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ELIZABETH O'BAGY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 4

SYRIA'S POLITICAL OPPOSITION



Photo Credit: Syrians protest in Homs on January 23, 2012. Photo courtesy of Ziad Homs.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization. ISW advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. ISW is committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 4 | SYRIA'S POLITICAL OPPOSITION | ELIZABETH O'BAGY | APRIL 2012

- Policymakers must identify and understand Syria's political opposition, both in exile and on the ground, in order to develop a clear vision of their aims and a better strategy for support. Any successful U.S. policy in Syria should focus on constructing a viable alternative to Assad's government.
- This report provides detailed information on the diverse groupings of the Syrian political opposition in order to inform the international community's response to the conflict. It distinguishes between the expatriate political opposition and the grassroots protest movement operating on the ground in Syria.
- Policymakers must come to the understanding that they may not get the chance to sit across the table from a single opposition party, but rather will have to work directly with the nascent political-military structures that have formed at a local level.
- The key to creating an effective national opposition lies in connecting the established national coalitions with the grassroots political movement.
- The most well-known and widely recognized established political opposition coalition is the Syrian National Council (SNC). The SNC is based in Istanbul and functions as a loosely-aligned umbrella organization comprised of seven different blocs: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Damascus Declaration, the National Bloc, the Local Coordination Committee (as representatives of the grassroots movement), the Kurdish Bloc, the Assyrian Bloc, and Independents.
- The SNC has not meaningfully engaged with local opposition forces, and is losing credibility and influence within Syria as the conflict grows more militarized.
- The other significant established political opposition coalition is the National Coordination Committee (NCC). The NCC is based in Damascus and favors a negotiated political settlement and dialogue with the regime. This stance has made the NCC less popular amongst the grassroots opposition movement.
- The grassroots movement functions at a local and regional level through coordination between the local coordinating committees and revolutionary councils. This movement has become tactically adept, better organized, and more cohesive, developing nascent political structures.
- The local coordinating committees, called the *tansiqiyyat*, form the base unit of organization. As the movement has grown, urban centers have developed oversight councils called the revolutionary councils to manage the committees within specific districts.
- The revolutionary councils are the main organizational structure for the grassroots political opposition. They manage the activities of the *tansiqiyyat*, organize protests, and coordinate with the armed opposition.
- The Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) is the largest grassroots coalition. It represents roughly seventy percent of the revolutionary councils and the majority of the local coordinating committees.

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- The armed opposition cooperates with the grassroots political opposition and a number of insurgent groups have shown a willingness to work under the guidance of the revolutionary councils.
- The lack of secure communications equipment has hindered the grassroots opposition's ability to coordinate above the local level because the government retains the overwhelming capacity to monitor, track and suppress greater organization at a national level.
- The established political coalitions such as the SNC have articulated a national vision for a post-Assad future and have received nominal support from the international community, yet they lack strong networks and popular legitimacy inside Syria. On the other hand, the grassroots political opposition has gained the support of the people, but it lacks a national vision and united front as the basis for international support.
- The United States must consider adopting a bottom-up strategy that provides better support to the grassroots movement operating within Syria. This entails developing better relations with critical elements of the grassroots movement and working with key individuals who have deep networks of supporters within Syria but also maintain ties to the SNC or the NCC.
- A bottom-up strategy would provide an avenue for U.S. support that incorporates both national and local opposition groups and encourages the emergence of a legitimate national political leadership.



MAP 1 | SYRIA

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 4

SYRIA'S POLITICAL OPPOSITION

By Elizabeth O'Bagy

On March 15, 2011, residents of a small southern city in Syria took to the streets to protest the torture of students who had put up anti-government graffiti. Following the government's heavy-handed response, demonstrations quickly spread across much of the country, which led to an uprising that has lasted for more than a year. As the conflict in Syria deepens, western powers look to extend their support to the Syrian people. Yet, this support has so far hinged on the emergence of a united opposition—a recognizable “face” for policymakers to work with.

In October 2011, a group of mostly exiled Syrian dissidents gathered together in Istanbul to establish the Syrian National Council (SNC) in an attempt to bring together the disparate opposition groups. Since its formation, the SNC has attempted to function as an opposition government in exile, similar to the National Transitional Council in Libya. Infighting has plagued the council, however, and it remains deeply divided. Western powers have been wary of fully recognizing the organization because of these divisions within the SNC. Nevertheless, the seventy countries at the April 2012 Friends of Syria Summit, cognizant of the need to show support for the Syrian opposition, recognized the SNC “as a legitimate representative” and “as the main opposition interlocutor with the international community”—a statement that fell just short of full recognition.

The SNC has not, however, unified Syria's political opposition. As the U.S. and other Friends of Syria nations remain frustrated by the SNC's inability to unite, they tend to view the organization as the only face of the Syrian uprising - leaving other important components of the opposition ignored. Protestors continue to drive the revolution inside Syria, rather than the SNC. This grassroots trend has transformed into an organized movement that displays a high level of integration and organization. Its components share a sense of mission, coordinate activities at a local and regional level, and have developed

functioning political structures. However, the movement has remained localized because Assad has denied it the space to communicate and unite under national leadership.

Policymakers must better identify and understand Syria's political opposition, both in exile and on the ground, in order to develop a clear vision of their aims and a better strategy for support. This report attempts to explain the diverse groupings of the Syrian political opposition in order to inform the international community's response to the conflict. A more nuanced understanding of the opposition's complex structure can help American policymakers and the international community confront realistically the challenge of developing a viable political alternative to the Assad regime. In the absence of a single unified opposition, policymakers should understand how opposition elements cooperate in ways that have sustained the Syrian revolution for more than a year. Understanding these structures will shed light on possible policy options for deepening support in a way that helps the Syrian people and complements the actions of those driving the revolution against Assad.

The first half of this report will focus on the established political opposition groups, the SNC and the National Coordinating Committee (NCC). The best known opposition group, the SNC, is a coalition of mostly exiled dissidents. The SNC has refused to negotiate with the Syrian government and has called for Assad's immediate

resignation. On the other hand, the NCC is an internal opposition organization that has limited recognition from the Syrian government. Thus, the NCC supports negotiations and has suggested ways of political reform within the current system.

The second half of this report will detail the grassroots opposition movement. It will show how activists working in local committees have mobilized and developed a political structure based on a hierarchy of committees, councils, and commissions. Though they are decentralized and operate at a largely local level, the opposition has displayed a high degree of organization and tactical development, similar to Syria's armed opposition.

THE SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL

Charter, Structure, and Challenges

The SNC appears to be the most viable opposition organization for states who oppose Assad to work with for a number of reasons. Most SNC members are well-educated, Western-oriented elites, previously exiled by the regimes of Assad and his father during their repression of political activity beginning in the early 1980s. It is headquartered in Istanbul and maintains satellite offices in eighteen other countries, including France, England, the United States, and Egypt. This international presence has allowed the organization to act as the primary Syrian opposition group on the global stage. SNC representatives have cultivated open communication channels, provided reliable access to members, and established good relations with important international figures. Moreover, many of the SNC's members are well-known opposition figures who have long been politically active, earning reputations as established dissidents during the political unrest of the early 2000s known as the Damascus Spring.¹ Thus the credentials of its members gave the organization a degree of credibility, which contributed to the popularity the SNC enjoyed among the Syrian people at its inception.

On October 2, 2011, a group of activists officially announced the creation of the SNC from Istanbul. Led by Burhan Ghalioun, a Paris-based Syrian political scientist, the council is comprised of seven main coalitions: the Damascus Declaration the Muslim Brotherhood, National Figures/National Bloc, the Kurdish Bloc, the Assyrian Democratic Organization, independent figures, and members of the Local Coordinating Committees representing the grassroots opposition.

The SNC's original charter stated that the council was founded in response to "the urgent need for a political framework for the revolutionary work being done on the ground" and that its goal was to build a "democratic, pluralistic, and civil state."² The council's charter outlined a sophisticated structure based on a 270-member General Assembly under the leadership of an eight-member Executive Committee and a twenty-one-member General Secretariat, both chaired by the SNC president. The combined seats of these two leadership bodies represent the seven coalitions along the basis of the following distribution of seats:

- Six seats for the Local Coordination Committee
- Five seats for the Muslim Brotherhood
- Four seats for the Damascus Declaration
- Four seats for the National Bloc
- Four seats for the Kurdish Bloc
- Four seats for the Independents
- One seat for the Assyrian Bloc

Though this structure was promulgated in the charter, to date the council has only loosely followed this outline. As of April 2012, the General Secretariat had thirty-two identified members: eight National Bloc, six Independents, five Damascus Declaration, five Muslim Brotherhood, four Local Coordination Committee, two Kurdish Bloc, and two Assyrian Bloc. The Executive

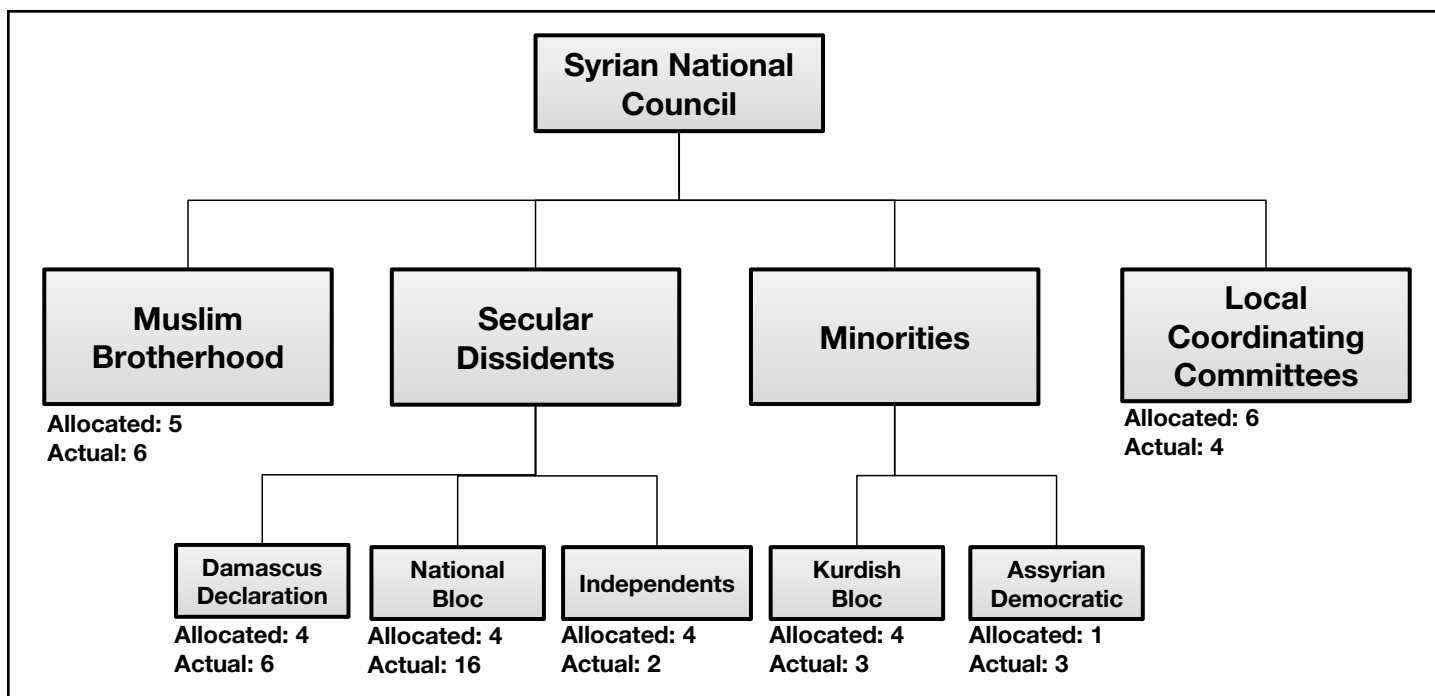


FIGURE 1 | SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL STRUCTURE

Committee had only six identified members: two National Bloc, one Damascus Declaration, one Muslim Brotherhood, one Kurdish Bloc, and one Assyrian Bloc. However, it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of seats being held in the General Secretariat and Executive Committee as some members, especially those associated with the grassroots movement and the on-the-ground opposition, are kept anonymous to protect their identity from government persecution. Additionally, the distinctions between the two bodies blur as many of the council's most prominent members sit on both the General Secretariat and the Executive Committee, which skews the distribution of seats. Finally, Ghalioun and those who serve on the Executive Committee have also restructured the distribution of power in favor of the Executive Committee.

