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Politicking in Doha

But will the Syrian opposition shift to more pragmatic diplomacy?

The Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) and the Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) are in dire need of internal renewal and a new political strategy given the deadlock of UN-led peace negotiations. A forthcoming opposition gathering on 4 February in Doha with more than 80 Syrian opposition leaders, activists and academics might offer an opportunity to do so. However, the event's public face is Riyadh Hijab, who is no longer part of the SOC and is seen as pursuing an internal leadership takeover. It is likely that the event will be part of a series that seeks to create a new centre of opposition without creating a new opposition body. Yet, neither Hijab's internal politicking nor possible legitimacy/efficiency gains from implementation of a parallel SOC internal reform plan will generate a new political strategy for the opposition. This requires creative and pragmatic diplomacy that focuses on, for example, negotiating crossline arrangements between all conflict parties that improve local security and facilitate travel, trade and aid to improve the desperate situation of the Syrian people – in line with the UN's call for a 'safe, calm and neutral environment' (SCNE). The habits of dialogue and compromise that can gradually develop in this manner could be leveraged at a later stage to address the more complex issues of power sharing and reconstruction once an appropriate window of opportunity has opened up.

Introduction

On the weekend of 4 February 2022, more than 80 Syrian opposition leaders, activists and academics will gather in Doha (Qatar) to take part in a 'research workshop' co-hosted by several Syrian think tanks that enjoy close relations with Qatar, such as Jusoor, Omran and Haramoun.¹ But the event's public face is

none other than Riyadh Hijab, a former Prime Minister under President Bashar al-Assad. He defected in 2012 and held prominent positions in the opposition, including as head of the Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC).² The conference's declared purpose is

1 We would like to thank Thomas Pierret (CNRS-IREMAM) and Erwin van Veen (Clingendael) for their constructive review of this brief. Its contents naturally remain our own responsibility. Note that the think tanks mentioned span a broad ideological spectrum that includes Muslim Brotherhood-style considerations as well as more leftist sympathies.

2 The Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) is the successor of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC). It was created at the Riyadh II conference in November 2017. In contrast to the HNC, which was founded at the Riyadh I conference in December 2015, it includes representatives of the NCB (often known as the 'internal opposition') as well as the Moscow and Cairo opposition platforms.

to discuss the state of the Syrian conflict and options for political action on the part of the opposition.³

Recent years have seen severe setbacks for the 'official' Syrian opposition, as institutionalised in the form of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC, also known as Etilaf). Territorially, parts of the country's northwest fell to regime forces backed by Russia and Iran in 2020. Geopolitically, Washington's Syria policy became incoherent under President Trump, followed by a growing disengagement under the Biden administration. This reduced US interest in (re-)engagement with the SOC while the EU had already put it on the backburner for some time.⁴ Meanwhile, several Arab countries, most prominently the UAE, Jordan, and Algeria, are pushing for normalisation with the Assad regime that puts the Syrian opposition out of sight entirely. Internationally, the UN-led peace process was reduced to the Constitutional Committee, a mix of regime, opposition and civil society representatives tasked with developing a new constitution. The Committee failed to make any progress in the six sessions that have taken place since October 2019, in no small part due to regime intransigence, which indicates that Damascus has little interest in agreeing a political compromise to end the conflict.⁵

So, while the SOC⁶ remains the most recognised opposition body internationally, and constitutes the backbone of the SNC, it has lost significant momentum and credibility in the eyes of many opposition activists and

intellectuals. In one part, this is because they view the SOC as subservient to Turkey; in another it is due to infighting and perceived corruption. Moreover, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) are not represented in either the SOC or the SNC, mostly due to Turkish resistance because of the YPG's links with the PKK and the YPG/Syrian Democratic Forces' ambivalent relationship with the Assad regime⁷.

