

## The Syrian opposition's dangerous divisions

Fred H. Lawson

*Fred H. Lawson is Lynn T. White, Jr. Professor of Government at Mills College in California. He has served as President of the Syrian Studies Association and Fulbright lecturer in international relations at the University of Aleppo in Syria.*

On January 6, 2013, President Bashar al-Asad gave a rare televised address to the Syrian people. The speech, delivered from the stage of the Damascus opera house with shifting collages of patriotic images projected in the background, was unfailingly defiant and uncompromising both in content and in tone. The President offered to engage critics of the Ba'th Party-led regime in a serious dialogue, but only after "all those who have sold Syria out to the foreigners" and "terrorists" agreed to lay down their arms. Such a national dialogue, al-Asad went on, would set the stage for the formulation of what he called a reconfigured "national pact" among the various components of Syrian society, which would then be submitted to a "popular referendum" for approval and implementation.

Close observers of Syrian affairs dismissed the address as further proof that the President and his allies had fallen out of touch with reality. *The New York Times*, for instance, reported that the speech gave "no acknowledgement of the gains [that had been made] by the rebels fighting against him." Long-time civil rights activist Haitham al-Manna' told the Beirut newspaper *al-Safir* that "the President communicated a sense of arrogance that does not stem from personal achievements, but from the defeats of others."

But suppose for just a moment that we take al Assad's address on its own terms, not simply as a wrongheaded misperception or duplicitous spinning of the current situation inside Syria but rather as a reasonable assessment from the government's perspective of the state of play after two years of large-scale popular revolt.

### A splintered and detached opposition

What we would notice, first, is that opposition to the Ba'thi political order continues to be profoundly splintered. A new umbrella grouping of opposition movements took shape in November 2012, under the unwieldy name the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF). The NCSROF supplanted the old Syrian National Council (SNC), which critics had charged had been from the start dominated by the Muslim Brothers and therefore offered dim prospects for secular liberals, Christians or Kurds. Ironically, the NCSROF immediately elected as its head a prominent member of the Muslim Brothers, Ahmad Mu'az al-Khatib. The SNC had been careful to nominate as its successive leading figures a secularist, Paris-based academic and a Kurdish activist who was a long-time resident of social-democratic Sweden. A modest broadening of the base of the opposition's flagship organization therefore accompanied a pronounced assertion of the Muslim Brothers' grip over NCSROF's agenda and decision-making process.

Like the SNC, the NCSROF boasts only minimal connections to the key components of the

opposition on the ground, the Local Coordinating Committees. Representatives from fourteen provincial councils took part in the founding congress of the NCSROF in Doha, Qatar, but only a handful of these individuals were actually based in Syria. Consequently, again like the SNC, the NCSROF operates almost entirely outside the country. Influential anti-regime activists inside Syria, most notably the National Coordinating Committee of Forces for Democratic Change, kept the new organization at arm's length. For inside activists, actual and suspected links between such external bodies as the NCSROF and foreign powers - Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States, to name only the most obvious ones - weaken the overall effectiveness and legitimacy of the opposition, and give the authorities in Damascus good grounds to charge that its opponents are furthering the interests of external enemies.

Moreover, the NCSROF (once again like the SNC) remains connected only loosely to the Free Syrian Army. Relations between the outside leadership of the opposition and the assortment of defectors and grassroots fighters that make up the FSA proved to be rocky from the very beginning. SNC leaders repeatedly ordered the FSA to subordinate itself to the "civilian" wing of the opposition, while military commanders insisted that they needed complete freedom of action in order to prosecute the revolt successfully. When the SNC at last set up a command structure of its own, the FSA not only refused to merge with it but even took steps to undermine the new command's attempts to co-ordinate operations among the autonomous militias that owe their allegiance to the Local Coordinating Committees.

### **Rising Islamist forces**

Even as deep divisions persist among the major components of the opposition, radical Islamist currents have seized the initiative in the battle against the government's armed forces. The most prominent of the militant Islamist groupings is the Assistance Front for the People of Syria, commonly called Jabhah al-Nusrah. This militia appeared during the last weeks of 2011, when it took responsibility for a series of bombings at military and party facilities in Aleppo and Damascus. It claimed that such indiscriminate and highly destructive operations were undertaken in retaliation for massacres of Muslim noncombatants carried out by pro-regime thugs (shabbihah). The Assistance Front expresses particular hostility toward the 'Alawi community of Syria, and tends to refer to the United States and Israel as "enemies of Islam." Its ties to the Islamic State in Iraq, an al-Qa'idah-affiliated organization that has been active in fighting against the US-backed regime in Baghdad, were publicly affirmed in early April 2013.

