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## Position Paper

# Syria and the New Arab League Initiative\*

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Al Jazeera Centre for Studies  
Tel: +974-44663454  
jcforstudies-en@aljazeera.net  
<http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/>

In a surprise move, and despite differences by different members of the Arab League on the first report of the League's monitors in Syria, the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Arab League surprised both Arab and international public opinion by announcing a new Arab League initiative to deal with the Syrian crisis. This initiative is a significant step in the direction of addressing security concerns that have arisen out of the Syrian crisis. It is difficult for international powers and actors interested in the future of Syria to ignore such an initiative.

This is a brief review of the Syrian situation in light of the new Arab League initiative.

## The Initiative

This initiative marks the third since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution and the beginning of action (under pressure of public opinion) by the Arab world in addressing the revolution. On Sunday evening, 22 January 2012, at the end of its meetings in Cairo, the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Arab League announced an initiative that reflected significant progress in the official Arab position on the Syrian revolution. Unlike the previous two initiatives which did not explicitly call for the resignation of Assad and were vague and allowed for prolonged procedures, this new initiative was explicit and clear and responded to the public demand of changing the regime.

The Arab League's initiative called for the formation of a government of national unity within two months, in which the current government and the Syrian opposition participate, and which would be chaired by a person that both sides have agreed on. The initiative states that the role of the government is to implement the provisions of the previous Arab League plan and prepare for multi-party parliamentary and presidential elections under the law, to be overseen by Arab and international monitors. More importantly, the initiative demands that Assad delegates complete authority to his first vice president, Farouq al-Sharaa, to fully cooperate with the government of national reconciliation and enable it to perform its duties. This means that the president will hand over his executive responsibilities during the transition. The initiative stresses that the Syrian government has to release detainees, remove its military forces from cities and residential areas, and allow Arab League organisations and Arab and international media to move freely around Syria in order to monitor incidents taking place.

The Council of Foreign Ministers decided to refer the resolutions on Syria, including the new initiative, to the UN Security Council (UNSC), seeking UN support for the Arab position. While Lebanon abstained from voting on the resolutions of the ministerial council, there was no real opposition from Iraq, which used to take pro-Syrian regime positions. This may have been due to its wanting to pave the way for the upcoming Arab summit in Baghdad, and because Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who faces a severe internal crisis, fears Arab isolation.

The initiative on Syria was clearly inspired by the Gulf Initiative on Yemen, which most observers now believe was successful, albeit after delays and obstacles, in achieving the transition of power in Sana'a. Syria, of course, is not Yemen. The then Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, did not dare oppose the Gulf initiative, despite his efforts to thwart it. On the other hand, the League's initiative on Syria was quickly and decisively rejected by Damascus.

## Reactions

Syria's rejection of the Arab League initiative was announced in an official statement through the official Syrian news agency, SANA, only a few hours after the declaration of the League's resolutions. The official indicated that 'Syria rejects decisions made by the Arab League Council on the ministerial level regarding Syria that are outside the Arab action plan and the protocol signed with the Arab League,' adding that 'Syria considers these decisions a violation of its national sovereignty, a blatant interference in its internal affairs, a flagrant violation of the objectives for which the Arab League was established, and a breach of Article VIII of its charter'. He stressed that Damascus

'condemns this decision, which came in the framework of a conspiratorial scheme carried out against Syria, a scheme that has been revealed to our people and the Arab world'. At a press conference held in Damascus on Tuesday 24 January 2012, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem restated the Syrian position that rejects the League's initiative and the decisions of the ministerial council.

The Syrian National Council (SNC), which is seen as the main Syrian opposition movement, did not hesitate to utilise the positive signs of the League's initiative and welcomed it promptly in a short statement. The council re-emphasised its position after its leadership's meeting in Cairo. Moreover, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (the Syrian Ikhwan), represented in the SNC and forming a core component of the Council, issued its own statement welcoming the League's initiative.

The initiative was supported by all western countries including the United States, Britain and France. Perhaps the clearest expression of the western position was expressed by the German ambassador to the United Nations, Peter Wittig, who stressed on Monday 23 January 2012, that the Arab League's request for the UNSC to endorse its call for the transfer of Assad's powers to his vice-president could be a 'game-changer' for the deadlocked UN body. 'The Arab League decided to seek the Security Council's endorsement for its decisions. This is something that Council members couldn't easily ignore or oppose,' Wittig said. The German ambassador clarified that the request for the UNSC's endorsement of the Arab League's initiative 'goes beyond the observer mission and asks Council members to consider the Arab plan in full.'

