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Research Report

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Struggling to Build an Alternative to Assad

Structural Flaws and Lack of Protection Undermine Syria's Opposition Government

Khaled Yacoub Oweis

International powers backing the Syrian opposition are turning their attention to an Interim Government founded in November 2013. The February 2014 collapse of the Geneva peace talks, which were supposed to produce a political transition, and growing alarm over chaos in rebel areas and gains by hard-line Islamists, have prompted renewed efforts to help the opposition fill the vacuum left by the collapse of central authority in large parts of Syria. Yet, the new entity has had little impact on the ground. Nor does the sacking of its first prime minister after only months bode well for its independence. In addition, regime strikes, opposition infighting, and a fundamental lack of security will lead to failure unless the opposition is revamped and a military umbrella created to allow it to govern inside Syria.

Syria's divided opposition has failed to provide an alternative to President Bashar al-Assad since the outbreak of the revolt against his rule in March 2011. The creation of the Western- and Arab-backed National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (the Coalition) in November 2012 did little to improve the situation. A power struggle between Qatari- and Saudi-backed blocs swiftly emerged and has since become chronic. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the Coalition's best organized faction, ended up holding the balance between the two wings. Addressing demands to provide basic services in areas outside Assad's control became secondary to internal politicking. Under international pressure, the Coalition sent a delegation to

represent the opposition at the doomed Geneva peace talks in January 2014. It has managed little else in the way of coherent strategy to counter gains by the Assad regime and the rising influence of al-Qaeda and its Islamic State (IS) offshoot, formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Moderate rebels, loosely gathered under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) banner, have been left controlling pockets in northern Syria, areas around Damascus and Homs, and the southern province of Deraa.

Technocrats to the Rescue?

Lacking military might, the Coalition set up an Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) to coordinate humanitarian work with the

Opposition Players

Ahmad Jarba: Saudi Arabia's point man in the opposition. A tribal figure, Jarba has good ties with the majority Kurds in his home region of northeastern Syria. He was instrumental in bringing the Kurdish National Council, a grouping of Kurdish parties that excludes the PYD, into the Coalition.

Mustafa al-Sabbagh: A businessman with strong connections to Qatar, Sabbagh's influence strengthened in July 2014 after striking an implicit power-sharing deal with Jarba that split senior Coalition posts between the Saudi- and Qatari-backed wings, and resulted in the sacking of Ahmad Tomeh, the interim prime minister who belonged to neither of the two camps.

Ahmed Tomeh: A former political prisoner from the province of Deir al-Zor, Tomeh's history of working equally with Islamist and secular opposition figures helped him become interim prime minister. But he exhibited a streak of independence that got him sacked. A moderate Islamist, Tomeh broke an opposition taboo after taking office by harshly criticizing al-Qaeda and describing it as being as repressive as the Assad regime.

international community, but political interference and allegations of corruption have undermined its operations, prompting calls for a technocratic opposition Interim Government to fill the basic services and administrative vacuum in areas outside Assad's control.

Disagreements between the Qatari- and Saudi-backed blocs prevented the formation of an Interim Government until the pro-Saudi bloc took control of the Coalition in mid-2013, following an expansion that almost doubled the Coalition's General Assembly membership to 123. Sensing the change in the regional mood, the Muslim Brotherhood backed the Coalition's en-

largement, which diluted its outright numbers, but positioned it as a kingmaker.

Western powers, irked by Qatar's support for militant Islamist forces and dominance over Coalition politics, had pushed for the expansion. The weakening of the Qatari faction opened the way for the election of Ahmad Jarba, a Saudi-backed tribal figure, as President of the Coalition in July 2013.

Although Jarba's term expired in July 2014 when he was succeeded by his confidant Hadi al-Bahra, Jarba has remained the most powerful member of the Coalition. Bahra's appointment was apparently the outcome of a power-sharing deal that left the Coalition's presidency with the Saudi wing but gave the Qatari faction the position of secretary-general and one of the three vice-presidents.

Ignoring its own public statements about the need for technocrats, the Coalition eventually in November 2013 named a ten-person Interim Government comprised largely of political appointees owing allegiance to various power brokers. The cabinet broadly mirrored the de facto regional and ethnic/confessional make-up of the Coalition, as well as a strong Islamist slant that the Coalition retained despite the inclusion of secular figures in its 2013 expansion. At least four ministers out of the nine remaining after the forced May 2014 resignation of Defense Minister Asaad Mustafa are linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, which was also awarded key advisory positions and a large share of the secretariat. International donors have been eager for the Interim Government to propose viable projects for financing. But regional and political affiliation has become the major hiring criterion, risking incompetence and undermining the Interim Government's claim to be technocratic.

