

Syria Alert

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Support the civilian uprising in Syria

One year ago, the Syrian people stood up to demand their freedom and dignity. The Syrian government's violent repression of this uprising has caused the death of an estimated 9000 Syrians during this past year. Why has the uprising's leadership not been able yet to lead the Syrian people to the freedom they all longed for?

In this Syria Alert policy brief, IKV Pax Christi analyses who leads the Syrian popular uprising and what challenges they face. It recommends that the international community address these challenges by

- 1. Supporting the Syrian nonviolent uprising with bold diplomatic activism and practical support*
- 2. Mediate and facilitate between the different opposition actors to establish a definite plan for transition and the new Syria*
- 3. Support the Syrian National Council in strengthening its legitimacy.*

1. Who are the main actors leading the Syrian popular uprising?

Citizens' committees in Syria

The nucleus of the Syrian uprising is formed by local, citizen-based committees throughout Syria in which Syria's youth participates particularly actively. In spite of the extremely cruel and violent response to the demonstrations by Assad's regime, the activists go on risking their lives on a daily basis in their demands for freedom and dignity. Precise numbers and data are hard to find. A rough estimate is that there are 300 of such committees all over Syria. The number of protest points throughout the country is between 500 and 700 on Fridays, the main protest day. Although in some cases they ask for protection by the Free Syrian Army (FSA, see below), their main strategy is a non-violent one. These groups are the main force getting the people unarmed into the streets. In areas and towns under siege they also take responsibility for some local administration work such as waste management and traffic control.

Not all committees regard themselves as members of broader networks and therefore their political positions differ. However, among the committees, more than 100 members do explicitly adhere to two networks: the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) and the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) (see descriptions of both below). They share the vision of peaceful change to a democratic and inclusive Syria, guaranteeing human and minority rights, and call for a Syria for all Syrians.¹

The locally-organized protest groups such as represented in the LCC and SRGC form the basis for a pluralist post-Assad Syria, a Syria for all Syrians. The depth and persistent nature of their courageous, mainly non-violent struggle has been undervalued by the international community, including by the EU. The importance of nonviolence succeeding in Syria goes beyond the region and will have its impact for many years to come.

Syrian National Council

The main representative of the Syrian opposition with whom the international community interacts is the [Syrian National Council \(SNC\)](#). This body was established in October 2011. The SNC consist of the exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the Damascus Declaration group, the Local Coordination Committees, the Assyrian Democratic Organisation and Kurdish opposition activists. Most of the SNC members are based in exile, many of them have left Syria in recent months. The SNC has members in many countries around the world. Libya was the first country to recognize the SNC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. On 27 February, the EU recognized the SNC as a legitimate representative of Syrians. The SNC is criticized because of its lack of effectiveness and action. Until now it has not been able to come with a clear, united agenda nor with an action plan, having too many internal differences to overcome and lacking a clear leadership. Still, it is the most legitimate body representing the Syrian people at the moment².

The above-mentioned [Local Coordination Committees](#) are an umbrella organization of local committees all around Syria that organize the peaceful protests and spread information to the outside world. This network consists of local youth leaders who play a central role in the protests. The LCC Syria promotes a peaceful transition towards a secular democratic Syria in which Syrians of all religious and ethnic backgrounds have equal rights. The LCC plays a central role in the SNC. A main figure in the LCC is human rights lawyer Razan Zeitouneh who has been in hiding since April 2011.

¹ See for LCC: <http://www.lccsyria.org/751> and <http://www.lccsyria.org/2322>. For SRGC: "Vision of Syrian Revolution General Commission", to be found on: <https://www.facebook.com/SyrianRevolutionGeneralCommission#!/SyrianRevolutionGeneralCommission?sk=info>

² See Chibli Mallat, Sadeq Jalal al-Azm et al, "A Strategy for Syria Under International Law: How to End the Asad Dictatorship While Restoring Nonviolence to the Syrian Revolution", in: Harvard International Law Journal, V. 53, March 2012, for a description of 5 criteria that determine the legitimacy of the SNC.

The [Syrian Revolution General Commission \(SRGC\)](#), also mentioned above, is a coalition of 40 grassroots opposition groups. Although they are not formally represented in the SNC, the SRGC does support the SNC. The main figure is a young female activist, Suheir Atassi.

