

# COMMENTARY

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## The Syrian Opposition's Very Provisional Government

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The Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (National Coalition) formally took up Syria's seat in the Arab League this week. The outgoing chairman of the coalition, Moaz al-Khatib, who had announced his resignation only days before, represented the coalition, and the provisional prime minister, Ghassan Hitto, sat behind him.

This recognition is an important diplomatic gain. But it will prove ephemeral unless the National Coalition and its provisional government can follow up speedily by delivering effective administration, basic services, dispute resolution, and security in the liberated areas, which it claims now extend over 100,000 square kilometres and include 10 million inhabitants.

The need for effective governance is urgent. The National Coalition faces armed anarchy in many areas, fragmentation of local civilian councils and rebel groups, constantly rising numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons, and competition from Islamist rebel alliances that are more coherent and increasingly proactive in providing local governance.

### Forming a Government

Moaz al-Khatib has threatened to resign on numerous occasions. Bringing matters to a head this time were differences within the coalition over the wisdom of forming a provisional government to administer opposition-held areas in Syria. Al-Khatib had opposed the move because he feared it could lead to a partition of the country.

The National Coalition went ahead despite Khatib's objections and on March 18 appointed Ghassan Hitto to head a provisional government, which he has yet to form. Two main factions within the National Coalition pushed through the decision: the Syrian National Council (SNC), which was the principal opposition framework in exile until joining the National Coalition in November 2012, and the National Bloc, which belonged to the SNC until it withdrew to join the

National Coalition. The two are dominant forces within the coalition, as shown by their ability to muster 35 votes for Hitto out of the 49 votes cast in its general assembly.

After an acrimonious vote, however, 12 members of the coalition's general assembly suspended their membership in protest. They complained about the hegemonic behaviour of the Muslim Brotherhood, which dominates the SNC, and the coalition's secretary general, Mustafa al-Sabbagh, who is a leading figure in the National Bloc. Some joined nearly 70 opposition figures—including many former members of the SNC and National Bloc—in calling for the addition of twenty-five new members to the National Coalition to better represents the “civil democratic current.”

Although it is possible that al-Khatib will rescind his resignation and resume his post, this is unlikely to resolve the internal disagreements over the nature and purpose of a provisional government. The dissenters call for completely abandoning the provisional government, or restructuring it on a consensual basis after expanding the National Coalition.

Ironically, the SNC had resisted forming a provisional government prior to joining the National Coalition, and continued to do so until March 2013. The SNC is afraid that the government will become a de facto contender for political leadership and undermine the National Coalition's claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, a status conferred by the Friends of Syria on 12 December 2012 and reinforced by the Arab League meeting.

The SNC only reversed its stance after the Arab League's Council of Foreign Ministers called on 6 March for the National Coalition to establish an executive body that could be entrusted with sovereign functions. And the council accepted that Hitto's appointment fulfilled this condition, even though the government is not yet set up.

But the hesitation within the SNC over establishing and seriously empowering a provisional government is troubling. If the provisional government founders, the National Coalition's own political standing and future will be jeopardized. It is possible that al-Khatib's pending resignation could galvanize the National Coalition into decisive action, but this requires the coalition to shed its fear of a political challenge from the very provisional government that it claims to want.

### **Transitional or Provisional Government?**

Al-Khatib's and Hitto's joint presence at the Arab summit papered over—rather than resolved—differences within the National Coalition. The coalition has opted for a provisional government, but a persistent minority, including al-Khatib, has tried to keep the door open for a transitional government instead. These terms were used interchangeably for much of 2012, but the distinction sharpened as the internal debate polarized in early 2013.

A provisional government would be formed by the opposition alone to administer liberated areas and, as its supporters state explicitly, to block negotiations with the Syrian regime. A transitional government would combine the opposition with members of the incumbent Syrian government as part of a political solution to the conflict.

The fault line emerged when the principal members of the Friends of Syria joined Russia and China in publishing the June 2012 Geneva communiqué. This called for the “establishment of a transitional governing body . . . [that] could include members of the present Government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.” No mention was made of President Bashar al-Assad’s role in the interim or of his ultimate fate.

In response, an opposition gathering in Cairo promised on 3 July to establish a “caretaker” government in agreement with an undefined “de facto national authority” and made up of “those whose hands are not stained with the blood of Syrians or by the pillage of public funds.” But this would come after the fall of Assad, the dismissal of the existing cabinet, and the dissolution of parliament. Only then would a national conference be convened to select a provisional legislature, which would in turn appoint a transitional government to run the country.

The opposition had given little thought to the exercise of power prior to Assad’s fall. Although it saw the Geneva communiqué as a political threat, the Joint Political Vision issued at the end of the Cairo meeting did not provide a practical alternative.

But the SNC was coming under growing pressure from external backers—especially France, Turkey, and Qatar—to create a body that could assume operational responsibility on the ground in liberated areas. Rebel advances in Aleppo starting in July and elsewhere in the north and northwest made this a pressing necessity over the following months.

The SNC prevaricated. It rejected dialogue, but its chairman at the time, Abdul Basit Sida, also acknowledged the need for a transitional government in which “the rest, whether in the Baath Party, the government or other institutions . . . can play a role in Syria’s future.” But he warned that “this is difficult and requires consultation with all members of the Syrian opposition, rebels and the Free Syrian Army.” Above all, the SNC sought to preserve its own political status.

### **Prevarication Redux**

Bowing to external pressure, the SNC finally committed to form a transitional government on 7 November 2012, four days before the establishment of the National Coalition. But it set a precondition that was subsequently adopted by the National Coalition: the government could only be established after securing “proven” international recognition.

The Friends of Syria duly recognized the coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people a month later. In January 2013, however, the National Coalition announced that as part of its effort to set up a provisional government it also wanted to take over Syria’s seats at the Arab League and United Nations. It was awarded the former on 26 March.