The response to the establishment of the Interim Government was lukewarm. Given that it was announced in the run-up to the U.S.- and Russian-sponsored Geneva talks which were supposed to produce a transitional authority formed jointly by the opposition and the regime, Russia saw it as

undermining the Geneva conference while the United States did not want to appear to be endangering the talks.

Without a clear mandate, the Interim Government has become embroiled in feuds with the Coalition that have deepened funding shortages. Its first interim prime minister, the moderate Islamist Ahmad Tomeh, tried to steer an independent course and was sacked along with his cabinet in July 2014. Whoever replaces him will also have to deal with a patchwork of local, and often rival, organizations in rebel-held areas that have been trying to compensate for the collapse of municipal services. These groups, operating as local administrative councils or relief bodies, often receive financial support from foreign governments, international aid groups, Syrian expatriates and opposition actors, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood and Mustafa al-Sabbagh, a central Coalition player linked to Qatar.

Weakened by political spats and Tomeh's sacking, the Interim Government will struggle not to fall under the thumb of the Coalition. Tomeh worked to keep lines of communication open with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, so as to build a constituency inside Syria without falling victim to the rivalry between the two backers. Millions of people in rebel areas are having to cope mostly unaided with dire living conditions, made worse by regime bombardment and jihadist advances. An exile opposition leadership largely disconnected from the grassroots and territorial conflicts between various rebel brigades that exacerbate the collapse of security have only worsened the malaise.

With the external opposition largely discredited on the ground, the Interim Government's relationship with local communities will depend on the extent to which it is seen as promoting local leaders who have experienced repression and regime attacks. One early test came when Othman al-Bediwi, minister for local administration, relief, and refugees, began his tenure by attempting to streamline the

local administrative councils, which number some seven hundred across rebel-held territory. These councils have struggled to operate independently of rebel brigades that have established their own fiefdoms. The chaos is acute in regions of low-intensity warfare in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, where rebel brigades have become more interested in carving out territory than fighting Assad's forces. Bediwi sacked several councils and organized new elections for others. Inside Syria, the move was largely seen as political interference, and Bediwi's meetings with local activists have therefore been stormy. But the latter reluctantly went along with the changes, hoping they would result in an inflow of project funding. The continuing working relationship between the two sides will depend on the Interim Government's ability to deliver.

Hesitant Patrons

The task of the opposition government is complicated by its relationship with the Coalition, which claims to represent the Syrian nation but has neither acted as a provisional parliament nor produced a strong command. Instead, the Coalition has emerged as a hodgepodge of competing interests with little focus on how to depose Assad. There are no institutional guidelines governing the relationship or dividing powers between the Coalition and the Interim Government. Indeed, the Coalition can choose at will to table a no-confidence vote, as it did in July 2014. This subjects the Interim Government to the constant risk of being made a scapegoat for a largely discredited opposition.

The Interim Government, which is based in the southern Turkish city of Gaziantep, initially received \$1.5 million in financing from the Coalition before the relationship between the two sides deteriorated. The only other funding has been a €50 million (\$68.2 million) grant from Qatar in December 2013. Most of the Qatari funds were spent on paying salaries, especially to teach-

ers inside Syria, and on small projects, such as building wells, providing artificial limbs, and repairing cell towers and electricity lines, mainly in northern Syria. Up to €12 million in handouts went to FSA brigades to co-opt them into supporting the Interim Government's operations and its stated goal of moving its headquarters to northern Syria.

Although supplying funding, the Interim Government has had little influence on the rebels on the ground. No framework for co-operation with the FSA has been achieved. Its command, the Supreme Military Council, underwent several power struggles before falling largely under the influence of Jarba at the beginning of 2014.

Tensions with the Coalition inevitably grew as the international spotlight fell on the Interim Government. Tomeh was invited to address a Friends of Syria meeting in London in May 2014, which infuriated Jarba and was seen by some in the Coalition as infringing on its foreign policy powers. The Friends of Syria officially include more than one hundred countries supporting the Syrian opposition. The core group of eleven active members who hold regular meetings comprises Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, as well as Egypt, which forced most of the Syrian opposition to leave its territory after the ouster of President Mohammad Morsi in July 2013.