Thus, as of mid-March, the council's structure had diverged significantly from its original charter. This has caused conflict with other SNC members who view the re-structuring as an attempt by Ghalioun to consolidate power. During the March 28 SNC meeting, five factions within the various blocs suspended their participation in the council until a new charter has been drafted

and the Executive Committee re-structured a second time to make it more representative. This process is currently underway and the SNC began working to create a new charter as of the beginning of April.

The SNC has a number of bureaus, including International Relations, Media and Public Relations, Military Affairs, and Finance and Economic Affairs. In mid-March 2012, it announced the formation of the Syrian Business Council (SBC), which aims to provide "unconditional support" to the Syrian revolution by helping to rebuild Syria on solid financial grounds. To achieve this goal, the SBC will support societal and state institutions, encourage investment, and seek development that can be sustained after the fall of Assad.³

Despite the seeming cohesion this sophisticated organizational structure suggests, the SNC is rife with internal division. The seven different coalitions that form the SNC are often at odds with one another, and they have failed to provide a unified vision. Council members publicly disagree over a number of key issues, in particular over whether and how to support Syria's armed

SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL KEY EVENTS

26 APR 2011	The first public meeting of members of the Syrian opposition is held in Istanbul.
29 APR 2011	150 people sign a new national initiative for democratic change, creating the Syrian National Coalition for Change. This is the first attempt to establish an organized external leadership for the Syrian uprising.
2 JUN 2011	The Syrian National Coalition for Change comes together with other elements of the Syrian opposition at a conference in Antalya, Turkey. The conference is attended by liberal, pro-Western elements, Muslim Brotherhood representatives, Assyrian and Kurdish minorities.
16 JUL 2011	350 dissidents gather for the National Salvation Congress meeting held in Istanbul.
23 AUG 2011	Another opposition conference is held in Istanbul leading to the formation of the Syrian National Transitional Council to represent the concerns and demands of the Syrian people.
2 SEPT 2011	Burhan Ghalioun is named President of the Syrian National Transitional Council.
2 OCT 2011	Building on the foundation of the Transitional Council, a comprehensive opposition council is announced. The Syrian National Council (SNC) formally declares its organizational affiliations and structure to include a General Assembly, a General Secretariat and an Executive Committee.
9 JAN 2012	The SNC General Secretariat meets in Istanbul to extend Ghalioun's presidency.
9 FEB 2012	Members of the SNC Executive Committee meet in Doha, Qatar.
26 FEB 2012	Twenty prominent members of the SNC form a splinter group called the Syrian Patriotic Group, led by Haytham al-Maleh and Kamal Labwani. They rejoin the SNC shortly after.
13 MAR 2012	Four prominent members resign including Haytham al-Maleh, Kamal al-Labwani, Catherine Atalli, and Walid al-Bunni.
28 MAR 2012	SNC General Assembly meeting is held in Istanbul.

opposition. A number of important splits occurred in early 2012 that brought to light many of these internal disagreements. On February 22, twenty SNC members who advocated working with the armed opposition broke away from the council and formed an opposition bloc called the National Change Movement. Prominent activist Ammar al-Qurabi led them.⁴ Although the SNC was able to coax a few of the more prominent

members to return to the council, including Kamal al-Labwani and Haytham al-Maleh, the reconciliation was short-lived and a final break was cemented shortly thereafter.

On March 14, both Labwani and Maleh announced their resignation along with two other important independents, Walid al-Bunni and Catherine Altalli. Frustrated with the lack

of transparency and organization in the SNC, Labwani claimed that the SNC “is incapable of representing the aspirations of the Syrian people at a time that the repressive regime is committing more criminality.”⁵ Former judge and long-standing dissident Maleh echoed his criticism. “I have resigned from the SNC because there is a lot of chaos in the group and not a lot of clarity over what they can accomplish right now. ... You will see many more resignations soon,” he said.⁶

Maleh’s comment reflects the unease currently felt among SNC members and suggests a power struggle is underway within the SNC. Many members complained about the lack of transparency in the Executive Committee’s work following a gradual restructuring that gave significant more power to Ghalioun and a small group of his allies within the council. Many saw this restructuring as Ghalioun’s attempt to consolidate power. “People are angry about the executive board. We don’t know what it is doing, and it’s not clear how they are spending the money being given to them,” independent activist Salam Shawaf said.⁷ Given the imposing personalities of many of its prominent members, it comes as no surprise that there has been a political struggle over leadership roles. In order to better understand the ongoing political struggle and divisions within its ranks, it is necessary to take a closer look at the blocs that form the SNC. Three of the seven blocs come from shared backgrounds and hold similar political views, thus these seven blocs can be combined into four primary groupings: established dissidents, minority sects, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Local Coordination Committee representatives.

Burhan Ghalioun

SNC leader Burhan Ghalioun is a Syrian political scientist who teaches political sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris. As a secular Sunni, Ghalioun has championed democracy since the 1970s. In a pamphlet he published titled “A Manifesto for Democracy,” Ghalioun argued that state power in the Arab world had become the enemy of society and called for the immediate implementation of

democratic reform.⁸ As a result, he became well-known as a critic of Hafez al-Assad, the father of current President Bashar al-Assad. Despite his reputation for his political thought, Ghalioun shunned party politics and instead focused on his intellectual pursuits following Assad’s brutal repression of political activity in the 1980s. He did not return to the political scene until early 2000 during the Damascus Spring when he resumed his call for democratic reform. He signed the Damascus Declaration in 2005 and has been politically active ever since.

Ghalioun has espoused the need for democratic reform, calling it a “historical necessity.”⁹ He believes Arab leaders failed to build modern states or successful economies, instead turning their states into “personalized” power structures. He has urged the Syrian people to unite around the demand for democracy and envisions a secular, democratic government for post-Assad Syria.¹⁰

Although he is capable and politically astute, Ghalioun’s leadership is anything but assured. Many Syrians feel as though Ghalioun, a Paris-based intellectual, has lost touch with those on the ground. Ghalioun has tried to be more responsive, changing the council’s policies to provide greater support to both activists and rebels operating in Syria. He has also been accused of being a puppet for the Muslim Brotherhood. This has weakened Ghalioun’s constituency and caused many secular and left-leaning opposition members to worry that they may become marginalized by more religious components within the organization. Despite these accusations, Ghalioun has remained committed to a secular political agenda.

When the SNC was first created, the council’s leadership position was highly contested and sparked fierce debates. Ultimately, the more Islamist members of the council helped to establish Ghalioun as president but limited his tenure to three months. Yet in January 2012, his presidency was renewed. The circumstances surrounding his presidency and the processes behind its renewal remain obscure, and there have

INDEPENDENT DISSIDENTS

The major blocs that make up the collection of independent dissident groups within this grouping are mostly long-term expatriate blocs:

National Bloc

This grouping of exiled dissidents derive originally from individuals who left Syria after the Ba'ath Party coup of 1964 and Hafez al-Assad's subsequent consolidation of power within Syria.

Damascus Declaration

This group derives from the democratic activists who were exiled from Syria shortly after Bashar al-Assad's ascension and consolidation of power in 2001/2005.

Independents

Many of the key individuals who make up this grouping have had a shaky relationship with the SNC over issues of how to support the opposition in Syria, in many cases breaking with the council. Some of these individuals have impressive networks within Syria and have maintained a degree of legitimacy within the protest movement not shared by the broader council.

been numerous challenges to his leadership. The real test of his leadership capabilities, however, will be in whether or not he is able to establish more connections to those on the ground and gain wider legitimacy among activists and protestors in the grassroots movement.

Established Dissidents: Damascus Declaration, National Bloc & Independents

Damascus Declaration

Most of the secular dissidents within the SNC have histories of activism during the period of intense political and social debate in Syria that began soon after the death of President Hafiz al-Assad in June 2000. During this time, a group of like-minded activists began organizing forum discussions of political matters and broader social issues. From the platform of the new forums, known as *muntadat* in Arabic, these activists mobilized around a number of political demands and actively pushed for political reform. They expressed their demands in the September 2000 Statement of 99, the first public manifestation of Syria's rising civil society movement following the death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000. This signaled the start of the era that became known as the Damascus Spring, the effects of which

would reverberate throughout the following years despite a campaign of repression that resulted in the closure of the forums and the imprisonment of the majority of organizers and participants.

In late October 2005, Syrian opposition figures issued a statement of unity known collectively as the Damascus Declaration. Written by prominent dissident Michel Kilo, the declaration criticized the Syrian government as being "authoritarian, totalitarian, and cliquish" and called for "peaceful, gradual, reform founded on accord and based on dialogue and recognition."¹¹ More than 250 of the most well-known and important opposition figures in Syria signed this document, and it got the support of the Muslim Brotherhood and other political unions, such as the Kurdish Democratic Alliance and the Arab nationalist National Democratic Rally.

National Bloc

The National Bloc encompasses a broad group of dissidents who participated in the July 2011 gathering of Syrian political dissidents in Istanbul, Turkey. Originally, they called this gathering the National Salvation Congress, and it was dedicated to a largely secular, nationalist agenda. Its members are primarily secular and tend to come from elite Syrian families. However, the bloc does include a

number of prominent Islamists and independent technocrats. A strong identification with Syrian nationalism unites the diverse, loosely aligned coalition, and it continues to push for reform based on a nationalist agenda.

