



# **Revolution in Danger: A Critical Appraisal of the Syrian National Council with Recommendations for Reform**

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# INTRODUCTION

*The Syrian National Council (SNC) has emerged as the leading political force in the effort to unseat the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It has the widest degree of representation of any of the existing political opposition forces and has received the most widespread international recognition. Yet from the outset it has been plagued by divisions, infighting, manipulation by various factions, and significant errors of judgment. To date the SNC almost certainly remains an indispensable aspect of the Syrian uprising, and by far the most likely (and indeed the only plausible) structure around which a political alternative can begin to coalesce. However, unless the serious flaws within the SNC are addressed quickly and effectively, it may fail to live up to this potential and, in turn, could deal a fatal blow to the uprising itself.*



## Context of the Syrian uprising

As the Arab uprisings took hold in Tunisia and Egypt at the end of 2010, groups based both inside and outside of Syria began preparations for a similar revolt against the Assad regime.<sup>1</sup> The most prominent of the grassroots organisations that began coalescing in March were the Coordination Committees in the Syrian provinces of Idlib and Homs. These Committees were composed largely of Syrian professionals in their early-to-late 30s, and were soon joined by smaller counterpart movements made up of university students in Damascus, Lattakia, Homs, Aleppo, and Deraa.<sup>2</sup>

In March, crowded marketplaces served as the centres for popular protest. But after the security forces violently disrupted the demonstrations, which were often situated close to sensitive public and governmental institutions in Damascus and Aleppo, protestors changed tactics. They correctly estimated that mosques and their adjacent areas, which are always crowded on Fridays, would be more secure from regime forces due to a high volume of people attending Friday prayers. Protestors also realised that mosques provided not only cover but also manpower for the protests. When young demonstrators started protesting inside mosques after prayers concluded and worshipers were preparing to leave, they often found themselves joined by dozens of ordinary citizens who had initially only gone to the mosques for prayers but became swept up in the popular protests they saw developing around them. The presence of plainclothes security personnel scrutinising all mosque-goers encouraged more people to join the demonstrations out of anger and resentment. Sometimes fighting in and around mosques broke out,<sup>3</sup> encounters which

were witnessed firsthand by one of this report's authors, who lived in Damascus until July 2011.

Syria's uprising, in short, was not entirely spontaneous, but it was a largely decentralised phenomenon. There was no direct or central system or hierarchy of authority or control, which might have been provided by traditional opposition movements in Syria. The most prominent and inclusive of these had been the Damascus Declaration group, a coalition of human rights and opposition organisations formed in 2005 to call for reform during the short-lived "Damascus Spring" period of liberalisation.<sup>4</sup>

When the current uprising erupted, such traditional opposition groups had no presence on the ground. However, because it involved well-known intellectuals and dissidents, the Damascus Declaration quickly became a fixture on Arabic and Western media outlets. This gave voice to anti-regime sentiments, but also left the real engine of the Syrian uprising — activists and volunteers on the streets — absent from the conversation. While the protest movements were grassroots, diffuse and decentralised, various members of the Damascus Declaration, other Syrian expatriates, and related organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood began trying to position as the leading organised political opponents of the regime.

As many grassroots activists have attested, the power of the uprising — and its ability to persist and expand for nearly a year in an oppressive police state — lies in its diversity, decentralisation, mobility, fluidity and lack of formal, hierarchical leadership. Under such circumstances, were security forces to arrest or kill one senior representative of a Coordination Committee, there were dozens who would take his or her place. Those activists who could be identified as having acquired acknowledged leadership roles were directly targeted by the regime, as were their family members.

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1 'Syria Protests Set for Feb. 5: Will the 'Day of Rage' Mirror Egypt and Tunisia?', Aol News, 31 March 2011, available at <http://www.aolnews.com/2011/01/31/syria-protests-set-for-feb-5-will-the-day-of-rage-mirror-eg/>

2 'Student killed as Syria protest turns violent', USA Today, 11 April 2011, available at [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2011-04-11-syria\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2011-04-11-syria_N.htm)

3 'Omayyad Mosque Fight', 18 March 2011, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cajX47nqhc>

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4 'The Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change', 16 October 2005, available at <http://www.demdigest.net/damascusdeclaration.html>

For the first two months of the uprising, virtually all of the Syrian opposition figures who appeared on international television were not speaking directly on behalf of any actual on-the-ground constituency, but were rather foreign-based sympathisers who could publicly side with the protestors without fear of reprisal. This provided an unfortunately wide space for political self-promotion and opportunism by individuals or groups seeking to capitalise on the uprising without having any direct involvement in it.

## Formation of the SNC

The Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed as the nucleus of a transitional government, conceptualised to play a role akin to that of the National Transitional Council (NTC) in Libya. Unlike the NTC, which was assembled in the liberated city of Benghazi, the SNC was founded in exile in Istanbul, Turkey. The SNC was formally inaugurated on August 23, 2011, after months of intense negotiation and factional wrangling as leading members from inside Syria, such as Riad Seif, worked to unite all major opposition parties under one umbrella.<sup>5</sup> Riad Seif is no longer a member.

Prof. Burhan Ghalioun was named chairman of the SNC on August 29 without any formal election for that position. A secularist with left-leaning politics, Ghalioun is a well-respected academic who teaches political sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris. Weeks before the SNC was formally announced, his name had already been floated by a consortium of opposition and Syrian youth activists as the ideal leader of the Council, an endorsement that, judging by his public reaction to it on Facebook, surprised and flattered him.<sup>6</sup>

There were several blocs associated with the first incarnation of the SNC, including the Damascus

Declaration, the Muslim Brotherhood Alliance, the Damascus Spring (another abortive reform movement founded in 2000/2001 when Bashar al-Assad inherited the presidency), the Kurdish Bloc, (consisting of all the major Kurdish parties in Syria), and the Assyrians Organisation, representing the ethnic Assyrian Christian minority. Furthermore, the SNC claimed to include members from all major Syrian political, ethnic and confessional constituencies — Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Assyrians, Kurds, Ismailis and Druze — and to draw together the on-the-ground grassroots activists with intellectuals, Islamists, liberals and nationalists into a broad coalition for regime change.<sup>7</sup>

The National Consensus Charter released by the SNC affirmed that “the Syrian revolution is a revolution for freedom and dignity,” and rejected “any calls for sectarianism or monopolising of the revolution,” as well as “foreign military intervention” as a solution to the crisis or strategy for regime change.<sup>8</sup>

Many Syrians were ambivalent about the announcement of the formation of the SNC. Some assumed that a “united front” would facilitate increased Western and Arab pressure on the regime and provide a functional government-in-exile for Syria. Others hoped the SNC would lobby on behalf of Western military intervention to protect civilians in Syria and hasten the Assad regime’s collapse.

