

## The Syrian National Coalition and the US – From Fading Faith to a New Commitment

By Florian Kommer



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What started with peaceful demonstrations in Damascus and Aleppo in spring 2011 has become the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. The war in Syria has now lasted for more than four years and there is still no end in sight. In the meantime an estimated 3,7 million Syrians have fled the country, and more than 210,000 have been killed.<sup>1</sup>

So far, the parties to the conflict, inside and outside Syria, have either lacked the will or the ability to end the conflict. Against the backdrop of the history of an authoritarian regime that prevented the formation of a strong Syrian opposition, it is not surprising that the West in general and the US in particular have difficulties finding capable allies in the prevailing chaos. However, a surge of rebel gains over the course of the last weeks show that Assad's position is in peril.<sup>2</sup> Although gaining control over the whole of Syria is still far beyond reach, the recent successes of the Syrian opposition in their fight against the regime might open up the opportunity to change the momentum in Syria.

While optimistic commentators already talk about a revival of the moderate<sup>3</sup> opposition, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) still dominates Western public debates. This is also true for the US media and policy coverage in which the fight against ISIS in Iraq ousts the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. The vast majority of US-led airstrikes against ISIS have been conducted in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> While this led to the withdrawal of ISIS from the city of Kobane, the airstrikes have not fundamentally weakened the terrorist group in Syria overall. The recent siege of the city of Palmyra proves that point.

The cruel executions of hostages by ISIS-fighters led to a worldwide outcry. In order to abate the public pressure, the White House claims to have "appropriately vetted elements of the moderate Syrian armed opposition"<sup>5</sup> as a basis for the US' train and equip program. Through this program, 15,000 Syrians will be prepared to fight the Islamic State over the course of three years. The program was recently launched with the training of about 90 Syrians at an undisclosed location.<sup>6</sup> As large parts of the opposition have criticized, however, these Syrians

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/07/us-mideast-crisis-toll-idUSKBN0LB0DY20150207>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mei.edu/content/at/assad-regime-beginning-end>

<sup>3</sup> Since it is difficult to differentiate between moderate and radical forces on the ground, this expression refers to groups that define their goals in terms of the liberation of Syria from Bashar al-Assad and the unity of the country.

<sup>4</sup> <http://graphics.wsj.com/airstrikes-on-islamic-state/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/26/statement-nsc-spokesperson-caitlin-hayden>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-begins-training-of-syrian-rebel-force/2015/05/07/5c5ac026-f4f0-11e4-bcc4-e8141e5eb0c9\\_story.html?postshare=5371431031748140](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-begins-training-of-syrian-rebel-force/2015/05/07/5c5ac026-f4f0-11e4-bcc4-e8141e5eb0c9_story.html?postshare=5371431031748140)

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will not be trained to fight the Assad regime. Both Syrians and foreign experts claim that this is too little, too late to have a serious impact on the conflict in Syria.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State John Kerry has been harshly criticized for raising the possibility of including Bashar al-Assad in future peace talks – a position categorically rejected by most parts of the moderate opposition. Although a spokesperson later claimed that Kerry did not specifically refer to Assad, this was another setback in the already tense relationship between the US and the Syrian opposition.

### Fading Faith in the Syrian National Coalition

More than four years into the conflict, the Syrian opposition has become highly fragmented and dysfunctional. This is also true for the biggest oppositional organization: the Syrian National Coalition (SNC). The Coalition was established in November 2012 and consists of several groups and parties, including the Syrian National Council – the largely ineffective former representative body – and various opposition members from Syria's major cities.<sup>7</sup> Officially called "National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces" (NCSROF), it is based in Istanbul.

The US formally recognized the SNC in December 2012 as the sole representative of the Syrian people.<sup>8</sup> About two and a half years later, the Obama administration seems to have lost faith in the coalition. And so did many Syrians. Various groups on the ground question the legitimacy of the SNC due its lack of progress towards an end of the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Despite its significant internal and external challenges, the crisis of the Syrian opposition must not lead to fatalism. It should rather make us reflect on the shortcomings of the international community to engage with the opposition, and question the current lack of a serious approach towards stabilizing the country.

