

The Syrian Opposition: Between the Illusion of Representation Abroad and the Lack of Achievement at Home

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the Syrian opposition emerged calling for the overthrow of the regime. However, it lacked any clear vision for crisis management or bringing about meaningful change. Over time, doubts arose about the objectives of this opposition, which seemed ambiguous. This ambiguity was accompanied by other problems, such as choosing to operate outside Syria and isolating itself from military factions. Gradually, it faced another problem related to its legitimacy and its role as a reliable alternative to the Syrian regime. This led local factions and councils inside Syria, which had control over areas both in terms of security and civil administration, to establish separate financing channels apart from the sidelined external opposition. This reduced the political influence of the latter, rendering it less visible and disconnected from the fighting groups inside Syria. It had no choice but to retreat and compromise on its initial goals, such as regime change and the transition of power, in favor of entering into negotiations that did not satisfy them.

In this study, we will shed light on the role of the Syrian opposition as a leadership since the beginning of the crisis until now. We will explore its founding background, as since its establishment as a representative of the Syrian street, the losses have continued to accumulate for the Syrian people. This opposition has not been able to strengthen its relationships with its supporters inside Syria, and its composition has become an incoherent mixture of formations, groups, traditional opposition figures, and followers.

All of them now operate according to the agendas of those who support them, and its members have become ambassadors for these backers.

The study is divided into two main axes. The first addresses several points related to the political and administrative failure of this opposition, while the second part deals with the violations committed by these opposition groups, through their military factions on the ground, against various segments of the Syrian population.

Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in highlighting the role of the Syrian opposition in exacerbating the suffering of the Syrian people rather than alleviating it. The study distinguishes between the beginning of their peaceful activism and their subsequent leadership and shift toward militarization, forming armed groups and factions.

The importance of our study also lies in clarifying the key features of this faction that has taken the lead in leading the Syrian movement. Is it indeed an opposition entity to the Syrian regime, or merely a group attempting to achieve its interests at the expense of the suffering of Syrians? Or are they puppets manipulated by other governments?

Research Problem:

The Syrians have been engaged in a war that has lasted for ten years, characterized by political contradictions and interests between regional and major powers, without regard for the suffering of the Syrian people. The opposition, in its various forms, has dominated the scene as a nominal opponent of the Syrian regime. However, its presence has had a clear negative role in perpetuating the crisis and the suffering of the Syrian people.

From this perspective, we can pose the research problem through several questions:

1. What is the reality of the Syrian opposition and its role during this crisis?

2. How did they lead the Syrian movement to a dead end and contribute to changing the situation to suit their own interests and those of their supporters only?
3. Did the opposition play a genuine role in managing the Syrian crisis for the benefit of the Syrians, or was it merely an illusion, a body without a soul, steered by foreign powers according to their interests and agendas?
4. Did the multiplicity of military factions affiliated with the opposition contribute to the continuation of the war in Syria, with their members committing more violations against the Syrians themselves, rather than defending them?

The First Part: The Syrian Opposition and the Loss of Administrative and Political Consistency

In recent years, the Syrian opposition has demonstrated its inability to represent the Syrian people administratively and politically, and its failure in managing the areas it controls. Notably, there has been no observable progress in these aspects within the councils established by the opposition since its inception. This underscores the absence of a clear political vision or any strategy to ensure its continuity and the effective administration of the areas under its control. Moreover, this perspective also highlights the divisions within the opposition bodies themselves, with many of its representatives prioritizing personal interests over national interests, further exacerbating corruption and division among its members. In this context, several reasons have contributed to the administrative and political failure of the opposition, including:

Lack of Administrative Organization from the Beginning:

The opposition initially relied on peaceful methods to change the existing regime. However, the political parties that called for this movement in 2011 lacked genuine organization and demonstrated an inability to lead it effectively. Many of the prominent figures who assumed leadership roles in this movement had ideological backgrounds and had not previously faced challenges of this magnitude. Additionally, they lacked the capacity to formulate strategies that would enable them to establish effective coalitions and reach positions of power.

Since the establishment of the Syrian National Council in October 2011, it became the largest and most influential assembly of the Syrian opposition until the formation of the Coalition of Opposition Forces in late 2012. Initially, the SNC included prominent figures and parties from all political factions of the Syrian uprising, claiming to have received popular authorization from activists on the ground, and positioning itself as their political representative in the uprising.

Despite the initial welcome received by this council, it failed to sustain its political activities. The strong dominance of specific factions within the council limited its scope, especially when the Muslim Brotherhood group gained intensive control over it. ¹This group, since its inception, has pursued power and influence while hiding behind the ideas of political Islam, and Syria was one of the first Arab countries where they spread their ideas. After their exile, this group faced internal conflicts and divisions. Its leaders and members began to adopt new approaches to both political and military activities, separating themselves from the old guard. They restructured the group's political thinking and practices from scratch. They opportunistically joined the opposition in late 2011, only to return to their ranks later and declare the formation of the Syrian National Council². Alongside this move, a coalition of political opposition figures and parties under the name of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change was formed in June 2011, aiming to unify the opposition³ under the banner of the Syrian National Council. However, the increasing problems and hurdles within the opposition body in this council paved the way for a new experiment: "the coalition." This was intended to create a common environment with the Syrian National Council under the banner of the "National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces," which was established in November 2012. The goal was to expand the political base of the opposition and regain its credibility. Power within this coalition was concentrated in three political blocs: the first led by Mustafa Sabbagh, a businessman close to Qatar; the

¹ "Anything but Politics: The Situation of the Syrian Political Opposition," Middle East Report No. 146, Brussels, 2013, p. 2.

² "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: Pioneering a Path of Violence."