This idea gained currency among activists following the success of the NATO-led limited military intervention in Libya, the victory of the NTC rebels and the killing of Muammar Qaddafi.<sup>9</sup> The “Libya model” became, in the minds of many protestors, a plausible scenario in Syria as well, and such hopes centred around the idea that the Syrian SNC could replicate the role of the Libyan

5 ‘New Syrian National Council Convening Saturday in Istanbul’, Foreign Policy, 19 August 2011, available at [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/19/new\\_syrian\\_national\\_council\\_convening\\_saturday\\_in\\_istanbul](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/19/new_syrian_national_council_convening_saturday_in_istanbul)

6 ‘Why Can’t the Syrian Opposition Get Along?’, Foreign Policy, 1 September 2011, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/09/01/why\\_cant\\_the\\_syrian\\_opposition\\_get\\_along](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/09/01/why_cant_the_syrian_opposition_get_along)

7 ‘Syria National Council. National Consensus Charter’, Foreign Policy, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp\\_uploaded\\_documents/110916\\_SNC%20-%20National%20Consensus%20Charter.pdf](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp_uploaded_documents/110916_SNC%20-%20National%20Consensus%20Charter.pdf)

8 Ibid

9 ‘Syrian Protestors Take Inspiration From Libya’, Fox News, 21 October 2011, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2011/10/21/syrian-protesters-take-inspiration-from-libya/>

NTC. The SNC, however, formally rejected any form of military intervention in Syria and thus was apparently not keeping pace with the building sentiment on the ground.<sup>10</sup>

Many Syrians have also been unaware of the structure and composition of this aspiring government-in-exile, which has yet to acquire many of the key factors that allowed the Libyan NTC to serve the central function it did in its own revolution.<sup>11</sup>

## The evolving structure of the SNC

The SNC's initial membership list for its General Assembly was comprised of 140 Syrians. Seventy-one of these members lived abroad, and it was determined, that their names could be safely announced to the public. The remaining 69 were said to be activists still living in the country, whose identities could not be disclosed without placing them at risk of arrest or assassination.<sup>12</sup> According to some sources interviewed for this report who were integral to the formation of the SNC, only 71 names were published because in fact the Council had yet to garner any actual domestic support inside Syria. Most grassroots activists, they claim, had not even heard of the SNC, much less agreed to join it.

A full third of the names published, were recognisable as members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. This organisation is an Islamist movement that was virtually wiped out during Hafez al-Assad's scorched-earth campaigns in the 1980s and subsequently banned, but still had acknowledged members, largely confined to the Syrian diaspora. In the intervening period, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood became dominated by its Aleppo branch. This accounts for the preponderance

of Aleppines and their allies — many connected by family ties — in Brotherhood representation within the SNC leadership.

The need for secrecy was in many ways, a considerable advantage for the SNC, making it impossible for a casual observer to know how many of these seats may also have gone to Brotherhood members.

In early October 2011 the SNC expanded to 230 seats, as many opposition figures deemed the original list insufficiently inclusive of the various political orientations, and religious and ethnic minorities in Syria. All 71 disclosed members from the original list retained their seats. Four more publicly disclosed members were added, comprising a new 75-seat super-bloc named the Former Administrative Committee.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the 75 seats reserved for the Former Administrative Committee, 20 more seats were allocated to the Brotherhood; 55 to grassroots activists; 20 to the Damascus Declaration; 20 to the Kurds; 20 to political independents; and 20 seats were reserved for future groups to join.<sup>14</sup> Of the 20 new seats given to the Muslim Brotherhood, only four names were announced, indicating that these 16 seats had yet to be filled and potentially constituted a quota.

The new, 230-strong member SNC is headed by an Executive Committee, initially composed of 29 representatives nominated from the various opposition groups. It included six representatives from the Local Coordinating Committees (one of the media-recognisable grassroots networks in Syria, although probably not the largest or most representative), five representatives from the Former Administrative Committee, four representatives from the Damascus Declaration, five from the Muslim Brotherhood, four

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10 'Syrian Opposition Split Over Key Issues', BBC News, 9 November 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15665622>

11 'Syrian opposition council: Save us from 'war'', CNN, 2 October 2011, available at [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-10-02/middleeast/world\\_meast\\_syria-unrest\\_1\\_syrian-opposition-syrian-revolution-daraa?\\_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-10-02/middleeast/world_meast_syria-unrest_1_syrian-opposition-syrian-revolution-daraa?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST)

12 'Syrian National Council document', Foreign Policy, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp\\_uploaded\\_documents/110916\\_About%20SNC.pdf](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp_uploaded_documents/110916_About%20SNC.pdf)

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13 'Anatomy of the Syrian Revolution', Fikra Forum, 16 November 2011, available at <http://fikraforum.org/?p=1711>

14 Ibid

from Kurdish parties, four for independents, and a single seat for the Assyrians.<sup>15</sup>

Only 19 out of the 29 names on the Executive Committee were published, and eight of them were Muslim Brothers listed variously under the Muslim Brotherhood bloc, the Tribal Coalition (supposedly representing tribes from northern Syria), and Local Coordination Committees.<sup>16</sup> To complicate matters further, the Muslim Brotherhood was also a party to the Damascus Declaration, so the Declaration's bloc is also likely to have included some of its members.

The Executive Committee was later renamed the Secretariat General and expanded to a total of 36 members. More Muslim Brothers were added to the group as were many leftists aligned with Ghalioun.<sup>17</sup>

Also in October, a new Executive Committee was created as a presidential body, consisting of just five members: Muhammad Tayfour, a Muslim Brother; two of Tayfour's moderate allies, Samir Nashar of the Damascus Declaration,<sup>18</sup> and Abdel Basit Sida, an independent Kurd in exile; Abdel Ahad Steifo, an Assyrian independent; and Ghalioun himself. This Executive Committee was subsequently expanded to include three additional members: Ahmad Ramadan, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood; and Haitham al-Maleh and Bassma Kodmani, allies of Ghalioun.<sup>19</sup>

Some observers within the SNC say they believe a power struggle has taken place between the right-wing Muslim Brotherhood bloc and a left-wing

Ghalioun-led bloc. The evidence suggests, however, that the Brotherhood has begun to dominate the SNC through its control of the Council's finances and its close relations with the Turkish government, which effectively supervised the creation of the Council and has exerted significant ideological influence on its makeup and political outlook.<sup>20</sup>

Compounding the Muslim Brotherhood's overrepresentation in the organisation, the SNC's membership roster clearly suffers from a stark demographic underrepresentation of ethnic and confessional minority groups. The newly-formed Kurdish National Council (KNC), representing all established Kurdish parties in Syria, recently "suspended" its membership in the SNC due to what its collective leadership apparently perceives as a disproportionate Sunni Islamist sway enabled by Ankara's powerful influence on the Council. Turkish government involvement is itself enough to push many Syrian Kurds away from the SNC, and the additional influence of Islamists has proved highly unpalatable. This withdrawal was a major blow to the SNC's claim that it comprehensively represents all Syrians, as Kurds constitute between 10 and 15 percent of the country's population (the exact percentage is unknown as no census has been taken in Syria since the 1960s), making them without doubt the largest ethnic minority in Syria. Yet even before the KNC's suspension of its membership, Kurds were only given 20 seats in the SNC as opposed to the 36 their demographic strength would seem to mandate. The Kurds were also given substantially fewer seats than the Muslim Brotherhood, which, whatever its actual constituency in Syria, cannot realistically be estimated to represent more than 15 percent of the total population in direct allegiance.<sup>21</sup>

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15 'Anatomy of the Syrian Revolution', Fikra Forum, 16 November 2011, available at <http://fikraforum.org/?p=1711>

16 Initially, there were eight MB members (Muhammad Taifur, Ahmad Ramadan, Ahmad Sayyid Youssef, Abdel Ilah Milhem, Emadiddine Rasheed, Muhammad Bassam Youssef, Najib Ghabbian, Nazir Hakim) and two of their allies (Motei Bateen, Anas Al-Abdeh ) amongst the 19 declared members of the Executive Committee, constituting the half the Committee.

17 'Structure of the SNC', Syrian National Council, available at <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/structure/structure.html>

18 'Syrian opposition activist released from detention', Khaleej Times, 28 March 2006, available at [http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2006/March/middleeast\\_March722.xml&section=middleeast&col=](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2006/March/middleeast_March722.xml&section=middleeast&col=)

19 'Executive Committee', Syrian National Council, available at <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/structure/executive-committee.html>

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20 'Syria's Opposition', United States Institute of Peace, 20 September 2011, available at <http://www.usip.org/publications/syrias-opposition>

21 'Members', Syrian National Council, available at <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/members.html>

This lack of balance between important ethnic and confessional minority constituencies, which are underrepresented on the one side, and the over representation of the highly ideological but well-organised and Turkish-backed Muslim Brotherhood on the other, lies at the heart of the structural problems that have plagued the SNC from its inception and have yet to be resolved.