Minority Sects: Kurds & Assyrians

The Kurds have been divided in their response to the Syrian uprising and their approach to the SNC. At its inception, the SNC had twenty-five Kurdish members from three of the major Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Future Movement, the Kurdish Union Party in Syria, and the Kurdish Azadi Party. However, in January 2012, the Kurdish Union Party in Syria and the Kurdish Azadi Party withdrew from the SNC, leaving only representatives from the nominal Kurdish Future Movement. As a result, neither of the two major Syrian Kurdish parties were represented in the SNC as of April 2012, and the most prominent Kurdish members that do have seats are independents and are not representative of the major Kurdish political trends.¹²

The Assyrian members in the SNC hail from the Syrian Christians for Democracy party, a group formed in late December 2011 in response to the Syrian uprising. In its first statement, the group expressed sympathy for the Syrian people and stated that it was formed as a party “to support the Syrian opposition and fuel the uprising.”¹³

However, Assyrians make up less than 0.1 percent of the population in Syria, and participation in the Syrian Christians for Democracy party is even more limited among this small portion.¹⁴

Because the Kurdish and Assyrian members in the SNC represent have only nominal minority support, the SNC has overstated its sectarian representation. The SNC realizes the importance of portraying the organization as non-sectarian and inclusive of minorities in order to be seen as truly representative. However, it has failed to include members of other major Syrian sects, including the Alawites, Druze, Ismaelis, and Turkmen, and has only a limited amount of Christian support. Since the SNC has failed to attract meaningful participation from these key minorities, it is unlikely that the organization will be able to gain wider sectarian representation.

The Muslim Brotherhood

A key element within the SNC is the Muslim Brotherhood. Many Syrians, even some of the SNC's own members, have accused the council of being a front for the Brotherhood because of the prominence of Muslim Brotherhood members in the council and the extent to which these members have funded the organization. Labwani accused Muslim Brotherhood members within the council of “monopolizing funding and military support” and said they were steering

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

The leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has been living in exile since 1983, and it is unclear how developed their networks on the ground are; however, this group is the most unified and best funded within the SNC, which has given it a great deal of leverage within the council.

Muhammad Riad al-Shaqfa

Leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. He has repeatedly denied the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in the SNC and has said that the alternative to Assad is a pluralistic, democratic and civilian regime.

Farouq Tayfur

The deputy leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. He has been most involved with the SNC and exerts a great deal of influence in the council.

the council “in a negative direction.”¹⁵ Another prominent independent council member, Walid al-Bunni, pointed to the negative role of the Muslim Brotherhood when he explained his March 2012 resignation. “The Brotherhood took the whole council. We became like extras,” he said.¹⁶ Regardless of whether the Muslim Brotherhood exercises effective control over the SNC, this perception limits the organization’s influence in Syria and raises concern among the council’s Western allies.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood does not have deep networks or support inside Syria, and its internal capabilities are weak due to its long history of persecution. The Syrian Ba’ath Party outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood shortly after seizing power in 1963. The Brotherhood continued its activities, however, and mobilized support for the organization covertly. Beginning in 1979, the Muslim Brotherhood led a rebellion against Hafez al-Assad, which the regime finally quelled with the Hama Massacre of 1982. Since then, the Assad regime has effectively suppressed the Brotherhood in Syria, forcing its leaders into exile. This network of regime opponents, living in exile since the 1980s, makes up the Muslim Brotherhood bloc within the SNC. Their long absence from Syria and the Assad regime’s propaganda campaign against them help to explain the lack of trust and fear many Syrians feel toward the Brotherhood.

Many armed opposition leaders share the belief that the SNC is a front for the Brotherhood, which helps to explain their lack of cooperation with the SNC. In an interview a Time Magazine reporter conducted near the Turkish border, rebels talked about being wary that the Muslim Brotherhood will try to “steal the revolution”¹⁷ through the SNC. One rebel who participated in the 1976 to 1982 Syrian uprising voiced his belief that the Brotherhood betrayed the uprising to the Syrian regime. He said the Muslim Brotherhood is “counting on the revolution weakening, and they will ride in on foreign tanks.”¹⁸ Another rebel said, “If I see one of those men in the

national council after the revolution strut in and try to claim a role, I swear I will kill him.”¹⁹

Though Ghalioun has denied these allegations, former Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Sadr al-Din Bayanouni’s announcements bolster suspicions that the Muslim Brotherhood exerts considerable influence within the SNC. In a video posted on YouTube, Bayanouni admitted the Brotherhood nominated Ghalioun as council leader merely as a “front.” Bayanouni explained that Ghalioun’s nomination was a move to gain wider international appeal and to prevent the Syrian regime from directing Islamist accusations at the council. “We did not want the Syrian regime to take advantage of the fact that Islamists are leading the SNC,” he said in the video.²⁰ Although both London-based Brotherhood spokesman Zuhair Salem and other Brotherhood Council members denied this video later, the announcement has led to doubts and suspicions among other blocs within the SNC.

While the Muslim Brotherhood might not have an extensive network in Syria, it does maintain a vast network abroad and is influential in the SNC. To date, the Brotherhood forms the most cohesive political bloc within the council, which has allowed it to capitalize on divisions among the other blocs and consolidate its authority. Furthermore, it has access to funds through high-level connections in the region built during years in exile and a powerful network of supporters in oil-rich Gulf countries. Much of the SNC’s funding comes from these connections, resulting in the Brotherhood’s monopolization of council finances and resources.

Local Coordinating Committees (LCC)

LCC is an umbrella term that typically refers to the local-level coordinating committees. These ground-level opposition groups vary in size and structure and operate with different capacities and in different localities throughout Syria. When the term LCC is used in the context of the SNC, it refers to a collection of approximately 120

LOCAL COORDINATING COMMITTEES

The seats designated for the local coordinating committees derive from a collection of 120 groups organizing protests on the ground in Syria, who recognized the SNC in October 2011. However, these seats account for only a small portion of Syria's ground-level protest groups and does not incorporate input from the Revolutionary Councils. Furthermore, the level of influence these groups have within the council has been limited by the fact that their leadership remains on the ground and cannot participate in meetings held in Istanbul and Paris.

prominent local coordinating committees that pledged their support to the SNC at its inception. It is unclear how or whether the LCC members at the SNC represent the complex network of activist committees on the ground. Many LCC representatives' names have not been released due to security concerns, but those members who have been identified have four seats in the General Secretariat.

Regardless of whether the LCC members are legitimate representatives of the grassroots opposition committees, they have not formed an effective political bloc within the SNC. Furthermore, approximately 300 of the local coordinating committees have not pledged their support to the SNC. Therefore, the seats reserved for LCC members have not achieved the desired effect of connecting the SNC to the demonstrators in Syria.

THE SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL AND THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY

The debate among SNC members over whether to support armed resistance and how to define the council's relationship with the armed opposition has become the most divisive issue within the SNC. Many activists, especially those on the ground, have called for greater support to the armed opposition as the conflict has become more violent. In late February 2012, one SNC member who requested anonymity said that roughly eighty members of the council were planning to defect in order to form a new opposition movement to focus on arming the rebels and supporting armed resistance.²¹ As of April 2012, Ghalioun appeared to be shifting the council's policy toward the

armed opposition in an attempt to gain greater ground support and control the militarization of the conflict. In its first overt act of support for the armed opposition, Ghalioun announced the SNC will pay fixed salaries to all officers, soldiers, and other members of the Free Syrian Army, the umbrella organization under which the armed opposition is loosely affiliated. However, he noted that this financing will not be used to provide weapons to the rebels.²²

Despite this recent rapprochement, the relationship between SNC and the FSA has been mostly antagonistic. Prior to the March 28 council meeting, Ghalioun had insisted that Syria was not at war and resisted calls for a militarized response to Assad's oppression. As a result, the two organizations have differed drastically in program and vision, acted independently of each other, and lacked coordination and cooperation.

However, following February's three-week bombardment of Homs and subsequent ground offensive in Baba Amr, Ghalioun reconciled his reservations about armed resistance with the "newfound reality" in Syria.²³ In a press conference in Paris on March 1, Ghalioun announced the formation of a military advisory bureau to oversee, organize, and unify the armed opposition, saying "it will be like a defense ministry."²⁴ Ghalioun insisted that the decision to form the bureau came after discussions with his counterparts in the FSA and that both had agreed it was necessary for the SNC to help "define their [FSA] missions."²⁵ Yet within hours of the press conference FSA leader Colonel Riad Asaad denied his involvement in the formation of the military bureau. In a phone call to Reuters from

Turkey, Asaad said, “Burhan Ghalion made this one-sided announcement. I did not know about it. We will not deal with [the military bureau] at all because we don’t know its aims or strategies.”²⁶

The formation of the military council represents the type of political maneuvering Ghalion resorted to in early 2012 in order to regain prestige. His belated recognition of the armed rebels represented a bid to gain support from the internal opposition groups by capitalizing on the FSA rebels’ popularity among citizen. However, many Syrians were skeptical about his intentions behind creating a military bureau. One Syrian who claimed to have fought with FSA rebels in the countryside near Idlib argued that Ghalion was trying to “be a hero like Colonel Riad Asaad.”²⁷ Another Syrian commented that it was a “typical” attempt to try to “gain power and dominate” competing elements and emphasized Ghalion’s need to act as a “stronger leader” if he is going to head the opposition.²⁸ Ghalion established his military council at the same time that the SNC was splintering in an effort to re-assert his position at the forefront of the opposition. Regardless of Ghalion’s intentions, his bid to unite the ranks of the opposition had not yet succeeded, as the FSA and SNC have yet to show any signs of cooperation in April 2012.

Challenge of Legitimacy

The SNC’s legitimacy on the ground has declined as the divisions within the council become more obvious. “We sense a bitterness from Syrian activists whenever the SNC is mentioned,” wrote journalist Hanin Ghaddar in late February 2012.²⁹ The SNC has been slow on critical issues, it has yet to meaningfully engage with local opposition forces, and it is losing credibility and influence on the ground as the conflict grows more militarized. An activist from Ariha, Idlib province said the SNC was not “in touch” with the Syrian people, and another from nearby Saraqib claimed it had “abandoned the people.”³⁰ One member of the Revolutionary Council of Homs reluctantly

stated that the SNC “was no better than Assad.”³¹ Meanwhile, protesters in a number of early 2012 demonstrations held in Damascus and other cities throughout Syria chanted, “Down with Assad, down with Ghalion.”³² These examples are anecdotal, but they are representative of overall disillusionment with the SNC.

Many Syrians have expressed a growing fear that SNC members are too busy competing for power and influence within their own organization to focus on helping people inside Syria. In its original charter, the SNC stated that the council’s presidency would be based on a rotating three-month term, a condition necessary to maintain the “democratic nature” of the council.³³ Yet, in what was arguably its first test of this democratic nature, the SNC extended Ghalion’s presidency in January 2012.³⁴ This sent a negative message to local demonstrators calling for democratic rule, who saw it as evidence that the SNC is attempting to co-opt the revolution and establish its own authority in Syria.

THE NATIONAL COORDINATION COMMITTEE

The National Coordination Committee (NCC), also commonly translated from Arabic as the National Coordination Body, is the second most widely recognized Syrian opposition organization. Like the SNC, the NCC is a coalition of opposition groups. Unlike the expatriate SNC, the NCC’s headquarters is in Damascus and the majority of its activities are based in Syria. The NCC was established in mid-September 2011, and moderate political activist Hassan Abdel Azim leads the organization. This internal opposition bloc consists of thirteen different groups including youth organizations, three Kurdish political parties, and a number of independent political activists.

