



# The Syrian File The Role of the Opposition in a Multi-Layered Conflict

**Cinzia Bianco**

## **Abstract**

Against the backdrop of Iraq's fragmentation and Egypt's derailed revolution, bold steps are clearly needed to prevent Syria from a likewise destiny, far worsened by the level of violence in the country and its role in the region's geopolitics. The degeneration of the crisis into sectarianism and social conflict is an increasingly tangible threat. Arguably, this degeneration is fuelled by the lack of a common vision for the future of Syria among those international players capable of influencing the conflict and within the internal opposition front. This paper analyses the anti-Assad front and outlines a post-war plan for national reconciliation framed in the context of the country's own past and experiences from other countries in the region.

**Keywords:** *Syria / Syrian conflict / Civil conflict / Conflict resolution*

## The Syrian File The Role of the Opposition in a Multi-Layered Conflict

by Cinzia Bianco\*

### Introduction

The Syrian conflict has brought to the surface and politicized the deep divisions existing inside the Syrian national patchwork, becoming over time a multi-layered conflict. It is indeed possible to identify multiple dimensions within it: the socio-economic dimension, the ethnic and confessional dimension,<sup>1</sup> and the regional and international dimension. All of these layers are reflected at the level of Syrian society and expressed through the formation of conflicting forces fighting the Alawi regime. These deep rifts are, to some extent, rooted in the country's contemporary history and the policies pursued by the Syrian regime over recent decades with the aim of staying in power. These rifts had a significant role in triggering and shaping the uprisings and, arguably, will also impact on the post-war transition.

The Alawi regime, from its takeover in the 1970s up until this conflict started, was able to bring relative harmony and stability to the diverse social classes and ethno-religious communities that historically competed to rule the country or simply to be politically and economically legitimized. Key factors in the regime's strategy for keeping the country together were power-sharing policies that conveyed an impression of inclusiveness within a reality of authoritarianism and sectarian (Alawi) dominance. Also, being representative of a minority itself, the regime was careful to give concessions to the other minorities and to avoid discrimination. This way it seemed to protect the other minority communities, who indeed have remained suspicious towards the current uprising and to some extent are still compliant with the regime. While the Sunni majority is mostly supportive of the uprising, many Christians, Kurds and Druzes fear that once the regime falls, they might experience discrimination and even annihilation under a new government,<sup>2</sup> especially if that government were to fall in the hands of political forces, which already play a key role in the conflict, that seem keen on building a fundamentalist Islamic State in Syria.

The urban business class also hesitated to take part in the revolt, as it had been co-opted by a certain number of benefits related to a degree of liberalization of the economy. During the first years of the Assad regime, in pure Ba'athist socialist fashion,

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<sup>1</sup> Syria's social fabric comprises Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, and Turkmen, with the Sunni Muslims constituting the majority (74 percent), followed by the Shiites (Alawis and Ismailis totaling 13 percent between them), Christians (10 percent), and Druze (3 percent).

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group, "Syria's mutating conflict", in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 128 (August 2012), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/128-syrias-mutating-conflict.aspx>.

the economy was run by the party and the government, and most of the population relied on public salaries and subsidies. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the regime reduced its economic interventionism, partly liberalized the market and, under Bashar in the 2000s, promoted private sector activities.<sup>3</sup> But, most of all, the regime granted members of the business class access to the executive bureaus that hold decision-making power in economic issues: an achievement from which the business class would hardly accept a step backwards.

In a different way these reforms were also counterproductive. Ba'athism and, therefore, socialism were strongholds of the regime's ideology, a way to win the support of the poorest strata. Liberalizing measures have "broken the deal" with those classes, who are now deprived of state aid and welfare. It is worth remembering that socio-economic grievances were at the heart of all "Arab Springs", and Syria is no different. As a side-effect of the transition towards a market economy, the Syrian government started to cut subsidies,<sup>4</sup> leading some living costs to skyrocket overnight.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the lower social classes have made up the bulk of the rebels since the inception of the uprising, and, clearly, given their support to that opposition force which is willing and able to tackle the deep socio-economic challenges.

At the same time, the revolution in Syria is altering key and very sensitive geopolitical balances in the Middle East, thus driving international and regional players to join in the attempt to influence Syria's destiny in order to protect their own vested interests. Most of all, as the phantoms of Iraq, a fragmented failed state, and Egypt, a derailed revolutionary country, haunt political circles at domestic and international levels, it seems clear that massive fragmentation and complete political chaos are among the most real threats to be faced. Clearly, the lack of a common vision for the country amongst the local as well as international actors involved hardly augurs for stability.