## The Muslim Brotherhood's role in the SNC

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's role in the upper echelons of the SNC, especially at a practical level, is generally not sufficiently recognized.

**Mohammed Farouk Tayfour** is Deputy Chairman of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and also one of the seven members of the SNC's Presidential Committee.<sup>22</sup> Tayfour accompanied Riad Shaqfe— current Chairman of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the movement's military leader during the Syrian unrest in 1979 and 1983—<sup>23</sup> to Iraq in the 1980s. (Many Syrian Muslim Brothers sought refuge in Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, which was then locked in a bitter rivalry with its Syrian Ba'athist counterpart and gave aid and comfort to virtually all enemies of the Assads.) After Saddam was deposed in 2004, Tayfour, Shaqfe and many other Syrian Muslim Brothers moved to Yemen. when the Syrian uprising began in mid-March 2011, both Tayfour and Shaqfeh quickly relocated to Turkey where Tayfour is now the director of the multi-million dollar Relief and Development Projects Bureau of the SNC. According to the SNC website, the Bureau aims to "create and implement plans for immediate relief work to alleviate the hardship-struck areas in Syria," and "develop a plan for needed development projects in Syria."<sup>24</sup>

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22 'Mohamad Faruq Tayfur', Syrian National Council, available at <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/members/item/57-mohamad-faruq-tayfur.html>

23 'Syria's Muslim Brothers: Where to next?', The Daily Star Lebanon, 17 September 2010, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/Sep/17/Syrias-Muslim-Brothers-Where-to-next.ashx#axzz0zIRjXMD>

24 'Relief and Development Projects Bureau', Syrian National Council, 23 November

The fact that that elements of the Muslim Brotherhood are—at least in appearance— effectively in charge of the SNC project for the reconstruction of Syria's social services and civil society — — should cause concern, given the long history of Islamist parties throughout the Middle East using such social service programs to advance their political agendas. This strategy was on full display in the recent post-Mubarak Egyptian parliamentary elections, which saw the victory of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's affiliates, as well as the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006 in which Hamas captured majority support. It is a crucial element of the "hearts and minds" strategy Islamists in the Arab world have employed to considerable success in recent decades.

The most notable Muslim Brotherhood member within the SNC is **Ahmad Ramadan**. Ramadan also accompanied Shaqfe and Tayfour to Iraq, where he produced the "Voice of Jihadists" programme for the main state-controlled radio station in the country during the 1990s. Ramadan was also the director of Hamas' Al-Quds Press International News Agency from 2004 until April 2011.<sup>25</sup> This agency was funded by both the Iranian regime via the Middle East and Africa Bank, an institution known to be a money laundering facility for the Iranian regime, as well as by the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah party, which is a client primarily of Tehran, but also of Damascus. Al-Quds Press offices were, in fact, formerly located in the Hezbollah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut in 2004, when the Syrian army still occupied much of Lebanon. Not just anyone could operate in this area: businessmen working in these suburbs need security clearance, certainly from Hezbollah, if not directly from Syrian intelligence.

Ramadan became the director of the Al-Quds International News Agency through his relationship

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2011, available at <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/bureaus/relief-a-development-projects.html>

25 'Feud of the Directors of al-Quds Satellite Channel', 13 October 2010, available at <http://bit.ly/wu4eKK>

with the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, Hamas, which is regarded as a terrorist organisation by most Western states. Ramadan also reportedly served on a variety of occasions as one of many liaisons between Hamas and Iran, which was, until recently, the organisation's main financier. Ironically, it is precisely due to the Syrian uprising and the Brotherhood role in the SNC that relations between Tehran and not only Hamas but Arab Muslim Brotherhood organisations have become strained at best and in some cases openly hostile.

The Al-Quds Press channel had no license to operate from Lebanon and was formally registered in London. Many allegations of corruption, employee mistreatment, and embezzlement (primarily of Iranian funding) within the enterprise have circulated in the Lebanese press, many targeting Ramadan personally.<sup>26</sup> According to the US-based attorney and SNC member Rasha Khaled: "There are a lot of question marks on Ahmad Ramadan's source(s) of finance".<sup>27</sup>

Ramadan is currently head of the Media and Public Relations Department of the SNC<sup>28</sup> and, although he is not listed as among its Muslim Brotherhood Alliance bloc members, he has apparently established a for-profit media organisation in the United Kingdom, yet to be publicly launched, which will aim to spearhead and perhaps even dominate the SNC's media campaign.

To run his Media Department, Ramadan also enlisted SNC members Obaida Nahhas, Khaled Khouja, and Hassan al-Hashmi, all reputed members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Many SNC members have voiced their concerns over how members of this Media

Bureau are not elected but selected unilaterally.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Muhammad al-Abdullah, an SNC representative not affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, resigned from the Media Bureau because of what he perceived as an "Islamist takeover."<sup>30</sup> Another SNC member, the aforementioned Rasha al-Ahdab, accused the Bureau of "inactivity."<sup>31</sup>

Ghalioun's allies in the SNC appears to have concluded that Ramadan's behaviour amounted to an attempt to monopolise the Council's media strategy, therefore Ghalioun's leftist bloc has established its own counterpart bureau within the President's Office.

**Imadedin Al-Rashid**, another SNC member not formerly listed as part of the Muslim Brotherhood Alliance bloc, is Vice-Dean of the Islamic Sharia Faculty at Damascus University, a position that cannot be assumed without regime approval.

According to active Muslim Brotherhood members interviewed for this report, al-Rashid is an active member of the Brotherhood who attempted to strongly imprint its Islamist agenda on these conferences. His partners include current SNC members Abdelilah Thamer Al-Melhem; Najib Ghadbian, who was at one stage associated with dissident former Syrian Vice President Abdul Haleem Khaddam; Sadad Akkad (a.k.a. Muhamad Sadad Jameel Akkad), who owns an Islamic education channel for children in Saudi Arabia; Walid Saffour, who runs the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) in London; and Haytham Rahma, the imam of a mosque in Stockholm, who runs a Brotherhood-affiliated organisation named the International Association of Syrian Expatriates.

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26 'Hamas-Affiliated Employees Stealing and Violating Lebanese Laws and do not have a broadcast license from Beirut', Kulalhaqqa, 12 July 2009, available at <http://www.kulalhaqqa.com/details.aspx?id=9072%20>

27 'Exacerbated the Differences Between the Members of the Syrian National National Council', Elaph, 30 January 2012, available at <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2012/1/713106.html>

28 'Media and Public Relations Bureau', Syrian National Council, 23 November 2011, available at <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/bureaus/media-a-public-relations.html>

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29 'Fun Biqai Reveals the Reasons for suspension of its membership in the Syrian National Council', Gate of Al-Ahram, 23 December 2011, available at <http://bit.ly/wpPVk1>

30 'Mohammed Al-Abdullah, Withdraws from the National Council', The Syrian, 9 November 2011, available at <http://the-syrian.com/archives/52211>

31 'Exacerbated the Differences Between the Members of the Syrian National National Council', Elaph, 30 January 2012, available at <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2012/1/713106.html>



The most influential figure in the Muslim Brotherhood bloc in the SNC is **Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni**, a three-term Chairman of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (1996–2008), despite the fact that he is not technically a member of the SNC.<sup>32</sup>

Al-Bayanouni's influence within the Council is demonstrated by his role as the primary public spokesman prior to the appointment of Ghalioun as SNC president. However, al-Bayanouni's record within the Brotherhood itself is chequered.<sup>33</sup> He was accused several times of "mismanaging" the group's funds. The most recent of these allegations of fraud was leveled by Ali Al-Ahmad, who accused al-Bayanouni of turning the Muslim Brotherhood into his "own farm" and spending the organisation's money on cultivating a loyalist faction rather than on zaka, (charity)<sup>34</sup>. As if to prove the point in sacrifice, Al-Ahmad was subsequently suspended, without trial in violation of the Brotherhood's own terms, for making such an accusation.