The National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change is a subset of the NCC and forms the main bloc within the organization. The two have become largely synonymous, and media

outlets often use the names interchangeably to refer to the same organization. The bloc is composed of most of the political parties associated with the former National Democratic Rally, an opposition alliance that was active in the early 1980s.³⁵ It also counts among its members many nationalist and socialist figures, including some middle-ranking military defectors and civil servants such as former Hama Prosecutor Adnan Mohamed al-Bakour. Thus, NCC members have some political experience and past activism, which initially loaned credibility to the organization.

The NCC was the only opposition group still calling for dialogue with the Syrian government in April 2012. It is critical of all armed opposition groups and opposed to any form of foreign intervention that would involve military measures. Its members insist on a political solution that welcomes all of Syrian society, including members of the current regime. They argue that dialogue remains the least costly route to political transition and have sought to negotiate a political settlement with Assad's government based on the conditional withdrawal of the military from the streets, the cessation of government attacks against protestors, and the release of all political prisoners. The NCC has sent several of its members to participate in mediation work, particularly through the Arab League, and it has initiated talks with the Syrian government. The Syrian government has recognized the NCC because of its moderate approach, and it is the only organization allowed to plan and execute limited political opposition activities in Syria.

However, this political program has alienated other opposition groups, and the Assad regime's continued intransigence and escalation of violence has limited the NCC's support base. Some Syrians and fellow activists have accused the NCC of being a "puppet opposition movement controlled by the regime."³⁶ The fact that the NCC has been able to operate from a headquarters in Damascus amid repression has led some opposition leaders to believe the NCC is collaborating with the Syrian government. Today the NCC has a very limited

power base among the general population, and it is kept alive largely through the efforts of its important Paris-based office headed by influential dissident Haytham Manna.³⁷

The National Coordination Committee and Syrian National Council

The NCC and SNC share a joint history, and many of their members are closely tied. These members are established opposition figures with similar backgrounds in Syrian activism, despite their clear differences of opinion. For example, SNC member Riad Seif and NCC member Aref Dalila signed the same petition in 2001 demanding political reform and were both subsequently arrested. Following their release from jail, the men formed an online campaign in 2008 to boycott telecommunications company Syriatel with the hopes that it would do financial harm to the company's owner, Rami Makhoul, a cousin to Bashar al-Assad and an important member of his inner circle. Seif was the first signatory on the 2005 Damascus Declaration, a document drafted by NCC member Michel Kilo and signed by many SNC and NCC members.³⁸ These types of connections are common. Many members have interacted with one another since the 1980s and continue to do so. As Ghalioun emphasized, "They [NCC] have distanced themselves from the SNC in order to protect themselves, and we are aware that these oppositionists inside the country cannot go as far as us. But there are regular contacts with members of the group who privately support us, and seats have been reserved for them within the SNC."³⁹

Despite their shared histories, the groups' political programs are highly contentious and differ on how regime change in Syria should occur. Ghalioun and Azim tried to unite the two groups in December 2011 and again in January 2012, but the two coalitions have been unable to merge into one larger opposition organization. Moreover, the NCC boycotted the March 28 SNC meeting in Istanbul. NCC member Mahmoud Merei stated, "We were not even invited for a dialogue

over the future of the opposition,” highlighting the contentious relationship between the two groups.⁴⁰ Perhaps as the conflict grows more and more desperate the NCC may be less inclined to negotiate with the Syrian government, a position that would increase cooperation with the SNC. However, this would cause the NCC to forfeit the somewhat protected status the regime allows them, making it unlikely to abandon its call for a negotiated political solution.

GRASSROOTS OPPOSITION

“The slogan ‘the overthrow of the regime’ is impractical, unrealistic, and useless.”⁴¹ –Qadri Jamil, NCC member

This epigraph exemplifies the most basic differences between the established political opposition and the grassroots opposition movement. Often in the face of violent repression the Syrian people have rallied to demand dignity and freedom with the popular rallying cry “*al sha'b urid isqat al nizam*” – put simply, the people want the fall of the regime. This is the primary objective of the opposition within Syria, and few have articulated what would come after it is achieved.

This lack of vision reveals a disconnect between the protest movement, which represents grassroots political activity, and the established political opposition. Many observers have voiced concern over the inability of these formalized organizations to connect with Syrians themselves, but the grassroots movement has not been able to develop a coherent political alternative to the Assad regime. Yet the movement remains the most viable opposition group in Syria, despite the fact that it has yet to articulate a post-Assad future, because it represents the activists and people driving the revolution. The remainder

of this report explains how the organization and capabilities of the grassroots opposition groups are structured and how they could become a viable alternative to the Assad regime, even if they lack a united organizational body now.

Foreign states have not considered Syria's grassroots opposition movement an effective alternative to Assad. Assad regime's has restricted the flow of information out of Syria and made difficult the emergence of a single, unified organizational body that pushes a grand vision and program. The organization and relative unity of groups like the SNC and NCC makes them more palatable to an international audience, even though demonstrators have led the revolution. U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta made this point clear in March 2012 when he told a Senate committee, “Here you've got triple the problems [compared to Libya] because there are so many diverse groups that are involved. Whether or not they can find one leader, whether they can find that one effort to try to bring them together in some kind of council – there are efforts to try to make that happen, but frankly they have not been successful.”⁴²

As Panetta's comments make clear, having “one leader” or “council” makes it easier for foreigners to provide support by allowing one front to rally behind and hold accountable. However, the grassroots opposition groups in Syria are as worthy and capable of receiving support. Refusing to consider these groups as a viable political alternative and focusing exclusively on the established political opposition is a reaction to the perception of chaos. A closer look reveals that the grassroots opposition displays a level of organization and coordination that could lead to a helpful degree of unification in the future.

Linking Demonstrators to Political Structures

The Syrian revolution began on March 25, 2011 when a fifteen-year-old boy named Mohammed and a group of friends spray-painted “Down with the regime” on a school wall. At the time,



A youth activist in Douma, Syria holds a satirical sign. (Photo: Ziad Homsy)

they had no idea that their actions would spark a revolution. Two days later, security forces arrested and tortured the boys. Their detention and torture ignited huge protests in their hometown of Dera'a, even after they were released two weeks later. These protests spread to cities throughout Syria and have continued for more than a year.

The youths who sparked the revolution are representative of those who now stand at the forefront of the opposition, leading demonstrations, organizing rallies, and disseminating news to those outside Syria. The core members of the grassroots opposition groups range in age from fifteen to thirty-five and come from the poor and middle classes, which the Syrian government politically and economically marginalized. Most young activists tend to be non-ideological in the traditional political sense and are simply motivated by a desire for freedom, dignity, and basic human rights, unlike most members of the SNC and NCC, who are associated with ideological political parties.

Leading the Revolution

International media has focused on the SNC as the representative of the Syrian people, portraying the council as the revolution's leadership. As a result, the grassroots protest movement is treated as a mass of youthful demonstrators. However,

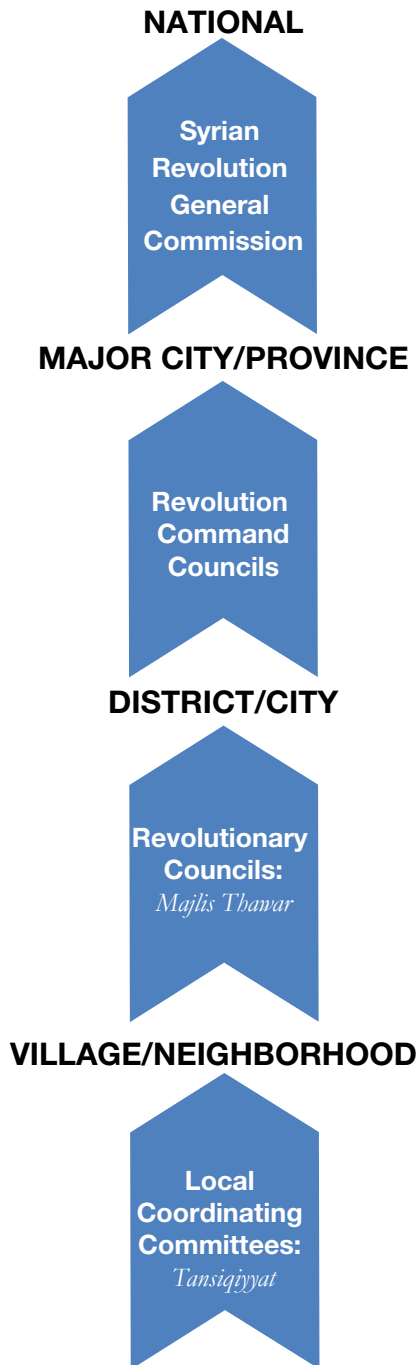
facts on the ground suggest there is a mature and sophisticated leadership driving the uprising. As the uprising has continued through the course of the past year, capable organizers and leaders have emerged. Local leaders have proven capable of thinking strategically and have attempted to develop a unified plan for achieving the revolution's aims.⁴³ They have also shown the capacity to regroup and develop new methods in response to both successes and defeats.

Though they have organized the opposition on a local basis, these leaders have managed to establish larger, more formal structures to coordinate the activities of the opposition. These structures, mostly in the form of revolutionary councils, have committees for organizing demonstrations, media outreach, security and armed operations, medical teams and humanitarian aid.⁴⁴

These activist leaders are often forced to live double lives or live in hiding, and their true identities are known only to a small group within their own communities. However, local leaders communicate and cooperate with one another on a national basis and are becoming increasingly organized.

Structure and Organization

The Assad regime's continuing crackdown has forced the primacy of local-level political structures, but a considerable degree of cooperation exists among these structures. Starting at a local level and moving outward, activists working in local coordinating committees mobilize support for demonstrations at the village and neighborhood level and coordinate with nearby committees. At the district and city levels, Revolutionary Councils and Revolution Command Councils coordinate the activities of the local committees and interface with armed opposition groups. At the national level, the Syrian Revolution General Council, as the main national grassroots coalition, promotes the activities of the regional councils, and serves as the main media outlet and interlocutor.



This represents the rough hierarchy of political activist groupings in Syria.

In many cases the Revolutionary Councils and the Revolution Command Councils are indistinguishable, but this is the most important level of political organization and military opposition integration.

The SRGC has demonstrated the ability to influence and work with the local groups, but does not directly control them.