Iran, Syria's main regional ally, expressed no clear position. This may have been because the Iranians were surprised by the extent of Arab consensus on the initiative.

What was significant was an unusual statement by Mikhail Margelov, the Russian presidential envoy for cooperation with Africa, and one of the officials responsible for the Russian policy on Syria. Margelov was quoted by the Russia's Itar-Tass news agency (23 January 2012) as saying that, 'Russia can do no more for Syria's Assad.' Also chairing the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council of Russia, he added that '[our] veto on the UN Security Council resolution was the last instrument allowing Bashar al-Assad to maintain the status quo in the international arena,' and that it 'was a serious signal to the president of Syria from Russia. This veto has exhausted our arsenal of such resources.' He pointed out that the Syrian president 'should read this position unequivocally: reforms, an end to violence, free elections. This is what the Syrian leadership should do immediately, today.'

However, Mikhail Margelov's press office quickly issued a statement (24 January 2012) maintaining that the earlier statement, widely quoted by Reuters, dates back to 23 November 2011, meaning that the Russian position has not changed. The fact remains that Margelov's statement was quoted by a Russian news agency; therefore, the statement, refuted or corrected, was released by Margelov's office and can be interpreted in one of two ways. First, that it was purposefully announced, and then refuted, to send a message to Assad that he needs to expedite a resolution to the crisis because Moscow feels that time and options are running out the international front – which is now consistent with the Arab League's position. Second, that the statement reflected Margelov's personal opinion, and higher authority in the Kremlin ordered him to retract.

Nevertheless, between 24 and 26 January 2012, Moscow had consecutive visits by the US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman; Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu; and prominent Lebanese politician, Walid Jumblatt. Syria was the main, and probably the only, topic of their talks with the Russian Foreign Minister and other Russian officials. The position expressed by the Russian Foreign Minister, in a joint press conference with his Turkish counterpart, corresponds with Russia's current position on the Syrian crisis: it rejected any international resolution that looks to impose sanctions on Syria or affect military intervention, and called for talks between the regime and the opposition, which Russia offered to host.

## Prospects for the Initiative

This paradigm shift in the Arab League's position on Syria did not come out of the blue. It is becoming increasingly evident that the Syrian regime is unable to suppress the popular movement that has arisen, despite the levels of violence and bloodshed employed for nearly a year in an attempt to quash the uprising. The Free Syrian Army has emerged as a significant variable in the equation of power between the regime and its opponents; whether in terms of their ability to confront the regime's forces or limit the scope of their activities. Meanwhile, the Arab League has lost the means to respond to the pressures of Arab public opinion after the monitoring mission failed to stop violence.

However, no one expected that the Syrian regime would respond positively to the Arab League's initiative, which would have entailed a rapid shift of power and Assad's resignation. Thus far there has been no balance of power between the regime and its opponents, and it is unlikely that the regime will accept the idea of Assad's resignation and transfer of power.

### What Are the Prospects for the Arab League's Initiative?

The initiative is a watershed in the official Arab attitude towards the Syrian regime, and perhaps it is now difficult for the Arab League to relinquish the position it has assumed. This is a blow to the legitimacy of the Syrian regime, as severe as the freezing of its membership in the Arab League and Arab League organisations.

The initiative will bring a new spirit to the UNSC, which over the past few months looked as though it was willing to ignore the Syrian situation, or unable to develop a position on the crisis. Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani and Arab League Secretary-General Nabil El-Araby plan to approach the United Nations to reach an international consensus on the Arab League plan. Such a consensus seems evident in the draft of the Arab League-European Union resolution to be submitted to the UNSC. Nonetheless, according to the Guardian (25 January 2012), intensified Western contacts in Moscow seek to pave the way for a Security Council resolution supporting the Arab League's initiative and calls for Assad to step down.

Such a resolution is not possible without a change in the Russian and Chinese position. Here lies the third reason for the importance of the Arab League initiative: it is noteworthy that Russia supported the Yemeni version of the Arab League's vision, that is similar to the one being tabled that looks to resolve the crisis and achieve a transition of power in Syria. Perhaps Russia, and China of course, will find it increasingly difficult to ignore the position of the Arab League.

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\*This article was written prior to the UNSC's vote on a resolution on Syria. On 4 February 2012 the resolution, put forward by the Arab League and European Union, was voted on in the UNSC. However, in what was seen as a blow for diplomatic initiatives, the resolution was vetoed by Russia and China.

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