The [Syrian Muslim Brotherhood](#) has been in exile since it clashed with the Syrian government in 1979-1982. Since 1980 membership of the Brotherhood can be punished with the death penalty. In recent years, the Brotherhood has renounced violence and called for a pluralistic and democratic Syria. Although it has for years constituted the main and largest opposition group, since the uprising started it has played the role of a follower and misses the infrastructure inside Syria because of its long exile. However, in a future Syria, the Brotherhood will inevitably play a central role as one of the more mature political opposition groups.

Members of the [Damascus Declaration group](#) are also represented in the SNC. It is a group of the “older generation” political opposition activists that launched in October 2005 the “Damascus Declaration” calling for democratic reform. The group included well-known opposition activists such as Abdulrazak Eid, Riad Seif, Haitham al-Maleh and sheikh Jawdat Said. Political groups that joined the Damascus Declaration were the National Democratic Rally, the Kurdish Democratic Alliance, the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, the Kurdish Democratic Front and the Kurdish Future Party. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood also supported the Damascus Declaration. In December 2008, 12 members of the council of the Damascus Declaration were sentenced to 2 ½ years in prison.

Groups inside Syria

The main counter-coalition to the SNC used to be the [National Coordination Committee \(NCC\)](#); a group of older-generation politicians, mostly secular leftist and nationalist groups and some Kurdish parties, with Hassan Abdel Azim as the main figure. A number of the members split from it and became active in the League for Democratic Change (see next). Other key figures in the NCC are Abdel Aziz el Khayyer, Haitham Manna' and Abdel Majid Manjouni.

The [League for Democratic Change](#) comprises well-known opposition activists who were previously active in the NCC, such as Michel Kilo, Samir Aita, Fayez Sara, Aref Dalila and Hasan Kamel. Some of them were key persons of the Damascus Declaration Group, like Fayez Sara and Michel Kilo.

The [Tayyar Binaa' ad-Dawla as-Souriya \(Building the Syrian State movement\)](#) is a political group that was formed during the uprising by a number of intellectuals, led by the writer Louay Hussein. The group, that also includes Mouna Ghanem and Rim Turkmani, tries to develop concrete plans for getting out of the current political crisis and for building the future state of Syria.

Armed opposition

As soldiers of the Syrian army defected, a new group was formed under the name [Free Syrian Army \(FSA\)](#). As the government violence against civilians increased, they took on themselves the protection of civilians against this violence which, until now, they regard as their core business. As part of this objective, they found themselves increasingly forced to undertake military operations against the Syrian army and security services. Today, the FSA consists not only of defectors, but also of civilians

who took up arms. Many local armed groups call themselves part of the FSA but there is hardly any form of central command. The leadership is based in Turkey.

There have been meetings between the SNC and the FSA and the SNC is trying to bring the FSA under civilian control. In that light, the SNC announced the establishment of a Military Bureau on 1 March 2012. This Military Bureau should play a role in unifying the ranks, strategizing, armament and monitoring compliance with international humanitarian law. The FSA immediately denied that they had agreed on such a bureau.

Many areas in Syria are now outside of government control. This lawlessness creates new risks and room for armed groups and “fringe groups” to establish a basis in Syria, with or without support from outside Syria. In that light, media have recently reported about the risks of al-Qaeda and Salafist armed groups active in Syria. Such groups are often linked to criminal groups and armed gangs, allegedly released from prison and supported by the regime, that operate in the current situation of lawlessness.

2. Challenges ahead for the Syrian opposition

Fragmentation

Over the past year, the international community has often complained that the Syrian opposition is too fragmented and has called on the Syrian opposition to unite so that there is one clear representative with whom to deal. These complaints and calls ignore the political background from which the Syrian opposition comes. Forty-two years of the Assad family in power has left no political room for opposition unless in the diaspora, has created fear and mistrust through its divide and rule policies and intimidation, and has strangled political dialogue and consensus building. The rivalries, disagreements and lack of pragmatic action that we see within the Syrian political opposition today must be understood against this background. This is a fact with which Western politicians have to learn to deal. And in the end, all opposition groups agree on one shared goal: The removal of the Assad regime.