Tansiqiyyat: Local Coordinating Committees

At the outset of the revolution activists organized themselves into small, localized committees that planned, documented, and publicized demonstrations. Known collectively as the Local Coordinating Committees, these committees became the organizational backbone of the Syrian revolution. Most Syrian villages and neighborhoods had their own coordinating committees by early 2012. There are around 400 different *tansiqiyyat* throughout Syria's cities and suburbs.⁴⁵ Volunteers of all backgrounds – male and female, young and old, and from all sects and religions – staff the *tansiqiyyat*.⁴⁶

Majlis Thawar: Revolutionary Councils

During the course of the revolution the protest movement evolved into a more elaborate structure of committees, councils, and commissions. Following the spread of the *tansiqiyyat* throughout the Syrian countryside, urban centers began to develop oversight councils called the Revolutionary (Rebels) Councils, or *majlis thawar*, which were responsible for managing committees in specific districts. Activists claim there are more than fifty such councils, with the more well-known councils in the districts around Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Dera'a, Idlib, Deir al-Zor, Damascus, and al-Raqqa.⁴⁷ Revolutionary councils serve as the main point of contact for local coordinating committees, organizing protests and other anti-regime activities, and coordinating with armed opposition groups.

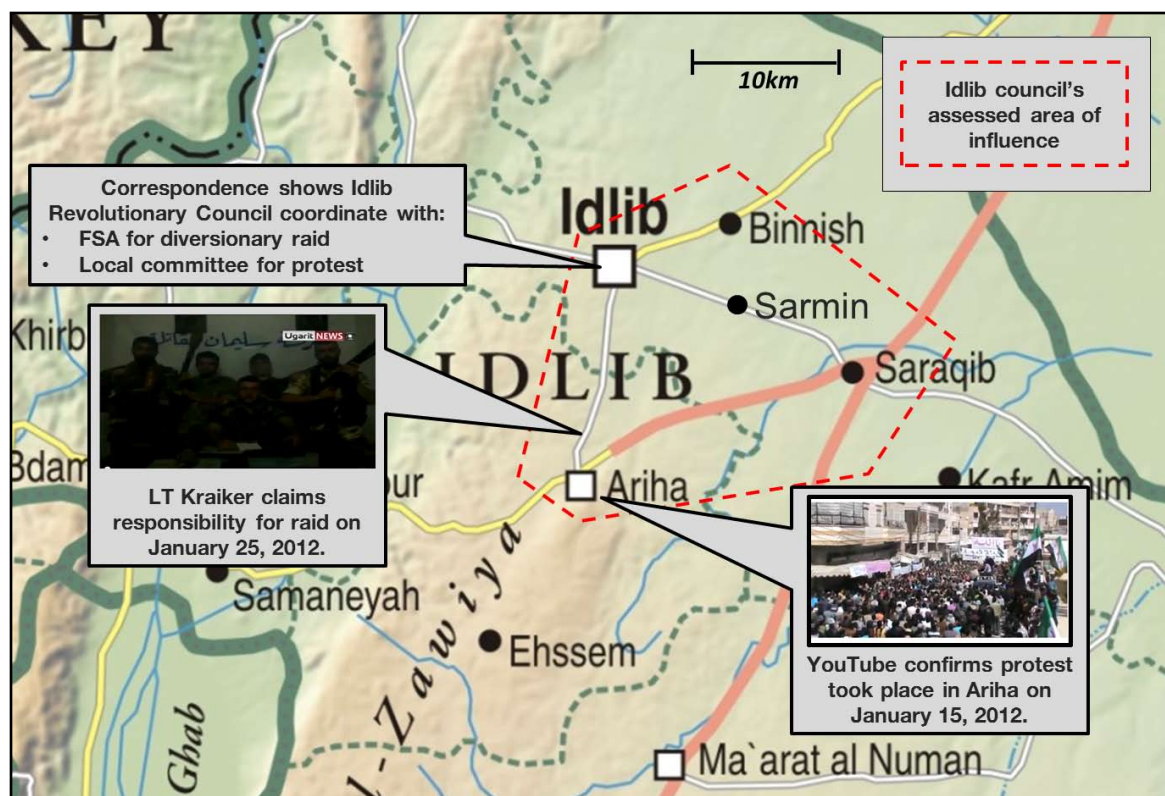
The Revolutionary Council of Homs, one of the more sophisticated councils, has become a virtual state-within-a-state.⁴⁸ The council boasts of an elected leadership and comprises separate divisions that handle armed operations, media outreach, demonstrations, medical and legal needs, and humanitarian aid. The council organizes protests and coordinates with security teams who block the streets to prevent regime security from entering and post lookouts to warn of approaching security forces on a daily basis. Its leaders coordinate with

medical teams to care for wounded demonstrators. Finally, it has several media activists and advisors who document the demonstration and ensuing security crackdown and then send the information to outside media and activists. As of January 2012, the Revolutionary Council of Homs was feeding 16,000 families throughout the province.⁴⁹ Moreover, it seems to have survived the regime's February bombardment and has continued its activities through April 2012.

To date, the revolutionary councils have proven the main organizational structure for the grassroots political opposition. They have been able to unite internally and develop structures that allow the councils to effectively manage the activities of the local coordinating committees within their districts. One member of the Revolutionary Council of Hama detailed its chain of command and outlined the various positions and roles of activists working for the council as of February 2012. He was responsible for coordinating opposition activities with the local committees in northwest Hama, including those in Kafr

Nabouda and Suqalabiya, and showed how he helped organize large-scale demonstrations that took place in both cities on March 13, 2012.⁵⁰ On this day, videos on YouTube confirm that protestors participated in a mass demonstration in Kafr Nabouda, and the website for the LCC stated that activists protested in Suqalabiya.⁵¹ These councils demonstrate a significant level of coordination and are able to communicate across the various committees.

One activist who jokingly called himself Abdel Muqawama (slave to the resistance) further detailed how the local committees and the councils work together. As a member of the al-Qusayr Coordinating Committee, he said organizers and activists from both the local committees and the revolutionary council meet together to plan the time and location of the protest. They decide on a slogan for the protest then create banners and signs to portray a unified message. They also coordinate logistics for the demonstration, often arranging for loudspeakers or sound systems and lighting if the demonstration will be held at



MAP 2 | IDLIB REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL COORDINATES ARMED & UNARMED OPPOSITION IN ARIHA ON JANUARY 25, 2012.

night. He and a group of other volunteers were responsible for documenting every incident that occurred in the city each day, including any protests, demonstrations, attacks, or other significant events. Another member of the committee was then responsible for delivering the list to the Revolutionary Council in Homs, thirty kilometers to the northeast, which would publish and distribute it. The Revolutionary Council in Homs also reported any notable incidents to its contacts within the armed resistance and coordinated operations based on that information, according to Abdel. He admitted that he did not know much about who the armed resistance was but said he had heard that armed rebels staffed the Revolutionary Council and helped support its actions.⁵²

A late January 2012 example demonstrates how one revolutionary council coordinates the activities of both the local coordinating committees in its area and rebel leaders, in this case engaging loyalist forces in one place in order to distract them from suppressing a demonstration elsewhere. A member of the Revolutionary Council in Idlib communicated with Lieutenant Zahir Kraiker, a well-known rebel leader affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, according to documentation provided by an activist inside Syria. The two men laid out detailed plans for a demonstration to occur at the same time as a guerilla operation in nearby Ariha, one of the key towns in Idlib district. The rebels mounted a raid to distract Syrian government forces that allowed the demonstration to proceed without forcible suppression.⁵³ Videos posted on YouTube confirm the operation's successful outcome. On the designated day, activists filmed a large demonstration in Ariha, and Kraiker claimed responsibility for a successful operation against loyalists in the city.⁵⁴

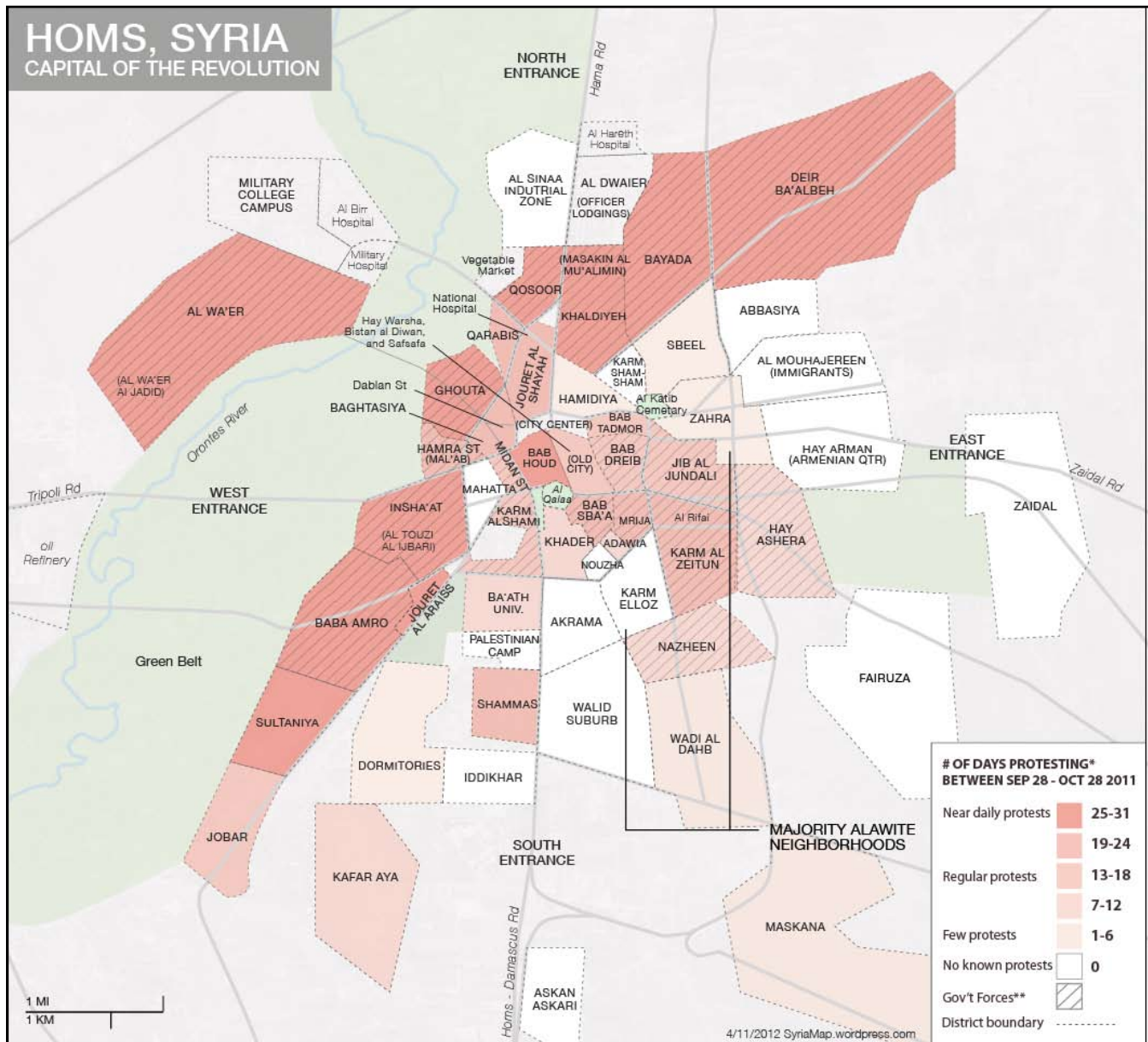
Majlis Qeyadat lil Thawra Suriyah: Revolution Command Councils

