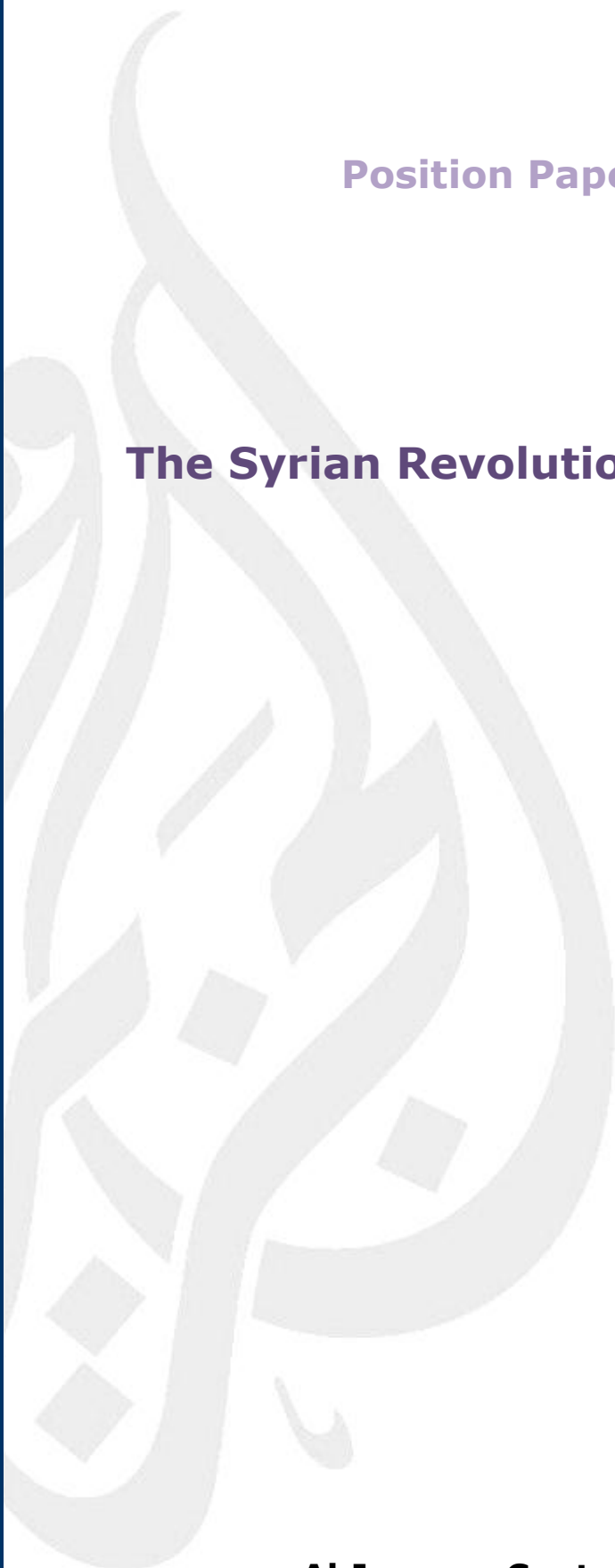




مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
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Position Paper

The Syrian Revolution One Year On



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Initially a small protest in Damascus, the first anniversary of the Syrian revolution in mid-March approaches. It has become evident, even among government officials and supporters, that the regime's response to the early demonstrations in Damascus and Daraa is the most significant factor behind the transformation of the popular movement from a small-scale protest with limited demands to a large-scale revolution aiming to eradicate the regime in its entirety.

At the outset, the regime had ignored the popular movement but later it denied it and even attributed it to a terrorist movement with connections to radical Salafism and Al-Qaeda. Ultimately, the regime labeled it an Arab and international conspiracy. Unchanging, however, has been the regime's policy of brutal repression against demonstrators in order to defeat and demoralize the people. While reformative steps have been suggested and taken, these have been minute, superficial, slow, and lagging far behind the people's demands. These concessive measures shrivel and shrink in comparison to the magnitude of repression and brutality.

In support of the popular movement, the Syrian opposition became increasingly active and participatory. However, opposition efforts have been confused and distracted by attempts to reach consensus and strategy discussions. In due course, the opposition succeeded in forming the Syrian National Council (SNC) in October 2011, which gained popular legitimacy and virtual recognition regionally and internationally in a relatively small amount of time. However, SNC efforts and capacity to provide political and humanitarian tools for the aid and benefit of revolutionary forces have been insufficient relative to the size of the popular movement, its aspirations, and the regime's continued violence against the people. By the end of last year, it had become evident that dissident soldiers and officers who announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011 played a crucial role in the conflict between the people and the regime. However, the FSA's true capacity, potential and organizational capabilities and structures remain questionable.