³ National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change Forces.

second dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and secular figures; and the third led by Syrian opposition figure Michel Kilo.⁴

However, this participation transferred the problems and conflicts of the first experiment to the second, adding new challenges. The coalition became a mere shadow, an entity incapable of playing any significant role in Syrian affairs. It faced criticism not only from the Syrian regime but also from its opposition rivals, the broader Syrian population, and its regional supporters.⁵ The coalition, its councils, and components were put to the test, especially with the escalation of the Syrian regime's actions and other political challenges. They began to engage in political maneuvering, taking certain stances to cover up others. This was done to align with the emotions of their supporters, maintain their position as leadership, and garner support from regional actors who saw them as the main political representation of the opposition.

Lack of Strategy

The absence of organizational structure within the Syrian opposition was coupled with a lack of a well-thought-out strategy, the provision of an alternative to the government, and a struggle with a draining competitive dynamic. This competition emerged due to the proliferation of parties, coalitions, civilian and military leadership councils within the opposition. Rather than encouraging consolidation and unification to form a larger entity, they sought mirages. The Muslim Brotherhood, in particular, implemented its strategy by gaining control of opposition alliances, starting with the initial councils in Istanbul, followed by their efforts to form the Syrian National Alliance in Doha in the summer of 2011. This culminated in their dominance within the Syrian National Council at the end of 2011. They subjected it to their influence and directions, using it as a platform to enhance their own status and strengthen their regional alliance network. Despite the growing external role they played, they were politically burnt in Syria again, as other opposition forces pulled the rug from under them. Their presence was merely a facade to align with the people's demands. Additionally, their ability to develop a new strategy to

⁴ "Anything but Politics: The Situation of the Syrian Political Opposition," Middle East Report No. 146, Brussels, 2013, p. 3.

⁵ The six failures of the coalition.

accommodate all these forces waned, and their capacity to secure human resources and financial resources diminished. Competing with other Islamic groups became their greatest challenge in any political participation, resulting in a loss of trust among others.⁶

On the other hand, differences in vision emerged between the Syrian National Coordination Committee and other opposition factions, including the Muslim Brotherhood, on several key issues. These included whether to negotiate with the government or pursue a military option, seek international support, and involve external military forces. Additionally, there was opposition from other factions to the Muslim Brotherhood's control over the Syrian National Council, with some accusing others of betraying the principles of their revolution. All of these factors were the main causes of escalating problems and disputes among opposition factions and their lack of any strategy from the outset.⁷

Therefore, the direct absence of a strategy had a high cost for the political opposition. Between waiting for a military victory or Western intervention, any initiatives to resolve the crisis were frustrated. Their limited understanding of the reality from the outset, confident in the fall of the regime within months, had a negative impact on their performance. They lacked any strategy for their present and future, from the establishment of the council and its rush to enhance its international recognition to the coalition's initial commitment to overthrow the regime and later shift to launching new proposals and initiatives, including dialogue with the Syrian government.

Lack of Trust

It is known that trust is a state in which a person is confident in the competence of someone or something, and in the case of individuals, this trust can be a form of loyalty to others, giving one the ability, strength, and enthusiasm to achieve goals, fulfill wishes, and desires. This is what a wide segment of Syrians hoped for from the opposition at the

⁶ The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria... pioneering the approach to violence.

⁷ National Coordination Body for the Forces for Democratic Change

beginning of the crisis. They saw it as a trustworthy party to fulfill their aspirations. However, this trust quickly dissipated for various reasons, affecting those inside Syria and extending to the outside. Some of these reasons include:

1- Internally

This opposition, with its various factions, has become estranged from the Syrian people. Many inside Syria see those outside as not representing them, as they have become tools manipulated from outside Syria. Even those who remained inside have become subject to decisions made externally.⁸

Criticism of the opposition and disdain for it have become commonplace, given its internal divisions. These internal conflicts have accompanied its development over the years, with each player having limited influence and effectiveness. The division is nothing more than evidence of its collective failure and its inability to unify its decisions throughout its years of operation. Its lackluster political performance has not kept pace with the significant transformations in the Syrian issue over the years of the Syrian crisis, which the Syrian regime has exploited. This is due to the opposition's inability to build strong bridges with Syrian society, leading Syrian opposition supporters to hold it responsible for the failure.⁹

In this way, the opposition has lost the trust of various segments of Syrian society, and this state of affairs has also affected the opposition's factions. Since the establishment of the Syrian National Council, which coincided with the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, it raised hopes among opposition supporters that this council could play a role similar to that of the Libyan National Transitional Council in Libya. They hoped it would secure Western military intervention in Syria and the overthrow of the regime, especially after the Libyan National Council recognized the Syrian National Council as the legitimate alternative to the regime and closed the Syrian government's embassy in Tripoli. However, the Syrian National Council lost its credibility due to the absence of a

⁸ The Syrian Political Opposition's Path to Irrelevance

⁹ The Syrian National Coalition...a late reform attempt?

unified vision on issues related to the armed opposition and Western military intervention. It also failed to include prominent secular opposition figures in its ranks, allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to dominate its decisions. The lack of trust in it led to pressure for it to merge and form a coalition of opposition forces, which, in turn, turned to the influence of activists inside, exacerbating internal polarization.

Complicating the credibility of opposition coalition representatives was the reality of political practices in exile. Activists who had been involved in the early months of the Syrian crisis, such as "Al-Khatib and Al-Atassi," quickly became involved in meetings in luxury hotels and power struggles in exile. Seats in local councils were reserved for individuals close to Al-Sabbagh (the Secretary-General of the Coalition), which intensified feelings of growing mistrust. The leadership did not effectively address this issue. Key figures who had strong on-the-ground connections, like Mouaz Al-Khatib and Suhair Al-Atassi, were named President and Vice President of the Coalition¹⁰. This deepened the divide between the hotel opposition and the opposition inside Syria, especially among the fighters. While these opposition figures were in world capitals, quarreling in luxury hotels, they became incapable of influencing the course of the war inside Syria.

