

COMMENTARY

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Endgame for the Syrian National Coalition

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The international conference called for by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to end the conflict in Syria may not actually take place. And if it does, it is unlikely to succeed. At the very least, preliminary talks about who will be invited—or excluded—from the Syrian government and the opposition and whether Iran will be asked to participate could drag on for weeks, if not months, well past the supposed start date of early June.

But whatever the eventual outcome, the joint U.S.-Russian proposal has deepened the disarray of the main opposition umbrella framework, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which was already facing a terminal crisis.

Terminal Decline

The signs of dysfunction have multiplied since Moaz al-Khatib confirmed his resignation as chairman of the National Coalition on 21 April. The coalition, which had disregarded al-Khatib's first attempt to resign on 24 March, was supposed to elect a new chairman at a meeting of its general assembly on 11-12 May. Agenda items also included the election of a new leadership committee, confirmation of Ghassan Hitto to head the provisional government that the coalition intends to establish in rebel-held areas inside Syria, and publication of the government's cabinet line-up. But the general assembly instead deferred all these items to a new set of meetings on 23-25 May, when the coalition will also announce its final stance on attending the international conference called for by Washington and Moscow.

The National Coalition has no realistic choice other than to accept the Friends of Syria-endorsed invitation. After all, the Friends of Syria anointed the coalition the "sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people" last December. But the coalition was visibly discomfited when the international grouping came out officially on 20 April in favour of negotiation with the ruling Syrian regime in the hope, as Kerry stated, of reaching a political solution "along the lines of the Geneva communiqué" of 30 June 2012. That plan calls for a transitional government to be

formed by the opposition and the incumbent authorities, without making the departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad a precondition. It goes directly against the National Coalition's declared position of "no dialogue, no negotiation" with the president. The coalition has no substantive response to this proposed transitional agenda and, as an internal assessment leaked on 6 May acknowledges, no defence against the distinct possibility of being left hanging out to dry on the diplomatic clothesline if it does not engage fully with it.

Even if the international conference does not convene or collapses, the National Coalition's fortunes will not look up. It remains dependent on political and financial support from the Friends of Syria, but that relationship has become increasingly tenuous of late. In part, this is because the coalition has failed to devise a political strategy capable of cleaving critical social and institutional constituencies away from the Assad regime, which would make a negotiated transition feasible. And the coalition has yet to provide opposition-held areas in Syria with effective administration or basic services and security.

The National Coalition is beset on other fronts as well. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) command inside Syria, which is supposedly allied with the National Coalition, has been in a nasty public spat with the Muslim Brotherhood since the end of March 2013. The Brotherhood is the most coherent organization in the Syrian opposition and the most influential single component of the Syrian National Council (SNC), the dominant force in the National Coalition. The FSA command accused the Brotherhood of imposing its "hegemony" over the SNC and the National Coalition, subverting "local councils and tens of coordination committees and bodies" to its agenda, and "forming militias and even creating warlords loyal to the [Brotherhood]." It also rejected the coalition's choice of Hitto to head a provisional government to run the liberated areas, regarding him as imposed by the Brotherhood.

The exact status of the FSA command inside Syria is ambiguous. The fact that it does not exist within the organizational chart of the Higher Military Council, which was announced in mid-December 2012 as the overarching coordinating structure for all FSA and non-jihadist opposition units, reflects the continuing fluidity of rebel chains of command. But the sentiments expressed by the FSA command inside Syria are certainly shared among the FSA general staff, which is formally attached to the head of the Higher Military Council, Brigadier General Salim Idris.

For example, Brigadier General Ahmad Rahal, head of the revolutionary military council in Syria's northern coastal region, which is part of the Higher Military Council framework, angrily claimed at an opposition conference in Cairo in mid-May that "weapons are reaching the Muslim Brotherhood and those close to Qatar although they are in the rear ranks of the revolution, while those in the frontlines do not have weapons." Rahal then called for a restructuring of the FSA general staff, saying it was "not permissible for it to be preponderantly civilian in character," a reference to the body's deliberate mix of professionally trained defectors from the Syrian army and civilian activists.

The Higher Military Council is itself displaying political autonomy from the National Coalition. In an official letter to the coalition on 1 May —leaked to the daily newspaper Asharq al-Awsat and separately confirmed by FSA general staff officers—the council demanded that

“revolutionary forces and battalions operating on the ground [inside Syria] be represented by 50 per cent of the coalition’s membership,” specifically by “civilian revolutionaries in the battalions.” It then warned that it would not submit nominations to fill the posts of ministers of defence and interior in the provisional government until its demand was met.

In a further sign of political assertiveness a fortnight later, Higher Military Council head Idris informed Kerry that he was ready to attend the proposed international peace conference. The National Coalition, to which Idris is nominally affiliated, has yet to make a formal decision on attendance.

Similar divisions and dynamics afflict the opposition’s civilian wing. The Muslim Brotherhood is arguably not as strong as is commonly believed, which may be why its leader, Riad al-Shaqfeh, announced on 26 April plans to open offices and rebuild the Brotherhood’s organizational structures and popular base in liberated areas in Syria. The Brotherhood’s attempts at entering the military sphere and sponsoring an umbrella framework of rebel formations—known as the Commission of the Revolution’s Shields—have faltered badly.

The Brotherhood has become increasingly defensive in response to unprecedentedly sharp accusations from other members of the National Coalition that it dominates the opposition framework. The head of its politburo, Hassan al-Hashimi, issued an official rebuttal on 19 April, but its critics’ distrust has only deepened.

In mid-May, around 200 activists—including prominent National Coalition members such as Michel Kilo, former SNC chairman Burhan Ghalioun, and several others who opposed Hitto in the March vote—announced they were setting up a new opposition grouping. They formed the Union of Syrian Democrats to “mobilize Syria’s ‘silent majority’” and pre-empt the Muslim Brotherhood from “grasping power here [as in] Tunisia and Egypt.” This “democratic pole,” as Kilo initially labelled it, hopes to provide a counterweight to the Muslim Brotherhood and the other main faction in the National Coalition, which is led by its secretary general, Mustafa Sabbagh, who is widely regarded as “Qatar’s man” in the coalition.

Drawn-out negotiations have been under way over the expansion of the National Coalition’s general assembly to allow a more equitable balance. There are reports that eight new members close to the democratic pole may be added, bringing their number in the general assembly to 25. Even if these reports are true, the distrust appears unbridgeable. Writing on 11 May, Kilo accused the National Coalition and the SNC of failing as leadership bodies and even of bringing about “the reverse effect of contributing to the continuation of the regime.” The opposition, he concluded, “has been more a burden on the *hirak* [revolutionary grassroots movement] than a negation of the regime.”

The Struggle for Authority Inside Syria

The deepening disarray of the National Coalition places its provisional government in jeopardy. Hitto announced on 25 April that preparations to launch it were complete and that he would present the cabinet line-up to the coalition for ratification on 11 May. But by then it had already become a common assumption in opposition circles that Hitto would be replaced. The Muslim

Brotherhood has suggested that his replacement will be “independent Islamist” Ahmad Khodr. Other sources predict the post will go to Ahmad Tomeh, secretary of the Damascus Declaration platform within the SNC.

But it is also likely that Hitto will not be replaced because the provisional government may not see the light of day. And even if it does, whether it would be sufficiently empowered politically to acquire effective political and moral authority in rebel-held areas of Syria is an open question.

The provisional government has moreover already fallen victim to the rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia for influence within the National Coalition. In opposition circles, there is a widespread perception that Qatar imposed Hitto on the National Coalition as prime minister-designate, and that opinion has proven impossible to shake. According to senior opposition figures, Saudi Arabia, which seeks a counterweight to the Qatari-backed Muslim Brotherhood, has made continuation of its assistance to the coalition contingent on replacing him. On 11 May, al-Khatib complained publicly that formation of the provisional government had been overshadowed by the tussle between “two regional powers,” each of which had its own preferred candidate for prime minister and sought to select ministers according to its own wishes.

The National Coalition may now take refuge in the view that the convening of the international conference proposed by Russia and the United States will make the establishment of a provisional government unnecessary or even counterproductive. Certainly its leaked internal assessment suggests that “the timing is not appropriate to announce it now, as circumstances do not favour securing international and regional recognition of it.” But this poses a dilemma for the coalition: unless it swiftly makes a concrete difference in liberated areas, shelving the provisional government will further erode the coalition’s standing, internationally and domestically.

In the coalition’s assessment, it now faces an additional distinct danger that the Friends of Syria will withdraw their sweeping diplomatic recognition of it as sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people should it ultimately refuse to attend the international conference. The coalition has no doubt taken note of the 15 May United Nations General Assembly resolution calling for a political transition in Syria. Although the text placed the onus on the regime for its use of heavy weapons and “widespread and systematic gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms,” it effectively downgraded the National Coalition to the status of “effective representative interlocutors for a political transition.”

