

## *COMMENTARY*

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### **The Friends of Syria and the Opposition's Dilemma**

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The concluding statement of the Friends of Syria meeting in Istanbul on 1 April 2012 was politically significant for three main reasons. First, it demonstrated that the international commitment to “political transition leading to a civil, democratic, pluralistic, independent and free state” in Syria has solidified. That reinforces the message to members and supporters of the Syrian regime—and anybody still in the middle—that the regime will continue to be isolated. Ending the country’s continually deteriorating economic conditions and deepening financial crisis is now inextricably linked to the opposition’s demand for a fundamental restructuring of power.

Second, the Friends of Syria recognized the Syrian National Council in exile as “a legitimate representative of all Syrians and the umbrella organization under which Syrian opposition groups are gathering.” This did not go quite as far as the Syrian National Council might have wished—the statement did not recognize the council as the legitimate representative of all Syrians. Nonetheless, it gave the council a major boost, making it the channel through which all political and diplomatic consultation will go, along with financial support and humanitarian assistance.

This will be significant if the April 10 cease-fire accepted by the Syrian government holds and if the “comprehensive political dialogue” called for in the Annan peace plan, which was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council on March 21, actually gets under way.

Granted, prospects for a lasting cease-fire and the full release of detained opposition activists are poor, and for a serious dialogue even poorer. But the recognition of the Syrian National Council by the Friends of Syria means that the regime will not be able to pick and choose its own “opposition” to talk to, as it has done in the past, and that it will have to negotiate in the presence of Arab and international mediators.

Should the Annan initiative reach a dead end, however, then the most significant aspect of the widening regional and international recognition of the Syrian National Council is that it has been formally appointed as the channel for funding from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—reportedly amounting to \$100 million—to pay salaries and other expenses of the Free Syrian Army. This gives the council the means, for the first time, to exercise real influence over the opposition’s main military body and to subordinate it to the political leadership.

The third and most significant political conclusion from the meeting, however, is the obvious implication that the Friends of Syria will go no further in confronting the Syrian regime at this stage. Even senior members of the Syrian National Council recognize that there will be no external military intervention in the foreseeable future, though they argue that this may change and continue to lobby for one. Despite all appearances of full political and moral support, the Friends of Syria meeting has left the Syrian National Council facing several major challenges.

Foremost among them is the Syrian National Council’s lack of a political program, a road map for the transfer of power. Simply demanding the immediate departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, or regarding this as the ultimate end goal of any diplomatic process, does not answer many difficult questions. Still unclear is how to engage the wide range of political and social groups that view regime change with trepidation, regardless of where their political sympathies lie.

What will happen to senior state officials, government ministers, top-ranking civil servants, and Baath Party members? Is there any reason to expect that they will facilitate the transfer of power without prior political arrangements and assurances? The Syrian National Council leadership argues that the problem lies exclusively with Assad and a tiny clique around him and can easily be resolved by his departure, but that approach side-steps important questions.

In the absence of external military intervention, the Syrian National Council will struggle to retain the diplomatic momentum abroad and, more importantly, the political initiative inside Syria. It may soon find that recognition of its status as a legitimate representative and umbrella organization raises expectations it cannot meet, compelling it to develop new political initiatives that may not enjoy consensus support within the council, let alone the opposition as a whole.

The draft “National Pact for a New Syria” proposed by the Syrian National Council at its latest Istanbul meeting, along with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s new “pledge and charter,” articulate a commendable vision for a future, democratic Syria. But the more immediate and

difficult task is to spell out steps and mechanisms for the coming phase and transition, if there is to be one.

Leading members and groups of the Syrian National Council increasingly respond to these challenges by focusing on what they call “re-establishing parity” with the regime. By that, they mean creating a counterbalancing military capability to deter continued, indiscriminate violence by government forces.

Yet without externally protected safe havens, sanctuaries in neighbouring countries, and a supply of weapons, none of which are forthcoming at present, the armed opposition will have to remain inside Syria, scattered in small numbers to avoid destruction. And that undermines the notion of parity. This search for parity simply bypasses the need for a political program, without resolving the difficult questions of how to retain control over armed groups inside Syria, develop the Free Syrian Army as a disciplined command structure and credible force, and maintain effective political leadership.

The Syrian National Council may find that the “comprehensive political dialogue” called for in the Annan peace plan is not merely something to be suffered temporarily but rather a powerful instrument in its hands. The plan may allow the opposition to shift the confrontation from the military arena, where the regime is strongest, to the political one, where it is strongest.

So far, suggesting this still provokes mutual recrimination and distrust between different wings of the opposition inside and outside the country. But this challenge will not go away: if the Syrian National Council proves unable to deliver on unrealistic expectations over the coming months, it will lose the support of those in Syria who continue to defy the regime openly, without gaining new trust or allies among the other sectors it needs to win over and mobilize.

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