Some of the larger cities have formed Revolution Command Councils to organize and coordinate the activities of the smaller, more localized

committees and councils. The introduction to the Damascus Revolution Command Council charter stated that the goal of the council was to form "a united leadership for the revolution" based on a "strategic vision."⁵⁵ It also claimed to be an "alliance of all revolutionary elements in Damascus," representing the Local Coordinating Committee of Damascus, the Damascus Revolutionary Council, and "those protesting in the streets every day."⁵⁶

One activist, who asked to be called Bassem in honor of a friend who had recently been killed by government forces, explained the loose organizational structure. "First, you have the *tansiqiyyat*. They're the people in the villages and countryside who go out and document all the daily things that happen," he said. "Next is the *majlis thawar*, which will collect all the information to spread it out. They'll say, 'Have a demonstration at this time and this place,' but that usually just happens or comes from higher up. They also help defend protestors and coordinate with the armed rebels. In some places you have a Command Council, which helps organize all these parts, but then it gets difficult because it's easier for the government to find out."⁵⁷

This description sheds light on a few important facts regarding the organization of the grassroots opposition. First, important organizational structures clearly exist among the grassroots opposition. Though most of the coordination is done at the municipal level, there is a level of organization that extends from the villages and countryside into the cities. Second, both Bassem and Abdel Muqawama said the revolutionary councils coordinated with armed opposition members. Third, although Bassem said that most demonstrations "just happen," he also mentioned that councils "higher up" than the local coordinating committees plan them. Again, this suggests a significant degree of organization among the grassroots opposition, starting from the main urban centers and filtering through the towns and villages.

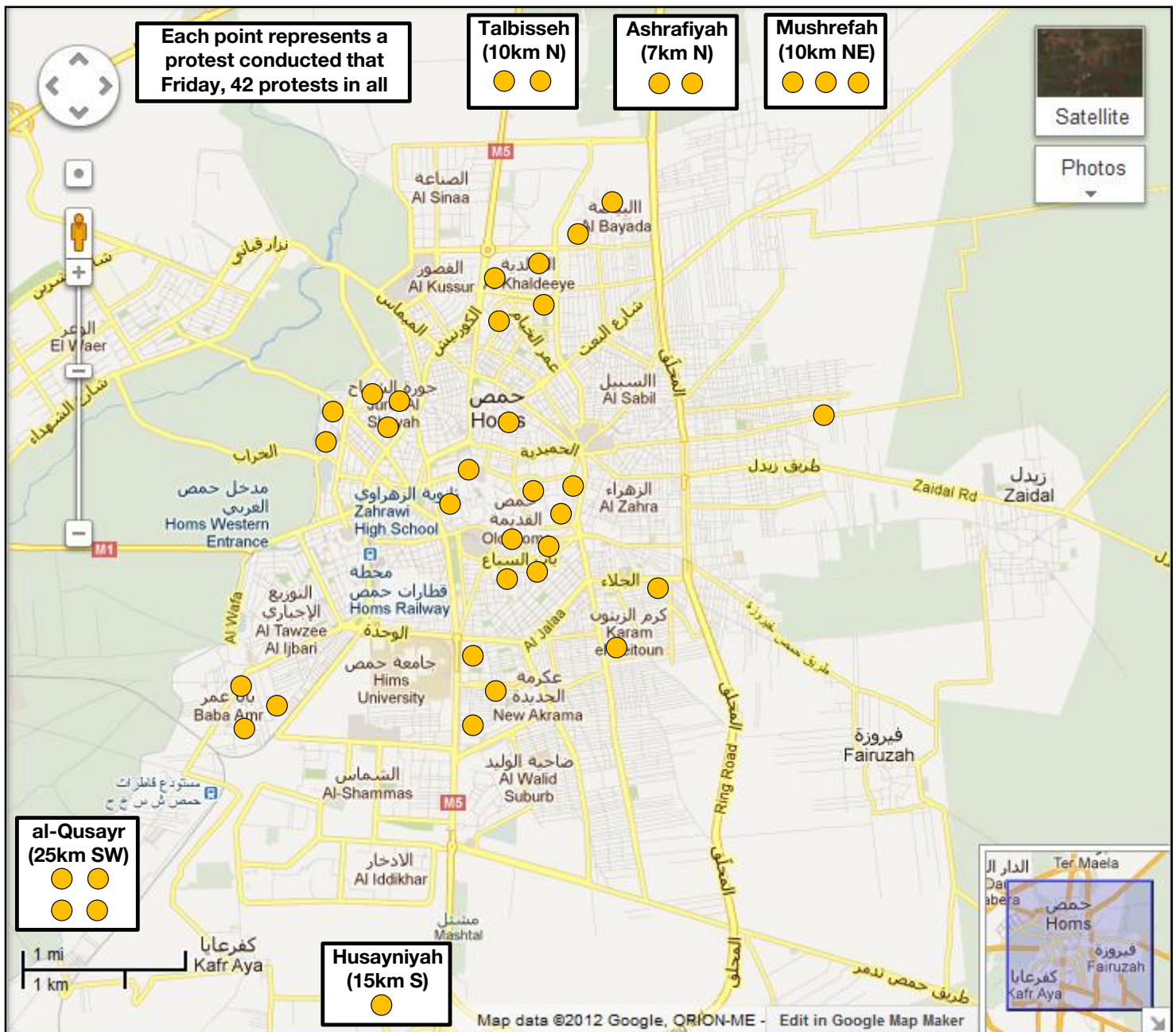


MAP 3 | HOMS PROTESTS BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 28 & OCTOBER 28, 2011. (COURTESY OF SYRIAMAP.WORDPRESS.COM)

The pointed comment about it being “easier for the government to find out” about the larger, more organized councils reveals the most important impediment to greater unity among Syria’s grassroots opposition. Organization requires communication and assembly. The Assad regime’s signals and human intelligence capabilities allow them to disrupt organizational meetings, detect activists, and target them. The Assad regime’s suppression is a defining limitation to the organizational capacity of the opposition on the ground in Syria. Activists have been forced to use creative ways to organize and communicate.

National Coalitions: The Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC)

The Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) is the largest grassroots coalition. It represents roughly 70 percent of the revolutionary councils and the majority of the local coordinating committees, with fifty-six different organizations officially recognized in its charter.⁵⁸ Though many of its key leaders have chosen to remain anonymous due to security concerns, the commission does include a number of prominent dissidents, including Suhair al-Atassi, Nidal



MAP 4 | PROTESTS COORDINATED BY HOMS REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL ON JANUARY 20, 2012.

Darwish, and SRGC spokesman Bassam Jarra. The SRGC has demonstrated a high degree of organization and has coordinated extensively with the local coordinating committees through its many bureaus and networks throughout Syria. It has representatives in the SNC and has been willing to cooperate with the council.

The commission's charter states that the SRGC's main goal is to unite the opposition and "help express its one voice." In order to do this, the

commission will participate in "civil, political, and media efforts" to support the political opposition and armed resistance.⁵⁹ The SRGC's website also outlines a detailed "strategic vision" for the struggle against the Assad regime. This vision is based on three components: mobilization and organization, the press and media, and diplomatic advocacy.

The SRGC has played a positive role in all three of these categories. On February 24, 2012,

the SRGC posted a document on its website titled “Pointers for Demonstrations.” This document, which the commission claimed to have distributed to all local coordinating committees, outlined basic principles for demonstrators and listed several points of advice for successful demonstrations.⁶⁰ Many demonstrations held that afternoon replicated the practices outlined in the document.⁶¹ The fact that these practices were used in demonstrations in cities as far away from each other as Dera’a and Idlib and that they occurred on the same day the document was published demonstrated the level of influence that the SRGC had with protestors. In another example of the SRGC’s influence, in September 2011 the Revolutionary Council of Hama released a statement saying that the NCC did not represent it and affirmed “the only legitimate representative for the people’s revolution is the SNC through their good relations with the SRGC.”⁶² The SRGC has also played an important role in gathering and disseminating information about Syria to the greater public. It has established its own “newsrooms” for receiving and publishing news, and its website provides detailed daily updates on events in all the major areas of Syria.

The SRGC has proven a capacity for adaptation and evolution. Originally known as the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SRCU), the group was dedicated solely to organizing and documenting the street protests, avoiding direct action. Members who once touted their freedom from politics as credentials to join the union are now actively engaged in political debate, and the group has decided to participate more directly in the political work of the uprising. As one SRCU member phrased it, “You can’t start a political program on Facebook. You have to be actively engaged in the political debate.”⁶³ This shift led to the merging of the SRCU with greater networks of political activists inside Syria, ultimately transforming the SRCU into the Syrian Revolution General Commission in August 2011.

While the overall response to the SRGC has been positive, some Syrians are reluctant to support the commission. One Syrian explained that he was wary of any group that claimed to “represent the people,” adding that “only the people can represent the people.”⁶⁴ Another Syrian echoed this sentiment, saying “there are too many groups trying to take over the revolution.”⁶⁵ Though neither of these Syrians directly referenced the SRGC, their comments reflect resentment among Syrians towards groups that claim to represent them. When asked his opinion on the SRGC, one Syrian activist who had volunteered with his local coordinating committee framed this resentment well. In answering, he shrugged his shoulders and resignedly asked, “Who’s that?” After a large sigh, he continued, “I don’t even know, who is the SRGC? Who is its leader? Who are its members? I know nothing about this group except that they claim to ‘represent the people’—but everyone claims to ‘represent the people.’”⁶⁶ These concerns may be justifiable in that it is very difficult to ascertain concrete information about many of the councils and commissions that are being formed. That the official SRGC website was registered in Bellevue, Washington is an indication of the questionable background of this group—a problem other national-level organizations share.⁶⁷

EXERCISES IN COORDINATION AND COOPERATION: NAMING THE FRIDAY PROTESTS

One of the defining features of the Syrian uprising has been the names given to the protests staged after Friday prayers. Protests throughout the country unanimously use just one name, calling into question assumptions about the protest movement’s fragmentation and warranting an examination of how these titles are chosen and disseminated. The process of naming Friday protests sheds light on how the Syrian opposition operates and reveals important features of its organizational capacity.

The process begins early in the week when a poll is posted on the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page, which is administered by an important group of grassroots activists closely aligned with the Syrian Revolution General Commission. The poll gives between five and eight possible names to choose from, and thousands participate in the vote. For example, during the week of March 19, 2011 the poll had received over 15,000 votes within the first five hours of it being posted, and the slogan “Friday of the Damascus Arrival” had garnered the most votes. The poll is usually closed late Wednesday night and the adopted slogan is then reposted on its Facebook page and the Facebook pages of the many committees, councils, and commissions that compose the body of the grassroots opposition. Sometimes these slogans are promoted in short YouTube clips in which the Friday protest name is accompanied by footage of the revolution and dramatic music. As a true testament to the power of social media and its role in the Syrian revolution, the winning name makes its way to the street.