Reluctant to cede influence, the Coalition has kept afloat its own Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) and has not followed through on a decision by its leadership committee to attach the ACU to the Interim Government. The ACU has come under allegations of corruption and its head, Osama al-Qadi, who is close to the Muslim Brotherhood, quit in June 2014. Qadi, who denied any wrongdoing, was subsequently appointed assistant for economic affairs to the interim prime minister, in an indication of the Brotherhood's influence over the Interim Government. The subsequent appointment of a new head raised hopes of

an end to graft and political interference in the organization, but the ACU's unresolved status and its separate existence alongside the Interim Government poses a dilemma for international donors who were hoping to see a streamlining of aid.

Entrenched Regime

The Coalition might be in a position to afford bickering or poor governance if it was facing a weak regime, or if it enjoyed the kind of strong support from allies that Assad does. But the opposition has had no answer to Assad's political and battlefield gains. In mid-2014, rapid advances by the Islamic State across eastern Syria and Iraq, and the prospect of the United States coordinating (however implicitly) with Iran to reverse the group's advances in Iraq, have strengthened Assad's claim to be a bulwark against terrorism.

That message was also central to the presidential elections held in June 2014 in the midst of raging conflict and against the will of much of the international community. The ballot took place in areas under regime control, mainly the centre of the country, the coast, and parts of the provinces of Hama and Aleppo north of Damascus. With the cooperation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has close links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), polling stations were also set up in the mostly Kurdish northeast.

Predictably, Assad won a third seven-year term, extending four decades of dynastic rule based on ceremonial ballots but underpinned by a security apparatus dominated by his minority Alawite group. Assad officially gained 88.7 percent of the vote, compared with 97.6 percent in a 2007 referendum and 99.7 percent when he inherited power from his father, the late Hafez al-Assad, in 2000. In a nod to an election law adopted in March 2014 that allowed multiple candidates for the first time since Assad family rule began in 1970, two other contenders were allowed to run. Neither criticized Assad or the crackdown. Most of the

opposition boycotted the elections, including the secular National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), which the regime had previously described as “patriotic opposition.”

Official turnout was 73 percent, but anecdotal evidence and witness accounts of empty polling stations whenever state television cameras left the scene suggest far smaller participation, comprising mainly Alawite loyalists, other minorities, and government workers traditionally coerced to vote. After the elections, prominent NCB members were banned from leaving Syria. The ballot all but destroyed the 2012 Geneva framework for a transitional authority and set the scene for prolongation of the military stalemate, thus increasing the pressure on the opposition to come up with a working administrative alternative of its own in the areas outside Assad’s control.

Islamist Ascendancy

During the course of 2013 and the first half of 2014, most territory outside regime control, except in the southern province of Deraa, fell to three hardline groups: the Salafist Islamic Front, the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front, and the al-Qaeda breakaway Islamic State. The Islamic Front has a strong presence in the northern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib near the border with Turkey and appears to be influenced by Qatar, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia. Its cooperation, or at least non-interference, would be crucial for the opposition government’s plans to concentrate on northern Syria as the most accessible region to service.

The Islamic Front has been under pressure. Its links with al-Qaeda apparently prompted a drop in funding from the Gulf from the beginning of 2014. In May 2014, Turkey and Qatar nudged the Islamic Front into adopting a “code of honor” that avoids the harsh jihadist rhetoric that has become the hallmark of the insurgency, and makes no mention of imposition of an Islamic state. The Islamic Front took over an opposition local council in the northern prov-

ince of Idlib in mid-2014 after hearing that it was due to receive \$1.5 million from the Interim Government.

The more dogmatic Islamic State has proven a much more difficult, and deadlier, challenge for the Western-backed opposition. The al-Qaeda offshoot is mostly led by foreign jihadists. In early 2014, it took control of large areas in the eastern province of Raqqa, partly compensating for losses in neighbouring Aleppo to an alliance of convenience comprising the Nusra Front, the Islamic Front, and some FSA units. Having secured a local tribal base in Raqqa, the Islamic State then expanded into the oil-producing province of Deir al-Zor, which borders Iraq’s Sunni heartland. One of the highlights of the Islamic State’s lightning desert advance was its seizure in July 2014 of the large al-Omar oilfield, previously in the hands of the Nusra Front. In Iraq, the Islamic State spearheaded a June 2014 takeover of the northern city of Mosul, which has historic links with Aleppo. Islamic State formations have been pushed to the east of Aleppo but remain a threat to other opposition forces, with “ sleeper cells ” in the city and elsewhere in the province. The international spotlight on this group helped Assad portray himself as a bulwark against extremism and chaos.