On 5 January, the coalition adopted a new precondition proposed by the SNC: significant international funding needed to be secured prior to founding the provisional government to enable it to operate. There was good reason for this. The Friends of Syria had pledged US \$145 million in assistance in mid-December 2012, but the National Coalition received a mere US \$8.5 million over the next three months.

When coalition Chairman al-Khatib took up the theme on 23 January 2013, he stated that a provisional government would need a US \$3 billion start-up fund. Five days later SNC Chairman George Sabra confirmed that the opposition needed “at least US \$500 million to be able to form a government.” The National Coalition, however, remained far short of these goals by the time it named Hitto to head a provisional government on 18 March.

The National Coalition’s demands were valid, but its nervousness over potential political competition from a provisional government was more important. The coalition’s executive bureau tried to pre-empt this threat on 21 January by reversing an internal statute that prohibited coalition members from heading a provisional government or joining it as cabinet ministers. This offered the National Coalition a means to retain direct control, but immediate protests from members and activists forced the executive bureau to restore the original rule a mere nine hours later.

The coalition’s executive bureau responded to this setback by resuming consultations with “opposition and revolutionary forces and the Free [Syrian] Army and friendly and fraternal countries to explore their views on the provisional government and the extent of their necessary commitments to it materially and politically.” In parallel, it formed seven “administrative” committees to deal with emergency tasks such as providing “telephone and internet communications support for the revolutionaries,” controlling border crossings, and resolving clashes with Kurdish self-defence militias in the border town of Ras al-Ain.

The National Coalition was falling back on ad hoc arrangements, replicating a pattern established by the SNC. The coalition had already announced on 10 January that it was “working with committees composed of technocrats who will serve as the nucleus for future ministries,” but their relation to the committees formed on 21 January was unclear. In any case, some of the emergency tasks—refugee affairs, treating the wounded, and “liaison with revolutionary and civil peace forces”—came within the remit of agencies that supposedly already existed in the National Coalition’s organizational structure.

### **If You Can’t Beat Them, Join Them**

The National Coalition published a list of candidates to head a provisional government on 17 March that was filled with “technocrats, businessmen, and economists.” The emphasis on their professional background sent a signal to the Friends of Syria that the National Coalition was serious about establishing a credible and capable government. The list was made up of exiles and people who have lived abroad for years. By emphasizing the technical and administrative qualifications over the political credentials, the coalition went some way toward reassuring members who were concerned that the government would usurp their political role internationally or build an autonomous power base inside Syria.

Hitto exemplified the outsider, technocrat profile. He is an information technology expert who lived in the United States for twenty-five years until his appointment as head of the National Coalition’s humanitarian and relief committee on 26 November 2012. A political unknown, he clearly serves the political desires of the SNC and National Bloc. The Higher Military Council,

nominally affiliated to the National Coalition, said dismissively that it had not even heard of him “until three days ago” and announced that it would not recognize him as prime minister.

Coinciding with al-Khatib’s resignation, this was an inauspicious start for the provisional government. Worse, the National Coalition should have been ready for a swift launch as soon as it appointed a prime minister, but had made no concrete preparations or plans. Following his election, Hitto announced that he was holding consultations to form his cabinet; define its mechanisms; discuss its program, work plan, and budget; and choose a location inside Syria to move. He was vague about the government’s main purpose, stating that it would prioritize funding the Free Syrian Army, protecting strategic installations, and “reactivating all that helps the Syrian people,” among other things.

The fact that all this was not already in place raises serious doubts about the capacity—and in many cases existence—of the array of executive offices and specialist committees announced by the SNC from March 2012 onwards and the National Coalition since November. The coalition had more than ample time to prepare.

No less important, the National Coalition evidently did not solicit practical proposals from local councils and administrative structures inside Syria, let alone strive to turn them into a provisional government. It preferred instead to appoint a body from outside to oversee them. Al-Khatib’s announcement at the Arab summit that provincial councils in Syria will be represented in an opposition national assembly to be formed at an unspecified date in the future is no substitute, and might not materialize anyway.

### **The National Coalition’s Last Stand?**

The lack of real substance behind the façade of the provisional government raises doubts about the National Coalition’s strategy of gaining more recognition. Winning Syria’s seat in the Arab League was important, but will remain a symbolic gain unless the coalition can demonstrate the ability to govern liberated areas. To keep trying to gain Syria’s seat at the UN, as al-Khatib mentioned at the Arab summit, is futile as both Russia and China can block the effort and merely diverts the coalition’s energies.

The National Coalition is betraying a dangerous lack of political acumen. It sought—and won—recognition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people from the Friends of Syria, but this did not lead to a transformation of its political, military, or financial capabilities. There is no reason to expect a provisional government to be any more successful. The Friends of Syria cannot guarantee success by awarding it further diplomatic recognition or by declaring it the official channel for assistance.

It is especially worrying that one of the more successful examples to date of restoring basic government administration and services, instilling a modicum of law and order, and protecting public property is in the city of Raqqa, which fell on 7 March to a coalition of Islamist rebels. Raqqa is relatively small with a peacetime population of only 250,000, but the National Coalition cannot claim to have done a comparably effective job of governing a city or town of any size.

The National Coalition may find that it paid a high price for Syria's seat in the Arab League when it made a cosmetic appointment to head a provisional government that lacks any actual capability to govern. The coalition is now caught in a trap largely of its own making: it cannot agree whether to form a government to block negotiations or enable them, and most of its members are unwilling to empower a government politically.

The coalition's most powerful factions never wanted to form a provisional government, but now that one has been announced it is how the National Coalition will be judged.

**Note:** This article was originally published in *Carnegie Middle East Centre, Beirut*.

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