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## The Syrian Political Opposition on the Verge of Irrelevance

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During the last eight years, the Syrian political opposition fell victim to the regional split between Turkey-Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and became marginalized as the diplomatic process shifted away from overthrowing Bashar al-Asad towards managing his survival in power. A sign of this marginalization is that the United States, which has been a key backer of the Syrian opposition, went from supporting regime change back in 2012 to arguing in December, via its special envoy to Syria, James Jeffrey: “We want to see a regime that is fundamentally different. It’s not regime change — we’re not trying to get rid of Assad.”<sup>1</sup>

While the diplomatic process surrounding the Syrian conflict has mostly failed at stopping the violence, let alone creating a just system of accountability for perpetrators of war crimes, it has provided a framework for a transitional government, starting with the first Geneva Communiqué of 2012.<sup>2</sup> Also, the UN Security Council has managed to pass two resolutions in 2014 and 2015, respectively, that allow UN aid to flow to non-government-controlled areas of Syria (Res. 2165), and call for the creation of a new constitution and free elections (Res. 2254).<sup>3</sup> Following a cease-fire agreement in December 2016 that was supported by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, a series of meetings in Astana, Kazakhstan, and Sochi, Russia, resulted in the creation of a constitutional committee that is supposed to usher in new elections and institutional reform. Notwithstanding these modest steps forward in the diplomatic process, most of the veteran Syrian opposition members resigned from official roles in the Syrian National

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<sup>1</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, “[Trump Wanted Out of Syria: It’s Finally Happening](#),” *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> For the official text of the Final Communiqué, by the Action Group for Syria, June 30, 2012, see: <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniquéActionGroupforSyria.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> For the full texts of each resolution see, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2165>, and <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2254>.

Council (SNC) in the spring of 2018, including Riad Saif, Suheir al-Atassi, George Sabra, and Khalid Khoja.<sup>4</sup>

The Syrian political opposition in exile, comprised of mainly well-off Sunni Arabs, has been working to overthrow the regime via political means, while the fighting on the ground evolved along an entirely separate track, with armed Islamist groups emerging at the forefront from around mid-2013.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as the war progressively turned in favor of the regime and its allies, civilian calls for the regime's overthrow have carried less and less weight.<sup>6</sup> The recent decision by US President Trump to withdraw US forces from northeastern Syria adds to the trend that Russia, along with Turkey and Iran will likely work out issues related to their future spheres of influence in Syria directly with Asad.

While reforming the Asad regime's state institutions may not be as attractive as regime change, it appears to be the only way for the remaining elements of the Syrian opposition to influence the Syrian political system. Unfortunately, because the Astana process has been seen as a distraction from the Geneva track, especially by the pro-Saudi wing of the Syrian opposition, they may miss this opportunity.

At the first Geneva meeting of 2012, for UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was the special UN envoy and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was deeply involved with negotiations. After consulting with the Syrian opposition, Clinton promoted regime change in the face of Russian objections, writing: "A transitional unity government would have to exclude those whose continued presence and participation would undermine the credibility of the transition and jeopardize stability and reconciliation."<sup>7</sup> It turns out that this was to be the first, and in many ways the last, political success of the Syrian opposition, which without external backing was powerless to impose any change in Syria.

The Syrian political opposition apparently thought that they were the alternative to Bashar al-Asad. In fact, their dominant political organ, the Syrian National Council (SNC), was widely recognized as the legitimate government of Syria by many countries back in 2012 and given Arab League status in 2013. Negotiating directly with Bashar al-

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<sup>4</sup> *The Syrian Observer*, "[After the Veterans Quit, New Resignations Rage Through the SNC](#)," May 5, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Shadi Hamid, "[Syria's Most Important Rebels are Islamists, and We Have to Work with Them Anyway](#)," *Brookings Op-Ed*, October 8, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Awad Mustafa, "[Opposition Group's Agreement Points to a Way Forward in Syria](#)," *The National*, July 4, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Black, "[Syria Crisis: Russia and US disagree over political solution in Geneva talks](#)," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2012.

Asad went against the SNC's *raison d'être* and did not seem possible.<sup>8</sup> Yet already at the second Geneva meeting in 2014, Russia managed to insure the Asad government's participation, much to the dismay of the opposition.

