

THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION'S LEADERSHIP PROBLEM

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Syria's opposition still lacks political leadership two years after the start of the country's uprising. In exile, the Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (National Coalition) professes to provide a representative framework for diverse civilian councils and rebel groups operating within Syria's borders, but it does not lead them. It must empower the grassroots structures to become the opposition's real political leadership inside Syria and shift its focus to frankly engage key political constituencies and state institutions to split them from the regime if it hopes to bring about lasting, democratic change.

Key Themes

- The opposition's first representative framework in exile, the Syrian National Council (SNC), reacted to diplomatic initiatives rather than shaping them, espoused militarization without being able to direct or support it, and failed to incorporate local leaders inside Syria.
- Expecting funding and political recognition from the international community, opposition figures and factions in exile competed for status and resources rather than uniting under a common banner.
- The National Coalition, which has supplanted the SNC, has proved no more effective in providing strategic political leadership, empowering local civil administration, asserting credible authority over armed rebels, delivering humanitarian relief, and devising a political strategy to split the regime. The resignation of National Coalition Chairman Moaz al-Khatib on March 24, 2013, placed its future in doubt.
- Local civilian and military councils inside Syria cannot assert effective authority on the ground in the absence of credible political leadership.
- Competing rebel groups and Islamist militants have filled the void, addressing growing needs for security, dispute resolution, food and fuel supply, and shelter.

Recommendations for the National Coalition

Exercise political leadership of military operations. The National Coalition must stake out a clear position on the conduct of major combat operations in Syria's cities, especially the looming battle for Damascus, in order to assert political direction and authority over military decisionmaking.

Govern the liberated areas and empower local political leadership. The coalition should empower the provisional government it has announced in liberated areas to make strategic policy decisions. Otherwise the government will fail to deliver effective administration, services, and humanitarian assistance or to assert civilian control over the armed rebels.

Devise a political strategy and prepare for negotiations. The coalition leadership should propose a concrete framework that offers principal political and institutional actors currently supporting the regime, other than President Bashar al-Assad and his inner core, the opportunity to play a direct, formal role in negotiating Syria's democratic transition.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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