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The Syrian Uprising: Syrian Discourse on the Social Networks, June 2012

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Background

Since the start of the uprising in Syria, more than 15,000 Syrian citizens have been murdered, and the bloodshed has no end in sight. The intra-Syrian discourse on the various social networks is marked by despair with Bashar Assad's continued rule and the uncertain future.

Some 10 percent of the Syrian population – for the most part secular, liberal, and from Sunni Muslim backgrounds – use Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and YouTube. At the same time, Kurds and senior members of the military and political opposition are active on the social networks, and one can also find quite a few Syrian exiles (including Alawites) among users.

What follows is a look at some key political issues currently debated on the Syrian social networks.

The Divisions within the Military and Political Opposition

There is much dissatisfaction and frustration over the divisions within the military and political opposition, reflected in the power struggles, the lack of consensus regarding a leader, and the lack of agreement regarding the desired end state – what Syria should like following the fall of the Assad regime.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA), composed of deserters from the regular Syrian army, comprises the primary military opposition. Although it received full backing from the rebels for a long time, network users have lately criticized the fact that the FSA is beset by internal struggles over command and hierarchy and is failing as a counterweight to the Syrian military and other security establishments.

The Syrian National Council (SNC), the umbrella organization of all the opposition groups, is situated in Istanbul rather than in Syria. Its main objectives are enlisting international economic and political support for toppling Assad's regime and creating an



alternative coalition that would represent each of Syria's ethnic communities with a mutually acceptable platform.

The Local Coordination Committee (LCC) activists have gained greater acceptance and popularity because they are involved in practical affairs, engage in non-violent activities (e.g., demonstrations), document the events in writing and photographs, ensure that civilians receive humanitarian assistance, and see to proper burials for those killed in the violence.

The Tension between Civil War (حرب أهلية) and Ethnic Conflict (حرب طائفية)

On the networks, the situation is described as the development of a civil war in which Syrian forces are killing other Syrian forces as well as civilians. However, the discourse stresses that this is not an ethnic conflict, and there are no calls for vengeance against the Alawite community. Rather, the focus is on toppling the Assad family regime. Indeed, it is the sources that are interested in hindering international intervention in Syria, as a result of fears of an ethnic conflict and bloodshed breaking out the day after Assad's fall from power, that have been responsible for casting the situation as an ethnic conflict. Similarly, Alawite sources on the web claim that the Alawite community is not in lockstep with President Assad and that the Alawite majority is intentionally silent.

The Muslim Brotherhood: From Secondary Role to Center Stage

The deepening split within the leadership of the secular-liberal opposition movements is inversely proportionate to the rising strength of the Muslim Brotherhood. As in other Arab states, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria is seen as the most organized and well-financed nongovernmental operation. The movement's growth is particularly noticeable in two key areas:

- a. Recruiting Muslim clerics and scholars in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan, and issuing *fatwas* allowing the use of force against Bashar Assad, even offering generous sums for his capture, and helping to finance and arm the opposition in Syria.
- b. As the depth of the division and ineffectiveness of the Syrian National Council becomes apparent, people on the social networks feel it is better that the Muslim Brotherhood take center stage and become the most important player as soon as possible.

The War of the Proxies

The social network users are concerned that the longer the struggle lasts and the chaos spreads, the more fertile the ground grows for the penetration of jihadists and other extremists who will only boost the sense of anarchy that provides Assad's regime with



the pretext that it is merely cracking down on terrorism. The networks reflect concern that Syria is becoming a battlefield where foreign elements play out their enmity and have proxies fight other proxies. The concerns seem to focus on two groups in particular:

- a. Radical Sunni Islam: jihadists and al-Qaeda, who enter from Jordan and – primarily – from Iraq. There is concern about the rising number of terrorist acts that cause heavy losses of life and massive property damage.
- b. Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force units, backed by Hizbollah operatives. In addition to weapons and financing, Iran has also dispatched many Quds Force officers to Syria. These men, who helped suppress the 2009 Iranian demonstrations, are now training their Syrian counterparts to do the same.

Bashar Assad: Beheading the Lion

President Bashar Assad's June 3 speech sparked much revulsion and criticism on the social networks. The dominant assessment is that Assad is trying to gain time and divert the discussion away from Syria's internal problems and his loss of relevance and steer it toward the issue of terrorism. The reforms policy he presented is seen as a cynical ploy designed both to buy time and keep foreign involvements at bay.

The prevailing sentiment is that President Assad has lost legitimacy and that until the "Lion" and the Syrian army leave the cities the battle will not end. No other solution is acceptable to the rebels. It is obvious to all that Assad's regime relies on Iranian and Russian aid.

There is a sense that Israel may act to topple Assad, thereby generating the collapse of the radical Iran-Syria-Hizbollah axis. This surprising expectation stands in stark contrast to the complete distrust that aid will come from Arab countries and the lack of expectations that they will help the Syrian people.

A further sentiment is that prospects of any type of arrangement with the regime are growing dimmer, be it the arrangement proposed by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan or political asylum for Assad granted by other Arab leaders (the Tunisian/Yemeni model). Consequently there is talk of killing Assad in Syria.

Lack of Western Intervention

Syrians active on the social networks reason that the international community's avoidance of military intervention in Syria stems from the following:

- a. Uncertainty over Syria's future: Lacking a plan and national consensus among the various factions, because of the divisiveness within the opposition, there is a real concern in the West that Syria will fall into the hands of political Islam or, alternately, fall into complete chaos.



- b. The domino effect: There is a clear understanding that toppling the Syrian regime will have direct implications for the stability of neighboring regimes. The West fears a destabilization of King Abdullah's regime in Jordan and a civil war in Lebanon (the first signs are already emerging in Tripoli). Similarly, some on the networks think that escalation between Hizbollah and Israel is likely.
- c. The Kurdish question: The discourse among the Syrian social network users attributes great importance to Turkey's fear that the fall of the Syrian regime may boost the Kurds' desire for autonomy. The networks note that the Turkish government, which at the start of the Syrian uprising openly called for toppling Assad, has recently moderated its sentiments, realizing the implications for a national awakening and the demand for political rights on the part of the Kurds.

Conclusion

The discourse on the social networks in Syria reflects a realistic and shrewd assessment about the difficulties of the current situation, as well as the understanding that the long struggle will not be resolved by external intervention

The liberal, secular elements face a number of – poor – options. They understand that there is not chance of reform that will include Bashar Assad's departure. They are aware that political Islam, i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood, has gained more influence and assumed key positions in the struggle to oust Assad – especially given the weakness of the secular opposition. Most of all, they fear that extreme jihad elements will assume positions of power, and chaos and anarchy will dominate. Consequently, the rebels are eager to see foreign, especially Western intervention that will bring about Bashar's downfall – even if this intervention involves Israel.

As in its prior days, Assad's regime can still inflict damage and cause regional destabilization. The prevalent sense on the networks is that Syria's neighbors are concerned about the negative ramifications for their own regimes once Bashar Assad is gone. Therefore, Syria's neighbors, including Israel, are choosing to maintain the lowest profile possible while making preparations for the day after Bashar.

