need to have a realistic analysis and a complete understanding of the issue of representation in order to comprehend the reasons behind the problem. That is because, the issue of representation is complex and multifaceted. The groups, who claim to represent the people in Syria, in the following manner: making the people dependent on them, establishing dominance over the

people, controlling the people and forming an authority.

Political opposition groups claim to represent the activists, protestors and other opposition elements in order to control and hegemonize them. Nevertheless, representation is a field, which requires serious work, high responsibility, and political cadres with strong administrative skills in order to achieve the objectives of popular movements and constitute an overarching political umbrella.

There are numerous causes of the representation problem, which led the opposition's failure. Some of these are real causes, while the others are related to individuals. Yet the purpose of the representation is to overthrow the despotic regime, which is the demand of the ma-



jority, and to guide the revolting people in accordance with the changes and developments within Syria and at the international level.

## The Return of Politics in Syria

The popular revolt in Syria has resulted in several important developments and changed perceptions. The most obvious development is that the people have overcome the fear threshold and returned to politics after forty years. With the uprising, the Syrian people became organized and established communication networks, unions and coordination committees. The popular rebellion made possible older political opposition parties to operate, which have been jailed and suppressed for years. Therefore, the spirit of opposition has been awakened and parties joined the popular uprising.

New opposition actors also have emerged in the Syrian politics during the uprising. Numerous conferences and meeting have been held in order to form a union among the

internal and external opposition groups. Following the meetings in Antalya and Brussels, independent opposition and intellectuals came together in Damascus for the first time in years, at a meeting in Hotel Semiramis. After this meeting, a coordination meeting was organized and several opposition members came together. As a result, the “National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change in Syria” was formed. Later on the “Syrian National Committee” was formed as a result of a series of conferences and meetings.

It is possible to outline the political opposition on two levels. The first level consists of new delegations and powers. These groups include those who were formed during and after the popular uprising. The second level comprises the classical opposition. As it is well known, the Syrian regime has formed a coalition under the leadership of the Baath party called the “Progressive National Front” with other political parties in the beginning of the 1970s. The Baath’s purpose was to monopolize the power by giving the

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impression of power-sharing. Even though many political parties in Syria were founded in the past, after 15 March 2011, which is regarded as the beginning of the uprising, numerous popular committees, coordination committees, delegations and different political forces emerged in the political scene.

### **Civilian Coordination Movements**

Civilian coordination movements consist of intellectuals and educated youth as well as technology-savvy people in Syria, who are interested in human rights and politics and seek to change the regime in Syria through democratic methods. Many of these people had attended the protests against Libya in front of the

Libyan Embassy during the rebellion in Libya. They had held demonstrations in front of the Egyptian embassy and the Ministry of Interior in Syria. They had ignited the flame of the Syrian revolution in Bab Tuma. Many of them had been arrested after the protests.

The civilian coordination group emerged in May 2011. It responded to the need for organizing and guiding the spontaneous protests and demonstrations attended by many people, who suffered from the regime's policies. Many people have risen to prominence within this group. Among these are Rezan Zeytune, Suhayir Atasi, Eymen Esved, Ömer İdlibi, and Ahmet Ebe Zeyd. Many of these are activists without a political or ideological background. However, it

does not mean that intellectuals and party members, who were threatened and suppressed, did not join this group.

In this context, it is an important development that some young people, who utilized the social media and computer communication channels very well, have reached out to the masses, defined symbols and invited people to protests, by making use of technology. In the following period, sincere young people have emerged who were discontent with oppression, contempt, and coercion. They had lost their hopes for reform and were not members of any party or followers of any ideology.

The civilian coordination movements consist of voluntary youth groups. These young people had distribution of labor among themselves in accordance with their professions. They have founded *Facebook* pages as well as humanitarian aid and media offices. Through *Facebook* pages, they sought to invite people to protests and convey the dates, locations, and course of the demonstrations. Some of these pages were founded before 15 March 2011,

the beginning of the revolution. One of the prominent pages is “Popular Revolution against Bashar Assad”. This page invited people to protests for the first time on 5 February 2011, which nobody attended.

The media units used to record the demonstrations and upload them on social network websites such as *Youtube* and *Facebook*. Then they used to send it to human rights organizations, international organizations, and to world and Arab press. In this movement, activists used to determine slogans, hold protests, collect aid for the families of the martyrs and try to meet their needs. They also used to provide medicine to the street hospitals, which were founded to avoid the risk of arrest, torture and detention in the hospitals under the regime’s control for people who were wounded in the protests.