Fighters loyal to the Assistance Front took the lead in attacks against major military installations across northern Syria during the winter of 2012-13. But this militia is only one of several radical Islamist forces that have gained strength over the last few months. The Free Syria Brigades, whose adherents advocate the replacement of the secularist Ba'thi order with an Islamic system of government, constitute a powerful force in rural districts of the northwest. Equally active in the countryside around Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur is the Hawks

of Syria, which appears to be more concerned with overthrowing the country's current political elite than it is with eradicating the 'Alawi community as a whole. Elements of the Hawks of Syria have been especially ruthless in their treatment of captured soldiers and officials: horrific videos of the brutal executions of unarmed prisoners have been released by the militia as evidence of its commitment to inflict punishment on all defenders of the Ba'thi regime.

Other significant Islamist currents include the Banner of the Nation, whose units are largely made up of foreign fighters. Libyans who acquired combat experience in the campaign that ousted Libya's Muammar Qaddafi play a predominant role in this militia. Chechens, Uzbeks and British Muslims can be found in the ranks of the rival Dawn of Islam. The 'Abdullah 'Azzam Brigade, by contrast, has attracted cadres primarily from Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. These three groups tend to refer to the Syrian uprising as merely the initial phase of a global revolt against those who oppress Muslims.

Such resolutely Islamist fighters have tended to deal with local populations in a more honest and generous fashion than have the guerrillas of the Free Syrian Army. Yet the Islamist militants have alienated the general public in at least two ways. First, radical Islamist forces have started to engage in combat against other opposition militias. On January 9, members of the Assistance Front ambushed and killed the commander of the FSA's al-Faruq Brigade in the town of Sarmada. The attack most probably occurred as retaliation for the September 2012 killing of the Islamist leader Firas al-Absi, and it took place in the context of reports that the Assistance Front is organizing popular protests against the FSA in northern districts that have fallen out of state control. At the same time, the Assistance Front started to challenge Aleppo's primary Islamist militia, the al-Tawhid Brigade, and put sustained pressure on autonomous formations of fighters to accept orders from the Front's battlefield commanders.

Second, radical Islamist fighters have sparked popular outrage by assaulting Syria's minority communities. Human Rights Watch reported on January 23 that one unit of Islamist militants destroyed meetinghouses used by devout Shi'is to commemorate the martyrdom of al-Imam Husain, and that other units raided and looted Christian churches across Latakia province in November 2012. Syria's mainstream (Sunni) Muslims may no longer be immune to the wrath of the radicals. *The Guardian* reported on January 17 that members of the Assistance Front had damaged several tombs around the northern town of A'zaz, on the grounds that the monuments were "too pretentious for Islamic traditions."

As Islamist forces have seized the vanguard of the opposition, particularly in the north, Syria's Kurdish community has mobilized to protect itself. During the initial months of the uprising, the great majority of Kurds adopted a neutral posture. Bouts of armed struggle were consequently absent from the areas around al-Raqqah and al-Qamishli. As the uprising transformed into civil war, however, the authorities in Damascus tolerated, and perhaps even encouraged, the emergence of a radical Kurdish organization throughout the northeastern provinces. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which represents the present

incarnation of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has now taken charge of a broad swathe of northern Syria.

Clashes between the armed wing of the PYD, known as the YPG, and Islamist fighters become more frequent and intense in February 2013, particularly around the predominantly Kurdish town of Ras al-'Ain. At the same time, a rival Kurdish militia, the West Kurdistan People's Defense Forces, skirmished with Islamist units along the border with Turkey. The likelihood that such confrontations might escalate into large-scale warfare is heightened by the fact that the PYD leadership exercises little influence over the day-to-day activities of the YPG.

It is under these circumstances that the Syrian government launched a large-scale counteroffensive shortly after President al Assad's opera house address. The regime's armed forces in mid-January pushed simultaneously into the contested neighborhood of Bustan al-Qasr in Aleppo, the opposition-held southern and western districts of Homs, the Damascus suburbs of Dumah and Dar'iyyah and the southern town of Busra al-Harir. In a striking innovation, the regime set up a collection of popular armed formations called the National Defense Forces, the first of which is an all-female brigade operating at Homs.

It is of course possible that the January counteroffensive and the military operations launched against opposition forces outside Damascus in early April 2013 represent the death throes of Syria's Ba'thi order. But it is worth considering whether the convergence of persistent divisions among opposition forces, the rise of radical Islamist currents and a sharp escalation in skirmishes between opposition fighters and Kurdish militants has put President al-Asad and his allies back in a comparatively strong position, diminishing the prospects for a quick end to the conflict.