

The Syrian Opposition From Incoherence to Disaster

By Akram Kachee

Translation: Lea Sharkey

On December 5, 2016, the Security Council of the United Nations gathered to discuss the Syrian case and especially Alep. China and the Federation of Russia opposed a project of resolution which aimed to end all attacks led in Alep, for a period of seven days. Since that session, discussions have been held outside the United Nations. However, neither the Syrian regime nor the Coalition, main body of the political opposition, are taking part in these negotiations.

Historical background

Before the first demonstrations of March 2011, there were groups composed of several political parties. Some of them were also part of several political blocks. These include the National Democratic Bloc, the Damascus Declaration, the Muslim Brothers, the Marxist Left, and some Kurd parties that didn't join the Damascus Declaration, unlike others.

Between the end of spring and beginning of summer 2011, a new claim appears in this landscape. The demonstrators demand a form of political organisation able to reflect their actions and ideas as a whole. In view of the situation, the NCC is created (National Coordination Committee) on June 30, 2011 in Halboun, on the outskirts of Damascus. Also called « *opposition from the inside* », this body gathers fifteen partisan organisations and a large number of independent personalities. Mainly from secular-left inclination, this body also includes some moderate islamists. The NCC formulates a « *threefold no* » program: no to violence, no to communitarianism, no to foreign intervention.

Simultaneously, several initiatives from exiled Syrians aim to showcase the political opposition and make its fight known. After a series of international conferences, the Muslim Brothers headquarters, located in Turkey, eventually centralises these initiatives in order to create a national council. Other Syrian opponents join them, and especially a branch of the Syrian Communist Party, the People's Party. At this moment, Western chanceries are looking for an interlocutor that could be legitimate in the eyes of the demonstrators. As Westerners think that political Islam may have a role to play in the transition process, Nicolas Sarkozy suggests that the stages of the Libyan operation should be followed as a blueprint in the settlement of the Syrian file. A SNC (Syrian National Council) is created on September 16, 2011, in Istanbul. This council is pushed by Turkey and Qatar, two countries supporting the Muslim Brothers. Although this organisation has been welcomed by the Syrian opinion, some criticise the initiative as a copy and paste version of the National Libyan Transition Council.

The first President of the SNC, Burhan Ghalioun, is confronted with the daunting task of supporting the movement and define its main directions. Faced with a complex political reality, he struggles to communicate coherently and has contradictory claims (being at the same time for and against foreign intervention). As it is, in the founding text of the SNC, B. Ghalioun notes that the SNC « *refuses any form of interference of intervention violating the Syrian national sovereignty* ». However, the document further stipulates that « *in order to answer the call for revolutionary action, the SNC asks every international bodies to take their responsibilities in protecting the Syrian people* ». In the

meantime, the Western powers have clearly stated their support to the SNC and have recognised it as sole legitimate representative agent of the Syrian people.

In spring 2012, in order to allow a conflict resolution by the « *Arab house* » the Arab League offers to form a conciliation framework, between the National Coordination Committee standing for the Syrian movement of the inside and the exiled Syrian National Council. As a result, a negotiation takes place that brings together different standpoints, and leads to the signature of the Cairo Pact on July 3rd, 2012. Very thorough on the transition modalities, the text has provided a basis to the Geneva conferences 1 and 2. On the same day, Burhan Ghalioun retracted himself, and stated that he signed only a preliminary version. Moreover, he declared himself a victim of a series of official statements released without his approval.

With the repeated failures and loss of legitimacy of the SNC, Hillary Clinton suggests enlarging the opposition to a coalition. The newly included figures from civil society are not representative of the Syrian movement. Created in 2013, this coalition is presided by Ahmad Jarba, close to Saudi Arabia. Some personalities from the historical opposition to the regime are also part of it, such as Michel Kilo. Thereafter, militarisation and fragmentation of the armed factions have dominated, exacerbating the lack of coordination between the opposition and the operational forces. Moreover, thirteen armed groups, including Jabhat al-Nosra (affiliated to Al-Qaida), refused to recognise the Coalition, which appeared as a Western creation and counter-revolutionary organisation.

These difficulties led to a meeting in Riyad, 2015; the main focus being the inclusion of representatives from the armed groups to the Coalition. Ultimately, this session ended with the creation of the High Negotiations Committee.

Theoretical framework

1. The Coalition and the regime, a mirrored system. In fact, all the bodies of the Syrian opposition reproduce the culture and system of the hated regime. The dissidents, avoiding a self-critical analysis, failed to reach the Syrian society when spreading democratic values. This was all the more a failure, as they placed their hopes in democracy but did not manage to apply its principles to themselves. Eventually, rejecting the other was the sole basis to their political project.

2. The National Council and the Coalition, a growing counter-revolutionary movement. From the start, the Muslim Brothers have played a major role. Still today, they constitute the core of the Coalition, and especially the *al-Tali'a* branch, which favours armed struggle. This body, which finds its legitimacy from the events of the eighties, claims the status of the sole victim of the repression carried out then. Its members participate in the Coalition and create various splinter groups designed to manipulate the debates to their profit, spreading their circles of influence through active cronyism.

Analysis

Since the emergence of the first opposition bodies in 2011, a split has divided the NCC, active inside Syria, and the exiled SNC. Yet, this division has impacted the following events. In fact, the standpoints of these two blocks have grown irreconcilable. On the one hand, an opposition from the inside, from a secular left, averse to foreign intervention and mainly pacifist (NCC). On the other hand, a movement that represents the exiled opposition (SNC). From a right-wing stance — even supported by a communist fraction under Islamist influence — it works towards foreign intervention and encourages armed struggle. These two lines are also divided on the modalities of a possible transition. For the inside opposition, the end of the regime was not mandatory. It thus defended the principle that negotiations, with some elements from the regime, would preserve the population. It prescribed to focus on a deep shift led rather in the medium term, that would then bring about the regime's fall. On the contrary, the National Committee quickly requested the definitive and unconditional departure of the Syrian President. Today, the SNC keeps this standpoint and refuses all dialogue with existing institutions. The lack of any secular independent and democratic stream condones the idea that there is only one alternative: Assad's regime or the jihadists. This dead-end contributes to dilapidate the sympathy that the Syrian uprisings had first aroused.

References

Bechara Azmi, *Syria: A Path to Freedom from Suffering*, al-Doha, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013.

Rsas Muhammad, « La haine comme guide en politique », *Al Akhbar*, 29/04/2016