The political opposition did not have a wide enough platform to broach any other subject beyond goal number one: overthrowing Asad. This was partly due to the inherent divisions within the opposition from the outset. Firstly, those who fled Syria in 2011, who tended to be secular, were suddenly faced with a large contingent of Muslim Brotherhood members who were exiled in the 1980s. While the Muslim Brotherhood-oriented contingent had some ideas about how to run the country, the newcomers arrived with few new ideas, as the state of civil society inside Syria was weak after half a century of single-party rule. The most significant political umbrella movement was the short-lived Damascus Declaration of 2005, which had merely called for a set of reasonable political reforms, not the actual overthrow of Bashar al-Asad.<sup>9</sup> Yet many members of the Damascus Declaration were arrested and intimidated in prison. It was the experience of prison, harassment by secret police (*mukhabarat*), and the violent crackdown by the regime and its loyalist thugs (*shabiha*) in response to the civilian uprising in 2011 – not to mention the memories of the Hama massacre of 1982 and the government oppression of the 1970s and 1980s – that created a consensus among the new and old opposition that there was no way to redeem Asad and his inner network through institutional reform.<sup>10</sup>

The Astana process, which has de facto replaced the Geneva-based process, is offering the Syrian political opposition an opportunity to participate in changing the Syrian state's legal foundations by rewriting the constitution. Many in the opposition equate constitutional reform with institutional reform, and see both as regime-driven strategies to keep Asad in power. In addition to rejecting the principle of regime-change, the Astana process has been led mainly by three players: Turkey, Iran, and Russia, with the UN adding its support. Turkey claims to be representing the opposition and was responsible for bringing certain elements of the opposition to the series of meetings. However, since late 2015, when Saudi Arabia took the initiative to have a Riyadh-based umbrella organization called the Higher Negotiations Committee (HNC), individual members of the opposition have had to consider both Turkish and Saudi interests alongside their own goals. This has meant that in practice, the Saudi-led HNC has stood on the sidelines of the Astana process. The United States, and to a lesser extent France, Germany, and the UK, have also been skeptical of the Astana process, though at times they have extended

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<sup>8</sup> Adam Bacsko, Gilles Dorransoro, and Arthur Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 152.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Landis and Joe Pace. "The Syrian Opposition." *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2007) 45-68.

<sup>10</sup> The Syrian intellectual dissident, Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, who was imprisoned in the 1980s has written very clearly about this in his book *The Impossible Revolution* (London: Hurst, 2017).

limited support. Recently, however, the US State Department spokesperson, Heather Nauert, said that the Astana process has led to a political stalemate.<sup>11</sup> So while the opposition as a whole prefers in general to discuss a transition away from Assad, it has been increasingly torn between the Turkish-Qatari axis and the Saudi-Western one, which disagree about participating in the Astana process.

The SNC grew weaker between 2013-2015 as a result of funding issues and internal mismanagement. Initially, its leadership wanted all state sponsors of aid, led by Qatar, and followed by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and the US, Britain and France, to go through them to help civilian local councils in the opposition-held areas.<sup>12</sup> However, they failed in their efforts, as alternative funding from anonymous donors in the Gulf at times in coordination with the CIA, bypassed the SNC and went directly to the militias fighting Assad.<sup>13</sup> Further, large areas of rebel held territory were cut off from the border zones with Turkey and Jordan, becoming subject to the diktat of local militants at the expense of the opposition leaders in exile. State sponsors, in particular Britain and France, eventually stopped sending humanitarian aid through civilian opposition channels, and the UN was forced to coordinate with Damascus to deliver aid to civilians in rebel-controlled territory. As the Free Syrian Army was defeated in a number of areas, such as the Lebanese border region and eastern Syria, and as Turkey found itself in major domestic political trouble with several major terrorist attacks in 2015, followed by a coup attempt in mid-2016, the civilian Syrian opposition had less and less political space in which to operate. While Turkey influenced the SNC by providing a base for its operations and direct access to northern Syria, Qatar and Saudi Arabia competed for influence over its members by paying their salaries and funding various initiatives in accordance with the respective goals of these states.<sup>14</sup> This led to several problems, such as the chaotic resignation of the moderate preacher from Damascus, Moaz al-Khatib,<sup>15</sup> as the Saudis sought to exclude the Muslim Brotherhood, and as the secular and Kurdish elements felt sidelined by both Turkey and the competing state sponsors.

As the rebels' situation deteriorated further in late 2015 with the entrance of Russian air power on the Assad regime's side, the Saudis took the initiative, sponsoring a new organization called the Higher Negotiations Committee (HNC), whose aim was to bring in Islamist armed groups on the ground alongside the civilian political groups, such as the SNC. The Saudi diplomatic push included putting a senior member of the Islamist Jaysh

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<sup>11</sup> "[Washington says Astana process produced Syria 'stalemate'](#)," *The National*, November 30, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> See the *Assistance Coordination Unit's* annual report for 2013 for the most comprehensive look at the state sponsors in that period, <https://www.acu-sy.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ACU-Annual-Report-2013.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Baczko et al, *Civil War in Syria*, 103-117, 135-144.