At the same time, the Coalition has failed to build any semblance of an alternative administration in regions that fell to the opposition as far back as 2012. Services supplied by the new Interim Government, such as restoring wells, repairing electricity lines, and delivering food are only starting to trickle into FSA-held areas, mainly in the north. This contrasts with other areas out of Assad’s control.

In the east, the Islamic State has largely left local councils and government workers, who still receive salaries from the regime (for example at the hydroelectric dam at Tabaqa) to do their work. International food aid is reaching Raqqa and a major polio immunization program relying on local volunteers was also conducted in the region. While the Islamic State is suspected of

killing and kidnapping several members of opposition local councils who spoke out against its violent methods and harsh imposition of its interpretation of Islamic law, it has been co-opting at least part of the local population by defeating rebel brigades tarnished by a reputation for lawlessness and theft. The group has also been able to provide fuel by virtue of its seizure of oil and gas fields and other energy infrastructure and is showing deference to the prestige and communal authority of the region's tribal leaders.

PYD regions in the northeast have seen the most efficient administration due to an infrastructure that has largely remained intact, good ties between the PYD and Assad and the organizational skills of Kurdish parties which, unlike the rest of the opposition, had been allowed to operate under Assad's rule. The PYD declared self-rule in the Kurdish areas of northeast Syria at the beginning of 2014. The Coalition, noting that Arabs also live in the region, denounced the move as compromising Syria's unity.

The Recovery Trust Fund

Prospects of the opposition receiving wide-ranging help to match the support that the regime enjoys from Russia and Iran have diminished as Assad's foes have failed to unite and jihadists have all but taken over the battlefield. Struggling to define their policy toward Syria, Western countries have opted for more modest backing.

With the conflict dragging on, a fund set up originally for reconstruction by Germany and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has become a test bed for a new approach focused on improving daily lives. Administered by Germany's KFW development bank, the Syria Recovery Trust Fund (the Fund) has received €85 million out of €100 million pledged as of mid-July 2014. Eight projects costing €8.5 million in the fields of health, water, and energy have been approved. The Fund aims to alleviate the "immediate suffering" of civilians in rebel areas by ensuring supplies of water, fuel,

medicine, and food. The Coalition signed a framework agreement for the Fund in Berlin in September 2013. Its steering committee consists of Germany, Japan, Kuwait, the UAE, and the United States. The main contributors are Germany (€18.6 million), the United Arab Emirates (€10 million), the United States (€10.9 million), as well as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark.

The Fund could help reverse the bleak picture on the ground if it is integrated into a wider strategy of supporting a technocratic opposition structure that contrasts with the free-wheeling style of the Coalition. Yet, while Fund operators aim to keep their relationship mostly with the Interim Government, it will be difficult to shield delivery of services and projects from the chaotic politics of the opposition and interference by Coalition members, unless the Interim Government is strengthened.

Security Risks

The Interim Government estimates it needs to employ some ten thousand people to function as a basic services organization. Transferring the headquarters a few kilometers south, just inside Syria, would bring the Interim Government closer to its constituency and help convince Syrians and international aid agencies that opposition leaders, who mostly live in exile, are willing to share risks. Twenty international aid staff have been killed in rebel-held parts of Syria since the beginning of the revolt.

Indeed, the Interim Government has sent dozens of employees into Syria, yet without any protection. An air strike on the Aleppo local council office, which began cooperating with the Interim Government, killed one council member and wounded several others in April 2014. An ambulance bought with Fund money was destroyed in another strike on the city. In general, Assad's forces have not shied away from using planes and missiles to hit targets right on the border. In addition, the Islamic State, which still has bases in Aleppo province, and to a less-

er degree the Nusra Front, remain major threats. Hundreds of ambulances sent to Syria by international and Syrian donors in 2013–2014, including four bought by the opposition government with Qatari assistance, have been seized by various rebel groups and converted into fighting vehicles.

Securing supplies and services amidst a multitude of armed groups in rebel areas would not only necessitate agreements with the Islamic Front and other rebel brigades. It would also require a several-thousand-strong force, putting the onus on the opposition and its backers to train a unified military arm capable of fulfilling basic protection tasks after years of toying with different military structures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A new international formula to provide basic services in rebel-held parts of Syria is needed. It should combine cooperation with the opposition government, a clarification of mandates, measures to improve transparency, and a framework for military protection.

Clarification of mandates: Service delivery and aid projects will continue to suffer if the Interim Government is not granted sufficient autonomy to operate separately from the Coalition and avoid becoming mired in the allegations of nepotism and corruption that have afflicted the opposition. Since the Geneva talks, the West has been wary of intervening in Coalition politics. But with donor cash at stake, the West should use its influence to cajole the opposition into getting behind the Interim Government rather than turning it ever more into a tool of Coalition politics.

