



ISSUE BRIEF BY **FAYSAL ITANI** AND **NATHANIEL ROSENBLATT**

Zooming in on Syria: Adapting US Policy to Local Realities

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As the conflict in Syria enters its fourth year, US policy has consistently failed to achieve its stated object: a negotiated political transition based on the mutual consent of the regime and opposition. The United States and its Western allies have focused on summits and high-level diplomacy as the most effective means to that laudable end. This approach ignores an essential missing ingredient: an opposition able to coordinate different anti-regime forces, exercise agency on their behalf, and provide decent local governance, without which Syrians will continue to suffer and fight irrespective of whether the regime is overthrown.

When the first Geneva conference was convened in 2012 and participants agreed on the Geneva I Communiqué, it was assumed that a unified and empowered opposition front was possible, and that foreign actors could play a decisive role in pressuring their clients in Syria to make peace. By the time a second conference was held in January 2014 to implement the Communiqué, no such opposition had emerged. Instead, the conflict has metastasized; its deepening intractability, complexity, and militarization indicate that the prospects of a negotiated settlement are more remote than ever. Geopolitical alignments and pressure from foreign patrons may temporarily decrease regime and rebel violence, but unless the opposition's central flaws—rebel fragmentation and radicalization and governance failures in rebel territory—are addressed, a settlement will remain out of reach. The next inevitable geopolitical and local shifts will once again escalate the conflict, and Syria will remain trapped in a cycle of violence.

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The single-minded US focus on international diplomacy has come at the expense of a nuanced and granular understanding of the opposition. This has encouraged a reactive approach that has failed to keep pace with the evolution of the uprising as it morphed from peaceful protest to armed rebellion and, finally, full-blown civil war. Unless the United States adopts a more flexible, imaginative, and committed approach, Syria will continue its descent into lawlessness and terrorism, causing untold suffering for Syrians, threatening neighboring countries, and fueling regional sectarian hatred and violence.

For the United States to play any relevant role in facilitating a negotiated political transition in Syria, it needs to fundamentally alter its framework for understanding and dealing with the uprising, to gain a much deeper grasp of the local opposition and its standing among the local population, capacity to govern, and ability to coordinate and represent Syrians in international fora. Policymakers need to evaluate why the opposition has evolved as it did through the stages of protest movement, armed insurgency, and long-term civil war. This brief takes a micro-view of key moments in the evolution of the conflict and shows how moderate trends within the opposition lost the upper hand. The authors argue that foreign actors

played a role in worsening internal divisions among opposition players, empowering radical sectarian militias, and thwarting efforts to overthrow the regime. Such an analysis offers critical lessons on how the United States can more effectively pursue a political transition in Syria.

From Peaceful Protest to Civil War

Syria's uprising began as an improvised, nonviolent protest movement in March 2011, and had become thoroughly militarized by February 2012. It has since killed more than 140,000 and displaced some 8 million, of whom 3 million live as refugees in neighboring countries. Nearly half the population of 20 million is in urgent need of humanitarian aid. Three years on, the conflict is defined by both sides' inability to militarily bring a decisive end to the fighting; a strong consensus among opposition supporters to continue fighting until the regime is overthrown; the absence of national-scale institutions that can enforce decisions on the opposition's behalf; the marginalization of secular civil society activists, many of whom formed the vanguard of the nonviolent protest movement; and the entrenchment of a number of dominant civil and military organizations, preventing new entrants to the conflict though not necessarily new coalitions.

The uprising initially took the form of nonviolent resistance and protests inspired by the Arab Awakening. Syria's uprising was ad hoc, however; unlike in Egypt, where activists had long planned for their revolution, Syria's preexisting underground activist community did not lead its country's revolt. In fact, many of its members were skeptical that Syrians would rise up at all. Yet protests in central Damascus in February 2011, directed at President Bashar al-Assad and his close allies, spread to provincial towns like Deraa and Baniyas, where the security forces' heavy-handed treatment of the local population merely provoked greater unrest. By March, it was clear that the Syrians had their own uprising, one that remained peaceful for months in the face of a growing violent crackdown by regime troops and loyalist militia.

It is significant that the uprising took the established community of nonviolent, urban activists—and Syrians in general—by surprise. This disorientation and lack of preparedness made it difficult for opposition elements to plan

for post-liberated areas, which led to gross mismanagement. It also complicated foreign efforts to help consolidate the peaceful achievements of the uprising's first phase, including efforts to preserve its nonviolent character and win the trust and support of anxious minorities and Syrians benefiting from or at least resigned to the regime-dominated status quo.