<sup>14</sup> Ufuk Ulutas, "The Syrian political opposition: what went wrong?" *Insight Turkey* 18, no. 2 (2016) 31.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Chulov, "[Moaz al-Khatib's resignation plunges the Syrian opposition into chaos](#)," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2013.

al-Islam militia (JI), Muhammed Alloush, as head of the HNC. Alloush had no political experience outside of Eastern Ghouta, where the JI had set up a provisional rebel government with Saudi backing. This move was meant to show that the HNC was in touch with the "facts on the ground." However, Jaysh al-Islam was accused of using Alawis as human shields in Eastern Ghouta, and Muhammed Alloush was an outspoken proponent of using any means necessary to overthrow the regime, leaving little room for compromise.<sup>16</sup> Upon his resignation in mid-2016 following the failure of an additional round of talks in Geneva, Alloush said, "The peace talks failed to stop the bloodshed of our people, failed to secure the release of thousands of detainees or to push Syria towards a political transition without [Bashar] al-Asad and his criminal gang."<sup>17</sup>

The fourth Geneva meeting, held in March 2017, was no longer about transition.<sup>18</sup> Instead of working on substantive matters, members of the HNC and the Syrian regime verbally jabbed at each other behind closed doors.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the UN-supported Astana peace talks had already begun in January, with Turkey moving to represent the rebel side to work out a concrete deal with Russia and Iran to end the civil war. In addition to leaving the Syrian political opposition on the sidelines, the Saudis and their allies were left out of the Astana process, which continued throughout 2017 and 2018 in the absence of further Geneva meetings. The Abu Dhabi-based *The National* argued recently that UN's special envoy to Syria from 2014 through 2018 Staffan de Mistura was naïve and should never have attended the series of Astana talks between Iran, Russia and Turkey, "which nullified his own Geneva process and gave the alternative talks the legitimacy needed to eclipse the UN's role."<sup>20</sup> However, it is equally reasonable to argue that the Astana and Sochi talks were born upon the failure of the Geneva process, as a result of the opposition's miscalculations such as sending a hardline Islamist militia fighter to lead diplomatic negotiations.

In 2018, while the Istanbul-based SNC continued to hemorrhage members, as mentioned above, de Mistura has been working to create a new constitutional committee that would be comprised of Syrian opposition figures and regime-sponsored figures. Going into de Mistura's last month in his position, an agreement was made between the regime and the opposition, which included a list of 50 representatives from each side to sit on the

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<sup>16</sup> Josh Wood, "[Rise and fall of Syrian rebel negotiator leaves peace talk hopes in tatters](#)," *The National*, May 30, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> *Al-Jazeera*, "[Syria negotiator Alloush quits over failure of UN talks](#)," May 30, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Tom Miles and John Irish, "[The Syria talks may surprise by meeting the low bar of expectations](#)," *Reuters*, March 3, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Dylan Collins, "[Geneva 4 and the shifting shape of Syria diplomacy](#)," *Al-Jazeera*, March 11, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> *The National*, "[De Mistra's departure kills hope for Syrians](#)," October 25, 2018.

committee. Once the committee is formed, it would presumably spend a good part of 2019 drafting a constitution, and then there would be new elections.<sup>21</sup>

Back in 2012, the regime sponsored significant constitutional reform, which abolished the single-party rule of the Ba'ath Party, instead declaring Syria to be a pluralist democracy, and called for seven-year terms for the presidency. Subsequently, Bashar al-Asad was elected by a landslide in areas under his control in 2014.<sup>22</sup> The Astana process has, in addition to helping resolve many technical issues related to the final stages of the civil war, led to a scenario whereby the main players involved are repeating a cycle of constitutional reform and elections similar to what the Asad regime initiated in 2012 and 2014. The possibility (and indeed, likelihood) that Asad will simply emerge stronger than ever may have been a major factor in the mass resignations of Syrian opposition figures earlier this year.

Following 2018, there appears to be little hope for a transition away from Asad any time soon. The international community has an interest in finding whatever 'band-aid' is necessary to mitigate the short-term violence in Syria and to take steps towards resolving the Syrian refugee crisis, which may mean that the EU and US would provide aid for reconstruction, if the regime showed a willingness to implement a few token institutional changes. The divisions within the Syrian opposition that have further widened since the Saudi-Qatar rift opened up in June 2017, coupled with Trump's recent announcement of the impending withdrawal of US troops from Syria, have rendered the first Geneva meetings in 2012, when Hillary Clinton and the political leadership of the Syrian opposition were bent on overthrowing Asad and taking power, a distant memory. For now, what's left of the Syrian opposition will have to work on Syrian constitutional reform with the next UN Envoy, or face further marginalization.

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<sup>21</sup> Marianna Belenkaya, "[Despite Difficulties, Russia Optimistic about Constitutional Committee](#)," *Al-Monitor*, December 20, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Marwan Makdisi, "[Confident Assad launches new term in stronger position](#)," *Reuters*, July 17, 2014.