It is without doubt that the coordination movement was the most suitable organization for popular uprising. These groups provided fieldwork and activities, where many other political groups and parties remained inadequate. Yet, political groups were unsuccessful in gathering

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the masses and leading them to protests by utilizing social media and internet. However, the regime's intelligence and security forces prosecuted and arrested the young people in the coordination movements. Many of their members were arrested, tortured and purged.

The coordination movement was spread in every neighborhood of cities from Dara'a in the south to Qamishli in the north, from the coast of Latakia to the Abu Kemal in the east. As the popular uprising expanded, activists sought to improve coordination among other coordination centers. Therefor numerous committees were founded. The most important of these are "Syrian Revolution Coordination Union" that brought togeth-

er sixty centers across Syria, and "Syrian Revolution General Committee." "Syrian Revolution Supreme Command Council" was formed lastly.

### **New Opposition Movements**

In the first months of the Syrian Revolution classical political parties -whether leftist, liberal, Islamist or nationalist- were not in a good situation. That is because these parties initially kept their distance to the revolution. As the popular uprisings exploded in Egypt and Tunisia, these parties have explained the lack of rebellion in Syria with the social and political structure of Syria. However, they attended the revolution that they



were initially reluctant to join and later on they claimed to represent the revolution.

As the people were killed in the streets, the protests increased in number and intensity. At this stage, the aforementioned parties contacted the young people who acted impulsively and individually. Later on the Damascus Declaration announced that it supports the popular uprising and joins the revolution. Other political groups declared that they join the revolution as well.

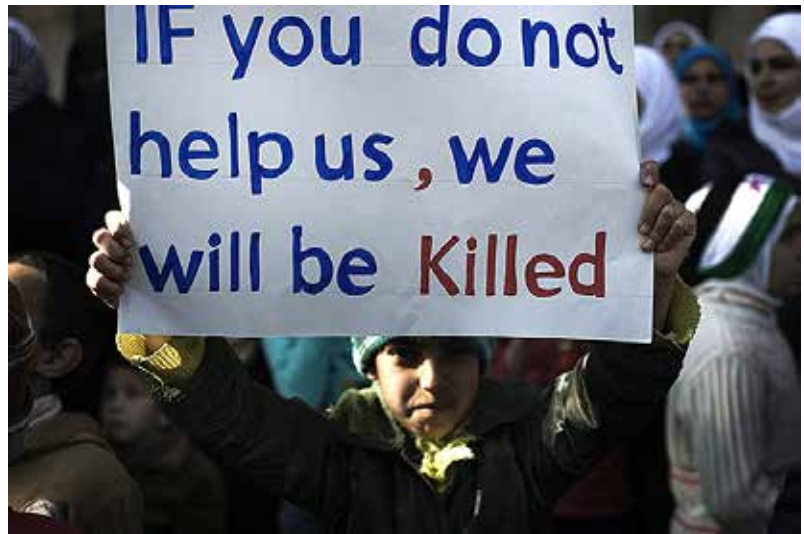
Besides, the leaders of the classical parties have missed the train or waited for the train in the wrong station. They hastily organized conferences at home or abroad in order to present a clear political vision, increase their political experience and compensate for their shortcomings. They had to accept the demands for regime change as their own slogans. However, it was not what they wanted, even it was not present in their long term political programs, and they were clueless about how to react to these demands. Since they do not have the capacity and cadre for regime change, they did not want to undertake

the opportunity. They were even unsuccessful in contacting the groups and coordination movements on the field.

The Syrian revolution assigned the political parties with a mission to represent. This was one of the most urgent needs of the revolution. The people laid the responsibility on the political groups to carry the banner of the revolution, to unify their powers and capacities, to gather all the groups under an assembly or coalition and to contact activists in the field. However, the political parties did not have the capacity to meet these demands or contact with the field due to their stagnant structures caused by decades of being deprived from politics or activity.

As the revolution grew and expanded, these parties increasingly found themselves in a state of astonishment and rashness. Some members of the classical parties, some activists and intellectuals attempted to create a unified opposition. In light of changes in the political arena, several opposition groups were formed that have limited activity. These are Unity Movement for Democratic Free Syria, Citizenship Movement,

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Movement for Establishing a New Syrian State, Association for the Pulse of the Youth, Syrian Leftist Coalition, Syrian Seculars Union, National Transformation Movement and Democratic Platform.

Beside these groups, other groups were founded that are close to the regime and confirm its views. Among them are “Syrian Communists National Unification Committee” under the leadership of Kadri Cemil who had left the Communist Party, and “National Social Syria Party – Intifada” under the leadership of Ali Haydar who had left National Syria Party. These two parties formed “Change Salvation Popular Front”. In addition, “National Reconciliation

Aleppo Declaration Secretariat” was founded by some people from Aleppo whose names are not announced and “Third Way” was founded by Muhammet Habesh. “National Initiative for Democracy” and “Syrian National Movement” were founded as well. These groups did not have a presence in the field and some of them have been dissolved after their launch.