Division between the diaspora and the “inside”

Because of the political climate in Syria, several political opposition forces have been forced into exile for decades. Before the uprising started last year, there was always a tension between Syrians inside, who had to survive in and find a *modus vivendi* with the daily reality of oppression, and those outside, who would often take a more confrontational approach. When the uprising started, these two came closer together in their joint agenda of getting rid of the Assad regime. However, in recent months in which the violence of the regime against its civilian population has become even more random, brutal and large-scale and in which the opposition has not achieved major progress, we see again that the divide between “inside” and “outside” grows. People inside who are in danger and lack basic things such as food and medicine, increasingly mistrust the opposition politicians who sit

comfortably outside, have meetings in 5 star hotels and do not bring them any relief. Analysts warn that if these leaders in the diaspora were to return after the fall of the regime, a new leadership crisis would occur because the people will no longer accept them as leaders. One of the key issues on which the division between inside and outside becomes clear is the issue of foreign intervention. While the SNC has called for international military intervention, groups that have a stronger presence inside, such as NCC and Tayyar, oppose international intervention.



Banner from Binnish in Idlib province on 10 March 2012, reflects the challenges posed to the leadership of the uprising: “Down with the coordination committees and councils; Down with the traitors in the National Council; Down with the Syrian Revolution website; Down with the Union of Coordinating Committees and the Syrian Revolution General Commission.”

Representation

The fragmentation into different political groups and the division between inside and outside add to the fact that many of the groups do not represent a majority of Syrians. Some of the leaders abroad do not really have a constituency or influence inside Syria, some come from an urban elite that has no links with the poor rural population that are an important part of the revolution. There is also a limited representation of minorities in some of the bodies such as the SNC, although in other groups members from minority groups play a key role (for example, Michel Kilo and Fayez Sara are Christians, Aref Dalila is Alawi). Also the issue of women’s representation is an issue to monitor given the disappointing experiences for women in the transition process in Egypt.

Young localised leadership

Another challenge to the leadership of the uprising is the fact that most of the experienced political opposition leaders have left in recent months. The daily leadership of the uprising is in the hands of a young generation of activists. They lack political experience and operate very locally, organizing the uprising in their own town or neighbourhood. So we see a grassroots movement that is very active, but lack the leadership to have more impact on national and international level. As one of IKV Pax Christi's sources in Syria put it, "the people are lost without political leadership."

3. Recommendations

It is crucial that the international community puts some effort into addressing these challenges with regard to the leadership of the Syrian uprising. It should not put all its efforts into unifying the Syrian opposition but rather give priority to other steps that will strengthen the Syrian opposition:

- The European Union should recognize the importance of the locally-based civilian opposition groups in Syria such as the LCC and SRGC and support them politically and diplomatically as well as logistically and financially.
- The EU should not focus its diplomatic contacts with the opposition exclusively on the SNC, but maintain diplomatic contacts with all the relevant political forces as mentioned in this report. It should continue to support the SNC as the main representative of Syrians.
- Instead of focusing on uniting the opposition in a unified institution, the focus should be on working on a shared plan, anticipating a post-Assad era. Mediation and facilitation between the different opposition forces should focus on preparing a concrete, agreed "road map" for transition. This mediation should also bring the opposition "inside" and "outside" closer and aim to address the leadership gap.
- The EU should assist in strengthening the legitimacy of the SNC amongst the Syrian people.³ Efforts should be made to work with the SNC on securing an inclusive democratic Syria based on the rule of law. Such explicit plans for inclusiveness are a necessity in winning the trust of the different minorities in Syria.

³ See again the 5 criteria referred to in footnote 1 above: (1) the support of the people as expressed in continuing non-violent demonstrations; (2) the maximum exercise of democratic deliberation despite the practical difficulties; (3) the continuing quest for descriptive and substantive representativeness of all parties in the absence of electoral representativeness; (4) a growing international recognition, in law and in fact, that they stand on a far superior ground than the regime as the right interlocutors—thereby also a recognition that the massive popular disaffection is a *Revolution*, and not a "civil war"; and, (5) on a moral plane, its continued adherence to the path of either no violence or, in the most dire circumstances, the least possible use of force.

- Contacts with the armed actors (FSA) should aim at bringing them under civilian control. By integrating them in the political strategy, a basis is laid for their possible future role in peace keeping and law enforcement.
- Diplomatic activism is needed in order to support the nonviolent strategy of the uprising. The international community should apply more bold diplomatic measures, such as replacing Syrian embassies by opposition embassies or recognizing opposition passports. The ambassadors to Syria should play a key role in diplomacy with the opposition.

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