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BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER

SYRIA WORKSHOP SERIES

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June 2013 THE CHALLENGE OF SYRIAN UNITY:  
REASSURING LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND  
FRAMING NATIONAL CONSENSUS

## BROOKINGS

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## A LETTER FROM THE CONVENER

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Dear friends and colleagues,

Two years into the uprising against Bashar al-Assad, large swathes of the Syrian population have yet to embrace an opposition they see as divided, partisan, and lacking a clear political project. From April 22 to 24, 2013, the Brookings Doha Center, in collaboration with the Democracy Council of California, held a closed-door workshop in Paris focused on exploring the concerns and interests of this “grey area” of the population. Participants included prominent members of the Alawi, Christian, and Druze communities, Kurdish and tribal leaders, as well as representatives from the National Coalition of Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (SOC).

A number of key points emerged throughout the course of our discussion. The dialogue made clear, first of all, that Syrian minorities are increasingly fearful of the rise of sectarianism and extremist groups across the country. Participants complained that not enough is being done by the SOC to address the concerns of those minorities and factions that have in large part either sided with the regime or been reluctant to join the revolution.

Furthermore, they stressed that opposition groups have repeatedly failed to establish a clear political vision with the buy-in of a majority of Syrians. In order to acquire greater legitimacy and support inside the country, participants said the Syrian opposition must work to develop an effective political solution – a solution that, over the course of the discussion, took the shape of a unifying national compact. The compact advocated by participants was one built on a process of power-sharing and broad consensus. It should appeal to elements inside and outside the opposition, they argued, allowing each Syrian constituency to define and defend its interests within a unified Syria.


Participants suggested that this Syrian national compact be based on processes of dialogue between opposition elements and community representatives, perhaps under the oversight or facilitation of

an international third party. Such discussions, they said, should work to define intra-Syrian and international guarantees for the provision of security and the protection of certain rights.

This workshop also created an opportunity for different Syrian constituencies to engage with high-level representatives from France, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Turkey. Participants expressed frustration regarding an international response which they saw as insufficient and misguided. Alongside the political process outlined above, they said, there must be increased military support from Western governments in order to change the balance both on the ground and in any future negotiations with the regime. For their part, international representatives stressed that in order to obtain further support from the international community, the Syrian opposition had to focus both on broadening its membership and on building effective political and military institutions inside the country. This effort, they said, should concentrate on ongoing attempts to establish an interim government in “liberated areas” and on improving communication and collaboration with local actors on the ground.

It is with great pleasure that we present the following event briefing based on what was a revealing and thought-provoking workshop. The document comprises a summary of the major themes and findings of the discussion, as well as a closing statement issued jointly by all the Syrian participants (see Appendix). The debate was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants.

Sincerely,



Salman Shaikh  
*Director, Brookings Doha Center*

# THE CHALLENGE OF SYRIAN UNITY: REASSURING LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND FRAMING NATIONAL CONSENSUS

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## SYRIA IN FRAGMENTS

In a discussion of the current state of the crisis, the majority of participants singled out sectarianism as their greatest concern, describing it as an existential threat to a united Syria. Many emphasized the role of the Assad regime in fomenting sectarian strife and seeking to transform the revolution into an outright sectarian conflict. By playing one faction against the other and capitalizing on sectarian fears, they said, the regime had relied on a strict policy of “divide and rule.”

According to an Alawi officer who had defected from the Syrian military, the regime is “comfortable with” and directly benefits from the growing tide of extremism in the east and north of Syria. President Assad, he said, was for now happy to allow “liberated areas,” such as Raqqa, to remain under the control of extremist forces whose prominence reinforces the regime’s narrative of “terrorist insurgency.” Some even went so far as to speculate that Assad had previously cooperated with extremist groups in Iraq and was now deliberately supporting jihadi groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, to “give the Syrian opposition a bad name” and block financial support to the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Many said that a fear of Islamist insurgents coming to power was stopping minorities from joining the revolution, wary that the revolt was heading in the wrong direction. More importantly, this fear was precluding consensus on what the fate of the Assad regime should be. Only 20 percent of the population is currently fighting to uproot the regime, one participant said. The remainder – including a majority of Alawis, Kurds, Druze, and Christians – form a “big silent bloc between ... the regime and the opposition.”