Against this background, the Doha workshop could offer an opportunity to explore how the relevance of the Syrian opposition at large can be improved. Beneath the surface, however, run darker currents. Discontent with the SOC/SNC mean that some wish to capitalise on the deadlocked UN-led peace process to replace the SOC wholesale with a new body that is closer to Qatar.⁸ It is worth noting that the majority of those invited to Doha have been sidelined by the SOC or operate outside of 'official' opposition bodies. The real stakes of Doha therefore are the extent to which it can recalibrate the Syrian opposition's external strategy and its internal legitimacy. Russia is following the event closely as it seeks to weaken the SOC, which currently constitutes an obstacle to Moscow's vision of a political solution based on the Assad regime having the sole legitimate claim to state power.⁹ From the SOC's perspective, the Doha workshop takes place at a sensitive juncture. It cannot revive a moribund UN-led peace process on its own, has no political alternatives,¹⁰ and is about to consider an ambitious internal reform plan secretly prepared with Turkey.

3 See: <https://www.syriahr.com/en/234539/> (accessed 24 January 2022).

4 Except for its role during the Geneva negotiations: Hauch, L., *EU engagement with the Syrian opposition (Etilaf)*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2021 (accessed 23 January 2022).

5 For background on the Constitutional Committee: Hauch, L., *Syria's Constitutional Committee in Review*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020 (accessed 23 January 2022).

6 For background on the SOC: Daher, J., *Pluralism lost in Syria's uprising*, 2019, [online](#) (accessed 26 January 2022).

7 Netjes, R. and van Veen, E., *The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2021 (accessed 23 January 2022).

8 See: <https://npasyria.com/en/69814/> (accessed 24 January 2022).

9 See: <https://tass.com/world/1381371> (accessed 24 January 2022).

10 See: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1196881/middle-east> (accessed 24 January 2022).

Box 1 Surveying the Syrian opposition to Assad

Today, Syria is divided into roughly four areas controlled by different states and entities. The Assad regime runs the west, centre and parts of the east, with an appreciable Russian presence in the west and centre, and an Iran-linked presence on the Lebanese border, around Damascus and in the east (c. 60% of the country). A number of areas along the northern border are under Turkish control even though some are nominally run by the SOC's executive arm, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), and policed by the Turkish-funded 'Syrian National Army'. The northern part of Idlib in the northwest is run by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its Salvation Government under Turkish military protection (combined c. 10% of the country). Finally, the northeast and parts of the east are under the control of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF maintains an ambivalent relationship with the Syrian regime and its classification as opposition is debatable (c.30% of the country).

One could take the view that HTS, the SOC and the SDF together form the Syrian opposition with regards to control of Syrian territory, yet these groups have vastly different agendas and barely cooperate. There is also the dense web of Syrian (diaspora) CSOs and activists to consider. The SOC is the major actor in the SNC, which has the mandate to represent the Syrian opposition in UN talks. While the SOC remains the most recognised opposition body, what constitutes 'the opposition' remains contested in the emotional, identity and material sense.

Doha as a missed opportunity for the SOC

While the President of the SOC, Salem al-Muslet, and other high-ranking members of the SOC and SNC will attend the workshop, they were invited as individuals rather than as representatives of their institutions. Initially, the SOC had even been offered to co-host the workshop, but it declined because it could not agree on the desirability of doing so.¹¹ Part of the SOC leadership recognised that such an endeavor could be useful in rebuilding bridges with opposition elements not represented in the SOC,¹² and in mending fences with the Cairo and National Coordination Body opposition platforms supported by Egypt, the UAE and

Saudi Arabia.¹³ Others in the SOC leadership suspected that the workshop could be exploited to undermine its position in front of a large audience.¹⁴ Once the SOC declined, Jusoor – the Istanbul-based and Qatar-linked think tank that had floated the idea – turned to Riyadh Hijab¹⁵ since he is the only other entity in the opposition with the political clout and financial backing to convene it.

11 Interviews with a senior SOC leader, Istanbul, 22 November 2021 and 12 January 2022.

12 Mostly pro-Hijab figures sidelined following his departure from the SNC in December 2017. They include Suheir al-Attasi and George Sabra (both resigned from the SOC in April 2018).

13 For background on the Cairo group see: Hauch (2021), *op.cit.*. On the National Coordination Committee: <https://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48369> (accessed 23 January 2022).

14 Interviews with a senior SOC leadership figure, Istanbul, 22 November 2021 and 12 January 2022.

15 See: <https://www.qasioun-news.com/ar/articles/246902/amid-conflicting-timing-talking-about-a-political-movement-for-the-syrian-opposition-led-by-riyad-hijab> (accessed 24 January 2022).

