



Insight

# New Leadership in Syria

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The creation of a new coalition to represent the Syrian opposition could prove to be a watershed moment in resolving Syria's crisis. The coalition has the potential to further galvanize international and domestic support for the Syrian opposition and could play a crucial role in finally deposing Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad.

On November 11, under pressure from the U.S. and others, disparate elements of the Syrian opposition united to form the new National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Force. The National Coalition replaces the Syrian National Council (SNC), which critics derided as ineffective, fragmented, and dominated by out-of-touch ex-patriots. Members of the SNC, prominent Syrian dissidents, and opposition leaders met in Doha for two weeks to work out negotiate a detailed, unified structure. In another break from the SNC, which was headquartered in Turkey, the Coalition will be based in Egypt.

Four personalities were selected to lead the Coalition. Moaz al-Khatib will serve as President. The former imam of the historic Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, al-Khatib is considered a religious moderate. While he has struck striking many of the right tones in public speeches, his website reveals some anti-Semitic and potentially anti-Western views. Still, his selection represents an effort to show sensitivity to Syria's Islamic heritage without bowing to more extremist elements.

Other leading members of the Coalition are considered more secular. Mustafa Al-Sabagh, former chairman of the Syrian Business Forum, will serve as the Coalition's Secretary General. The Coalition has two vice presidents. Riad Seif is a businessman and, dissident, and diplomat. Suhair al-Atassi is the daughter of a respected secular human rights activist and an advocate for women's rights.

Groups inside Syria and beyond have hailed the emergence of the National Coalition. Leaders of the Free Syrian Army lent their support to the new initiative, which may ultimately be a conduit for arming the rebels and securing other forms of international assistance.

The National Coalition also gained key international support. France, the UK, Turkey, the Arab League, and the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states recognize the National Coalition – and not the Assad regime – as the sole representative of the Syrian people. The U.S. and others have recognized the new Coalition as “legitimate,” but stopped short of declaring it the sole representative of the Syrian people. According to the State Department, the United States is continuing to evaluate its position on recognizing the Coalition. Spokesman Victoria Nuland said the group should work to, “strengthen its organizational structure,” and “demonstrate its effective outreach to groups on the ground.”

A major concern about the Coalition is its lack of ties to Syria’s Alawites and other minority groups, including Christians, Kurds, and Druze that enjoy relative protection under the Assad regime. Encouragingly, the Coalition recently named an Alawite to be its Ambassador to France.

Also Rejecting the Coalition are many of Syria’s Islamic extremist militias, which have grown in prominence as the war drags on and Western assistance to moderate forces lags. Members of the Al-Tawheed Brigades, Islamist rebels leading the fight against the Assad regime in Aleppo, spoke out against it, before others in the group distanced themselves from the comments. Over a dozen other anti-Assad combatant groups, including the al Qaeda-aligned Jabhat al-Nusra, rejected the Coalition as a “foreign project.” While the Coalition’s rejection by radical jihadists is not necessarily a bad thing, the Coalition will need to find a way to bring as many of the anti-Assad fighters under its authority as possible, and ultimately work to disarm those it cannot.

The Coalition is not perfect, but represents sorely needed progress in uniting the disparate factions of the Syrian opposition. Moreover, Syria is a complex mixture of ethnic and sectarian groups. The Assad dynasty, for all its cruelty, managed to bring relative stability to the country for over 40 years. Many have worried that under a post-Assad government, Syria will once again collapse into chaos. The Coalition is an attempt to assuage these concerns by developing a credible, inclusive blueprint for Syria’s future. It is also an effort to show that anti-western Islamists will not dominate the new Syria, a growing concern across the region as the Arab Spring unfolds.

The Obama Administration is right to embrace the Coalition while holding back its full support in the form of formal recognition. The Administration should continue to work closely with the Coalition and provide increased assistance. At the same time, it should clarify benchmarks needed for extending full recognition, such as stronger support from the Syrian people, development of a credible transition plan, effective control of the Free Syrian Army and other armed groups, and or better inclusion of and assurances to Syria’s minorities.