Having sent advisers to help the Interim Government in Gaziantep, Germany should propose a clear institutional framework and concise job descriptions for ministerial portfolios. A clearer structure could allay Coalition fears of the Interim Government encroaching on its authority, and convince international donors to deal with the Inter-

im Government instead of channelling aid through a plethora of local councils, activists' organizations, and middlemen. That would also include achieving a balance between preserving local structures and imposing central control.

Indeed, the Coalition should become more of a provisional parliament, leaving administration to the Interim Government. A parliamentary structure with committees and open debate would help define the largely arbitrary relationship that has developed between the Coalition and the Interim Government. In turn, the cabinet would need to instil a merit-based culture among its staff and stop the wave of political hirings, particularly for advisory and leadership posts, which has done little to enhance its reputation and handling of projects.

Increasing transparency: A major criticism of Coalition power-brokers has been that they have received millions of dollars in Gulf money without revealing how the cash was spent. A website detailing all sources of government financing, including Fund money, where the cash is going, and at what stage project completion stands would help to improve the political atmosphere. The site could eventually include a database about local needs and priorities collected by councils in hundreds of towns and villages.

Redressing the military imbalance: A U.S. announcement in June 2014 of some \$500 million for an opposition military build-up could be used to give the Interim Government protection, provided the effort does not result in the creation of even more disparate militias interested more in expanding their territory than building a national rebel force. Support would therefore have to be attached to criteria concerning recruitment and hierarchy so as to curb corruption and political interference.

The new U.S. strategy appears aimed at making the Hazm movement, a new grouping of Islamist brigades that do not subscribe to al-Qaeda ideology, the nucleus of a northern military force. If the group

manages to rise above the corruption and gang mentality that have all but fatally damaged the military struggle against Assad, it could indeed support a lighter policing force of five thousand proposed by the Interim Government to handle tasks such as escorting transport convoys and guarding depots.

Working around political limitations:

Even a robust opposition force would not be able to prevent the barrel bombs, ballistic missiles, and heavy artillery that the regime has used as weapons of terror against civilian targets. An effective but politically risky Western response would be an Iraq-style no-fly zone imposed by NATO and the extension of its missile shield stationed in Turkey to prevent ballistic weapons launched from deep within regime territory from hitting rebel population centres. Yet, with a reluctant United States, and al-Qaeda muddying the lines of battle, such a scenario has become politically impossible. Other ways have to be found to rob Assad of the freedom he has had to target civilians since the start of the conflict. Rebel brigades have also been using smaller weapons that indiscriminately kill and injure civilians in regime areas.

One approach could be to emulate the 1996 April Understanding between Israel and Hezbollah in South Lebanon, mediated by the United States and France, which brought civilian casualties down sharply by committing both sides to attack only military targets outside built-up areas. A group consisting of representatives of France, the United States, Lebanon, Israel, and Syria monitored compliance and met to examine complaints. A Western diplomatic push would be needed to get Russia on board for a similar effort to protect civilians and create safe zones with the consent of the Assad regime, the opposition, and their respective backers. Unlike previous efforts to protect civilians, a deal similar to the April Understanding would not involve the kind of provisions Russia has shied away from, such as threats to Assad's position or threats to use UN-approved force. Rather it

would signal Russian and U.S. willingness to put their diplomatic weight behind an agreement that both could take credit for if it were to bring down the level of violence. Germany should use its ties with Moscow to narrow the differences between Russia and the United States. A major difference between Lebanon-Israel and the Syrian case would, of course, be the actual presence of UN peacekeepers on the ground, who were in Lebanon when the April Understanding was reached and reported on infringements first hand. However, monitoring of an understanding for an initial area in northern Syria could possibly be conducted from Turkey.

As far as other players are concerned, pressure by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey on hard-line Islamist groups would be needed to make such a deal work. The Islamic Front has already signalled political flexibility by adopting, at least rhetorically, a new code of honor. The position of the Nusra Front could be influenced by Qatar, which in March 2014 mediated a hostage-exchange deal involving nuns captured by the Front in the town of Maaloula. Still, it is far from certain whether Qatar actually has sufficient leverage. The Islamic State will likely aim to foil any concerted international effort at protecting civilians, which would leave it as the only major faction in the conflict not committed to limiting the war. At the same time, if nothing is done to stop indiscriminate regime strikes against the population, the jihadists will continue to recruit successfully in Syria.

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