The lack of advance planning thwarted efforts to build a joint, civilian-military cooperative body that could govern effectively and help coordinate military action. Without such an actor, there is nobody with sufficient presence and credibility to negotiate a political transition in international summits. Opposition-held Syria remains a mosaic of hyper-local councils that cannot cooperate to address macro-level concerns about national governance, reconciliation, violent Sunni extremism, and warlordism. The nationalist tone of the early protest movement has become increasingly sectarian, targeting the Alawite minority that forms the regime's social base. The roots of this failure and foreign actors' contribution to it can be discerned in the experience of the town of Binnish, which continues to haunt the opposition today.

Local Governance Failure: The Case of Binnish

Early in the revolution, the Syrian regime sent 400 armed thugs (*shabiha*) against demonstrators in Binnish, an early protest hub in northwest Syria. In response, residents posted armed guards at the town's entrance to protect them. As these brigades grew more organized, they developed committees that began providing basic services. These were some of the earliest versions of the "local administrative councils"—local governing structures set up across opposition-held Syria. At one point, activists described Binnish's council as a model of civilian governance.¹

The situation did not last. The Syrian National Council, the first umbrella group set up to represent the Syrian opposition, pledged support for Binnish's councils, but chose to funnel finances exclusively through one local family that enjoyed the favor of external funders. The

1 Rania Abouzeid, "A Dispatch from 'Free Syria': How to Run a Liberated Town," *Time*, July 24, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/07/24/a-dispatch-from-free-syria-how-to-run-a-liberated-town/>.

avored faction refused to share resources with other local players, leading to armed conflict between the town's influential families. Disputes inevitably arose as armed protection units tried to adopt civilian leadership roles, and there were violations and crimes against civilians. These early difficulties derailed efforts to build civilian institutions in Binnish.

The failure of the opposition's external supporters to track aid to the opposition, assess its impact and interaction with complex local realities, link its provision to a wider national insurrection strategy, and hold recipients accountable for their actions helped destroy the revolution's first phase of peaceful protest and civic activism. This was to have dire implications for the security and well-being of Syrians and the wider struggle against the regime, especially as the leaderless nature of the Syrian opposition contributed directly to the rise of sectarian militias. Some of these militias would later reject outright the notion of a negotiated political settlement.

By July 2012, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, and the militant Salafist group Ahrar al-Sham, took advantage of the chaos in Binnish and began making inroads there. They provided training, equipment, and salaries for local fighters, and had sufficient experience to bring disparate military units under one unified command. They commanded respect among residents who appreciated their discipline and intolerance of corruption. By October 2012, Binnish was an early headquarters of the now-powerful Salafist militant movement in northern Syria. Sectarian militias led residents in protests that differed radically from the early ones calling for national unity. Protesters threatened to slaughter Alawites, who formed the regime's social base.

The rise of sectarian militant groups was not inevitable. It was a direct consequence of local governance failures in the uprising's early days, at least partly due to misguided foreign support. This was to have devastating consequences for the opposition perhaps less because of its influence on US policy—which from the start was somewhat ambivalent toward the uprising—and more because of its profound effect on many Syrians who feared the regime would be replaced by something even more oppressive.

Lessons from Raqqa: The Importance of Broad Local Coalitions

Within a year, the peaceful uprising had transformed into an armed insurgency. Relentless regime violence, opposition hopes of encouraging a Libya-style international intervention, and the desire to protect civilians from state violence all contributed to militarization. Just as the peaceful uprising was unable to build on its gains, the armed rebellion's territorial gains ultimately paved the way for more opposition failures and disappointments. Regardless of whether it was avoidable given the scale of regime repression, the shift to violent insurgency eventually unleashed dynamics that harmed the opposition.

The experience of Raqqa highlights the opposition's weaknesses and its external allies' failure to grasp the context in which it operates. Particularly, it demonstrates weak efforts to involve a broad spectrum of locals in governance, the fragility of civilian governance in the aftermath of liberation, and the necessity of protecting local civilian leadership from both regime and extremist violence.

In March 2013, rebels captured their first provincial capital, the northern city of Raqqa. By then, the opposition umbrella group Syrian Opposition Coalition, or Etilaf, emerged as the West's main Syrian partner and conduit for aid. Beset by factionalism and with much of its membership based in neighboring Turkey, neither the Etilaf nor its international partners—the United States, Europe and several Gulf States—were ideally placed to shape events and establish governance in Raqqa. They would certainly fail without the close cooperation of local players within the community and an intimate understanding of the challenges they faced. Sadly, neither was forthcoming. Raqqa was eventually taken over by the transnational jihadist group Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), a deeply sectarian militia with little regard for the well-being of Raqqa's residents or the nationalist aims of the revolution.