Riyad Hijab: A familiar face with fresh ambitions

After Riyadh Hijab was replaced as the SNC's chairperson due to Saudi pressure in 2017,¹⁶ he kept a safe distance from the organisation and turned back to Qatar. Over the next few years, Hijab cultivated a reputation as patriotic statesman backed by the Qatari foreign ministry and rallied a network of supporters frustrated with the SOC/SNC's handling of UN-talks, particularly the performance of the Constitutional Committee and Turkey's continued engagement in the Astana track.¹⁷ In this role of 'opposition to the opposition', he also developed close relations with Azmi Bishara, an influential Palestinian adviser to Qatar's rulers who runs a media and think tank empire, including the Haramoun (think tank) and Syria TV (a satellite TV channel focusing solely on Syria). According to several sources, Bishara encouraged Hijab to get behind the workshop and offered his support. Despite Turkish/Qatari 'authorisation' of only a 'research workshop' and a stipulation that it should refrain from agitating against the SOC, Hijab¹⁸ is nevertheless set to deliver the opening speech, sent invitations to the approximately 80 attendees in his own name, and onboarded additional think tanks as co-hosts to increase the event's perceived legitimacy.¹⁹ According to one Doha insider, "all decisions are made by Riyadh Hijab's office."²⁰

16 The Saudis dropped Hijab in the wake of the Qatar diplomatic crisis in June 2017 due to their perception of Hijab as a Qatari proxy. Washington and Brussels were also frustrated that he was not doing enough to engage in UN talks and to expand the SNC to include a wider range of opposition platforms. Hijab resigned from the leadership of the SNC in November 2017 after the Saudi foreign ministry did not invite him to the Riyadh II opposition conference.

17 The first Astana summit was held on 23 January 2017 in the capital of Kazakhstan. It has a trilateral format of Russia, Turkey and Iran and was initially set up to negotiate a series of ceasefires. It has since developed into a main venue and catalyst for diplomacy on the Syrian conflict.

18 See: <https://bit.ly/3FQv79j> (accessed 24 January 2022).

19 Phone call with researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 17 January 2022.

20 *Ibid.*

Towards an internal leadership takeover?

The fact that Hijab keeps his cards very close to his chest with regards to the event's agenda has raised suspicion. In TV interviews, he has shared only soundbites about the need for "new approaches" and "political initiatives that push for a real solution".²¹ Those who have recently spoken to him say that he has been less than open about the expected political outcomes of the workshop.²² Some opposition figures speculate that he is using the event mostly as a personal public relations exercise without a particular agenda in mind. Others assert that he has ambitions to return to his old job as head of the SNC and will use the workshop to put himself forward as an alternative candidate to lead it. A final, and most likely, interpretation is that Hijab seeks to get himself anointed as the informal leader of the broader Syrian opposition, including the armed opposition and civil society, without creating a new opposition body.

Hijab's strategy behind this prospective power-grab-by-workshop appears to be his assumption that a successful conclusion of the nuclear talks in Vienna will enable key international and regional states to impose a political solution to the Syrian conflict on the opposing parties, including President Assad.²³ Although Hijab allegedly has little faith in UN-led peace talks, he appears to believe that the main external stakeholders will eventually get round to hashing out a deal that enforces a modicum of power sharing between various Syrian constituencies.²⁴ Hijab apparently sees himself as advocate of such an 'imposed solution' among the wider Syrian opposition movement and as champion of its implementation in the role of respected Sunni Arab politician.

21 See: <https://bit.ly/3fPSycj> (accessed 24 January 2022).

22 Telephone call with researcher in the Haramoun think tank, 9 January 2022.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Phone call with researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 17 January 2022.

Putting aside for a moment how realistic the scenario of an imposed power-sharing solution is, the Doha workshop can be understood as part of a larger programme to position Hijab as the Sunni Arab politician who can deal with Assad. If this is correct, a series of events would follow Doha in which he, via think tanks, challenges the official political opposition bodies (SOC/SNC) on their shortcomings and positions himself as the only credible candidate with the clout to convince the broader Syrian opposition movement of the need to accept painful compromises. With Qatari political and financial support, and leveraging the wave of frustration among the wider opposition, Hijab might create enough pressure on the SOC/SNC for it to fall in line behind his *de facto* leadership.