Yet the Friday protest names were not always decided this way. In an interview, Wael Tamini, a Syrian journalist with the BBC’s Arabic service, explained, “In the earlier days or months of the uprising, the name was chosen by the admins of the Syrian Revolution page on Facebook, so the people did not used to vote on the name of the Friday [protests]. But actually, they complained to the admin. They told him, ‘We want a democratic Syria, so you have to give us a chance to vote for the name of the Friday [protests].’ And actually, the admins of the pages responded positively.”⁶⁸ This example demonstrates the capacity for democratic institutions and change.

COMMUNICATION AND LOGISTICS

One of the largest impediments facing the opposition in its attempt to organize across the disparate committees and councils throughout Syria is the Assad regime’s control of telecommunications within the country. The Syrian government can effectively cut off

communication, as the opposition relies on social media to communicate.

Grassroots opposition forces have few alternate means of corresponding when telecommunications are shut off. On March 16, it was reported that telecommunications in most Syrian provinces were cut off due to demonstrations held in commemoration of the one-year anniversary of the Syrian revolution.⁶⁹ The day this announcement was made, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights’ Facebook page stopped posting around 11 p.m. and did not start reposting until March 19. Similarly, LebanonNow’s live tracker stopped posting Facebook and Twitter activity at 11:30 p.m. and did not resume until March 19. Yet both sites continued to post limited links to YouTube videos documenting the protests. This demonstrates that the Syrian government’s ability to control telecommunications limits communication channels, but some activists are still able to get information out through other means.

Many activists have found ways to bypass government restrictions on telecommunications. After witnessing the Egyptian government’s success in shutting down all Internet and mobile phone networks, a group of Syrian activists tried to circumvent a similar move by distributing satellite phones and modems across Syria. Ammar Abdel Hamid, a Syrian activist based in Maryland, estimated that he and his group of activists had delivered more than 100 satellite phones and laptops to Syria.⁷⁰ In response, the Ministry of Information issued a statement on May 22 outlawing all satellite phones, citing them as a “means of dealing with foreign parties that intend to damage the national security.”⁷¹ However, illicit phones remain an important communication tool.

Censorship and the Syrian government’s monitoring have hindered communication. This issue has plagued attempts to unite the ground opposition, and as LCC spokesman Omar al-Idlibi stated, “Because of the regime’s policies, one

of the problems for the opposition in Syria is that we are always working as individuals, not groups, because we cannot work in public. We're always working in secret."⁷² For that reason grassroots political opposition leaders to keep decision-making localized and limited to a small group of trusted individuals. For example, one local coordinating committee in Aleppo discovered informants inside the committee were foiling their efforts to put together surprise demonstrations. The group was forced to cease much of its work and minimize its activities.⁷³ In another example, an activist from a local coordinating committee in the Damascus countryside complained that the committee was "completely ineffective" because the ranks of their volunteers had been "riddled with double agents."⁷⁴

The fact that the government uses Facebook to monitor and track activists in Syria has become so widely known that activists have resorted to using fake Facebook accounts as a means of deception. In his lecture titled "Plato's Digital Cave: The Arab Spring as a Battle of Representation," Marwan Kraidy, a professor of communication at the University of Pennsylvania, discussed not only the regime's potential for entrapment by attempting to identify activists through fake Facebook events and groups but also activists' attempts to deceive the government through fake accounts.⁷⁵ One activist described how he and a few of his friends had created a group on Facebook and then planned a demonstration via messages through the group's main account. The demonstration they had planned was intended only as a decoy to divert attention away from the actual demonstration that was to happen elsewhere.

This highlights the important paradox that has so far limited greater unity among the grassroots political opposition: the more organized activists become, the easier it is for Assad's forces to track their activities and suppress them. The Assad regime, recognizing the perils of greater opposition organization, has attempted to curb interface among the various groups by tightening

controls on communications. The government has monitored wide-scale communication and coordination and effectively stopped it in many instances. Activists must resort to organizing by word of mouth and use traditional meeting points such as mosques or neighborhood tea shops in order to circumvent government detection. In some cases, activists have resorted to atavistic forms of communication, such as carrier pigeons and smoke signals, in order to evade detection.⁷⁶

GRASSROOTS OPPOSITION AND THE SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL

The relationship between grassroots opposition and the SNC is ambiguous. Many of the local coordination committees have recognized the SNC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian opposition, and that subset has been conflated with all of the local committees in Syria. Most Syrian activists, including those involved in grassroots political organizations, initially hoped the SNC would effectively represent their movement. These supporters saw the SNC as a way to advocate for the Syrian revolution abroad and believed that resources available to the SNC would help propel their cause. Moreover, the histories of many prominent SNC members comforted them and, as one activist put it, they believed the Syrian opposition was "in good hands."⁷⁷

Yet, even from the beginning, the SNC's attempts to unite the Syrian opposition under its umbrella faced resistance from key grassroots activists. LCC spokesman Omar al-Idlibi repeatedly voiced his concern over supporting the council, and after it was formed in Istanbul in October he was among the first to question it. "This formation hurts the cause on the ground because they are rushed and not done in a professional way," he said.⁷⁸ Other activists have said that coordination should be left to them. A spokesman for one organization called the Coalition of Free Damascenes for Peaceful Change announced his group's intention to undermine the SNC, declaring "their plan now is to unite the committees on the ground."⁷⁹

He added, "As soon as we get done we'll elect a transitional council, but we don't want it to happen outside the country. People outside don't know what's going on inside. We're the ones with experience."⁸⁰ Another activist and protestor put it much more starkly. "Saying if they don't join this [the council] they don't support the revolution, it's bullshit," he said.⁸¹ More people are expressing similar views as the violent conflict escalates. The Syrian people are beginning to feel that the SNC has "lost touch" with the revolution.⁸² The result has been that the SNC faces growing demands from grassroots activists to "translate their words into actions."⁸³

The generation gap has also hindered friendly relations between the grassroots opposition and the SNC. The coordinating committees and the Syrian Revolution General Commission are mostly composed of youth-led groups that form the majority of those demonstrating in the streets. On the other hand, the SNC is better known as the established opposition since many of its members have been politically active since the early 1980s. The new generation of protestors that has led the Syrian uprising distrust the established dissidents for being too close to the regime or for having failed to deliver significant democratic change in the past.

GRASSROOTS OPPOSITION AND THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY

With growing calls to provide weapons and support to the armed opposition in Syria, many SNC members fear that the balance of influence and power is rapidly shifting away from the political opposition. The dispute over the SNC's announcement of a military bureau is emblematic of the contentious relationship between Ghalioun and FSA leader Riad Asaad. This has fueled internal discussions over the political challenge to the current civilian-led opposition posed by the rise of the armed opposition.

The prospect of armed revolutionaries who are unresponsive to any civil control threatens hope for a viable post-Assad government, but

positioning the SNC as the only viable alternative to Assad may not achieve the desired relationship between political and armed opposition. The FSA-aligned rebels pose a challenge to SNC efforts to present it as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Furthermore, rebels have cast a shadow over the council by questioning Ghalioun's actions and motives. FSA-aligned rebels do not pose a challenge to ground-level political opposition, though, and there is a degree of cooperation between the two groups, especially as violence has escalated in the spring of 2012. The fact that insurgent groups work under the guidance of local councils indicates that the grassroots opposition has the potential to become a viable political alternative upon the fall of the Syrian government.

Revolutionary Councils and Joint Operations

A number of grassroots activists have commented on the connection between the Revolutionary Councils and members of the armed opposition. One member of the Revolutionary Council of Baniyas said they often worked with armed rebels, coordinating demonstrations in an attempt to ensure a certain degree of civilian protection during protests that sometimes escalated to violence.⁸⁴ Another member of the same council confirmed his colleague's report, saying that liaison with FSA rebels was an important function of the Revolutionary Council. "That's how it is in most of the cities," he added.⁸⁵ He attested to his claims by providing a chain of emails that suggested significant contact between the civilian head of the Baniyas Revolutionary Council and armed rebel leadership in the area.⁸⁶ Whether or not this correspondence resulted in any form of concrete coordination, the communication itself reflected a growing cohesion among the opposition groups on the ground and a desire to cooperate.

Many reports in the Arabic press document instances of FSA soldiers entering a city, or part of a city, specifically to protect civilians during a demonstration and then leaving as soon as it



Syrians protest in honor of martyred rebels in Homs. (Photo: Ziad Homsi)

ends. An activist named Bashar al-Harakki told al-Mustaqbal News that during a large protest in Damascus, “FSA elements came early to position themselves around the city center where the protest took place. They were very organized and left as soon as it ended.”⁸⁷ Similar reports have emerged since September 2011 in Rastan, and there are neighborhoods in Damascus, Homs, and even Aleppo where armed opposition fighters guard roads leading to demonstrations to hold off security forces.⁸⁸

In another interview, one activist went so far as to say that the two groups largely overlapped. “One day they’d have a gun over their shoulder, and they’d be shooting at Assad’s forces, and the next day they’d be standing next to you in a demonstration, chanting for the same things you were chanting for,” he exclaimed.⁸⁹ The FSA and the local opposition committees consist largely of ordinary citizens who are fighting the daily realities of an uprising and its harsh repression, so this is plausible but hard to verify. Evidence suggests that the FSA and grassroots opposition in Syria tend to support each other and work together when appropriate or possible. Grassroots activists and organizations share much of the popularity the FSA has enjoyed, and largely for the same reason: Both groups are seen as part of the “popular resistance” against the Syrian regime. This is juxtaposed with the SNC and NCC, which advocate on their behalf but remain insulated from the conflict.

Civilian Protection Commission

The Civilian Protection Commission (CPC) is an example of a local organization that demonstrates a high level of cooperation between armed rebels associated with the FSA and grassroots political activists, as well as the ability to connect with a broader network of activists and opposition leaders. On February 16, a former *shabiha* member who became a well-known activist named Abu Jafaar after his defection announced the formation of the Civilian Protection Commission in Homs. In his video statement Abu Jafaar states that the newly created commission was “created in response to the crisis in Homs.” It required a joint effort on behalf of all “military and civilian disciplines,” and it consists of “leaders of the FSA and its civilian counterparts,” he said.⁹⁰ Days after Abu Jafaar’s statement, demonstrators in central Homs’ Bab Houd neighborhood, and in al-Qusayr, thirty kilometers to the southwest, announced the creation of the Civilian Protection Commission.⁹¹ During the demonstration in Bab Houd, the protestors chanted, “The people support the Civilian Protection Commission,” while they held signs that read, “The Syrian people give the Syrian National Council one last chance to translate their words into actions. It is time to act for the people.”⁹²

The creation of the Civilian Protection Commission elicited an overwhelming response from both armed opposition groups and civilian activists. Within days, numerous ‘battalions’ formed around Homs to support the CPC,⁹³ and many civilian activists, including human rights groups and health organizations comprised of doctors and nurses, pledged their loyalty to the group.⁹⁴ In one video, a group of FSA soldiers stand together with a group of doctors to proclaim the need to defend civilians against the “atrocities committed by the Assad regime.”⁹⁵

The CPC also sent representatives to the February 24 Friends of Syria meeting in Tunis. A statement announcing its decision to attend said that the CPC’s representatives would voice its full support

KEY INDEPENDENT FIGURES

Certain independent figures who have been associated with the SNC have split with the council over key issues and retained a degree of legitimacy within the grassroots opposition movement, largely through their deep networks in the country.