Despite the regime's extreme violence and repeated attempts to suppress the popular uprising, Arab and international responses to the Syrian crisis have been slow and lacking in direction, particularly in comparison to efforts regarding the crisis in Libya, for example. One explanation for the world's inability to deal with the Syrian crisis effectively is that the revolution in Syria has turned into a complex battlefield – both literally and figuratively – on which a fiery conflict between regional and international powers is being fought.

The following is an attempt to analyse the Syrian crisis, as its one year anniversary approaches, by examining the various elements and forces at play and trying to anticipate the direction that the crisis may take in the near future.

The Regime: Bullets Resound the Loudest

Over the past twelve months, the regime's approach to and position on the popular movement has remained static. Since the beginning of the revolution, the regime has responded to the popular movement by employing security services and the most loyal military forces against the people. Moreover, Shabeeha, a militia of thugs formed and run by President al-Assad's cousins and financially maintained by loyal businessmen, has also been utilized in violent repression. However, during the last two months, in the backdrop of constantly escalating violence and the increasing FSA activity, the regime has shown caution in deploying its army units, especially those with Sunnite majorities. In the past, deployment of these units in volatile areas had resulted in vast military dissent. Reports indicate that the military's fourth division has become the main apparatus for attacking "rebel" cities. Led by Maher al-Assad (the president's brother), it is believed to be much larger than the average division, consisting perhaps of more than a hundred thousand troops, mostly Alawites.

In addition to these security measures, the regime adopted some reforms. For example, the state of emergency has been lifted and the government has been changed. Still,

these reforms are smaller and less vigorous than the popular movement and its demands. Most importantly, these reformative procedures have not actually resonated and no positive results have been seen yet. Neither lifting the state of emergency nor changing the government altered the regime's policy or terminated the detention of tens of thousands of people, many of whom were subjected to torture that sometimes led to death.

The new Syrian constitution, drafted by a committee set up by the Syrian president, was the most reformative step taken by the regime. However, the referendum was held (at the end of February) amidst unprecedented attacks and bloodshed by regime forces against the city of Homs and areas of Hama, and amidst SNC calls to boycott the referendum. Furthermore, the new constitution does not provide a fundamental change in the governing system. Aside from dropping the eighth article (which states that the Baath Party is the leader of state and society), the constitution confirms the president's authority over all state institutions, including the judiciary and executive branches and the military. It also suggests that the president may stay in power for another fourteen years after the end of his current term, thus implying that newly permitted political pluralism would only be allowed in the government, which will continue to have limited powers under an authoritarian presidential system.

A significant development in the Syrian crisis was the start of actual implementation of comprehensive sanctions by the United States and European Union at the end of last year. The Syrian economy, with the hampering and restriction of almost all exportation and importation, has now entered a stage of paralysis. Although the depreciation of the Syrian pound (by more than forty percent of its original value) is a dangerous indication in such a volatile situation, the Syrian pound would have depreciated even more had Syria's imports not decreased as well. Despite this grim economic situation, the Syrian regime has maintained its financial and military capabilities owing to Iran's financial assistance, Iraq's energy supplies, and Russia's arms and ammunition supplies. Because its survival is linked regionally to Tehran's position and allies in Iraq and Lebanon, it is not surprising that Iran's interest and influence in Syria has reached unprecedented levels.

The Syrian National Council: Challenges of Unity and Armed Resistance

The SNC has made significant achievements since its establishment in October last year. It succeeded in building a generally acceptable organizational structure – a noteworthy feat since it includes a large number of different political forces, personalities and activists who had not worked together before. The popular support gained by the SNC upon its declaration, the befuddled stances of the Coordination Board (the SNC's rival opposition alliance), and suspicions about the relations of some of the Coordination Board members with the regime all paved the way for the SNC to become the most credible representative of the popular movement in Syria.