At the same time, some new opposition movements rose to prominence. These are “Syrian National Council”, “National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change in Syria”, and “National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces”.



## Syrian National Council (SNC)

The conditions on the ground made it necessary that the Syrian opposition unites under one committee. “United Opposition” rallies took place on 23 September 2011. Intense meetings have been held in Istanbul as a result of the efforts. At last, on 2 October 2011, the founding of “Syrian National Council” was announced in Istanbul. This coalition consists of Popular Movement, Independent Liberals, Damascus Declaration, Assyrians Organization, Muslim Brotherhood, Damascus Spring, National Kurds Body, National Body and numerous independent people.

Its founding declaration states that “SNC represents the revolution at home and abroad”. Its purposes were announced as changing the regime including Assad and all the regime’s mechanisms, providing the participation of all people to the revolution and supporting the revolution. SNC’s objectives were to overthrow the regime and all its organs, to comply with the demands of the revo-

lution, to avoid communication with the regime and to establish a new democratic state.

The expectation from the SNC was to form a gathering mechanism for all factions of the opposition. The fact that SNC consists of the groups active on the ground and independent opinion leaders causes SNC to be the most important achievement of the opposition. The Council consists of some independent people, Independent Islamic Movement, National Working Group, representatives from the field whose names are not announced, Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change, two Kurdish parties beside Kurdish Future Movement, Muslim Brotherhood and Democratic Assyrians Organization. It has a general assembly and an executive board. In addition, some people from National Working Group and Independent Islamic movement, who do not have any political allegiances, formed “Provisional Syrian National Council” on 15 September 2011 in Istanbul, which was disbanded a short while later.

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on the streets and squares. On 17 October 2011, the Friday rally was called “SNC represents me”, and there were banners supporting SNC. Syrian Revolution Supreme Committee and local coordination committee supported this decision and announced that SNC represents them and speaks on their behalf.

### **National Coordination Committee**

The first congress of the National Coordination Committee

was held on 17 September 2011 under the slogan, “No to foreign intervention, no to violence and no to ethnic disintegration”. As a result, a central commission comprising eighty members from different parties was established. These parties are Social Democrat Arab Union Party, Syria Communist Working Party, Social Democrat Arab Baath Party, Syria Democratic Union Party (PYD), Democratic Social Party, Communist Party – Political Office, Social Arabs Movement,

United Assyrian Party and People's Association against Zionism.

A final declaration was published after the meeting. It stated that for ending the current crisis and attaining reliable results, there is a need to restore confidence, build dialogue with people and hold a comprehensive national conference. It asked Assad regime to give up the military response, release all the arrested people from the beginning of the uprising, and accept the popular uprising and the natural results of the national crisis.

The committee's declaration on 8 October 2011 included a vision for Syria's transformation from despotism to democracy. It was accepted as an expanded founding declaration. However, it did not include aforementioned demands. Therefore, Unity Movement, some coordination groups and United Socialists withdrew from this committee and declared their support for Syrian National Council. Coordination Committee did not organize any large protest rallies other than a few weak demonstrations.

Since it carried on its activities by contacting a few activists, it was not able to constitute a presence on the ground. The reason for its ineffectiveness is the difference in mentality and working practices of the young people who started the uprising, the elderly people in the party cadres and independent people who recently joined the parties, and the copying of the structure of stagnant parties.

### **The Growing Schism in the Opposition**

The Coordination Committee's claim to represent the opposition inside Syria caused the risk of fragmentation between the home opposition and external opposition. However, many groups that are at the forefront of the revolution within Syria rejected to enter into this coalition. For example, People's Party, an important component of the Damascus Declaration, did not enter into the committee and announced their support for SNC. In addition, many Kurdish parties did not join the committee, even though they had joined the writing of the

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founding statement. Among the Kurds, only PYD, who formed strategic cooperation with Assad, joined the committee.

On the contrary, Coordination Committee did not join the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and SNC. It caused intellectual and political fragmentation within the opposition. In another viewpoint, this fragmentation is between the SNC consisting of liberals and Islamists and Coordination Committee consisting of nationalists. Thus, the fragmentation is also on the basis of ideological and political differences. That is to say it is to a certain extent among Islamists-liberals and nationalists-leftists.