Kamal Labwani

Labwani split with the council in February 2012 over disagreements about supporting armed opposition in Syria. Labwani continues to work with a network of political and military opposition on the ground.

Walid Al-Bunni

A prominent Syrian dissident who was is an important member of the SNC's foreign policy bureau. He has repeatedly criticized the SNC for its failure to recognize the FSA and in late February he created a faction within the SNC called the that adamantly called for greater support to the armed opposition.

Haythem Maleh

Maleh 's membership in the SNC has also wavered between support and resignation due to conflict with other senior SNC members over key issues. While an important figure, his ability to access opposition networks in Syria is less credible due to his limited connections with youth activists.

for both the armed resistance and the political resistance “on Syrian soil.”⁹⁶ This emphasis on the resistance “on Syrian soil” was repeated throughout the text and was combined with rhetoric about the “true Syrian people” and their “popular resistance against the Assad regime.”⁹⁷ The text seems to counter the claims of the Syrian National Council as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, instead suggesting that both the armed and political resistance on the ground are more truly representative. In this way the CPC may prove an important example of how the grassroots opposition can develop an organization capable of uniting armed and political elements of the opposition.

BRIDGING THE GAP: KEY NATIONAL FIGURES

Building a successful opposition force in Syria that is capable of challenging Assad's government and serving as a viable alternative to the regime depends on authenticating the established political organizations within the grassroots community. Winning the trust of young Syrians who are organizing and driving the uprising on the ground is not an easy task. It will require

opposition veterans on the outside to relegate greater authority to these activists, and it will require an effort to be more responsive to those working on the ground.

It is necessary to restructure the SNC in a way that allows it to be more responsive to those on the ground and more representative of the Syrian people. One possible way to achieve this goal is providing greater support to key individuals who have both clout in the SNC and deep connections to those on the ground. Such figures have the potential to develop greater ties between the SNC and the grassroots political opposition. In the words of Joshua Landis, director of the Center of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oklahoma, “Syria needs a George Washington.”⁹⁸ The idea that there needs to be a central figure who has the support of the Syrian people and can also serve as the “face” of the Syrian opposition to the outside world is critical. Such an individual may bridge the gap between the disparate opposition groups. Below are a few individuals who have the potential to act in this role.

Kamal Labwani

Kamal Labwani is a Syrian doctor and artist, and he is one of the most prominent members of the Syrian opposition. Born in Zabadani in 1957, Labwani has a long history of activism. Popular stories say that he first took to the streets in 1963 after Hafez al-Assad helped stage a military coup. At the time he was only six years old. In 1982, while serving as a military doctor, Labwani witnessed the Hama massacre. As a result, he became an opponent to the ruling Ba'ath Party and often criticized the Assad regime. He became involved in the Damascus Spring movement in 2000 and helped create a forum for national dialogue with fellow dissident Riad Seif, a current SNC member. In September 2001 he and Seif were arrested, and he spent the next three years in prison. Following his release, he became a dedicated political activist, establishing a political union based on principles of democracy, liberalism, and secularism.⁹⁹

Labwani was the first Syrian dissident to be invited to the White House in 2005, a visit he was later imprisoned for. Labwani, a former Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, has spent most of the past decade in prison.¹⁰⁰ The Syrian government released Labwani in what appeared to be an effort to show flexibility and sincerity hours before the Arab League was set to suspend Syria's membership in the organization in 2011.¹⁰¹

Labwani has played an active role in the Syrian uprising since his release. Originally a member of the SNC, he announced his resignation from the council in March, criticizing the SNC's ineffectiveness.¹⁰² Shortly after his resignation, he put forth a plan for establishing a more balanced and effective Transitional National Assembly that better reflects the opposition on the ground in Syria, "the democracy activists who embody the will of the people to stand up to despotism and brutality."¹⁰³ Outlining his plan for the Assembly, Labwani wrote, "We, a group of non-partisan activists writing from within Syria, seek to properly reproduce the political representation in a balanced way that is in line

with internal concerns "This Assembly will adopt a constitutional declaration that will define the powers and functions of the opposition to organize them and determine the new identity of the state and its future system." He then defined a two-tiered strategy that would support both a liberal political agenda and military action. According to Labwani, "adopting an organized armed struggle that is national and non-partisan, with financial, logistical and political support of friends," is the best way to "end the regime and provide a viable alternative to Assad."¹⁰⁴

Labwani seeks to create an opposition organization that can respond to the needs of both the Syrian people and the international community. Drawn on Labwani's deep ties to Syrian activists and an extensive on-the-ground network, this assembly may support the creation of real, not merely political, momentum towards the revolutionary transformation that has so far been propelled by the grassroots movement. It may also be the type of restructured national opposition organization necessary for garnering greater international support.

Suhair Atassi

Suhair Atassi is an outspoken Syrian activist who, until January 2012, had been organizing opposition activities in Damascus. Atassi hails from a prominent political family and was highly influenced by her father, Jamal al-Atassi, who was a great political mind respected in many political circles. Her own activism began during the Damascus Spring when she helped establish a pro-democracy forum in the name of her father. She now runs the Jamal Atassi Forum group on Facebook. This Facebook group is an extension of the banned Jamal Atassi Forum, which calls for political reforms in Syria, including the reinstatement of civil rights and the cancellation of the emergency law that suspended constitutional rights in 1963.¹⁰⁵

Atassi was an important figure in the grassroots movement and organized numerous protests.

She also helped establish the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union and is a member of the Syrian Revolution General Commission.¹⁰⁶ After months of coordinating domestic opposition, in January 2012 she left Syria for Paris, where she is now calling on the international community to “provide political and logistical support to the revolution.” She said she left Syria to bring the opposition movement “to a new stage at a critical time.”¹⁰⁷ As an important leader within the SRGC, Atassi has already shown a capacity to unite local and national opposition groups.

Yahya Sharbaji

Yahya Sharbaji is an example of a national figure who epitomizes the heart of the grassroots movement. Unlike the older established dissidents like Labwani and Atassi, Sharbaji is a leader of the youth movement. The Assad regime imprisoned him in September 2011, but he is a nationally recognized example of the type of young activists who have played a leading role in Syria's revolution.

Sharbaji was born in Damascus' Daraya suburb in 1979 and began participating in non-violent activism around 1999 when he joined a group known locally as the Daraya youth. This group was comprised of about twenty-five young men and women committed to studying non-violence. During the early 2000s, at the time of the Damascus Spring, the Daraya youth met regularly to clean up streets and conduct anti-corruption campaigns. By 2003, many of the group's members had been arrested due to their participation in public assemblies. The group disbanded shortly afterward, but its effects continue to be felt in Daraya today as protestors in the area often cite its members as role models.

Sharbaji became a key field organizer for demonstrations in Daraya during the early stages of the Syrian uprising. Sharbaji became known as “the man of roses” because he was committed to non-violence and would give roses to the armed forces sent to repress protestors. His rose

initiative soon expanded further to writing notes attached to the roses, saying things such as, “We are your brothers. The nation is big enough for all of us. Please don't shoot.” Sharbaji became a local hero and was well-known throughout Syria for his commitment to the uprising and calling for peaceful, democratic reform.¹⁰⁸

On September 6, 2011, Sharbaji was arrested with fellow activist Ghaith Matar, whose body was sent back days later.¹⁰⁹ Sharbaji remains in prison. Razan Zaitouneh, another well-known grassroots activist, wrote about Sharbaji and the effectiveness of his demonstrations in spreading non-violent values even while facing bullets.¹¹⁰

Labwani, Atassi, and Sharbaji represent leaders who have the potential to bridge the gap between the established political coalitions working largely from abroad and the grassroots protest movement. However, finding a single leader in the Syrian context is unlikely. The Syrian revolution has been sustained largely because of its decentralized and fragmented nature, which has made it difficult for the Assad regime to suppress. As one activist stated, “The positive aspects of keeping the internal opposition without a known political leadership outweigh the negatives.”¹¹¹ While it is important that there be greater cohesion and unity among the various political opposition groups – something that may be achieved through key figures – it will remain necessary to work within the framework of the nascent political-military structures that have formed at a local level.

CONCLUSION

Thousands of Syrian protestors have taken to the streets every day for over a year, often under fire from Assad's forces as he presses to end the uprising. Yet, U.S. policymakers have had difficulty identifying the Syrian political opposition and have relied on more accessible but less representative organizations, namely the SNC. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in September 2011, “The opposition in Libya had a face, both the people who were doing

the outreach diplomatically and the fighters. We could actually meet with them. We could eyeball them. We could ask them tough questions.” Her comments highlight the difficulties of engaging the Syrian opposition without a united representative organization.

Any successful U.S. policy in Syria should focus on constructing such an organization as a viable alternative to Assad’s government. Established political coalitions such as the SNC have articulated a national vision for a post-Assad future and have received nominal support from the international community, yet they lack strong networks and popular legitimacy inside Syria. On the other hand, the grassroots political opposition has gained the support of the people, but it lacks a national vision and a cohesive message as the basis for international support. The key to creating an effective national opposition lies in connecting the established national coalitions with the grassroots political movement.

Until these two forces can align, the international community will need to provide greater support to the opposition on the ground rather than focusing exclusively on the Syrian National Council. Policymakers must understand that they may not get to sit across the table from a single opposition party. Rather, they will have to work directly with political-military structures that have formed at a local level and find ways to support the protest movement directly.

Syria’s grassroots political opposition is organized, despite perceptions of disunity. Although the protest movement is inherently localized, it has been forced to remain so in order to evade government repression. The grassroots protest movement has become tactically adept, better organized, and more cohesive regardless of these constraints. Through increasing coordination between the local coordinating committees and the revolutionary councils, it has proven its resilience and demonstrated substantial capabilities for

mobilization. These are capabilities that can be built on.

The lack of secure communications equipment has hindered the opposition’s ability to coordinate above the local level. Their ability to act on a united front has been crippled by the government’s overwhelming capacity to monitor, track and suppress greater organization. Clinton announced in early April that the U.S. would provide non-lethal support to opposition groups, including secure communications equipment, which is vital to their efforts. This new equipment may help the protest movement overcome the limitations under which they operate and develop even greater cohesion.

Even if Assad can be persuaded to de-escalate violence in Syria, the conflict may have reached the point where a negotiated settlement is no longer possible. The protest movement is unlikely to accept any outcome that falls short of Assad’s removal, and the regime is not prepared to concede to this. Unless the U.S. is prepared to allow the Assad regime to stay in power, it must consider developing relations with critical elements of the opposition inside Syria. This will require developing a strategy that builds a viable alternative to Assad from the ground up, rather than relying solely on the SNC. Pursuing such a policy would allow the U.S. to help Syria’s opposition achieve shared objectives and to manage the consequences should the Assad regime fall or the conflict protract.

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