### If Not Now, When?

There are several reasons to believe that the current timing is ripe to launch a new, sincere attempt to empower the moderate opposition. Firstly, the regime's position has recently deteriorated, exemplified by the losses of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughour. The lack of manpower and the demoralized Alawite minority pose a serious risk to the regime's stability.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-components/general-body.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/exclusive-president-obama-recognizes-syrian-opposition-group/story?id=17936599>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/syrian-national-coalition.htm>

Secondly, Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations Envoy to Syria, recently announced that he will once again begin meeting with various opposition groups, the country's government and regional powers including Iran.<sup>10</sup> In previous talks, the Assad regime, Iran and Russia belittled the SNC for a lack of legitimacy and international support. A determined political backing by the West of the SNC would highly improve their position in any future negotiations.

Thirdly, the new president of the SNC, Khaled Khoja, seems determined to unite the divided opposition under the coalition. He recently announced that "we have a new strategy which is based on taking the initiative and launching a dialogue between the coalition and other parties that aren't part of it. The ultimate objective is to have a general assembly that includes all parties who want a new Syria and have a common stance towards any negotiation process with the regime based on the Geneva I agreements."<sup>11</sup> In a recent meeting in Istanbul the SNC, representatives of the revolutionary and military forces and representatives of the elected local councils agreed on further cooperation.<sup>12</sup> This can be seen as a first step in the right direction towards internal consolidation and coordination within the moderate opposition camp.

Overall, there is no serious alternative to the SNC for the West. If the West is willing to seriously back a Syrian-led moderate opposition, the SNC will be the only viable option to support.

### Overcoming Internal Divisions

The SNC currently has very limited space to maneuver due to various internal and external constraints. It will be decisive to overcome these constraints in order to enable the SNC to become a viable actor. The sheer number of fractions makes it very difficult for the SNC to find a common stance on several thorny issues of principle.

When it comes to internal divisions, one of the most crucial factors relates to religious sectarianism. The majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims, and so is the opposition. There is no doubt that the support of the Sunni population is therefore essential. However, the various minorities in the country might become a game changer in the near future. Most Shiites still back Bashar al-Assad because they are affiliated with the Alawite regime, and they are afraid of revenge attacks by the Sunni opposition. Recent reports from within Syria suggest, however, that they are becoming increasingly demoralized.<sup>13</sup> In order to overcome the sectarian split, the

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/24/us-syria-crisis-un-talks-idUSKBN0NF0YJ20150424>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/26/statement-nsc-spokesperson-caitlin-hayden>

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-begins-training-of-syrian-rebel-force/2015/05/07/5c5ac026-f4f0-11e4-bcc4-e8141e5eb0c9\\_story.html?postshare=5371431031748140](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-begins-training-of-syrian-rebel-force/2015/05/07/5c5ac026-f4f0-11e4-bcc4-e8141e5eb0c9_story.html?postshare=5371431031748140)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/world/middleeast/an-eroding-syrian-army-points-to-strain.html?ref=topics& r=0>

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SNC must credibly show its willingness to include non-Sunni rebels into their political and military ranks.<sup>14</sup> As Fred Hof, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and former special adviser on Syria at the US State Department, puts it: “The Syrian opposition should make it clear that the term “Assad regime” refers to a clan and a relatively small circle of criminal enablers, and that all others will be welcome to participate in the politics and defense of a united, post-regime Syria.”<sup>15</sup>

The division between secular and Islamist forces is similarly difficult to overcome. While more radical elements within the opposition are willing to cooperate with groups like Jabhat al-Nusra on the ground, the moderates are not. They claim that radical Islamists are not better than the Assad regime itself when it comes to human rights and democratic freedoms.