Al-Bayanouni hails from a family of Muslim religious scholars in Aleppo. His brother, the noted imam Muhammad Abul Fateh al-Bayanouni, formally met with Bashar al-Assad alongside a group of other imams before travelling to Kuwait in April 2011 to promote the Syrian regime's ostensible "reforms," at precisely the time the protest movement was gaining ground. Al-Bayanouni's nephew, Bashar Muhammad Abul Fateh al-Bayanouni, ran a joint-Kuwaiti-Syrian investment fund with the blessing and partnership of top Syrian security officials before fleeing after the initiative collapsed.<sup>35</sup>

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32 'Syria: Bayanoni Reelected MB Chairman with Majority', Ikhwan Web, 25 August 2006, available at <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=3634>

33 'Syrian Leadership Mentor: I refuse to "militarization" of the Syrian Revolution, despite provocations', Al-Arabiya, 14 October 2011, available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/13/171688.html>

34 'Syrian Brother: Bayanouni farm kicked me out after exposing the squandering of the Zaka funds', Al-Arabiya, 6 March 2007, available at [http://www.alarabiya.net/save\\_pdf.php?cont\\_id=32316](http://www.alarabiya.net/save_pdf.php?cont_id=32316)

35 'News of the bankruptcy group jazz in Aleppo after collection billion pounds and the disappearance of its director Bashar Bayanouni of sight', Syria-News.com, 21 August 2008, available at [http://syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy\\_seq=120246](http://syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=120246)

It is clear that although Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni is a crucial figure in the SNC and a long-serving leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, others in his family enjoy a very different relationship with the Assad regime. Perhaps this is not unusual for prominent families living under authoritarian dictatorships, but it re-emphasises the complexity of forming a credible, transparent and representative leadership for the SNC.

The exaggerated influence of such controversial Islamist leaders is a reflection of some of the reasons why the Council has been unable to replicate for the Syrian uprising the successful "big tent" approach of the Libyan NTC.

## The National Coordination Committee

The National Coordination Committee (NCC) is an opposition group established in late September 2011 in the suburbs of Damascus under the careful scrutiny of the Assad regime, as demonstrated in the local state-controlled media coverage of the announcement.<sup>36</sup> For this reason, many opposition activists suspect that while the NCC undoubtedly includes many genuine dissidents, it has been stage-managed by the regime to provide a cover for "dialogue" that will ultimately preserve regime continuity and offset the prospects for regime change. NCC critics essentially see the Committee as a kind of safety valve on the pressure cooker of political dissent facing the Assad regime and the Committee's membership does little to dispel that perception.

The NCC's executive bureau is headed by Hasan Abdul Azim, a one-time Ba'athist who has strongly opposed any international engagement in ending the violence in Syria. He also declared, as late as October 2011,

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36 'National Coordinating Body for Democratic Change names Executive Committee\_Syrian opposition must avoid splits', Support Kurds in Syria, 11 October 2011, available at [http://supportkurds.org/news/national-coordinating-body-for-democratic-change-names-executive-committee\\_syrian-opposition-must-avoid-splits/](http://supportkurds.org/news/national-coordinating-body-for-democratic-change-names-executive-committee_syrian-opposition-must-avoid-splits/)

that ending the presidency of Bashar Al-Assad is “not a priority” for the Committee.<sup>37</sup> Azim has been accused by Damascus-based activists of coordinating the ambush on the convoy of the former U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert Ford who was due to meet Azim at his office in downtown Damascus on September 28, 2011.<sup>38</sup> Even if this accusation appears far-fetched, it reflects the distrust many activists have of Azim, who could most accurately be described as a “gradual reformist.”

Azim’s deputy abroad was originally Burhan Ghalioun, who left the NCC in August 2011 to join the SNC. Ghalioun was replaced by Haitham al-Manna, the nephew of the current Vice President of Syria, Farouq al-Sharaa, whom the Arab League has proposed as the regime official to usher in a “peaceful transition” of power from Bashar al-Assad. Also known as Haitham al-Oudat, Manna has strong ties to Iran and has facilitated meetings between other NCC members and Tehran, according to opposition figures interviewed for this report who wish to remain anonymous.<sup>39</sup>

Manna’s role as a genuine oppositionist is hotly contested. He formerly accused demonstrators of being paid to take to the streets<sup>40</sup> and has said that international media coverage of the demonstrations was fabricated, bolstering a central and thoroughgoing element of the regime’s year-long narrative about the revolution.<sup>41</sup>

Other prominent members of the NCC include Abdul Majeed Manjuna, a socialist and ex-minister in Assad’s

cabinet, who has also expressed strong opposition to any international engagement in ending the violence in Syria;<sup>42</sup> Sameer al-Aita, a counsellor for the Syrian Presidential Palace; Tareef al-Aita, Sameer’s brother and director of the Assad University Hospital; and Saleh Muslem, the leader of the Kurdish Workers’ Party in Syria (PYD/PKK), a party which has been supported by the Assad regime since the 1980s and is regarded by many Western states as a terrorist group.

Some members of the NCC have defected and accused the Committee of working with Syrian intelligence.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, in an effort to unite the opposition into one coherent group, Ghalioun spent months trying to reconcile the SNC with his former allies in the NCC, which recently renamed itself the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB). On New Year’s Eve, the Western press reported that an alleged agreement had been reached between the two bodies. Signed by Ghalioun in the presence of SNC members Walid al-Bunni, Haitham al-Maleh and Catherine al-Talli, the agreement purported to present “a unified-Syrian opposition consensus to the Arab League in January 2012” and “refuse[d] any foreign military intervention in Syria, deeming Arab intervention not foreign”.<sup>44</sup>

News of this agreement led swiftly to demonstrations in Syria criticising Ghalioun and the SNC, with some activists from Ghalioun’s home city of Homs accusing the SNC president of being a “conspirator”. Although Ghalioun maintained that the text leaked to the press was only a “draft” pending broader SNC and NCB approval, Haitham al-Manna insisted that it was, in fact, a final statement of principles.<sup>45</sup> Two ranking SNC

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37 ‘Syrian opposition figure Hassan Abdul Azim: the slogan “Drop the President” is not among the priorities of the opposition’, Die Presse, 5 October 2011, available at <http://www.dp-news.com/pages/detail.aspx?articleid=98774>

38 ‘Pro-Assad Protest Temporarily Traps U.S. Ambassador’, The New York Times, 29 September 2011, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/world/middleeast/pro-assad-protest-temporarily-traps-us-diplomat.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/world/middleeast/pro-assad-protest-temporarily-traps-us-diplomat.html?_r=1)

39 ‘Iranian officials meet with Syrian opposition’, The Daily Telegraph, 14 November 2011, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8889824/Iranian-officials-meet-with-Syrian-opposition.html>

40 ‘Haytham Manna accuse the rebels occur with the disappearance of money’, 24 October 2011, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YT3h9OE5bPw>

41 ‘Dr. Haytham Manna – Khaya media coverage of the revolution of dignity’, 2 April 2011 available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UMuUVdd—c>

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42 ‘Abdul-Majid Manjounah and Fly’, The Syrian, 30 October 2011, available at <http://the-syrian.com/archives/50200>

43 ‘Huge splits in the form of national coordination and accused of being agents of the system, and dissidents were a gathering of freedom and dignity to support the Syrian revolution’, Sooryoon.net, 11 September 2011, available at <http://www.sooryoon.net/?p=37588>

44 ‘Text of the Convention between the NCB and the Council’, 31 December 2011, available at <http://bit.ly/xCPd4F>

45 ‘Ghalioun: The agreement with the NCB is a draft’, CNN Arabic, 31 December 2011, available at <http://arabic.cnn.com/2012/syria.2011/11/1/syria.opposition/index.html>

members confirmed privately to one of the authors that they had no prior knowledge of this agreement and that it had not been voted on or even presented to the SNC General Assembly, with one noting that no formal SNC press release was ever released confirming the substance of Western reports. In the event, the agreement was ultimately rejected by the SNC.

While the truth behind this abortive merger remains shrouded in mystery, it highlights yet another difficulty the SNC has faced in both shoring up credibility with the Syrian “street” and gaining legitimacy with foreign governments. This difficulty is rooted in a paradoxically encouraging aspect of the Syrian opposition as a whole: While the SNC’s repeated strategic flip-flops may seem to indicate confusion and disorganisation, but reflects a desperate effort to remain relevant to an on-the-ground constituency as the Syrian uprising becomes increasingly militarised. Moreover, activists and rebels increasingly seek some form of Western military intervention to rebalance a fight that has so far been waged between, a well-armed regime backed by mercenary forces, Russian weapons, Iranian money, and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah agents and a loose collection of , army defectors and civilians armed with hunting rifles, RPGs and AK-47s. Virtually all ground-level and grass-roots activists in the Syrian uprising have long been committed to ousting Assad from power, so rumours about the SNC’s possible merger with a Damascus-based opposition group committed to “reform” — if not reconciliation with the regime — categorically opposed to Western intervention were met with fierce domestic denunciations. “Burhan Ghalioun, don’t you hear? The people want a no-fly-zone!”, chanted Syrian singer-turned-revolutionary Abdel Baset Saroot in Khaldiya, Homs to a crowd of thousands, which then repeated the slogan.<sup>46</sup> The merger and its rejection can therefore be interpreted as the beginnings of Syrian democracy, *avant la lettre*.

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46 “Khalidiya’s Spontaneous Response to Saroot”, YouTube, 31 December 2011, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol87kOWmYng>

Virtually all ground-level and grass-roots activists in the Syrian uprising have long been committed to ousting Assad from power, so rumours about the SNC’s possible merger with a Damascus-based opposition group committed to “reform” — if not reconciliation with the regime — categorically opposed to Western intervention were met with fierce domestic denunciations. The merger and its rejection can therefore be interpreted as the beginnings of Syrian democracy, *avant la lettre*.

Another telling sign of this phenomenon was revealed in the SNC’s next about-face. While the National Consensus Charter originally categorically ruled out Western military intervention as a way to topple the Assad regime, in January 2012, the SNC formally endorsed a NATO-imposed no-fly zone over the western corridor of Syria and the establishment of a “safe area” in the northwest province of Idleb, centred in the city of Jisr al-Shughour—a proposal which hewed closely to a model originally conceived by one of the authors of this report which was formally recommended by Ghalioun in a press statement. More to the point, the SNC spent January 2012 lobbying the Arab League to transfer responsibility for the Syria question to the United Nations Security Council in the hopes that it would license just such an intervention.<sup>47</sup> This demonstrates that the SNC cannot run a unilateral policy without being accountable to the people it wishes to represent abroad, and its changes in policies reflect at least a partial understanding of that fact.

Nevertheless, the SNC is still learning how to adapt policy to public relations, and how to relate to its required constituencies and navigate between its competing internal blocs and members. Ghalioun, for instance, appeared to nullify his newfound support for military intervention in a January 2012 interview with Al-Arabiya, only days before once again reversing his

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47 ‘Homs alarm proof pipe secular Syria’, 31 December 2011, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udAVv5h-Wtk>

position an telling the BBC that he supported the SNC-backed protocol of asking for a safe area and no-fly zone.<sup>48</sup> Such inconsistency, which has been a hallmark of the SNC's public diplomacy, has significantly exacerbated doubts about the organisation's coherence, cohesion and efficacy.

The SNC's lack of transparency, compounded by the autocratic tendencies exhibited by some of its Muslim Brotherhood members, have led to a number of high-profile defections from the Council. Syrian journalist Marah Buqai resigned from the SNC because she found the appointment rather than the election of members of the Executive Committee, Secretariat General, and Media Bureau to be undemocratic. She also charged that the SNC with failing to connect with grassroots activists on the ground. According to Buqai:

*"Elections were only conducted for some bureaus, excluding many, such as the Media Bureau which remains impenetrable to the called for democracy. When I talked to an Executive Committee Member about the need for elections he answered that members of the Executive Committee and Secretariat General are not elected, but assigned....You are creating an "assigned" government, will that mean you will cancel elections when you get to power?"<sup>49</sup>*

SNC member Rasha al-Ahdab has added: "There are members of the Executive Committee and the Secretariat General that should definitely be changed. There are hypocrites amongst them and Assad loyalists." Al-Ahdab went so far as to demand that the Executive Committee disclose its sources of funding; she also called for the "monitoring of the mechanism and work of the Secretariat General."<sup>50</sup>

48 'Ghalion: The regime lost the initiative, and I expect an international movement to stop the killings in Syria', Al-Arabiya, 7 January 2012, available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/07/186812.html>

49 'Fun Biqai Reveal the Reasons for suspension of its membership in the Syrian National Council', Gate of Al-Ahram, 23 December 2011, available at <http://bit.ly/zM4pLN>

50 'Exacerbated the Differences Between the Members of the Syrian National National Council', Elaph, 30 January 2012, available at <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2012/1/713106.html>

Distrust of the leadership and structure of the SNC extends even to some of its own members. Dissent and disagreement are healthy in any organisation, particularly one committed to democratic change. But the levels of mistrust and mutual suspicion that seem to afflict the present SNC structures are decidedly unhealthy, and reflect deep-seated flaws requiring urgent correction.

## The Turkish Connection

Turkey became inextricably involved in the Syrian uprising in June 2011, when approximately 10,000 Syrian refugees escaped a brutal and indiscriminate assault by the regime on the city of Jisr al-Shughour and took refuge on the Turkish side of the border.<sup>51</sup> At around the same time, Turkey also hosted a series of Syrian opposition conferences such as the Syria Conference for Change in Antalya<sup>52</sup>, and the Syrian National Salvation Conference in Istanbul.<sup>53</sup>

Although the Islamist government of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed to be keeping a healthy political distance from the Syrian opposition, there is evidence that Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has had a larger role in attempting to influence the future of a post-Assad Syria than it cares to admit.<sup>54</sup>

**Ghazwan al-Masri**, a member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Executive Committee (or shura council), is the pivot around which its connection with the Turkish government revolves. Al-Masri escaped Syria to Turkey in the early 1980s and became a successful

51 'Syria's Wounded Refugees: Tales of Massacre and Honorable Soldiers', Time, 12 June 2011, available at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2077207,00.html#ixzz1IEjsqXPu>

52 'Syrian businessmen back opposition conference', The Guardian, 30 May 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/30/syrian-businessmen-back-opposition-conference>

53 'Syria Activists to Hold 'National Salvation Conference' in Damascus, Istanbul', Naharnet, 15 July 2011, available at <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/10446-syria-activists-to-hold-national-salvation-conference-in-damascus-istanbul>

54 'Syria's Kurds Could Lose Out in Post-Assad Scenario', Worlds Politics Review, 13 February 2012, available at <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/11457/syrias-kurds-could-lose-out-in-post-assad-scenario>

businessman, using his newfound connections to obtain a Turkish passport in which he is currently registered as “Gazi Masirli”.<sup>55</sup>