However, public support for the SNC has dwindled and its cohesion is in danger. From the perspective of the Syrian public and a wide spectrum of activists, the SNC has been unable to accomplish much in terms of facing the regime's repression in revolting cities. Moreover, it has not paid enough attention to the dire humanitarian situation and desperate needs of the Syrian people. In addition, from an organizational perspective, the discrepancies and gap between the SNC's executive bureau (which is responsible for everyday leadership) and its secretariat and general assembly has become more evident and salient. Some even believe that SNC Chairman Dr. Burhan Ghalioun is determined to stay in his position in spite of prior agreement on rotation.

One of the main failures of SNC leadership was their disregard for the FSA in the first few months after SNC establishment, resulting in a lack of trust between SNC and FSA officers who consider themselves the leaders of the free army. Throughout that period, SNC leadership believed that the militarization of the revolution would affect it negatively and that there was no need to support the FSA. The SNC did not announce the formation of a military council until the end of February to regulate the relationship with the FSA

and in attempt to unify the various armed groups across the country, that now play a major role in the revolution.

The many facets of deterioration in SNC performance and effectiveness led to the emergence of the Group of Twenty, headed by Haitham al-Maleh, a prominent lawyer and human rights activist. It appears that the group will try to form a leadership within SNC parallel to the current one although they emphasized that they would not secede from the organization. Regardless of the reasons behind the move, it will certainly raise more doubts about the coherence and credibility of the SNC. Perhaps the announcement of the formation of a SNC military bureau was an attempt to respond to criticism and contain the voices of internal opposition. In order to fulfill its role and position as an effective representative of the popular movement and a leading actor in the revolution, the SNC will need to further its efforts and enhance its organizational and representative capacities.

The Free Syrian Army: A Dilemma of Armament and Political Leadership

The FSA began as a modest revolutionary effort when a small group of dissident officers, led by Colonel Hussein Harmoush, announced its formation mid-summer of 2011. Harmoush was later detained by Syrian intelligence in an operation that appeared to be planned with the help of a Turkish intelligence agent on the Syrian border; his fate is currently unknown. In the mean time, an air force officer, Colonel Riyad al-Assaad, who was a companion of Harmoush and one of the first officers to dissent, appeared to succeed Harmoush and lead the free Syrian army on the Turkish-Syrian border.

At the end of 2011, rates of dissent in the armed forces increased and groups of dissident officers took the initiative to form battalions under the FSA in different areas of the country including the towns and suburbs of the Damascus, Daraa, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Idlib, and Deir al-Zour governorates. Such battalions are usually led by the highest-ranking dissident officer in the region. In the city of Homs and several Damascus suburbs, however, military mutiny was preceded by a civil insurgency when civilians and activists took up arms and retaliated from hideouts in highlands and dense agricultural areas.

It may not be entirely accurate to regard Colonel al-Assaad and his direct subordinates as the central command of the FSA. Given the lack of advanced means of communication and the difficulty of establishing a communication network covering all of Syria, the FSA is in fact more of a conceptual phenomenon than an actual army with a clearly hierarchal and evident leadership structure. Also, the financial and military means available to al-Assaad's leadership often do not reach all FSA bases throughout Syria, leaving battalions undersupplied and incapacitated. Because he is from Mount Zawya in the Idlib governorate (which is closest to the Turkish borders), Colonel al-Assaad probably has control over FSA forces in north-west Syria, but the loyalty of battalions to his leadership in other areas is questionable.

Another problem facing the organizational structure of the FSA and its leadership is that Colonel al-Assaad is no longer the highest ranking officer in the FSA after the dissent of officers like Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sheikh from military intelligence and Brigadier General Fayez Amr. Al-Assaad's headquarters were frequented by SNC leaders in the past few weeks seeking to build a leadership structure based on a hierarchal ranking system which takes the ranks of new dissident officers into account.

At the end of February, the formation of a military council of fifteen officers, including Colonel al-Assaad and led by Brigadier General al-Sheikh was announced. The new council acts as a Ministry of Defense for the FSA, and confirms Colonel al-Assaad's executive field leadership (a position resembling that of Chief of Staff) of the army groups. Despite the fact that he did not openly oppose the new leadership structure, it is not yet certain whether he and the group of officers around him will adhere to it and comply with the orders of the council.

Until the end of February, FSA arms supplies were limited to weapons belonging to dissident soldiers who received them from sympathetic comrades that still serve in the army and weapons smuggled across the Turkish and Lebanese borders. Like arms, the funds available to FSA units are also limited. Funding tends to come from civilian donations and merchants and Sunni businessmen who support the revolution. Although reports allege the attainment of financial support from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon (Hariri supporters), or Libya, there has been no evidence of such.