Moreover, their failure to form a temporary government and the divisions over specific individuals, despite their marginalized role, eliminated the opportunity to build relationships on the ground between them and the Syrians inside. This was evident during the lengthy meeting to expand the coalition in late May 2013, and the frustration reached its peak. The meeting ended with a joint statement in which four activist networks threatened to withdraw their support for the coalition unless activists were given at least 50% of the coalition's seats.¹¹

What the opposition suffers from most is its lack of administrative depth within Syrian territory. This is reflected in its superficial preparation of local administrative structures,

¹⁰ Anything But Politics: The State of the Syrian Political Opposition, Middle East Report No. 146, Brussels, 2013, p. 2; 19.

¹¹ The Syrian coalition meetings continue in Istanbul without reaching the election of a president

representative bodies, or interim governments within the country. Despite previous calls to redirect its financial resources and political energies toward building effective structures on the ground, this has not been done.

For instance, in 2012, there were calls to transform the Syrian National Council from a large representation body in exile into a smaller entity inside the country to lead the uprising. However, the Syrian National Council's resistance and reluctance to form a transitional authority, fearing it might be overthrown as a representative of the Syrian opposition, emphasized the lack of trust even among its own ranks. This shows the opposition's inability to develop itself beyond being just a representation structure lacking leadership and executive capabilities. Despite announcing the establishment of executive offices to give itself the appearance of a government, it did not follow through or provide teams to work in these offices. The exception was the Relief and Development Office, which benefited from the presidency of Teyfour, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and acted as a cover for the Brotherhood's own networks.¹²

2- Internationally and Regionally:

The current state of the Syrian opposition, including all its entities, is evidence of its political and organizational decline. This has been reflected in the regional and international environment surrounding it. Foreign intervention has been the major contributor to the opposition's current state by providing political, financial, and military support. The goal was to strengthen this opposition and use it as a card in the conflict within Syria and its regional surroundings.

However, this opposition deviated from its path by aligning ideologically and politically with countries and organizations with shared interests. Furthermore, the widespread presence of the Muslim Brotherhood within the structures of the Syrian opposition, and their influence in decision-making, eroded regional trust in these councils. Another reason for the opposition's deviation from its path was pressure from some countries. In November 2012, due to American and Qatari pressure, members of the Syrian National

¹² Political opposition and the leadership problem

Council agreed to make their organization a member of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.¹³

Additionally, contributing to this situation is the ethical and behavioral decline within the opposition, which has reached a point where it expresses its aspirations through torrents of insults and humiliations. This has made it a less significant and less cared-about entity by international and regional parties. This, in turn, has strengthened the Syrian regime, increased the suffering of Syrians, and diminished the interest of international parties in resolving the Syrian crisis.

Moreover, this has imposed a burden on regional and international supporting countries, both in terms of security, politics, and finances¹⁴. The opposition has become a new point of contention against the opposition, particularly concerning humanitarian aid. It became apparent later on that the opposition lacked the organizational capacity to manage this aid effectively, according to a statement from the Syrian National Council in November 2012. Officially, the council received donations totaling \$40.4 million from Libya, Qatar, and the UAE, of which approximately 65% was spent on humanitarian aid. This led the Friends of Syria group to express its reluctance to allocate resources to a politically unstable body like the Syrian National Council. This stance was endorsed by major donor parties such as the United States and the United Kingdom, which collectively provided around \$200 million during that period. This was due to a lack of trust in the opposition's ability to fairly manage and distribute aid. There was a desire to ensure that the alternative to the opposition, such as the Refugee Commission, received direct funds to be delivered to active committees on the ground, away from the council.¹⁵

All of the above confirms an absolute lack of trust in the Syrian opposition, especially in the coalition, its councils, and its leadership figures, to the extent that every decision made by this opposition is always met with doubt and a lack of confidence in its

¹³ Anything But Politics: The Status of the Syrian Political Opposition, Middle East Report No. 146, Brussels, 2013, p. 2.

¹⁴ Syria... after the marginalization of the opposition

¹⁵ Political opposition and the leadership problem

leadership, both popularly and regionally, given that they are unelected. It is challenging for this trust to be regained, especially in its current form.

The Representation Deception: A Game of Musical Chairs

The continuous and growing criticism of the Syrian opposition, coupled with the increasing disappointment among activists inside Syria and the general population, prompted them to rush to reaffirm their representational status. They repeatedly announced internal restructuring to make their councils more effective and inclusive. In the early days of the Syrian National Council's formation, as criticisms mounted, it began reaffirming its representational status through internal restructuring. This involved reducing the size of its previous leadership and accommodating 13 other opposition groups under the pretext of expanding the representation of the Syrian opposition and involving all its factions, which were constantly changing due to withdrawals, resignations, and absences.¹⁶

This announcement was an early indicator of the "representation deception" aimed at gaining international recognition, particularly in the first meeting of the Friends of Syria group in February 2012.

Furthermore, the Syrian coalition performed a "democratic" play between the coalition's president, Anas al-Abdah, and the head of the negotiating body, Nasr al-Hariri. They exchanged the turban to maintain their roles in representing the Syrian people through elections to their councils. However, these elections proved to be mere "recycling," with the roles simply shifting between specific individuals – essentially, a game of musical chairs. This has not yielded any real benefits for the Syrian people thus far.¹⁷

¹⁶ The Syrian National Council expands the representation of the Syrian opposition

¹⁷ Regarding the "farce of changing the fez"... How did the Syrians follow the coalition elections?

The Power and Influence Struggle (The Arrogance Syndrome)

This concept applies particularly to the political elite as they tend to praise themselves, inflate their image, excessively use the word "we," display excessive self-confidence, disdain and belittle the opinions of others, monopolize decision-making, refuse to listen to advice, and act without considering the consequences of their actions and decisions on others.