In addition, there is a fundamental mistrust by the fighters on the ground towards the diaspora. The bitter infighting has marred the coalition’s relationship with opposition forces inside Syria. As stated previously, the SNC-president Khaled Khoja seems to be well aware of these splits and is working on broadening the coalition’s legitimacy.<sup>16</sup>

A pivotal point of contention within the opposition camp is the future role of Bashar al-Assad. Due to the astonishing resilience of the regime, some people see him as an unavoidable part of a political transition for the country. However, Assad is responsible for the use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons against his own people. Not only did he attempt to crush the revolution by using lethal force against peaceful protesters. He also contributed to the rise of ISIS by focusing his military attacks on the areas under control of the opposition while largely sparing the territories controlled by ISIS. Western intelligence reports also suggest that Assad finances ISIS by buying oil and gas from wells, which the terrorist group seized.<sup>17</sup> Considering these crimes, it is difficult to imagine how Assad could be part of a reconciliation process, which ultimately will be necessary to heal the wounds of the conflict. A majority of the opposition therefore cannot conceive of a political future for Assad. A recent statement by the SNC and several other oppositional groups underlines this position once again.<sup>18</sup> This is a key premise that the US should continue to use explicitly and publically align with the SNC: there is no solution to the conflict with Bashar al-Assad as part of a transitional government.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/08/18/SNC-opposition-chief-reassures-minorities-in-post-Assad-Syria.html>

<sup>15</sup> [https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/01/is-bashar-al-assad-finished-for-real-this-time-again-syria/?utm\\_source=Sailthru/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/01/is-bashar-al-assad-finished-for-real-this-time-again-syria/?utm_source=Sailthru/)

<sup>16</sup> [http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29099/Syria\\_Political\\_Armed\\_Opposition\\_Agree\\_Five\\_Points](http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29099/Syria_Political_Armed_Opposition_Agree_Five_Points)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10585391/Syrias-Assad-accused-of-boosting-al-Qaeda-with-secret-oil-deals.html>

<sup>18</sup> [http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29099/Syria\\_Political\\_Armed\\_Opposition\\_Agree\\_Five\\_Points](http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29099/Syria_Political_Armed_Opposition_Agree_Five_Points)

## From Civil War to Proxy War

Moreover, the Syrian opposition reflects regional rivalries and contradictory international involvement. Two trajectories dominate the conflict in this regard. Firstly, Saudi-Arabia, Turkey and Qatar have more or less individually backed the opposition over the past years while also being accused of supporting mainly radical Islamist groups.<sup>19</sup> However, in March 2015 the new Saudi King Salman publicly received the Turkish President Recep Tayip Erdogan to discuss a joint effort to support a broad variety of the Syrian opposition coherently. The SNC expressed their hope that this could shift the momentum on the ground in favor of the Syrian opposition and force the regime back to the negotiating table.<sup>20</sup> The recent capture of Idlib was arguably the first measureable outcome of this cooperation.

Secondly, Iran is still one of the major supporters of the regime, which seems to be increasingly dependent on foreign Shia fighters. For instance, Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers have assumed key roles in the offensive south of Damascus in February 2015.<sup>21</sup> Since the outbreak of the war in 2011, Iran has poured men, money and weapons into Syria. Afraid of an anti-Shiite and anti-Iran government taking over from Assad, they put a lot of effort in keeping him in power. In this battle for regional influence, Iran wants to make sure that their direct connection to the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah is guaranteed. Tehran, in turn, claims that the Syrian revolution was hijacked by Sunni radicals.

In addition to Iran, Russia continues to back the Assad regime on the international stage. Several attempts in the UN Security Council to condemn the use of force in Syria were vetoed by Russia.<sup>22</sup> Based on long standing political, military and economic ties, Moscow continues to sell weapons on a large scale to Assad.<sup>23</sup> These actions stabilize the regime both militarily and politically. Therefore, recent peace talks in Moscow were boycotted by most parts of the opposition.<sup>24</sup> The high level of financial, political and military involvement by all regional powers shows that the civil war in Syria has long become a proxy war for the region.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/04/idlib-takeover-means-turkey-150405073027241.html>

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/12/saudi-arabia-turkey-syria\\_n\\_7012268.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/12/saudi-arabia-turkey-syria_n_7012268.html)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2015/middle-east-north-africa/statement-on-a-syrian-policy-framework.aspx>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47860#.VUzaMsl7yUk>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/17/us-syria-russia-arms-idUSBREA0GOMN20140117>

<sup>24</sup> <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59590>

### Empowering the SNC to Become a Viable Alternative

Whether we like it or not, the US has a crucial role to play in defining a comprehensive and coherent strategy towards an end to the war in Syria. In the current gridlock, neither the opposition nor the regime has the capacity to stabilize Syria, US policy will be decisive. Accepting the status quo means de facto accepting a stalemate with thousands of more deaths to come. Instead of the half-hearted approach, a strong commitment by the Obama administration towards the SNC is urgently needed.