As one senior Druze leader explained, the Druze of Sweida are afraid to join the revolution, fearing regime reprisals from *shabbiha* militiamen or the

Syrian military. On a similar note, a former advisor to the Assad regime contended that “Alawis do not defend the regime, they defend themselves.” Motivated primarily by self-preservation, Syrians are increasingly turning to their immediate communities – whether ethnic or sectarian – for protection and strength. This impulse leads to further dangers, an Alawi activist warned, as “fear of a massacre could itself push people to commit a massacre.”

Participants emphasized the need to reassure minorities and build trust among different communities and factions. As one international observer pointed out, unless the opposition has the support of key minority groups, “Assad will continue to feel safe.” A member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood said that “only the Alawis can free Syria from Bashar,” pointing to the urgency of engaging this community. According to an activist from Lattakia, however, Alawis attempting to rebel against the regime – including in Assad’s home town of Qardaha – had actually been discouraged, even “threatened,” by certain Islamists within the opposition. Furthermore, he said, their efforts had received only scant attention in anti-regime media.

Participants made clear that cycles of violence and sectarianism are leading the country toward further fragmentation, both political and military. Syria is undergoing a slow process of “cantonization,” some warned, with one saying, “We are heading toward a Sunni, Kurdish, Alawi, and Druze division of Syria.” Furthermore, the revolution had also deepened the rift between the rural poor and the urban middle classes. Born out of rural villages now under the control of rebel militants, the culture of the revolution is “largely alien to the urban bourgeoisie” of Damascus and Aleppo, a Kurdish academic explained.

Participants voiced concern for the lack of political initiatives that might stop the trend toward

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fragmentation. They admitted that Syrians have not yet devised an effective political formula for maintaining Syrian unity while ending the crisis and guiding the country toward a stable transition. Thus far, one international representative insisted, “the opposition has not done its job” in agreeing on and popularizing such a plan. A veteran Christian politician said, “We are divided as an opposition,” adding that “every sect is presenting a different program.” He, along with others, argued that it was necessary to establish an inclusive process to articulate such a plan, “starting with collective steps.”

### CHANGING THE MILITARY BALANCE ON THE GROUND

Participants agreed that in order to change the calculations of the Assad regime and create the conditions for a solution in Syria, the military imbalance between government and opposition forces must be addressed. As has been made clear in the run-up to the proposed Geneva II conference, the state of the conflict on the ground will dictate the balance of power in any future negotiations. While the regime receives decisive support from “Iran, Hizballah, Russia, and [Iraqi prime minister] Nuri al-Maliki,” one participant said, “the Friends of Syria continue to seek to manage, rather than solve the crisis.” What is more, the current situation allows the regime to solidify its key “lines of defense” around the coast, Homs, and Damascus, while extremist elements consolidate their control in parts of the north and the east.

International intervention, participants emphasized, is necessary to change this military imbalance. Some suggested that it should come in the form of giving rebel forces more – and more advanced – weaponry, while many added that the Friends of Syria should launch “surgical strikes” against military assets used to target civilians. Such steps would not only help protect civilians, they added, but would also send a clear and necessary message that the Friends of Syria truly support the removal of Bashar al-Assad. Further, a more organized and earnest effort to build the capacities of the FSA would be critical in any efforts to isolate the armed extremists that remain the most effective rebel forces in Syria today.

Tilting the military balance in this way would also encourage further defections, especially among the “70 percent of the army that is Sunni,” a former air force officer said. He spoke of “four Alawi republican guards who were willing to join in the transition” but said that such figures needed incentives to defect and must do so at the right moment. Under current circumstances, he said, such defectors would be easily replaced by other loyal recruits.

Ultimately, the trajectory of the military conflict is central to shaping attitudes among Syrians about the nature of any political settlement to the conflict. As one former adviser to President Assad pointed out, many Syrians still do not see the fall of the regime as inevitable. “As long as that conviction is not there – it’s difficult to have a tangible consensus over the shape of a future Syria or the elements of a new constitution,” he said.

### A MILITARY SOLUTION ALONE WILL NOT RESOLVE SYRIA’S PROBLEMS

Participants were equally clear in stressing that a military victory for the opposition would not secure the country or ensure a sustainable peace. One participant said that with Syria on its way to violent fragmentation, the toppling of Bashar al-Assad would not – on its own – prevent further conflict, whether with remaining regime elements or between rival rebel forces. Some, meanwhile, raised the fear that an intensification of the conflict would likely increase the influence of extremist factions such as Jabhat al-Nusra.

In conjunction with the opposition’s military efforts, then, participants advocated a political initiative that could hasten the erosion of regime support and build a platform for peaceful transition. While discussion of a similar idea was slated for a later session, from the start of the workshop participants independently raised the idea of a political and social “national compact” based on principles of power-sharing and broad consensus. They placed emphasis on a process that would be inclusive and appeal to all Syrians, including those who had not bought into the National Coalition of Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces

(SOC). This process, they said, should allow each Syrian constituency to articulate its interests and negotiate guarantees on addressing those concerns within the framework of a united Syria.

There was near unanimity on the idea that any political solution proposed by the opposition must be contingent on Bashar al-Assad's removal from power. Any political projects that involve dialogue with the regime, one media personality said, must not allow Assad and those responsible for the killing of civilians to escape without trial. In a departure from the majority view, however, a former Alawi officer argued that the opposition should be cautious about removing Assad by force. The killing of the president, he said, would lead to a severe backlash from "sectarian elements" within the army and precipitate even greater bloodletting. Rather, he suggested removing Assad and other leading Baathist figures "through elections," presumably referring to presidential elections scheduled for May 2014.

## TOWARD A NATIONAL COMPACT

Responding to participants' calls for the development of a national compact, an international expert on post-conflict rebuilding agreed that the question of "how Syrians choose to manage their diversity" must be addressed with urgency. Leaving these issues until after the fall of the regime, he said, would only make them more difficult.

The discussion made clear, though, that developing national consensus to reassure different constituencies about the shape of a future Syria would be a challenging project. Issues to do with the role of religion in the future state and the division of authority between central and federal institutions, for instance, sparked heated debate.

On the question of religion, a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood insisted that the group "did not want an Islamist state ... because we don't think the Syrian social fabric is right for one." His calls for a "civil state," were supported by participants who

noted the popular mistrust of the term "secularism." Others – notably many Alawi representatives – emphatically argued that only an explicitly secular formula could ensure the proper functioning of a democracy in Syria, with all its religious and ethnic diversity.

Representatives from the Kurdish National Council (KNC) also met with some resistance when they insisted that any national compact include assurances on the establishment of a federal system. Some responded that federalism might be unsuited to Syria, given the mixed distribution of groups and ethnicities within the country. A prominent Christian dissident argued that Syrians must seek to exist "as citizens, not sects, in the public space." He added, "If we try to solve the Syrian issue through the prism of sects and different factions, then we won't end up with a unified country."

As suggested by an international expert, one near-term solution to these sorts of debates would be to focus on "delineating principles of coexistence" while leaving the details to the process of constitution drafting. Certainly, participants were able to agree on several of those broader principles, including commitments to pluralism, equality of rights, the rule of law, and maintaining the territorial unity of Syria. Further elements of a national compact developed in the near term need not be final and irreversible. As an international observer familiar with transitions in Eastern Europe pointed out, there may be a need to renegotiate these or other principles over the course of a transition, whether to reconcile conflicting parties or allow others to enter the political process.

## ADDRESSING MINORITY CONCERNS

It was clear, however, that declarations of broad principles might not be sufficient in encouraging different communities to endorse a political process of this kind. As one KNC leader put it, "Documents don't matter to those on the ground." Rather, there was an insistence from several participants that these communities receive "clear guarantees" – both

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from groups inside Syria and from the international community – on a range of issues, including the provision of security and the protection of certain rights. While a majority of participants emphasized this desire for guarantees, they did not articulate clearly how such guarantees would be met or who would be responsible for ensuring that they are respected. One participant did, however, suggest that the international community – in particular the United Nations and the Arab League – should play a role in this regard, presumably referring to the security dimension. An American diplomat, meanwhile, urged minority representatives to be more specific about the guarantees they requested and to define pragmatic steps toward raising these demands with the opposition.

Outlining some of the concerns of the Kurdish community to be addressed in this way, KNC representatives consistently called for a constitution that ensured a “decentralized, federal state” and for equality of rights for all Syrians, whatever their ethnicity. One KNC leader pointed out that the regime is currently able to offer these sorts of guarantees; since the start of the revolution, it had in fact already granted citizenship to thousands of Syrian Kurds and lifted a ban on Kurdish language teaching. The opposition, he said, would have to match those sorts of commitments. Further, another KNC member raised the need to provide greater humanitarian relief to Kurdish areas, which he said had been neglected by the opposition in its aid efforts. He urged international powers to deal directly with Kurdish stakeholders on this front.

Describing some of the major concerns of the Alawi community, one participant spoke of the need to clarify the identity of that group in a post-Assad Syria – whether as an Islamic sect or party – emphasizing that they must not be classed as apostates. He said that Alawis currently employed by the state must not be discriminated against on the basis of their identity and should retain their positions where appropriate. Further, participants raised the need to address the issue of ownership rights with regard to land that the Assad regime had expropriated and given to Alawis. There was a fear that previous owners’ efforts to reclaim these

properties may feed further sectarian violence in the mixed coastal areas.

There was a clear demand among participants for processes of dialogue through which these minorities and other actors could communicate their concerns and seek effective guarantees. Participants agreed that these processes would be critical in building much-needed trust between different communities and working toward greater consensus on visions for a future Syria. Many supported the idea that an independent third party such as the UN may be needed to play a role in supporting and facilitating these dialogues.

## LESSONS FROM CAIRO

Moving forward, many emphasized the need to both build on and learn from previous exercises in transition planning, in particular the “Cairo Documents” agreed upon in July 2012. These documents – drafted at a meeting of some 250 opposition representatives – included a “Transition Phase Plan” and a proto-constitution also called a “National Pact.” Discussing why that initiative had failed, participants stressed that it had not ended in real consensus and had not established the means for outstanding disagreements to be resolved. Members of the KNC, for instance, complained that they could not support the Cairo Documents due to objections over terminology referring to Syrian Kurds but that they had no channels through which to raise and resolve their concerns.

Further, a failure to agree on mechanisms for communicating and popularizing the initiative had left it dead in the water. Some pointed to the irony that the Syrian National Council (SNC) had failed to endorse a Follow-Up Committee charged with promoting the plan, despite the fact that the SNC had played a central role in the Documents’ formulation.

In the future, participants agreed, whatever political projects are drawn up must be both based on long-term processes of dialogue and more effectively communicated – especially within Syria. Participants did not elaborate on the details of how

this could be achieved. One activist, however, did emphasize the challenge of incorporating the Alawi communities of the coastal region in these efforts, given that they lack leadership structures and media outlets that are independent of the regime. For their part, members of the SOC said that a draft transition plan they are currently developing would seek to build on these previous efforts and reflect the outcomes of any ongoing dialogues.

## EXPANDING THE SYRIAN NATIONAL COALITION

A majority of participants – including representatives of both the SOC and the Friends of Syria – agreed that broadening the SOC would be an important step toward the formation of any consensus-driven political initiatives. Many complained about what they saw as the body’s failure to resolve internal differences, its perceived manipulation by regional forces, and its lack of democratic legitimacy. Participants alleged that what legitimacy it had came from external recognition rather than internal support or through a referendum. SOC members, meanwhile, asserted that in a revolutionary situation, it was natural for the legitimacy of leadership bodies to come from the revolution itself rather than from democratic mechanisms.

One SOC figure said there was a “will for expansion” – particularly to include more Kurds and more women – though this expansion would not be achieved through a popular vote. On the military side, the FSA – which was “struggling to operate with battalions that did not follow its command” – was pursuing a similar policy of “dialogue and absorption,” a leading SOC figure said. Recent efforts to establish an interim government within the north of Syria were also designed to address these issues, increasing the effectiveness of the SOC and therefore its legitimacy on the ground, one figure familiar with the initiative said. International representatives firmly supported this plan, but said that the expansion of the SOC should also aim to incorporate more

actors working inside Syria, such as local councils, local coordination committees, and technocrats capable of building effective institutions.

Despite this apparent desire for expansion and inclusivity, the SOC has since struggled in its efforts to enlarge its membership. A coalition meeting held at the end of May sought – with some success – to integrate a bloc of liberal figures, but revealed, once again, the unwillingness of several members to significantly broaden representation.

## THE ROLE OF THE FRIENDS OF SYRIA

The majority of participants agreed that Western governments had not done enough to protect civilians and provide military support to the opposition and the armed rebellion – thus “falling short of their promises.” Many blamed international inaction on a range of conspiratorial motives. A Druze leader, for example, claimed that the West was prioritizing the interests and security of Israel above those of Syria. A Kurdish politician, on the other hand, said the international community sought to prolong the revolution in order to attrite the military capabilities of Iran and its main ally in the region. A Kurdish academic went so far as to say that Western powers were trying to “preserve the regime,” fearing the strength of militant extremism.