Raqqa residents selected a council of community leaders that worked at cross-purposes and clashed with the council installed by the Etilaf. After months of bickering with the Etilaf, and facing a lack of funding, the local council capitulated. The

Etilaf chose to back and finance a local lawyer named Abdullah Khalil to lead the governing council. Khalil worked intensively with Raqqa residents and clerics to prevent the total collapse of governance in the city. On May 19, 2013, however, unidentified masked men kidnapped him. No group claimed responsibility for the kidnapping, and Khalil has not been heard from since. ISIS militants filled the governance vacuum and now control Raqqa alongside Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, a sectarian militant group accused by Human Rights Watch of atrocities against civilians. It is likely that one of these groups kidnapped Khalil, whose disappearance ended Raqqa's experiment in local, moderate governance.

Raqqa illustrates that civilian governance structures are extremely fragile in the early stages and vulnerable to both regime and extremist violence, as shown by Khalil's kidnapping. If they are to survive and operate effectively, they must enjoy the protection of allied rebel groups. Investing in civilian governance from abroad without securing the civilian population is futile. In other words, success at the civilian level depends on military capability, where jihadist groups enjoyed a significant advantage due to consistent external financing and military aid.

Raqqa also demonstrates how the failure of Etilaf and its backers to build a broad coalition of local influential players has hampered governance efforts, facilitated the rise of extremists, and led to heavy reliance on a few individuals (or even one person) who are perpetually vulnerable to violence. A similar dynamic was observed in Binnish, where heavy reliance on one family doomed governance efforts and led to a takeover by extremists.

Syria's Current Reality: Intractable Civil War
Reflecting on what happened in Syria over the past three years reveals key missed opportunities, and also highlights how external actors could more effectively engage with local opposition forces in pursuit of political transition.

Syria's conflict is now an entrenched, long-term civil war. Belligerents are unable to achieve a decisive military victory, given the current balance of forces. There is still no incentive for the regime to give up or even share power, and no ability on

the rebels' part to force it to do so. Barring greater international intervention, the stalemate is not likely to be broken.

A strong consensus exists in pro-opposition circles to continue to support fighters against the Syrian government until Bashar al-Assad is replaced. In detailed focus group discussions conducted in twenty-eight towns across Syria in the summer of 2012, respondents unanimously rejected the idea of returning to the way life was before the revolution. In an early interview after Geneva II negotiations in January 2014, one Homs-based activist commented on negotiations to aid the city: "People do not want food to enter just so they live" he said, "We want life with our freedoms."² This strong pro-opposition support rules out any negotiated transition that preserves the political dominance of Alawites, including President al-Assad and his inner circle.

National-scale institutions that can enforce decisions on the opposition are absent. Beset by successive failures, disappointments and perceived abandonment by their ostensible allies in the West, Syrians overwhelmingly reject the legitimacy of the Etilaf, which they had hoped would secure much-needed financial and military support if not direct foreign military intervention. The popular narrative is that there is an "external" opposition and an "internal" opposition, and legitimacy stems from staying in the country; local actors are far more important.

Civil society actors and institutions that could support compromise and negotiation—and offer Syrians something better than decades of regime misrule—have been marginalized. Civil society activists are perhaps the most persecuted group of people in Syria today, targeted by both the regime and extremist rebel groups. The absence of a moderate civilian leadership based in Syria further empowers religious and sectarian extremists, and implies little appetite for compromise on the part of the rebellion's most powerful actors.

It is difficult to establish new civilian or military structures in Syria, due to the prohibitive costs of entry into the opposition. While existing groups may form new coalitions such as the collection of

² Maya Gebeily, "Homs Activists Want Nothing Less than Freedom," *NOW*, January 28, 2014, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/532802-nothing-less-than-freedom>.

fighting groups in the opposition Islamic Front, the reputation and start-up costs needed to gain a following in Syria today are very high. This means that creating and empowering new, Western-backed military or civilian organizations would be a difficult, costly and long-term commitment. The United States and its European and regional allies including Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia will likely need to make do with existing opposition forces.