Those afflicted with the arrogance syndrome do not see any power or authority except themselves. This is the least that can be said about the leaders of the Syrian opposition who have exhibited symptoms of this syndrome since the formation of the Syrian National Council and continuing through the establishment of the coalition. Their behaviors and actions have not changed, especially in controlling the key mechanisms of opposition bodies and their decisions. They have marginalized most democratic forces, and what remains of them is just a facade to conceal the actual reality: powerless parties and secular figures subject to the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and their dominance. This was the case with their predecessors, driven by the fear of losing power. They have used all methods to obstruct any attempts that could lead to a transition inside Syria, fearing the formation of a transitional authority that might become an alternative to them as representatives of the Syrian opposition. Their conventional political thinking, the issue of exclusion and power monopolization, and the vilification of others reflect an unchanging opposition mentality, even in the face of pressure. When France asked the National Council to work on forming a transitional government in August 2012, the Council responded with plans to expand its membership, fearing the transfer of power to other leaders and their exclusive control over it.¹⁸

The plans for expansion, restructuring, and holding elections were nothing more than a theatrical performance, designed to simulate a "democratic" game with a preconceived scenario. This behavior somewhat resembles that of many leaders who seek to maintain their influence, like the exchange of the presidential seat and the prime minister's position between Russian President Putin and his former Prime Minister Medvedev in a lackluster "democratic" drama. Similarly, Turkey's amendments to its governance system,

¹⁸ Why did the Syrian opposition fail to formulate a comprehensive national project?

transitioning from a parliamentary to a presidential system, and the new proposal to change the constitution under the pretext that Turkey's problems stem from previous coup-written constitutions, serve to divert public attention from the necessity of their departure through early elections, ensuring the extension of their terms in power and maintaining control for their own members, despite their declining popularity. The Syrian opposition coalition mastered these tactics through its representatives, such as "Anas Al-Abdah and Nasr Al-Hariri," who exchanged roles as mentioned earlier and repeated them in multiple governorates. However, these actions offer nothing new. Their goal is to monopolize power and individual decisions. Their actions amount to no more than a rotation among a few influential individuals clinging to empty seats.¹⁹ They are now considering transitioning from these empty seats to official positions.

As the presidential elections in Syria approach, the Syrian opposition, represented by the coalition, has begun preparing for them. They established a committee called the "Supreme Electoral Commission," in a first-of-its-kind move, claiming it would enable the forces of the revolution and the Syrian opposition, through their legitimate representative, to compete in future presidential, parliamentary, or local elections and prepare the public for electoral participation. This move has stirred controversy among those loyal to them, who view it as a step that serves the Syrian regime's interests, as it transforms the revolution from a struggle for freedom into a power struggle for the presidential seat.²⁰

Returning to the dimensions of such decisions, they represent a confirmation of the non-compliance with agreed-upon principles and appear as "childish" programs driven by individual interests. In contrast to the United Nations' decisions regarding the political transition in Syria and the stages of their implementation, such as Security Council Resolution 2254 and the United Nations General Assembly's decision to form a "Transitional Governing Body," the coalition's decision signifies its confusion and incompetence in making any decisions. It highlights the absence of any future vision, and

¹⁹ Regarding the "farce of changing the fez"... How did the Syrians follow the coalition elections?

²⁰ The "Syrian Coalition" is preparing for the presidential elections... and controversy among the opposition

its retreat without providing any justifications underscores its personal shortcomings. It continues to act as if it is above the people, asserting its right to represent them.

Lack of an Administrative Compass

Since the formal establishment of the Syrian opposition, starting with the announcement of the Syrian National Council, this opposition has failed to overcome the challenges necessary for its continuity as a competitor. It has been unable to manage and lead the battles, provide relief in its areas of control, or engage with diplomatic initiatives or any political proposals to solve the problem. It has not played a role in these challenges or overcome them, as the leadership of the armed rebellion shifted to effective actors within the country. In essence, the leadership role is no longer concentrated within a unified structure.²¹

Avoiding these challenges in international forums, the opposition later attempted to unify its positions in meetings dedicated to discussing the Syrian crisis, such as the Coalition stream, the Coordination Body, the Popular Front for Change, the State Building stream, and other parties. However, the number of international conferences held over the years between these parties without results indicates the extent of the dominance of the one-sided idea, especially since in each conference, the presence of international powers with their own agendas is evident. Examples of such conferences include the Astana, Riyadh, Geneva, and Sochi conferences, under various names such as the "Peoples of Syria" conference in Sochi and the "National Dialogue" conference. This illustrates the depth of division, which has reached the point of vilification and mutual accusations, confirming the absence of true leadership from the scene and their failure to understand the complex reality of the country. Additionally, their allegiance to other countries has deprived them of any independence in decision-making.²²

²¹ Political opposition and the leadership problem

²² 7 years of the Syrian crisis.. The opposition is fragmenting and the regime is regaining its breath

A March of Division

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, multiple reasons have contributed to its decline. Political choices have ignited conflicts among its various factions and exacerbated divisions within. It deprived the movement of any political body or leadership capable of uniting the domestic activists and their goals. The division within the opposition has become so severe that it is difficult to reach any agreement on issues related to resolving the crisis, or at least to rescue what remains. This has resulted in a mutual lack of trust due to its failure to engage in genuine political communication and action, and its involvement in alliances far removed from the objectives of the popular movement.

From the outset, its activism has been characterized by spontaneous initiatives and ad hoc meetings rather than organizational efforts.²³ It found itself in an unexpected situation and was unable to unify. The first meeting of opposition figures from the "Damascus Declaration" and the Muslim Brotherhood took place in Istanbul, then Antalya, and later in Brussels, where they called for the departure of the Syrian president. Meanwhile, the internal opposition, represented by the Coordination Committee, met in Damascus and called for the overthrow of the regime while rejecting foreign intervention. However, the chaos among opposition factions prevented an agreement on the principles supported by civilians within Syria and led to a deviation from their goals.²⁴ This has stirred their dissatisfaction since the beginning, culminating in the naming of Friday, "Unity of the Opposition," on September 23, 2011, where many sought to give the traditional opposition one last chance before the slogan "Overthrow the Opposition" was raised alongside "Overthrow the Regime."²⁵

However, nothing changed in the behavior of the opposition. Since the formation of the National Council in Istanbul in October 2011, divisions emerged. Accusations of the

²³ The reality of the Syrian opposition and current and future challenges, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 2011, p. 2.