However, it will not all be plain sailing. For example, Turkey has its own reservations about Hijab. For one, Ankara suspects him, as a lifelong Ba’th Party member, of favouring a brand of Arab nationalism that sits uncomfortably with Turkey’s own policies. During his term as SNC president, Hijab was noted for prioritising Arab allies of the opposition – such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and the UAE – over Turkey.²⁵ Turkey is also nervous about the possibility of Qatar and Hijab opening channels with the US and SDF given Hijab’s roots in SDF-controlled Deir Ezzor²⁶ and the enthusiasm expressed by some of the co-hosting think tanks for the idea of decentralisation.²⁷ Nevertheless, Ankara is likely to have to tolerate a degree

of engagement with the SOC from Hijab and Qatar given that the Emirate subsidises part of Turkey’s Syria policy – including the operational costs of the SOC – and cooperates with Turkey on a wide range of issues. Having Hijab agitating against the SOC/SNC from the safe distance of Doha might actually be useful for Turkey because it makes the SOC/SNC more dependent on Ankara. It is also worth bearing in mind that a number of informal border-crossings and dialogue efforts already exist, which are tolerated by Turkey. As for Qatar, should the workshop be successful, it is likely to try to secure a seat at the top table of final status negotiations on Syria in the person of Hijab. For now, it is hedging its bets, positioning itself only as ‘quiet host’.

Whatever the true intentions of Hijab and his backers, a meeting in the Qatari capital on 16 January 2022 between Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, SNC President Anas Abdah and SOC President Salem al-Muslet suggests that the workshop intends to be quite ambitious. Abdah and al-Muslet received assurances that the conference will not be exploited to publicly discredit the SOC and SNC.²⁸ Wanting to appear positive, both agreed to attend.

But what about a new political strategy?

So far, the Doha workshop seems to be low on new content and creative ideas for improving the relevance of the Syrian opposition and/or addressing the Syrian conflict²⁹. All eyes are on Hijab’s opening speech and the position paper that is being drafted by some of the co-hosting think tanks. Expectations that the workshop will produce tangible results are probably exaggerated as it is better seen as part of

25 In his almost two-year tenure as President of the SNC (known then as the High Negotiations Committee), Hijab under-represented armed groups close to Turkey while over-representing armed groups close to Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As a result, Ankara worked discreetly to undermine his position by inciting armed groups close to it to challenge Hijab’s authority, which contributed to his downfall.

26 Telephone interview with a Syrian National Army commander in Ras al-Ayn with close ties to Turkish authorities, 22 January 2022.

27 Omran has issued several reports and organised many workshops about a decentralised solution to the Syria conflict: <http://omranstudies.org/publications/books/centralization-and-decentralization-in-syria-concepts-and-practices.html> (accessed 24 January 2022).

28 Phone call with senior figure in the SNC, 20 January 2022.

29 In 2018/19, similar yet smaller meetings to the one currently scheduled in Doha took place, in which Hijab hosted prominent opposition members that work outside the SOC/SNC’s framework. At the time, the agenda was reportedly focused on a rejection of international negotiations in their current form. Whether Hijab will introduce new ideas or sticks to his former agenda remain to be seen. See: <https://bit.ly/3AG2cUj> (accessed 29 January 2022).

a longer trajectory in which Hijab attempts to become a centralising and unifying figure in the Syrian opposition.

For the SOC, the Doha workshop coincides with fresh developments in its own organisation. Six months into Salem al-Muslet's term as president, a reform plan supported by Turkey is being considered for action. The plan is pushed by an alliance of Syrian opposition blocs and independent opposition figures.³⁰ It contains long overdue changes to the SOC's internal by-laws and membership, including extending its president's term beyond 12 months, slimming down its membership, including more women and technocrats, and making the organisation more representative of Syrians inside and outside the country. "The net result of these changes will make the SOC more dynamic and more independent," claimed Badr Jamous, a senior SOC figure and one of the spearheads of the reform effort.³¹ Implementation of the reform plan is likely to be complicated, however. Given that nearly half of current SOC members would be likely to lose their positions, a purely democratic approach is unlikely to work.³²