Nevertheless, the FSA's greatest downfall is its relationship with the SNC. The SNC is the most credible political structure representing the revolution and the popular movement. A revolution's military force is dependent on and inherently connected to that same revolution's political body with regards to its decision-making and strategizing. In the case of the revolutionary efforts, the decentralized nature of the FSA and their span across a vast geographical area as well as the independent activity of such units without the consent or regulation of the revolution's political leadership, the SNC, could prove to be a major threat to the stability of the country, especially if the regime falters and the state's leadership falls upon revolutionary bodies.

As asserted above, SNC leadership did not take the necessary steps toward enhancing cooperation with the FSA in the initial stages of the revolution. However, its decision (on 29th February 2012) to establish a military bureau and the clarifications made by its chairman on this issue the next day indicate its desire to cooperate with the FSA and incorporate it into the revolution's political system. These recent developments also indicate SNC recognition of its duty to arm and finance the FSA while participating and supporting strategic decision-making. Surprisingly, Colonel al-Assaad's comments on Ghalioun's statements (1st March 2012), reflected his dissatisfaction with the military bureau and confirmed that he would deal with its decisions in a selective manner, suggesting that he would only accept decisions that coincide with his views and aims and refute those that do not.

There are a large number of dissident officers and soldiers who serve in the FSA's armed units. The number may be over twenty thousand and is steadily increasing due to the accelerated pace of defections. With civilians joining FSA units as well, the FSA is quickly turning into a major revolutionary force, participating in escalating confrontation between the rebels and al-Assad's regime. If the SNC proves unable to incorporate the FSA into the political process and subject all of its military groups to central command, Syria's political future will fall into an abyss of uncertainty even (and perhaps particularly) if the ultimate goal of overthrowing the current regime is achieved.

Arab and International Stances: From Delegitimization to Arming the Opposition

The collective Arab stance on the Syrian crisis rapidly gained momentum since the Arab League's Ministerial Council meeting on Sunday, 12th February 2012 in Cairo. The Council adopted several decisions, including:

1. Emphasis on the full implementation of all of its resolutions on Syria, the most recent of which being Resolution No. 7444 (dated 22nd January 2012) concerning the layout of a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis. Meanwhile, the Arab League urged the Syrian government to fulfill its pledges and respond seriously and quickly in cooperation with its efforts to find a peaceful solution to the crisis
2. The end of all forms of diplomatic cooperation with the Syrian regime in international bodies and conferences, and inviting all countries that are keen on protecting the Syrian people to support this action
3. The end of the Arab League's observer mission formed under a protocol signed between the Syrian government and the League Secretariat on 19th December, 2011, and inviting the UN Security Council to pass a

resolution for the formation of a joint Arab-UN peacekeeping force to monitor and attest to the cease-fire.

4. Opening channels of communication with the Syrian opposition, providing it with all forms of political and material support, and urging it to unite and engage in serious dialogue to enhance its coherence and effectiveness before the Tunis conference.

These decisions ended the controversy over the observers mission in Syria and led to irreversible rupture between the Arab League Council and the regime in Damascus. Also, the ministerial meeting highlighted the ability of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to promote cooperation within the Arab League Council so as to the achieve goals set individually by its members in particular. For example, although initially hesitant about the strategies, Algeria finally joined the Arab majority. Iraq, aspiring to see a significant Arab presence at the upcoming summit in Baghdad, did not oppose the assertion of the Arab position (although numerous reports indicate that it, alongside Iran, still supports the Syrian regime). In comparison, Lebanon, whose current government rose with Syria's help, is not a key player in the group.

The question remains: why has the Arab position on Syria, led by the GCC, become more assertive and undeterred? The answer is twofold. Firstly, Arab public opinion, worn by images of oppression in Syria, can no longer be ignored and resulted in increasing pressure from the peoples on their respective governments. Secondly, a significant number of Arab states see political change in Syria as a strategic blow to the Iranian project in the Arab Levant. Tehran's support of the Syrian regime increased and solidified Iranian influence and power in the region; and the fall of the regime may, accordingly, weaken Iran's hold on the region. A year after the outbreak of the revolution and the escalation of the confrontation between the regime and the people, Syria is evidently not only a battlefield for the conflict between the Syrian people and their oppressor but also an arena for conflict between Iran and its powerful Arab rivals.