The current US train and equip program is not only too little, too late but also too one-sided. ISIS is undoubtedly a threat to the Syrian people and the wider Middle East. But it is not the only one. To concentrate exclusively on ISIS, as with the train and equip program, while ignoring Assad will not end the hostilities and attacks against innocent Syrians. On the contrary, the fact that Assad will not be part of a solution could be a point of departure from where it will be possible to unite a larger variety of oppositional groups.

The US must empower the SNC to overcome their internal and external divisions in order to assist it in becoming a credible alternative to the regime and ISIS. It will be fundamental to work as a convener to fight fragmentation and bring the different positions under one umbrella. Whether it is the inclusion of religious minorities, the division among radicals and moderates or the split between the diaspora and local fighters, diplomatic efforts and financial incentives can strengthen the coherence and legitimacy of the SNC. This also means that all US support for groups on the ground should be channeled through the SNC. This would not only improve the standing of the Coalition but also guarantee that the war in Syria stays a genuine Syrian-owned effort. There are justified concerns that the still existing state structures would implode as soon as Assad is leaving. Therefore, the US should invest much more resources in order to advise and train members of the SNC on how to build inclusive government structures. The sharing of expertise on a large scale will enable the coalition to overcome organizational flaws. For instance, it will be decisive whether the newly emerged city councils in liberated areas like Idlib will be able to provide basic services for the local population. Meanwhile, the SNC has to be encouraged to come up with a viable strategy for improving the humanitarian situation in rebel-held areas. The current lack of expertise and progress in this area weakens their credibility. As long as the Syrians do not see an improvement of their situation, they will not put their trust in the SNC.

Furthermore, since ISIS is still able to pay its fighters comparatively high salaries, it will be necessary to transfer resources to the SNC to enable them to compete financially with radical groups like ISIS.<sup>25</sup> Many of their fighters are not attracted by radical Islamism but rather by the possibility of being able to feed their families.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kitconews/2014/09/22/isis-entices-youth-with-high-salaries-king-of-jordan/>



In addition to needing financial and organizational support, the SNC has to be treated by the US as a strategic partner. That provided, former flaws and shortcomings can be assessed and a common strategy on how to gain influence and stabilize the country can be developed. This would for instance include a coherent media strategy on the local, national and international level to counter the "Either Assad or Anarchy" narrative. Showing that the SNC is a credible alternative to the prevailing chaos will be critical to gain support of the Syrian people. In addition to the political and financial aspects mentioned above, military assistance and training for the SNC will be necessary. This aspect, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Moreover, it will be necessary for the US to coordinate efforts with regional allies and partners, particularly with Saudi-Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. It is important to find a common stance on how to best support the SNC with political, financial and military means.

In addition, the influence of Iran will remain a decisive factor in the Syrian context. Iranian support for Bashar al-Assad continues to be one of the main obstacles for the SNC's goals. While the nuclear talks are unlikely to change US-Iran relations fundamentally, they might open new backdoors that allow for negotiations on Iran's ongoing support for Assad. Staffan de Mistura's invitation to Iran for "discussions" in Geneva is a first step in this regard.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the significant internal and external challenges, the crisis of the Syrian opposition must not lead to fatalism. It should rather make us reflect on the shortcomings of the international community's engagement with the opposition and question the current lack of a serious approach towards a new beginning. An unambiguous and sincere commitment to the SNC will significantly strengthen the position of the moderate opposition in the war on the future of Syria. The coalition has to be empowered to become a real alternative to Assad and ISIS. This is a precondition for any political solution, which remains the ultimate goal.

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Apr-27/295845-louay-husseini-announces-exile.ashx?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Apr-27/295845-louay-husseini-announces-exile.ashx?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter)