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Middle East and North Africa Summary

Opposition Snapshot: The Syrian National Coalition

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INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of discussions that took place during a small closed-door study group convened at Chatham House in September 2013 to discuss the role and vision of the Syrian National Coalition of Revolution and Opposition Forces, with a focus on the latest developments within Syria and international responses to the crisis. Some of the main findings of the meeting include:

- The Syrian National Coalition supports decisive international action in Syria, aimed at punishing the alleged use of chemical weapons in the conflict and shifting the balance of power in favour of the opposition.
- The Syrian National Coalition is in favour of resuming negotiations at a Geneva II conference and would accept the presence of the Assad regime.
- The Syrian National Coalition is opposed to involving Iran in a Geneva II conference and believes that negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme should not be included in diplomatic talks over Syria.
- Saudi Arabia was seen as a key ally of the Syrian National Coalition, providing it with military and humanitarian aid, and political support.
- The Syrian National Coalition is reported to have reached an agreement with the Kurdish National Party in which Kurdish representatives will join it.
- In a post-conflict transitional period, the Syrian National Coalition would seek to ensure representation of all political, ethnic and religious groups in the constituent assembly – a transitional government would oversee the drafting of a constitution and provide a roadmap for democratic elections.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule

'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

CHEMICAL WEAPONS AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

Participants provided a brief chronological outline of the Syrian conflict, highlighting the way in which the violent repression of peaceful protests by the Assad regime two years ago prompted the armed response of opposition groups. Amid escalating violence, the alleged use of chemical weapons on 21 August 2013 marks a tragic turning point in the conflict. It was pointed out that the Syrian National Coalition of Revolution and Opposition Forces supports international intervention aimed at punishing the perpetrators and destabilizing the Assad regime. According to this view, an appropriate international response should consist of surgical air strikes and an increased commitment by Western countries to arm rebel groups fighting within Syria. Some hoped this would lead to a substantial weakening of the Assad regime and saw it as a potential first step towards transition.

One participant expressed disappointment over the United Kingdom's parliamentary vote that rejected air strikes on Syrian regime targets but stressed that the Syrian National Coalition respects the vote.

Some were concerned with the potential aftermath of a US strike in Syria. Proponents of US military involvement suggested that a strike might allow the opposition a strategic advance that could ultimately shift the balance of power from the regime to the opposition. Much depends on the intensity and ultimate purpose of a prospective US strike. It was noted that the Syrian National Coalition supports decisive US action in Syria.

DIPLOMATIC OPTIONS

Several participants questioned the effectiveness of limited US air strikes – a policy option they saw as far more likely to be adopted by the Obama administration in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. Consequently, participants discussed the feasibility of a diplomatic solution to the conflict. It was argued that the Syrian National Coalition is in favour of resuming negotiations at a second round of Geneva talks and would accept the presence of the Assad regime. Iran, on the other hand, was seen as an unwelcome party – the Syrian National Coalition views it as a key actor in the Syrian crisis, supporting the Assad regime and directly complicit in the killing of civilians. While some conceded that the Syrian National Coalition might in the future negotiate with Iran, it was clear that this option was currently off the table. Others questioned this approach, suggesting that, as an integral part of the Syrian crisis, Iran should also be involved in a potential diplomatic solution.

In a related discussion, participants explored the possibility of linking the Iranian nuclear debate with potential negotiations over Syria. While some saw this as a potentially beneficial longer-term negotiating strategy, it was noted that the Syrian National Coalition regards the Iranian nuclear issue as a regional and international one that causes considerable concern but should be dealt with separately – a diplomatic approach to the Syrian crisis involving ‘bartering’ over Iran was seen as highly unlikely.

ROADMAPS FOR TRANSITION

Participants also considered a post-conflict scenario in which the Syrian National Coalition would need to ensure the stability of a fractured country. Some underlined the pluralistic nature of the Syrian National Coalition and suggested that during the transitional period, it would seek to involve all parties in a constituent assembly to ensure the representation of all political, ethnic and religious groups. A transitional government would oversee the drafting of a new constitution and provide a roadmap for democratic elections with the aim of guaranteeing equal human rights for all Syrians, including freedom of expression and adequate political representation. It was also noted that Syria will require continued international assistance and commitment – as one participant put it, ‘actions must be louder than words – international support must be tangible and effective’.

REGIONAL SUPPORT

Saudi Arabia was presented as an example of providing tangible international assistance. It has provided the Syrian opposition with important military and humanitarian aid, and has invested considerable political capital in supporting the Syrian National Coalition. Meanwhile, the relationship with Qatar was one that the Syrian National Coalition was keen to nurture.

INTERNAL SUPPORT

There was some debate over the level of internal support that the Syrian National Coalition can muster. Some worried that the large number of different opposition groups fighting within Syria makes cohesion problematic. Others suggested that support for the coalition amongst the Free Syrian Army is as high as 90 per cent. It was emphasised that the coalition accepts all Syrian fighters that accept its leadership, regardless of religious or ethnic

background, and it was stated that this includes Islamist groups fighting under its command.

In its bid to guarantee the broadest possible representation, it was announced that the Syrian National Coalition has reached an agreement with the Kurdish National Party. It was suggested that Kurdish representatives will join the coalition and that there have been no demands for autonomy but the possibility of establishing a Syrian federal state was discussed.

It remained unclear whether the Syrian National Coalition would be willing to enter a power-sharing agreement with the Assad regime, although one participant highlighted the need for openness to ensure all Syrians work together towards the establishment of a united, democratic state where political and sectarian differences are no longer a source of conflict.

ABOUT THE MENA PROGRAMME

The Middle East and North Africa Programme, headed by Dr Claire Spencer, undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa. To complement our research, the MENA Programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events which seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy. We also produce a range of publicly available reports, books and papers.

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ABOUT OUR SYRIA WORK

The MENA Programme has been running the Syria Study Group (SSG), an expert-level discussion series, since December 2011. MENA Programme researchers provide regular comment and analysis on Syria in the media, and are currently developing a stream of work on the Syrian conflict's economic, political and humanitarian impact across the region.

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