²⁴ The Syrian opposition...a procession of division and disagreements

²⁵ The reality of the Syrian opposition and current and future challenges, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 2011, p. 3.

opposition not being representative and the Muslim Brotherhood's influence were exchanged. These divisions continued with the formation of the coalition in 2012, and soon witnessed withdrawals of some members who opposed the formation of an interim government, in addition to resignations, such as the resignation of Khatib on March 24, 2013, citing that certain matters had crossed red lines.²⁶

In addition to the aforementioned factors, another significant issue that harmed the opposition was the division and lack of coordination among its regional supporters. The consequences of this were evident on both the political and military fronts, as competition among its most important backers intensified, mirroring the internal divisions within the coalition, diverting it from its primary mission.²⁷

Here, the consequences of this division can be highlighted as follows:

Emergence of conflicting and competing projects: The opposition, in both its political and military forms, split into several projects, with some taking on an extremist character, contributing to an increase in religious rhetoric among opposition factions.

Competition for influence and resources: Whether at the political, military, or civilian level, this factor prevented the formation of a united front and reinforced the entrenchment of narrow local, ideological, and political identities, all of which competed against the primary goal of confronting the Syrian regime.²⁸

Disagreement over military intervention: This formed a fundamental point of contention between the National Council, which supported the idea of military intervention to end

²⁶ The Syrian opposition...a procession of division and disagreements

²⁷ James Clapper, Director of US National Intelligence, indicated in March 2013 that the Syrian opposition forces seeking to overthrow the Syrian regime were “gaining strength and gaining territory,” but at the same time he stressed that this opposition “is still fragmented, and finds it difficult to contain the flow of extremist fighters.” Foreigners,” citing: American intelligence: The Syrian opposition is divided and Assad is suffering from a shortage of supplies.

²⁸ Why did the Syrian regime not fall?

the violence, and the Coordination Committee, which opposed the idea as it would complicate matters further.

Dialogue with the Syrian regime: From the outset, the opposition was divided on how to deal with the Syrian government, with some vehemently rejecting dialogue and others in favor of it.

Guided by external interests: Most opposition bodies were formed through non-Syrian initiatives, making them susceptible to international and regional polarization, further deepening divisions among their ranks.

Diversity of opinions bolstered the adversary: The variation in opinions and positions among opposition forces regarding Syria's future weakened them and strengthened the other side, the Syrian regime. The opposition has not overcome the binary thinking that divides its surroundings into enemies and friends.

Enhancement of control by Islamic factions: The division among political parties, councils, and coalitions enabled other parties to fill the void, fueling military escalation and expanding the influence of armed Islamic factions within local and civilian governments. Islamic entities, such as the "Civil Service Administration" established by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, took on coordinating roles among local councils.

Regional skepticism about the opposition: The chaotic posture of the divided opposition, split between moderates and extremists, along with their alignment with armed factions, especially extremist Islamic ones, placed them in a position of doubt in the eyes of regional and international powers, particularly those that used to support them. The majority of them are now seen as a potential threat.²⁹

Post-Syria: This is another point of contention among opposition groups. Some see it as a new Syria that is civil and democratic, while others envision a civil state with pluralism, a

²⁹ The path of the Syrian political opposition towards marginalization

clear separation between religion and state, and the guarantee of freedoms and rights for all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliations. This diversity highlights the influence of Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁰

A Record of Theft and Corruption

Currently, it's enough to launch even the simplest rumor to create a buzz in the media, turning it into a topic for investigation and analysis. Thus, any statement issued by the Syrian opposition, no matter how minor, is attributed to it. Mere analysis and criticism of these statements are considered a disgrace to the opposition. Scandals now emanate from the depths of this opposition. The verbal clashes between its factions and their threats to expose each other regarding theft and corruption have pushed them to unveil their hidden agendas. They aim to divert accusations of theft and betrayal away from them and exploit Syrian blood for their own gains.

Numerous statements and leaks have been issued by opposition members and official media outlets, exposing these scandals. For example, Syrian opposition figure "Kamal Al-Labwani" leaked information about receiving \$5 million in funding for the Syrian opposition from the U.S. Congress in 2005. He called for the suspension of this funding in 2012 because these funds had been stolen. He also claimed that \$1,100 per month per family of detainees from the "Declaration of Damascus" group was allocated but only \$100 per family was distributed, and the rest remains unaccounted for. He accused others of corruption and their ties to Israel. People like "Anas Abdo" (President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces since his election on March 5, 2016) were accused of this since 2006, claiming they established an opposition television station in London that only broadcasted for a few minutes and the rest of the money was used to buy properties and houses in Amman.³¹

³⁰ The division of the Syrian opposition is a great service to the Assad regime

³¹ Thieves from a long time ago... A Syrian opposition member leaked a recording of thefts before the outbreak of the revolution.

In another scandal, this time exposed by The Washington Post, diplomatic cables leaked by the WikiLeaks television site on April 18, 2011, revealed secret diplomatic correspondences between American embassy employees in Damascus and the U.S. State Department. These correspondences pertained to funding the Syrian opposition and strengthening civil society institutions both inside and outside Syria.³² These records included information that the U.S. State Department secretly provided \$6 million in 2006 to the "Justice and Building" movement led by "Anas Al-Abdah."³³ American diplomats in the leaked cables called for a reduction in the policy of financing the opposition.³⁴

In another instance of theft and corruption, the opposition figure "Suhair Al-Atassi" was accused of embezzling \$20 million in aid from the United Arab Emirates intended for Syrian refugees. After her actions were exposed, "Al-Atassi" stated that she was not the only one who had misappropriated funds; all members of the coalition had received money from European countries, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, but none of it had reached the refugees or even the opposition inside Syria.³⁵ She claimed to have documents proving the actions of opposition coalition members. Approximately \$70 million was spent, with \$20 million disappearing. She asserted that she was not responsible for this and all she did was purchase a property in Washington, consisting of a building and a 10,000-square-meter plot of land, worth only \$12 million. She threatened to expose the actions of the coalition members, who wasted millions of dollars. They took entire apartments instead of rooms, spending thousands of dollars.³⁶ The source within the opposition reported that some members of the Riyadh 2 delegation were recently dismissed and replaced with close associates of Nasr Al-Hariri. The source also mentioned that the delegation's expenses amounted to \$200,000 monthly.³⁷ This highlights the involvement of most opposition figures in corruption cases and their failure to play any effective role in delivering aid funds to refugees, residents in camps, or those suffering inside Syria. Rather, most of this money was stolen, or transferred to those

³² WikiLeaks cables: Washington has been funding the Syrian opposition since 2006

³³ To view the full text of the telegrams, see the links

³⁴ Washington secretly funded the Syrian opposition

³⁵ Suhair Al-Atassi: I am not the only one who stole aid money

³⁶ After the \$20 million scandal, Suhair Al-Atassi breaks her silence and explodes an even bigger scandal!

³⁷ Learn about the expenses of the Riyadh 2 delegation and how much Nasr Hariri receives monthly

close to the opposition leaders, which eliminates any doubt that this opposition was never the Syrian concern. Rather, it was seeking power and money, and followed the path of the opposition in order to provide wide channels of corruption in it, through which it could reach its endeavors. In wealth, fame and power.

The Second Part: From Fighting Injustice to Practicing It

This part delves into the background of the Syrian opposition, its military factions, and the violations it's accused of, exploiting the state of chaos and instability to commit these actions. This is a common occurrence in any conflict, where one party bears the greater responsibility for human rights violations, including the targeting of civilians, arrests, kidnappings, and torture. This makes them the worst perpetrators.

The other party hides its crimes under the guise of struggle, fighting against an oppressive regime to replace it. It claims to be the savior from this injustice, without considering human rights or governance standards. This applies to the Syrian opposition coalition, both its political and military components, since the start of the Syrian crisis.

This opposition managed to deceive everyone with its violations, making the Syrian regime the main accused and portraying itself as defenders of citizens' rights. It presented itself as a different, more humane, and effective government in Syria, ignoring its violations. Disregarding its violations harmed everyone who relied on it.

No longer can its statements about the regime's misconduct or anything else justify its actions. Some of its members have even been listed as terrorists. This summarizes the accomplishments of this opposition during this period, illustrating its composition and violations clearly as follows:

An Army Dominated by Extremist Organizations

In October 2019, a group of military leaders within the Syrian opposition announced the formation of the "Syrian National Army" in the Turkish city of Şanlıurfa. They aimed to establish a unified body for the Syrian opposition after eight years of calls for all factions to unite under one entity. This new "National Army" merged the "National Front for Liberation," which included factions from the Free Syrian Army in Idlib in May 2018. Their declared mission was to confront the Syrian regime.

However, instead of following this path, they shifted their course to assist the Turkish army in invading other areas outside the control of the Syrian regime. They invaded the cities of Jarabulus and Afrin, among other areas primarily inhabited by Kurds. These military actions were promoted as liberation efforts for the residents of those areas. However, numerous unreported crimes and violations occurred, especially in Kurdish regions, including killings, rape, abduction, and theft, in places like Afrin.

Other reports indicate that the "Syrian National Army" employed brutal torture methods to terrorize anyone who differed with them—a tactic commonly used by terrorist organizations like ISIS. Many videos circulated on social media illustrating the torture, rape, and beatings endured by civilians at the hands of this army. These violations weren't limited to Afrin but extended to areas in northeastern Syria. In October 2019, when this army, supported by the Turkish military, took control of areas like Ras al-Ain/Serekaniye and Tell Abyad/Kari Spi, they also committed ongoing crimes and violations, all under the watchful eye of their Turkish supporters.

Despite the promotion of this army as a unified structure, it lacks unified leadership and discipline. In addition to the variety of factions, their ideologies, and their loyalty to faction leaders and fighters, rather than overall commanders, have spread the principle of personal authority among them. This has created competition and infighting among them for gains without any accountability, especially as their violations and crimes increased.

Moreover, the backgrounds of many of these factions, with their ideological inclinations, made it difficult for them to transition to institutional structures. They continued their crimes and violations under the banner of the "Syrian National Army," despite calls from human rights organizations to stop them and hold the perpetrators accountable.

Here, we can highlight some of these opposition factions known for their extremism, terrorism, and ongoing violations despite calls for their cessation and the prosecution of their members:

Ahrar al-Sham

Ahrar al-Sham is one of the largest and most effective militant groups among the Islamic organizations active in Syria. It has worked to absorb smaller Islamic groups while maintaining organization and discipline within its ranks. The estimated number of its fighters ranges from 10,000 to 20,000.

Many researchers have pointed to the relationship between Ahrar al-Sham and Turkey. One of them is the Turkish researcher and academic, Omar Ouzdemir, who is a professor at Sakarya University and a researcher at the Middle East Strategic Studies Center (ORSAM). In 2015, he noted several common points between Turkey and Ahrar al-Sham.³⁸ Turkey described Ahrar al-Sham as the largest and most effective military movement, its most important ally, and a significant factor in its security. It classified it as a moderate force alongside the Army of Conquest and the Army of Islam. Turkey saw it as the best movement to secure its southern borders from threats, as claimed.

However, these claims were contradicted by a report from Amnesty International in July 2016 titled "Abductions, Torture, and Killings Under Armed Group Rule in Aleppo and Idlib." The report explicitly accused some factions, including Ahrar al-Sham, of committing war crimes. Philip Luther, the Director of the Middle East and North Africa Program at Amnesty International, commented on this by saying, "Armed groups in Aleppo and Idlib today enjoy impunity to commit war crimes with many of these armed groups freely indulging in violations of international humanitarian law, including by using torture, which the Syrian government has been regularly condemned for."³⁹

³⁸ Türkiye's relationship with Syria's Ahrar al-Sham: security and the future

³⁹ Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Fatah, and Amnesty International

The report documented 24 cases of abduction between 2012 and 2016, including peaceful activists and children, as well as minority groups targeted solely based on their religion. It also documented the abduction of boys aged 14, 15, and 16 by elements of Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib and Aleppo between 2012 and 2015. The report also highlighted cases of killings by these groups, including civilians, children, LGBTQ+ individuals, and women.

Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam)

Jaysh al-Islam was formed through the merger of several groups, with its backbone being the Islam Brigade led by Zahran Alloush. It relies on funding from countries including Turkey and Qatar. This faction managed to attract a large number of followers within the country, using religious rhetoric similar to what Ahrar al-Sham did. Ideologically, Jaysh al-Islam is close to Jabhat al-Nusra, and despite ideological differences, these were settled through discussions and Sharia rules. This was stated by its leader, Zahran Alloush, to the American Daily Beast newspaper on December 15, 2015. He said, "I met with Abu Maria al-Qahtani, one of the leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra, and found no differences between the Sharia of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Sharia of Jaysh al-Islam."⁴⁰

This faction became notorious for its crimes and violations since its establishment. In the city of Adra in the Damascus countryside in 2013, Jaysh al-Islam, along with Jabhat al-Nusra, committed brutal massacres, killing many minorities, especially Alawites. They also detained civilians from Alawite, Ismaili, and Druze backgrounds in cages on the rooftops of houses, using them as human shields. This occurred concurrently with the random rocket shelling of the city of Damascus.

⁴⁰ Details of Zahran Alloush's interview with the American newspaper The Daily Beast

In Douma, a suburb of Damascus, they were accused of being behind the disappearance of several human rights activists, the most prominent being Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hamadeh, Samira al-Khalil, and Nazem al-Khalil.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, the husband of the abducted Samira Khalil, stated in December 2013 that this military group, Jaysh al-Islam, does not cooperate with anyone in the Ghouta. He also claimed that "Razan Zaitouneh" had been threatened two months ago, and shots had been fired in front of her house to intimidate and drive her out. He concluded that "Jabhat al-Nusra will not commit any crimes in the area without coordination with 'Zahran' in the Eastern Ghouta."⁴¹

Additionally, several journalists were arrested in the Ghouta, including Firas Mefieda, Abada Saleh, Mohammed Hamdoun, Shadi Abdullah, Hmam al-Husry, and Muayyad al-Derani. After their release, signs of torture were found on their bodies due to their criticism of Jaysh al-Islam leaders. The purpose of these practices was to silence voices through torture and intimidation. Jaysh al-Islam was also accused of closing down media institutions, including the largest institution in the Ghouta, the "Sabq" Foundation, and the independent "Majd" Foundation.

In another circulated video, Alloush accused Alawites of having non-Islamic and non-Arab origins, referring to them as Nusayris, threatening them with death.⁴²

Jaysh al-Islam became known for constructing prisons specializing in civil crimes, including the "Repentance Prison,"⁴³ as well as another prison for military crimes called the "Concrete Prison."⁴⁴ Additionally, there were prisons specifically for women referred to as the "Women's Ship," where female detainees were subjected to various forms of torture.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Yassin Al-Haj Saleh: The "Islam" Army kidnapped Razan Zaitouneh and her companions

⁴² Zahran Alloush, a moderate terrorist, vows to kill Shiites and Alawites and establish the modern Umayyad state

⁴³ Stories of torment from the prison of repentance

⁴⁴ In pictures: the prisons that were used by the "Army of Islam" in Douma

⁴⁵ Army of Islam...the dagger that killed the revolution from "Ghouta" to "Ras al-Ain"

Jaysh al-Islam's violations were not limited to the Alawite minority but extended to Kurdish areas in Afrin, Serekaniye (Ras al-Ain), and Tal Abyad, resulting in the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents. Various local, international, and human rights organizations leveled numerous accusations against the National Army, of which Jaysh al-Islam is a key component, for wide-ranging violations, including abduction, on-site executions, and forced displacement of civilians, as well as the occupation and confiscation of their homes.

Jund al-Aqsa

The formation of this army is attributed to a jihadist named "Abu Abdul Aziz al-Qatari," an experienced fighter who had participated in Afghanistan. Initially, the organization operated within the ranks of the al-Nusra Front, which was linked to al-Qaeda. However, it later began to operate independently and changed its tactics for fighting against the Syrian regime.

Ideologically, it shares similarities with Ayman al-Zawahiri and his followers, such as supporting armed struggle against non-believers, overthrowing the Syrian regime, establishing Sharia law in the country, building a caliphate similar to the terrorist organization ISIS, and using suicide bombers. They also called on jihadists worldwide to join the war in Syria.

The United States classified it as a global terrorist organization. In January 2017, the group decided to dissolve itself, with its members joining other factions, most of which fell under the banner of the Free Syrian Army or the Syrian National Army.

Ansar al-Tawhid

Ansar al-Tawhid is one of the extremist groups active in northern Syria and is one of the units integrated into the Free Syrian Army. This faction was formed in 2012 after the merger of several small groups, with most of its members later coming from remnants of "Jund al-Aqsa." Both Ansar al-Tawhid and Jund al-Aqsa adhere to al-Qaeda's ideologies,

especially their jihadist creed. However, Ansar al-Tawhid began to change its ideology in line with Turkish-Qatari politics. In May 2020, it declared its independence and claimed not to be affiliated with any other organization in Syria.

All the aforementioned changes in this faction suggest that "Ansar al-Tawhid" is essentially a rebranding of "Jund al-Aqsa," and its declaration of independence represents a reshuffling of terrorist groups operated in secret by their backers, serving as a ready alternative to Jabhat al-Nusra in case new developments occur. Therefore, its presence in Idlib was a primary justification for the Syrian regime's and Russia's bombardment of the city, and even the United States targeted one of its camps in the town of Kafraya in Idlib province in August 2019.

Nur al-Din al-Zenki

One of the most active groups in Syria, Nur al-Din al-Zenki was formed in November 2011 and initially considered itself an independent group. However, it changed its name several times, starting as "al-Zenki," then joining "Liwa al-Tawhid" (the Unity Brigade), followed by "Tajammu Fastaqim Kama Umirat" (Rally as Ordered), which was closely aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. Eventually, it returned to its original name, adding an Islamic connotation, becoming "The Nur al-Din al-Zenki Islamic Battalions." Later, this group joined the "Army of Mujahideen" and became one of its pillars. However, it announced its withdrawal from the latter in May 2014, renaming itself "The Nur al-Din al-Zenki Movement."

Despite considering itself a moderate opposition group, its record is not free of violations and crimes. This includes the incident of a child named "Abdullah Issa" being beheaded by one of its members, as well as the torture of civilians, as confirmed by video footage circulated by activists. The Syrian opposition justified these practices as "individual mistakes" to downplay them. However, they were part of a series of repeated crimes committed by this organization, similar to other factions under the banners of the "Free Syrian Army" or the "Syrian National Army."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The crime of slaughtering the child Abdullah Issa

In July 2016, Amnesty International issued a report revealing that armed groups were carrying out killings, torture, and abductions in areas such as Aleppo and Idlib in northern Syria. Among the groups involved in these activities was "Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement."⁴⁷

Therefore, regardless of the names of these armed factions, they remain fundamentally linked to extremist organizations. What reinforces this belief is the human rights violations and crimes committed against civilians in areas under their control and beyond.

Lack of military organization

The reports and evidence of these armed opposition groups' violations and crimes underscore their inability to govern a country. They are no different from any other organization that mistreats civilians before any opposing military party. According to many local and international human rights organizations, these factions, most of which fall under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army or the Syrian National Army, as represented by the Syrian Opposition Coalition abroad, have committed crimes against civilians outside the bounds of the law, prevented landowners from returning to their properties, looted their possessions, and illegally occupied their areas.

The results of the operations conducted by these factions and their supporters have exposed the falsehood of their claims regarding their ability to manage the areas under their control and provide security for the residents therein. Instead, the opposite has occurred. They lost control of the leadership of those areas, and security fled from them as people entered. The outcome has been disastrous.

This is what "Sara Leah Whitson," the Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, pointed out in response to what happened in the safe zones proposed by Turkey as a result of its military operations in Syria: "The executions, looting of property, and preventing displaced people from returning home are compelling evidence that the 'safe

⁴⁷ Amnesty International: Syria: Cases of kidnapping, torture and summary killings by armed groups

zones' proposed by Turkey will not be safe. Contrary to Turkey's narrative that its operations will create a safe area, the groups it is using to administer the area are committing violations against civilians and discriminating on racial grounds."⁴⁸

Here it can be said that violations and the commission of crimes against civilians will not stop as long as such opposition continues in its crimes without oversight or accountability. Given that most of the factions mentioned earlier have fallen under a unified umbrella, such as the "Free Syrian Army" or the "Syrian National Army," the military wing of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, which claims to represent the political interests of the Syrians, everyone bears responsibility for these crimes. They should not escape accountability and should be classified alongside other terrorist organizations for their crimes against Syrians, just like any other terrorist faction. The countries that support them also share this responsibility.

As these opposition groups continue to commit violations and increase their political and military activities, the conditions for resolving the Syrian crisis have been seriously undermined. Many actors in this conflict, directly or indirectly, have participated, turning the crisis from a local issue into a regional and international one. These involved parties have different perspectives, leading to a failure to reach consensus on the final resolution of the Syrian crisis.

Conclusion

The foregoing emphasizes the opposition's responsibility for its own failures and inability to establish a broader popular base or embody the people's demands and make appropriate decisions. It has not learned from past mistakes but instead accumulated more in the present, increasing its chaos, particularly militarily. This has allowed foreign powers to intervene in the Syrian conflict, far removed from the wishes of the Syrian people. Additionally, there have been allegations of terrorism, corruption, and theft within the opposition's ranks.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch: Syria: Violations against civilians in "safe areas"

Therefore, their understanding of the Syrian crisis has been superficial, resulting in repeated failures to achieve any goals. These can be summarized as follows:

1. A heterogeneous mix of members, including exiles, intellectuals, secularists, Islamists, and others, created a diverse spectrum of groups and individuals with no connection, common denominators, or unified vision, lacking communication with protesters inside Syria.

2. A cycle of frustration and distrust undermined its credibility among the grassroots, leading many armed factions to reject the legitimacy of the opposition.

3. Unclear objectives: Despite stressing the importance of unity, the opposition, in all its spectrums, failed to take any organizational action, diminishing its ability to present demands with a unified vision.

4. Rhetoric to mask its failures: Since 2016, when its military and political capabilities declined, the opposition's only means of response were speeches.

5. Lack of coordination among regional supporters fueled divisive competition among members of various councils, especially those associated with Gulf states and Turkey, diverting the opposition from its primary mission to regional agendas.

6. The push of popular movements towards armed conflict without the organizational capacity or influence left the opposition factions weak. Their inability to control the territories they seized weakened their standing and led to a loss of support from foreign powers, which criticized the behavior of Islamist groups operating under their banner.