30 According to multiple sources, those pushing for reform are: Salim al-Muslet and his bloc of tribal leaders, Badr Jamous and his Free National Movement bloc, Abdulhakim Bachar and the Kurdish National Council bloc, and independent figures like Hadi al-Bahra, Dima Moussa, Anas al-Abdeh, Hafiz Qarqout and Yihya Maktabi. Those openly opposing the reform plan are Nasr al-Hariri and his Revolutionary Movement bloc, Abdulilah Fahd and Muhammed Hussein Qaddah of the Local Councils bloc, and the Syrian Turkmen Council bloc. SIG PM Abdulrahman Mustafa, though a Turkmen, is broadly supportive.

31 Phone call with SOC Political Committee member Badr Jamous, 12 January 2022.

32 Two blocs in the SOC are targeted for culling: the Revolutionary Movement bloc and the Local Councils bloc, which are both seen as unrepresentative and surplus to requirements. The problem is that the by-laws stipulate a 50+1 majority to eject these blocs, and a two-thirds majority to introduce new members into the SOC. This means that even those members who are likely to keep their membership must take stock of the new power balance caused by the disappearance of at least 30 members before they decide that reform is in their interest.

On balance, much will depend on whether officials in Ankara are willing to lean on relevant SOC members to vote in favour, even if it costs them their positions and perks.

Paradoxically, Hijab's initiative taps into the same well of discontent with SOC/SNC performance that the SOC's own Ankara-sponsored reform plan seeks to address. The two are not necessarily irreconcilable but face the same challenge of a deadlocked political process in terms of UN-led peace negotiations with the Assad regime that even a revived SOC cannot hope to unlock.

What the Syrian opposition can do instead

Considering that the deadlock of the UN-led talks is unlikely to be solved anytime soon, the SOC/SNC could instead proactively introduce a new agenda that puts the big-ticket issues of UNSCR 2254 on the backburner for the time being. As part of this agenda, the SOC/SNC would negotiate pragmatic arrangements with other parts of the opposition, as well as the Assad regime, that address urgent economic and livelihood needs of all conflict parties and people living in their respective territories. Such arrangements could focus on establishing crossline arrangements between the different opposition areas (SOC-HTS-SDF) – as well as the regime held areas – that facilitate local security, travel, trade and aid. This would have the advantage of slowly rebuilding a practice of contact and coordination while improving the economic and humanitarian situation for ordinary citizens. Such modest new beginnings could help develop building blocks for later use.

Crucially for the opposition, such an approach would bring the SOC/SNC closer to developments on the ground in a useful and functional manner without giving up the goal of a genuine political transition. The UN Security Council's demands for creating a safe, calm and neutral

environment (SCNE)³³ in Syria aligns with such an approach and has the potential to gradually replace polarised frames and attitudes with more practical diplomacy that builds on the immediate needs and requirements of citizens and conflict parties alike.

Naturally, some will see such an approach as deepening the *de facto* division of Syria while others will take the high ground and argue that there can be ‘no deals with the devil’. Such views are not incorrect, but neither are they realistic. Survival of the Syrian political opposition and keeping the flame of UNSCR 2254 alive are not likely to happen by waiting for an elusive grand bargain to be sealed. Rather, it is more likely to be brought about by the patient, taxing and somewhat less exciting work of rebuilding relations and restoring flows of goods, people and ideas in day-to-day affairs as a precursor to bigger steps in the future. Today, the extreme needs of the Syrian people override principled objections against the restoration of basic socio-economic connectivity – without losing sight of war crimes committed and the enduring utility of UNSC 2254 as lodestar for a political solution to the conflict. If the SOC can revive itself and the international community increase its support on this basis, there is good reason to think that pragmatism can deliver better and more human results.

33 The call for ‘SCNE’ can be traced back to the to the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, where a safe, calm and neutral environment was mentioned as a requirement for a political transition. UNSCR 2254 did not mention the term but reiterated the need for the Communiqué’s full implementation. Hence, the concept and the UN’s call for it has a legal dimension that diplomacy can refer to and build on.

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