As the National Coalition’s legitimacy fades, de-facto leadership will start to pass more visibly to those on the ground: rebel groups and military councils more or less loosely affiliated with the FSA; local civilian councils; the increasingly cohesive Islamist rebel alliances; and in some cases Jabhat al-Nusra and other jihadist groups, both foreign sponsored and home-grown. The process will be messy. With the rebels and the regime heading toward a strategic equilibrium militarily, the absence of an effective, overarching political framework will produce a patchwork of competing allegiances and areas of control in opposition-held areas.

Areas of friction are clear enough. Vying for control over territory, border crossings, and resources such as the oil fields in Syria's northeast, FSA and Islamist units, Kurdish militias, jihadists, and Arab clans have already clashed. Internecine violence has only been occasional so far, but social, political, and ideological fault lines within the opposition will be revealed more plainly should the stalemate with the regime persist. Tensions exist between rural and urban populations, armed rebels and civilian activists, and diverse Islamist and secular opposition groups. They too will be sharply accentuated.

Syria's humanitarian crisis meanwhile continues to deepen at a staggering pace. In early May, United Nations officials estimated that the number of internally displaced Syrians had more than doubled in the preceding two months and that roughly one in three Syrians now needs urgent assistance. Looking ahead, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees expects up to 50 per cent of the population of some 24 million to be internally displaced or seeking refuge in neighbouring countries by the end of 2013. The Friends of Syria are already seriously behind in delivering on existing pledges of humanitarian aid, with only half the US\$1.5 billion pledged at the Kuwait donors' conference in January disbursed by mid-May.

Time's Up

Clearly the international community bears a major responsibility to deal with this crisis and to find ways to prevent it from worsening. But the National Coalition must also take every opportunity to reach a political solution to the ongoing conflict. The authors of its leaked internal assessment offer convincing reasoning in favour of such an approach, specifically including formal engagement in negotiations within the framework of the U.S.-Russian proposal.

However, the National Coalition has repeatedly shown that it will not do this, and remains too divided to allow a volte-face of this magnitude. When al-Khatib proposed direct dialogue with Assad on 30 January, his coalition partners in the SNC condemned him bitterly for "stabbing the revolution and its martyrs." Since his resignation, he has been accused of privately backing the al-Damir Initiative, which among other points calls for Assad to remain in office until the next presidential election in May 2014, in which he would not run.

In a response posted on his Facebook page on 26 April, al-Khatib confirmed that he is currently working on "an initiative to spare the blood of Syrians." He did not specifically deny involvement with al-Damir but noted that he had discussed his initiative with certain unnamed members of the National Coalition. Al-Khatib seemed to imply readiness to meet Assad by stressing that his political and personal status entitled him "to meet every Syrian" while adding that he had not agreed to Assad remaining in office and would make an announcement should he do so.

Anything resembling the al-Damir Initiative is a complete nonstarter for the dominant factions of the National Coalition, but an international peace conference could leave Assad in office until the next presidential election. So even if al-Khatib's initiative runs aground, as it indeed might give the various odds stacked against it, the political challenge facing the coalition will not go away.

Even if the coalition formally accepts a U.S.-Russian invitation to the peace conference, the dysfunctional nature of its internal politics and the adverse impact of Qatari-Saudi rivalry on its policy choices will impede it from playing a critical role in any negotiations.

Other opposition interlocutors are already positioning themselves to be part of a political solution, or at least to challenge the National Coalition's claim to leadership. A principal contender, the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, which is still based in Damascus and has always called for a political solution, has been discussing the establishment of a Civil Democratic Alliance of like-minded opposition groups since February. And although it insists on Assad's departure as a precondition for a negotiated transition, Kilo's Union of Syrian Democrats sees itself as a representative opposition framework, not merely a component of the National Coalition, as shown by its planning to open offices in various international capitals.

The Friends of Syria might not withdraw their official recognition of the National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people anytime soon. But they are close to starting the search once again for a more credible opposition framework, preferably inside Syria. In the meantime the National Coalition will not receive financial and military assistance on the scale it needs, especially if it is to launch its provisional government. Instead, it will find itself sidelined should a substantive political process commence. The National Coalition, never destined to be more than an interlude, may limp on. But its time has already run out.

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