Gazi Masirli was a major figure in MÜSIAD, a Turkish Muslim businessmen’s association<sup>56</sup> formed to be a direct competitor with TÜSIAD,<sup>57</sup> the country’s largest secular business and industrialist association.<sup>58</sup> Masirli is the former vice president of MÜSIAD and the current Coordinator for the Middle East.<sup>59</sup> In 2000, shortly after joining the organisation, he became a trustee of the European Trust, which is part of the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe (FIOE) and has been accused of being affiliated with Muslim Brotherhood groups.<sup>60</sup> Other trustees of the European Trust around the time that Masirli joined included Ibrahim El-Zayat, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate in Germany, and Fouad Alaoui, one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate in France.<sup>61</sup>

Due to his position in MÜSIAD, Masirli has maintained strong ties with Erdogan personally and the AKP generally. The MÜSIAD International Business Forum is organised annually under Erdogan’s patronage, and its Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation is chaired by AKP member and current Turkish President Abdullah Gul.<sup>62</sup> According to the Syrian Ambassador in Ankara, Nidal Kabalan, in the

early months of the Syrian uprising — when the Assad regime “never presum[ed] there [was] bad will on the part of Turkey” — Erdogan asked Assad to “assist” Masirli with Syria-related matters.<sup>63</sup> However, Masirli and Erdogan’s cooperation is most apparent through the former’s work in two Turkish-based NGOs which are funded and sponsored by AKP: İnsan Hak ve Hüriyeti (IHH) and Mazlumder.

IHH, which garnered international attention for its lead role in the 2010 “Free Gaza” flotilla affair, is an Islamic charity.<sup>64</sup> It is so closely associated with AKP that it was dubbed a “governmental non-governmental organization” (or “GNGO”) by some prominent Turkish journalists.<sup>65</sup> According to Yavuz Dede, a senior IHH official, Erdogan has extended direct support to the organization.<sup>66</sup> No less than a quarter of the IHH senior leadership holds or held positions in AKP, or were candidates for public office under its banner.<sup>67</sup> The IHH also has strong ties to Hamas through the Union of Good, a Qatari-based coalition of charities headed by the noted cleric Youssef al-Qaradawi, who is likely the single most important Muslim Brotherhood spiritual leader in the Arab world. According to the US Treasury Department, the Union of Good is a specially designated terrorist entity because of its fundraising efforts for Palestinian Hamas.<sup>68</sup> According to a Jerusalem Center for Public

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55 ‘Turkey, The Global Muslim Brotherhood, and The Gaza Flotilla’, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2011, p.15, available at [http://www.jcpa.org/text/Turkey\\_Muslim\\_Brotherhood.pdf](http://www.jcpa.org/text/Turkey_Muslim_Brotherhood.pdf)

56 ‘Islam Online Features Turkish AKP Leader’, 25 July 2007, The Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Report, available at <http://globalmbreport.org/?p=99>

57 ‘The Pax Ottomanica from the 19th to the 21st Century On the (im)possibility of Turkish Regional Hegemony’, Research in Progress Seminar, University of Sussex, 16 November 2009, p 19.

58 ‘Turkish Business Association Drives Strong Muslim World Ties’, Dinar Standard, 29 April 2006, available at <http://dinarstandard.com/intraoic/MUSIAD042906.htm>

59 ‘What’s Happening in the Middle East?’ How does the Current Situation Affect the Region and Turkey?, MUSAID, available at <http://www.musiad.org.tr/en/detayDik.aspx?id=115>

60 ‘The Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe’, The Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Report, 17 October 2008, available at <http://globalmbreport.org/?p=1136>

61 ‘Syrian Ambassador Names Associate of Turkish Prime Minister as Muslim Brotherhood Leader’, The Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Report, 25 May 2011, available at <http://globalmbreport.org/?p=4496>

62 ‘What is MUSAID?’, MUSAID, available at <http://www.musiad.org.tr/en/Tarihce.aspx>

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63 ‘Syria ‘offended by Turkish PM’s statement, envoy says’, Hürriyet Daily News, 17 May 2011, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=syria-offended-turkish-leaders-comparison-with-halepche-envoy-says-2011-05-17>

64 ‘Gaza flotilla: the Free Gaza Movement and the IHH’, The Daily Telegraph, 31 May 2010, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/7790919/Gaza-flotilla-the-Free-Gaza-Movement-and-the-IHH.html>

65 ‘Much to ponder for Turkey and Israel once the dust settles’, Hürriyet Daily News, 7 June 2010, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=much-to-ponder-for-turkey-and-israel-once-the-dust-settles-2010-06-07>

66 ‘Erdogan and Turkish government supported IHH’, The Jerusalem Post, 24 January 2011, available at <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=204948>

67 ‘The Turkish IHH, which has a record of supporting terrorist groups, has close relations with Turkey’s AKP government. The Turkish regime gave it government support, including logistic and political propaganda assistance for the Mavi Marmara flotilla’, The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 26 January 2011, available at [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/html/ipc\\_e161.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/ipc_e161.htm)

68 ‘Union of Good’, U.S. Department of the Treasury, 12 November 2008, available at <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Pages/protecting-union-of-good.aspx>

Affairs report on the Turkish wing of the Muslim Brotherhood:

*"In the aftermath of the flotilla, the Turkish MB network continued its support in more official statements, and at a post-flotilla event in Kuwait, Turkish/MB network leader Gazi Misirli revealed that MÜSIAD had played a major role in funding the flotilla by "coordinating" donations. In addition, the Turkish/MB network was in ongoing contact with Hamas leaders as well as with the Union of Good, the coalition of charities headed by Youssef Qaradawi that raises funds for Hamas."<sup>69</sup>*

Although Mazlumder, or the Organisation of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People, claims to be "entirely independent of the state, and political parties or groups,"<sup>70</sup> Masirli is listed as an active board member.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, this organisation is headed by Ahmet Faruk Unsal, an AKP member, former member of the Turkish parliament<sup>72</sup> and an active trustee of IHH.<sup>73</sup> Mazlumder called for the termination of Turkish-Israeli relations after the flotilla incident<sup>74</sup> and has also initiated a probe to investigate "genocide" allegedly committed by Israel.<sup>75</sup>

## Turkish charities and Syrian refugees

Turkey considers the Syrian refugees in its territory to be "guests," not refugees. According to the Turkish government, they therefore are strictly under its

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69 'Turkey, The Global Muslim Brotherhood, and The Gaza Flotilla', Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2011, p.9, available at [http://www.jcpa.org/text/Turkey\\_Muslim\\_Brotherhood.pdf](http://www.jcpa.org/text/Turkey_Muslim_Brotherhood.pdf)

70 'The Association of human rights and solidarity for oppressed people', Mazlumder, available at <http://www.mazlumder.org/ing/sayfa.asp?sayfalD=1>

71 'Turkey, The Global Muslim Brotherhood, and The Gaza Flotilla', Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2011, p.15, available at [http://www.jcpa.org/text/Turkey\\_Muslim\\_Brotherhood.pdf](http://www.jcpa.org/text/Turkey_Muslim_Brotherhood.pdf)

72 'Symposium Attendants', Free East Turkistan Symposium, available at <http://www.doguturkistansempozyumu.com/en/katilimcilar>

73 'Trustees', IHH, available at <http://www.ihh.org.tr/mutevellii-heyeti/en/>

74 'Mazlum-Der, the building was occupied by the AKP', Milliyet, 16 January 2009, available at <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/Guncel/HaberDetay.aspx?aType=HaberDetay&Kategori=guncel&KategoriID=&ArticleID=1048189&Date=17.01.2009&b=Mazlum-Der%20AKP%20binasini%20isgal%20etti>

75 'Pallone Challenges Turkey's Genocide Hypocrisy', Armenian National Committee of America, press release, 13 February 2009, available at [http://www.anca.org/press\\_releases/press\\_releases\\_print.php?prid=1660](http://www.anca.org/press_releases/press_releases_print.php?prid=1660)

control and not subject to the international law governing the treatment of refugees. The UN has not been permitted to have any major involvement with the Syrian refugees in Turkey, either in terms of oversight or additional assistance.<sup>76</sup> Turkey has generally impeded media access to the camps,<sup>77</sup> and has restricted many of the refugees' basic freedoms. Many refugees have quit the camps to live alone in the forests on the mountainous borders between the Syrian province of Idleb and the Turkish province of Hatay. At present, only the Muslim Brotherhood reportedly has uncontested access to the camps through IHH and Mazlumder. The main facilitators for that access are two Muslim Brotherhood members of the SNC, Khaled Khouja and Muhammad Tayfour and Gazi Masirli.