The regime-insurgency balance of power, popular support for the armed struggle, the opposition coalition's weak standing among Syrians, and the disappearance of a moderate opposition center all indicates that the conflict is not ripe for political settlement, particularly one negotiated between a resilient regime with strong foreign backing and an opposition coalition that is unpopular among Syrians and faces outright hostility from rebel groups. Yet in spite of the factors outlined above, US policy has emphasized high-level diplomacy in pursuit of a negotiated transition of power—a strategy destined to fail at present.

The current approach to ending the conflict, championed by the United States, is based on several flawed assumptions. The United States assumes that the rebellion has inflicted sufficient costs on the regime to force it to recalculate its strategy of crushing the rebellion militarily, and that the opposition and its supporters are so desperate to end the violence that they would accept an outcome short of regime change. The current strategy is also based on the premise that there is an opposition actor (or even a unified coalition of actors) with the agency and ability to make decisions on a national level.

Above all, this approach wrongly assumes that the regime and opposition's respective foreign backers are willing and able to force an end to the fighting. Pressuring Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other foreign patrons to cut off money and weapons to the regime or rebels is unlikely to result in a settlement. The region is awash in small arms and explosives, both the regime and rebels can turn to other sources of support from both states and individuals. For example, much of the funds for the Sunni jihadist groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra come from wealthy private donors and criminal networks, not states. The scale and frequency of violence may subside somewhat, but as we have

seen, many Syrians do not necessarily see a mere reduction of violence that preserves the regime (or leaves them at the mercy of sectarian extremists) as an acceptable outcome.

[An Alternative International Approach](#)

The narrow pursuit of an internationally negotiated settlement is distorting the United States' understanding of the Syrian conflict. It also risks blinding its proponents to evidence that contradicts preformed policy preferences. The fact is that the current state of the uprising indicates the requirements for peaceful transition are absent. They are unlikely to emerge through national dialogue between warring parties with little incentive and, in the case of the Etilaf, ability to make serious concessions.

For Syrians inside the country, this implies more war and suffering until the conflict undergoes yet another fundamental shift. This could involve one or more of the following: the regime military could force a settlement on its opponent; the regime's strategy of large-scale shelling, air strikes and starvation targeting rebel-held areas could break the morale of the insurgency's support base; or a new or existing rebel group could defeat, absorb or dominate its competitors, consolidate control of territory and resources, and emerge as a credible and empowered negotiator for the opposition.

These are not necessarily promising scenarios, but one of them would have to emerge if there is to be any chance for a negotiated settlement. If ending the conflict is indeed the United States' desired end state for Syria, then its policy must aim for one or more of the above shifts. Assuming a serious US preference for political transition in Syria would rule out the first or second shifts. Working toward the third starts by recognizing the following:

- The fragmented rebellion has yet to achieve coherence. The United States should either simply allow inter-rebel dynamics to play out as they will, or try to shape them in a manner that empowers rebel groups less unpalatable to US interests and values. This would involve identifying, arming, training, funding, and advising select individuals and groups, in a manner that accounts for and works with rather than against local circumstances including tribal, family, sectarian, and other social realities.

- The Western states' single-minded, exclusive pursuit of a negotiated settlement deprives opposition groups of substantial US military and financial support, without which they will not have the agency, capability, or incentive to negotiate a settlement with the regime. It is also signaling to regime allies the United States' disinterest in backing the rebellion, depriving it of leverage in negotiations with the regime.
- If the US decides it is serious about helping a rebel force consolidate and emerge as a credible opposition negotiator, policymakers need to zoom in on the conflict in Syria, and invest more time and energy tracking and analyzing local developments. Policymakers should consider questions such as: Which rebel groups control which areas? Are they capable of holding them? How do rebel-rebel and regime-opposition relations vary across regions, or even neighborhoods? What are the various rebels' actual (rather than professed) beliefs and priorities? Which tribal leaders, influential personalities, groups, and institutions enjoy local respect and authority, and why? Are they adequately protected from regime and extremist violence? Only by understanding more deeply these internal dynamics will the United States be able to bring about its stated objective of political transition.
- There are limited opportunities for local ceasefires and humanitarian relief cooperation between the regime and rebels. These are valuable and should be exploited by the opposition's foreign allies, but are not a means to the end of a political transition.

Those who advocate US disengagement from the conflict in Syria often argue that there is no easy or good solution to the crisis. This is indeed true; it is a multi-layered conflict, and the United States has a number of imperfect tools at its disposal to guide it toward the official US goal of a political transition. If the United States is committed to this end, it must work with its allies to develop an opposition body that has the agency, capability, and intent to pursue it. This means US policy must understand and account for reality in Syria as it actually is—that is, as Syrians are living and shaping it—and not as policymakers wish it were.

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