While understanding the frustrations of participants and expressing a willingness to provide increased support, Western representatives said that in the aftermath of recent engagements (including in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya) there was little appetite for foreign intervention back home. An American diplomat explained that setting up safe areas or a no-fly zone – as some had demanded – would involve a complex and involved military effort. Citing the decade-long no-fly zone in Iraq, he said the United States would not be willing to undertake a prolonged commitment in Syria without knowing what the end result would be. According to a French diplomat, meanwhile, 62 percent of the French population

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***“Don’t ask us to do more if you don’t do your part.”***  
*-American diplomat*

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was against providing lethal aid to the Syrian opposition. The threat of terrorism and extremism was a sensitive issue in France, he argued, saying that a recent attack on the French embassy in Libya would “resonate heavily” with the French public and dampen the will for greater involvement.

All international representatives stressed that Syrians must take responsibility for shaping their future, encouraging them to find Syrian-led solutions. “Don’t ask us to do more if you don’t do your part,” an American diplomat said, criticizing the opposition for failing to develop a plan for a political solution to end the conflict. A British diplomat claimed that “revolutions are won 80 percent through political efforts and 20 percent through military efforts” and that “this revolution would be won politically.”

The American diplomat said Washington had increasingly been considering the possibility of providing lethal aid, but first the Obama administration wanted clearer assurances on the opposition’s desired endgame. Indeed, in the aftermath of the dialogue, the United States has suggested that greater military support may be forthcoming if Assad refuses to comply with the “Geneva II” peace conference. The British and French diplomats said their governments were leading the EU process to lift the arms embargo on the Syrian opposition – a step that has since been taken – and were continuing to work closely with the SOC’s Assistance Coordination Unit and General Salim Idris, leader of the Supreme Military Command. But in order to attract more support from Western donors, the Syrian opposition would have to focus on delineating clear transition plans, broader representation, and effective political and military institutions.

International representatives welcomed the participants’ proposals for developing a national compact and again stressed the need to broaden the nature of representation within the SOC and to improve communication and collaboration with local actors on the ground. By building unity and credible institutions, the British representative said, “the Syrian opposition has to find ways of convincing Syrians that they represent the best solution for their future.”

## APPENDIX: CLOSING STATEMENT

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Paris, April 24, 2013

A group of Syrians met to discuss the current situation in Syria, the nation's future, and expected developments. The group included the various elements of the Syrian people and its political, intellectual, religious, sectarian, and national segments, with significant representation of the Syrian women taking part in the revolution. It also included representatives of the most important countries of the Friends of Syria. The participants agreed on the following:

Syria is suffering from a severe and critical crisis caused by the current regime. This crisis puts the unity of the nation and its civil peace at stake. If we do not find the right solutions, a catastrophic situation will ensue.

The participants agreed to renounce extremism and terrorism in all its forms and to reject any solution to the Syrian crisis that divides Syrian society on a sectarian basis.

The participants believed that among the reasons for the continuation of the crisis is the absence of a comprehensive national project that reassures the elements of the Syrian society and the international community. This is in addition to the absence of a clear roadmap for the future.

They also believed that the back-and-forth of the international community on the Syrian issue is one of the factors that has complicated the crisis, threatening to prolong it and to aggravate its national, regional, and international repercussions.

Participants stressed the need to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad, including all its key figures. This requires mobilizing the capabilities of the Syrian people with all its elements and trends, through:

1. Preparing a comprehensive national project, built on previous national efforts, with the participation of the revolutionary forces in the field, in order to reassure all the elements of the Syrian people and to help them establish national peace and regional stability.
2. Supporting efforts that aim to expand the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces through dialogue with the forces that have not yet been represented.
3. Stressing our keenness on putting an end to the bloodshed of Syrians and accepting any political solution that preserves the nation and its citizens and meets the demands of the revolutionaries. The absolute minimum of these demands is the voluntary resignation of Bashar al-Assad or his removal by force. This requires the preparation of a clear roadmap supported by the revolutionaries and backed by the Friends of Syria, which will also help to guarantee success through a strict schedule.
4. In parallel with the work aiming to find a political solution, we stress that we will continue to support the revolution by all possible means, including humanitarian, military, and political support. We will also provide everything the revolution requires to resolve the battle in favor of the Syrian people and urge the international community to shoulder its legal and moral responsibility to protect civilians or support revolutionaries with the weapons necessary to stop al-Assad's killing machine. This must take place according to national rules and mechanisms in order to make sure that they are used only against Bashar al-Assad's gangs.

## APPENDIX (CONTINUED): CLOSING STATEMENT

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Participants agreed on the need to issue a national compact agreed upon by the various elements of the Syrian people of all intellectual and political affiliations. This compact should also include a radical, fair, and comprehensive solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria. Participants also stressed the importance of immediately taking necessary and practical steps to guarantee the drafting and release of the charter as soon as possible.

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