This underscores the powerful and highly influential role Turkey is playing in the development of the political and social makeup of the Syrian opposition in the border regions, in numerous conferences and meetings, and through its Islamist and other connections to the SNC leadership.

## Regime change or reconciliation?

In the early months of the Syrian uprising, Turkey was eager to preserve its relations with the Assad regime. Accordingly, Turkey initially reacted coldly to calls for radical reform or regime change and slow to warm to the opposition.<sup>78</sup> At some early stages, Erdogan's government even cited the unrest in Syria as a "conspiracy".<sup>79</sup>

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76 'Turkish Prime Minister to visit Hatay Syrian Refugee Camps: EMHRN calls for better international protection', Human Rights Association, 14 October 2011, available at [http://www.ihd.org.tr/english/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=723:oba20111014&catid=14:joint-press-releases&Itemid=30](http://www.ihd.org.tr/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=723:oba20111014&catid=14:joint-press-releases&Itemid=30)

77 'Displaced Syrians, Shelter of a precarious sort', The New York Times, 16 June 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/17/world/middleeast/17border.html>

78 'How Syria and Libya Got to Be Turkey's Headaches', Time, 30 April 2011, available at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2068633,00.html>

79 'Envoy: Ankara supports Syria's stability, reform', The Daily Star, 20 August 2011, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Aug-20/Envoy-Ankara-supports-Syrias-stability-reform.ashx#axzz1F7xxV6R>

Turkey has had significant economic and energy ties with both the Assad regime and its sole remaining regional ally, Iran. Turkish territory serves as a major oil and gas transit route from Iran, Iraq, Egypt and the Gulf, often passing through Syria. In addition, Turkey imports more than a third of its petroleum product from Iran,<sup>80</sup> and has a Free Trade Agreement with Syria which increased the trade level between the two countries from 21.5 percent in 2006 to an average in recent years of 35 percent.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the economic interests underlying Ankara's twinned relationships with Damascus and Tehran were at least as strong as the political and strategic interests.

A further complication for Turkey in uniting unequivocally behind the Syrian revolution is that it was also working, as late as 2010, on acquiring public recognition from the Assad regime of the Hatay province as Turkish territory.<sup>82</sup> Adjacent to the northwestern Syrian coast — jutting past the otherwise linear border deep into surrounding Syrian territory — this province has historically sparked most of the conflicts between Syria and Turkey. Hatay was part of the Vilayet (state) of Aleppo in the days of the Ottoman Empire, and Syria never accepted French acquiescence in the 1930s to the integration of the territory (then known as Alexandretta, with an apparent Arab majority but large Turkish minority) into the Kemalist state. Hatay's status was also been contested because of its strategic water resources.<sup>83</sup> Presumably, therefore, formal recognition of its sovereignty in Hatay would remain a major Turkish goal in engagement with a post-Assad Syria, although any discussion of this has remained private.

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80 'Exclusive: Turkey works to cut dependence on Iranian oil', Reuters, 19 January 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/19/us-turkey-iran-oil-idUSTRE801N520120119>

81 'Turkey-Syria Economic and Trade Relations', Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-syria.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-syria.en.mfa)

82 'PM Vows to build model partnership with Syria', Today's Zaman, 24 December 2009, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-196473-102-pm-vows-to-build-model-partnership-with-syria.html>

83 'The Alexandretta Dispute', The American Journal of International Law, Vol.39, No. 3, July 1945, available at <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2193522>

Turkey's long-standing marginalization of its Kurdish population informs much of its sensitive foreign policy calculations in the Middle East<sup>84</sup>. Turkey would undoubtedly take a dim view of any Iraqi-style autonomous Kurdish region in Syria or any outward show of Kurdish independence in a post-Assad Syrian state— a central demand of the Kurdish National Council and one of the reasons for its failure to reconcile with the SNC.

Moreover, the PKK/PYD has been supported by the Assad regime in the past, chiefly in its capacity as a proxy antagonist of Turkey.<sup>85</sup> Assad's recently acquired and short-lived amity with the Erodgan government consequently marginalised the PKK/PYD as a client of Damascus in 2010.<sup>86</sup> There is considerable speculation in many quarters that in the event of any external intervention in Syria, particularly by Turkey in the border regions, Syria might again tried to activate PKK/PYD cadres in retaliation.

The sectarian question also looms large in Turkey's Syria calculation. Turkey is home to about 15 million Alevi who belong to a sect of Shia Islam similar to that of Syrian Alawites. Although not ethnically Arab, many Alevi regard Assad as an ally, which may be why Erdogan has taken steps to placate this minority. In December 2010, Alevi were allowed to celebrate the Shia festival of Ashura in Istanbul for the first time in years.<sup>87</sup> Tens of thousands of Alevi and foreign Shia Muslims, flocked to Halkali square in the city for the occasion,<sup>88</sup> chanting not only in Turkish and Arabic but

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84 'An activist group allege Turkey used chemical weapons against Kurdish soldiers', Global Post, 9 November 2011, available at <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/europe/turkey/111109/turkey-accused-using-chemical-weapons-against-kurdish-sol>

85 'Turkey, Syria and the PKK', Today's Zaman, 17 September 2009, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-187338-turkey-syria-and-the-pkk.html>

86 'Is Syria Cooperating Militarily with Turkey Against the PKK?' Terrorism Monitor, Volume: 8, Issue: 35, 16 September 2010, available at [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=36863&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=26&cHash=ce489b07b1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36863&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=26&cHash=ce489b07b1)

87 'Iraqi Shiite cleric thanks Turkish PM for Ashura remarks', Hurriyet Daily News, 29 September 2010, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=iraqi-shiite-cleric-thanks-erdogan-over-his-ashura-remarks-2010-12-29>

88 'Halkali Asura 2011', 6 December 2011, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5-6M07cx10&feature=related>

also in Farsi — a clear sign to Ankara that the Iranian bulwark of Shia Islam in the Middle East is by no means dismantled even with an imperilled Assad.

Erdogan issued his strongest endorsement of regime change in Syria during his visit to the United States in September 2011, when he declared that he would impose sanctions on Damascus and open the Syrian refugee camps in Turkey to the international media, a promise he has yet to fulfil.<sup>89</sup> Yet many Syrian activists remain doubtful about the Turkish government's level of commitment to removing Assad from power, and suspect that it might be playing a back-channel game of reconciliation.