The Arab League met a week after the Russian-Chinese veto against the Arab-Western draft resolution on Syria (on February 4th 2012) that highlighted international disaccord on the Syrian crisis. The Russian-Chinese position agitated the Arab public and caused official resentment; the West's rhetoric also illustrated resentment for Russia in particular. The reasons behind the Russian and Chinese positions are evident: both countries fear that the policy of international (i.e. Western) intervention in troubled countries aiming to change their regimes may become a fixed approach in international law, resembling the international diplomatic and political policies of colonial times. Russia and China also seek to emphasize that the world is no longer subject to the whims and will of the United States. China's position on Syria, in particular, is reflective of the latest US strategy giving the Pacific region special importance.

A few days after the UN Security Council battle, Russia's foreign minister and head of intelligence visited Damascus. Despite telephoned discussions with Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and the Saudi monarch, King Abdullah, the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, seemed determined to maintain Moscow's initial position. In response to the Russian-Chinese opposition to the Security Council resolution, the Arab and Western countries turned to the UN General Assembly for a symbolic condemnation of the Syrian regime on 16th February. The severest response to the Russian and Chinese positions came from Turkey when it proposed the supposed Friends of Syria Conference in Tunis. Dozens of countries participated in the conference (on 24th February) but Russia and China did not attend. The conference was a shrewd political maneuver, as more than seventy countries, many of which Arab and Islamic, announced their support for the Arab initiative and called on President al-Assad to gradually transfer power and let Syria shift to democracy. It also declared limited recognition of the SNC as a representative (but not as the only legitimate representative) of the Syrian people who seek democratic transformation.

Nonetheless, the Friends of Syria Conference in Tunis witnessed a radical stance on the part of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, adamantly called for the armament of the Syrian opposition, emphasizing that transfer of power in Syria should happen whether willingly or unwillingly. He maintained that the decisions made during the conference were not substantive and radical enough considering the atrocities occurring in Syria. However, as discussions progressed it became evident that the United States and most Western countries were not in favor of arming the Syrian opposition (namely the FSA).

Another Friends of Syria conference will be held in Istanbul in mid-March in recognition of Turkey's role in the Syrian question and because Turkey was the first country to call for the formation of the Friends of Syria. Until the conference (in which the Syrian opposition hopes a more conclusive and effective decision will be reached), the controversy concerning the international community's next steps and the heated debate about the appropriate response to the increasingly complex situation in Syria will continue. Key questions such as whether it would be more effective to establish "safe passages" for humanitarian aid or enforce safe zones for the protection of fugitive civilians and dissident army forces; if any of the options open to the international community can be adopted without actual international military intervention; and whether the Arabs and the international community should arm the opposition while remaining largely disengaged from the heated internal conflict in Syria and leaving Syrians to fight for their country remain unanswered.

The regional and international disagreement on how to deal with the Syrian uprising is certainly a significant factor resulting in war-like diplomacy as well as relatively unhindered continuation and expansion of the actual war between the regime, the opposition and the people. The dispute between Iran and some Arab countries is not new, Russia and China's view of Syria as a political arena for fighting US and Western efforts, thus exacerbating and complicating the struggle over Syria, is.

The Revolution and International Strategies

The Arab initiative is the best solution for transferring power in Syria. It is the least costly in every aspect and protects Syria's resources and army. Unfortunately, the regime still refuses the initiative and chose to resort to force to defeat the popular movement instead. If stripped of its support from Iran, Russia, and China, it will not be able to reject the Arab initiative and continue attacking its people. Thus, unrestrained Iranian support and Russian-Chinese stances are very crucial to the regime.

There are little indications of a change in the Russian and Chinese stances. However, at this point, it is probable that tangible change depends on the United States rather than Russia or China which implies once again that Syria has indeed become the setting of a disturbing display of the power struggle between Russia and China and the United States.

What appears to be a mere international and diplomatic game for Russia and China has proven to be more sinister for Iran as it is fighting a strategic battle in Syria that may hamper and reverse the influence it has achieved in the region over the past two decades if the fire of the Arab revolution burns too brightly and incinerates Iran's influence in Syria or if the flames of revolution break out in Iraq and Lebanon.

The regional and international struggle does not mean that Syria's destiny will be determined by regional and international powers alone; and they will only exacerbate the situation or rush the solution. This is not the first time Syria turned into a regional and international battleground, but the difference between the situation in the 1950s and the current situation is that the Syrian people are now key players in the conflict, which increases the SNC's and FSA's responsibility as representatives and protectors of the people.