These two forces have several basic differences. Coordination Committee voiced some concerns towards the popular movements not the regime. Demands for changing the despotic espionage regime remained rhetorical, not seriously implemented in action. It was interpreted that Coordination Committee does not object to

Assad in the transition period. On the contrary, SNC demanded the regime and all of its organs to be overthrown. Coordination Committee and SNC had agreed on establishing a civilian and democratic state, though.

### **The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces**

The efforts for gathering the opposition forces under one national coalition or a banner have resulted in the founding of “National Syria Initiative” with the signature of Riad Seif, which acquired strong support from regional and global forces. Independent activists, representatives from opposition forces, and local revolutionary leaders met in Doha, capital of Qatar, on 8 November 2012 for a consultation meeting. After three days of talks they agreed on founding the “National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.” Some experts interpreted the coalition as a historic development for the Syrian opposition.

The parties that joined the founding of the coalition are as follows:

Syrian National Council Representatives,	Syria Business Forum,
Syrian local administration representatives,	Citizenship Movement,
Independent National Figures,	Revolutionary Secretariat Committee,
The figures who deserted the regime,	Unity Movement,
Syrian Revolution General Agencies Representatives,	Arab Socialist Democrat Party (the group that splintered from Hasan Abdulazim's party),
Local Coordination Committees,	Syria National Democratic Body,
Syrian Scholars Association,	Syria Assyrians Association,
Syrian Writers Association,	Free Syrian Army - Supreme Military Committee representatives.

These groups have joined after the coalition's expansion:

Democrats Union,	Military Council's Representatives,
Popular Movement's Representatives,	Kurdish Representatives from the Kurdish Council.

Coordination Committee and SNC had agreed on establishing a civilian and democratic state.

The coalition's member count has reached 121 after the Kurds' participation.

The coalition was regarded as an initiative encompassing all revolutionary forces and parties, which will provide help for the Syrian people and represent the revolution. It was established as an organization, which

will overthrow Assad regime, tilt the balances in favor of the opposition, and spend efforts for the revolutionaries' benefit at home and abroad. It put special emphasis in its official documents on sovereignty, independent decisions, territorial integrity, non-communication with Assad regime, overthrow-



ing Assad and its despotic cadres for political solution, holding responsible the people who shed Syrians' blood, and establishing a democratic and civilian regime in Syria.

### **The Stagnancy and Failure of the Opposition**

The Syrian opposition has failed to represent the popular movement, to establish a new organizational structure, to form a common vision, to unify their activities through building an umbrella structure and organize relations with regional and global forces. The reason for its failure is not its fragmented nature or ideological differences. There are different reasons for its failure such as:

- a. The discourse of victimization and unjust treatment has been put to the forefront more than the political discourse, which shows the inadequacy of the opposition in responding to developments. Even though the victimization discourse signify the scale of the Syrian tragedy, it gave the impression that the opposition will not be able to solve the issue and left a political vacuum, because the discourse emphasized humanitarian issues rather than political ones.
- b. The opposition's failure in setting clear cooperation conditions with the friends of Syria platform and lack of political maneuver caused it to react to developments.



- c. The opposition sought to terrify the Gulf countries by talking about an Iranian invasion. This way, they put the Syrian crisis out of its perspective for overthrowing the despot, and rather assumed a mission for protecting the Gulf and regional countries' interests. It is important to decipher Iran's strategic support for Assad regime; however it should not be presented as a main purpose.
- d. Political stagnation caused by long years of oppression and limitation on politics seriously damaged political opposition and moved it away from its original purpose. Therefore, political opposition was unable to represent a hope for the people; rather they were regarded in accordance with their principles and ethical stance.
- e. Most of the political parties and forces lacked clear party programs for change. These forces carried on their struggles through personal legacies of historical figures. They transformed their political activities into personal

exploitation by mummifying those figures.

- f. Some opposition figures only adopted the methods for criticism, fault-finding, blaming, poisoning the political atmosphere, personalizing the problems, segmentation and disintegration.

The fact that the number of opposition movements in Syria is rising shows that the main problem is not the ideological issues related to political forces. In this context, there are some multifaceted problems, which should be stressed in political circles. These problems have spread to the agencies and structures of political parties and made them stagnant. Therefore, political forces were unable to effectively lead the popular movement and contribute significantly to them. They only reiterated people's slogan without adding anything new, which shows that they were far from the reality of the revolution. The Coalition, SNC and National Coordination Committee and other opposition groups were unable to represent the popular movement, because none of them emerged out of the people.

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They were unable to command or help the popular movements but they benefited from its acquisitions. Even the armed opposition groups, who were against foreign intervention, remained silent about the global forces' intervention, but failed

to garner support for the revolution. The modest assistance from regional or global forces was utilized in lesser calculations to cause the dependence of local people rather than making a substantial contribution to the uprising.

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