Without question, Turkey's concerns in Syria are highly complex, its positions inconsistent and sometimes ambivalent, and therefore its intentions open to question. Central to the Syrian opposition's concerns is the role of Turkish intelligence chief Hakan Fidan, a personal confidant of Erdogan,<sup>90</sup> who is alleged to have strong ties to Iran. Fidan has been effectively given the "Syria portfolio" by Ankara (not exactly accurate, read the reference first), one reason why the capture of a prominent Syrian military defector has been blamed on Turkey.<sup>91</sup>

Indeed, Turkish involvement in the capture of Lt Col Hussain Harmoush has now been firmly established. In June 2011, Harmoush became one of the first high-ranking officers in Assad's military to turn against the regime. He was a co-founder of the Free Officers Movement, an independent brigade of defectors that has aligned with, but not joined, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the largest loosely-knit coalition of defecting soldiers in Syria. (Free Officers Movement was the

first group for defected soldiers, then came the FSA) According to own brother, Harmoush was captured by Syrian intelligence after being lured to a rendezvous with Turkish intelligence officers in one of the refugee camps near the border. Subsequent to his capture, he was forced to "confess" on state-run Syrian TV to a host of elaborate conspiracies only days after his family members were attacked and killed inside Syria.<sup>92</sup>

On February 10, 2012, Turkish authorities announced they had arrested five people, including intelligence agents, in connection with the kidnapping and transfer of Harmoush, despite repeated denials of any Turkish involvement in the incident until the arrests.<sup>93</sup> A leading Turkish newspaper identified one of the suspects as a "former Turkish intelligence officer Ö.S., who was discharged from the National Intelligence Agency (MiT)." Ö.S. handed Harmoush over to Syrian authorities in exchange for "bundles of US dollars."<sup>94</sup>

## Recommendations

Despite the critical analysis contained in this report, the importance of the SNC is beyond doubt. The Council remains the only Syrian opposition group currently capable of serving and being recognised as a government-in-exile, and as an umbrella group for opposition forces in general. Only the SNC has the resources to send its president and his entourage to world capitals and the Arab League to advocate on behalf of the Syrian people, and only the SNC can claim to at least include, however insufficiently, members of Syria's broad and diverse population, including ethnic and confessional minorities. The SNC deserves considerable credit for these achievements,

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89 'Turkey, in coordination with US, to impose sanctions on Syria', Today's Zaman, 21 September 2011, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-257465-turkey-in-coordination-with-us-to-impose-sanctions-on-syria.html>

90 'Israel Worried by new Turkey intelligence chief's defense of Iran', Haaretz, 7 June 2010, available at <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-worried-by-new-turkey-intelligence-chief-s-defense-of-iran-1.294568>

91 'Angry activists say Turkey handed deserted officer to Syria', CNN, 15 September 2011, available at [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-09-15/world/syria.unrest\\_1\\_local-coordination-committees-syrian-soldiers-syrian-government?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-09-15/world/syria.unrest_1_local-coordination-committees-syrian-soldiers-syrian-government?_s=PM:WORLD)

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92 'Dealing with Defectors, Syrian Style', Global Post, 21 September 2011, available at <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/the-casbah/dealing-defectors-syrian-style>

93 'Turks Held over Syrian Defector's Extradition', Al-Jazeera, 10 February 2012, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2012/02/2012210174512525191.html>

94 'MIT Spy Kidnapped Syrian Army Defector, Delivered Him to Assad: Report', Hurriyet Daily News, 11 February 2012, available at <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/mit-spy-kidnapped-syrian-army-defector-delivered-him-to-assad-report.aspx?pageID=238&nid=13556&NewsCatID=338>



and its undoubted and unique contributions to the Syrian uprising should be recognised as clearly as its flaws.

It is precisely because of this unique and invaluable role that enhanced scrutiny of the SNC is both justified and necessary. The Council must evolve in order to fulfil its historic mission. It is clear that thus far, the SNC has not fully lived up to popular or international expectations. The recent announcement made on 16 February that Ghalioun has been “elected” to yet another term as SNC president despite the organisational by-laws which mandate that the presidency should rotate every three months, is yet a further sign of creeping autocracy in a supposedly democratic transitional body.

The Muslim Brotherhood continues to play a disproportionate role in the organisation’s structure, leadership and policymaking. And because Western powers have ceded an all-important consultancy role in the formation of a united Syrian opposition to Turkey, the ideological trajectory of the SNC now reflects too little of the diversity and will of the Syrian people and too much of the agenda of the Turkish government.

The Kurds, who have a long and tragic history, need more than flattering reassurances to convince them that their future in a democratic, secular state is safe in the hands of the SNC; they need concrete guarantees, in writing, especially after Burhan Ghalioun’s statement on DW-TV stating that Syria is Arabic and Kurds are “foreigners”,<sup>95</sup> as do the Assyrians, the other major ethnic minority in Syria. Likewise, confessional minorities, including Alawites, Christians and Druze—a large number of whom have hitherto rallied around the regime out of fear of a Sunni Islamist seizure of power once Assad is gone— need better

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95 ‘Proof pipe apologize for Syrian Kurds’, Elaph, 28 October 2011, available at <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2011/10/692301.html>

representation and constitutional affirmation of their rights. The recent accession of prominent Christian Syrian dissident George Sabra to the SNC is a step in the right direction.

It is insufficient for the SNC or an alternative national leadership to suggest that issues central to these communities’ concerns will be dealt with after regime change. Statements that articulate clear positions with guarantees for the rights of all minority groups in Syria are essential to breaking the regime’s blatant strategy of pitting Syrian Arab Sunnis against all ethnic and religious minorities. The guarantees must be specific, written and binding. Recent SNC statements to the Lebanese people<sup>96</sup> and, to a lesser extent, to the Syrian diaspora overseas are useful templates for such vital political outreach to what will have to become core constituencies.<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, seats in the SNC leadership should be accorded to all groups according to their demographic numbers on the ground in all three echelons of the Council: the General Assembly, the Secretariat General and the Executive Committee. Moreover, the occupants of those seats ought to be determined democratically, not by opaque fiat. Enhanced transparency is a core requirement if the SNC is to overcome the doubts that have been both sown by the regime and its propagandists, and which the Council has bolstered by its own misjudgements.

Finally, there is the danger that the opposition to the Assad regime will become largely— if not entirely— driven by armed groups rather than organised, coherent political coalitions that can serve as alternative national leaderships. Rebels in Homs, Idleb, Der Ezzor, Deraa, Hama, Aleppo and the suburbs of

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96 ‘Open Letter to the Lebanese People from the SNC’, Syrian National Council, 26 January 2012, available at <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/news/item/531-pen-letter-to-the-lebanese-people-from-the-snc.html>

97 ‘SNC Statement to the Syrian Expatriate and International Community’, Syrian National Council, 28 January 2012, available at <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/press-releases/item/535-snc-statement-to-the-syrian-expatriate-and-international-community.html>

Damascus have been forming their own civilian-led militias to protect or “liberate” their neighbourhoods. The city of Zabadani was recently entirely in the hands of one brigade of rebels. Areas of the Damascus suburbs have likewise seen fierce gun battles between elite units of the regime and roving militias. The risks this poses to the SNC, and to the uprising itself, could not be starker: unless the Council incorporates more liberals and minorities in their ranks, and unless it adapts to the reality of a pitched battle now being waged by armed insurgents against a murderous dictatorship, it risks being overtaken by events that have acquired a momentum of their own.

Statements by the Free Syrian Army, the newly-formed Syrian Liberation Army and other insurgent brigades have angrily dismissed the SNC as insufficiently supportive and woefully ineffective. This trend must be reversed, and the SNC has to coordinate much more effectively with armed opposition groups on the ground that are currently keeping the revolution alive.

It must also provide these rebels with a broad and consensus-based political umbrella behind which to unite.

The SNC provides the clearest actually existing political alternative to the Assad regime. Without its effective leadership, there is a distinct danger that the uprising could lose any form of coherent political organisation, become fractured and disorganised, or become entirely subsumed to foreign interests. An internationally-imposed safe zone in Syria has been recommended by the authors elsewhere as a means of providing a geographical space in the country from which to unite behind a common strategy and make the SNC more representative of the mosaic of Syrian society. The SNC must work to replicate the role, albeit under very different circumstances and contingencies, that the NTC so successfully played in Libya. Otherwise, the Syrian National Council may well find itself overtaken by events and other forces, and reduced to a footnote of history.

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