This paper aims to shed light on how the rivalries and political dynamics within the opposition forces, coupled with the opposing influences exerted by external powers, will impact on the post-war the reconstruction process in Syria. Starting from an analysis of the different components within the Syrian opposition, as well as their relations to the external actors, the paper highlights their shortcomings and the reasons for their inability to take the country out of the current quagmire. Then, in the last section, the paper outlines possible post-war scenarios, and puts forward some proposals in the form of values, ideas, and practices that are drawn from the country's experience and that could form the basis for the process of nation and state re-building, with a view to avoiding the disintegration of the country and further entrenched conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Søren Schmidt, *The State and the Political Economy of Reform in Syria*, Fife, University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> "Drawing the Poverty Line", in *Syria Today*, May 2010, available at <http://www.dp-news.com/en/detail.aspx?articleid=37818>; "Syria's economy: Hard choices for the government", in *The Economist*, 20 January 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/17963303>.

<sup>5</sup> Food prices rose by around 27 percent in the years leading up to 2011, while poverty rates also rose sharply, posing a real threat to food security for the lower classes. See UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food on his mission to Syria (29 August-7 September 2010)* (A/HRC/16/49/Add.2), 27 January 2011, p. 6-7, [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.16.49.Add.2\\_en.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.16.49.Add.2_en.pdf).

## 1. Snapshot of the anti-Assad forces: the Syrian patchwork and international divisions

The Syrian opposition today is made up of disparate groups, political and military forces who seem neither to coordinate nor to agree.<sup>6</sup> The group recognized by most of the collective members of the “Friends of Syria”<sup>7</sup> as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people is the Syrian National Coalition (SNC). Set up in Doha, Qatar in November 2012, the Coalition is made up of 60 members and led by George Sabra, a Christian and former leader of the Syrian National Council, to which a sizeable number of seats inside the SNC have been allocated. The backbone of the SNC is constituted by Sunnis from the Muslim Brotherhood. 14 seats are allocated to delegates from the 14 provinces of Syria, 3 to Turkmens and 3 to Kurds from the National Kurdish Council. The remaining 18 seats are reserved for miscellaneous groups, including independent dissidents, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian Business Forum and political defectors from the regime. The Coalition coordinates its efforts with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main rebel army, whose leadership is made up of defected Alawites and the ranks of Sunni soldiers. The FSA is a composite group as well: it has functioned primarily as an umbrella group for army defectors, civilians who have taken up arms, and Islamist militants, including foreign jihadist militants. Even though the FSA does not seem too eager to be answerable to the SNC, key figures from the FSA have tried to downplay the role of the Islamist brigades inside the Army<sup>8</sup> as a way of positioning the FSA as the only legitimate armed wing of the officially recognized representative of the Syrian opposition, the SNC, which itself has taken distance from such groups.

Of the most militarily active groups within the FSA, the most noteworthy is undoubtedly the al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), offshoot of the al-Qa’ida-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq,<sup>9</sup> made up mostly of Sunni Islamists and comprising militants who fought the American and Coalition forces in Iraq. Al-Nusra’s leader, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, recently declared the group’s allegiance to Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri, who is believed to be the current leader of al-Qa’ida. The FSA has no control over jihadists and al-Nusra Front, which has also refused to recognize the Coalition’s primacy, as shown by the failure to enforce a United Nations-brokered ceasefire in October 2012, which the FSA had formally accepted, but which the Front did not respect. Reactions to the revelation of the identity of the Front in Western circles were tough. The United States, referred to by the Front as the enemy of Islam and had already blacklisted the group as a terrorist organization in December 2012. In May 2013 the United Kingdom and France led a push to replicate the US move and designate the Front as a terrorist organization via the United Nations Security Council as a way of drawing a clear

<sup>6</sup> More on this in the report “Guide to the Syrian opposition”, in *BBC News*, 12 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15798218>.

<sup>7</sup> The “Friends of Syria” is a group of countries and bodies which convenes periodically on the topic of Syria. Formed in 2012, it comprises the United States, all EU Member States, the Arab League states and Turkey.

<sup>8</sup> Phil Sands, “Syrian National Coalition on brink of collapse”, in *The National*, 28 May 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/syrian-national-coalition-on-brink-of-collapse>.

<sup>9</sup> Cole Bunzel, “Introducing the ‘Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria’”, in *Jihadica*, 9 April 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/introducing-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-greater-syria%E2%80%99D>.

distinction between it and other rebel units that do not share the al-Qa'ida ideology, and of starving al-Nusra of funding.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of its shady image, there have been allegations of powerful sheiks from the Gulf, supportive of the idea of having Islamists in power in Syria, covertly providing money and weapons to the jihadists,<sup>11</sup> even allowing for the group's allegiance to al-Qa'ida. Domestically, the Front enjoys increasing popular support among Sunnis from the lower classes, at the expense of the regular resistance army.<sup>12</sup> Better equipped with a steady arms supply, better trained for unconventional warfare, better experienced in effective guerrilla tactics, and far more successful on the battleground, especially against strategic state targets, as shown by the capture of a key airbase in the north in January 2013,<sup>13</sup> the Front fighters are the revolution's elite commando troops. The FSA, instead, has been criticized for conducting poorly-planned missions, for being very badly coordinated, as fighters are believed to have only limited or no contact with each other or the FSA's leaders in Turkey, and for committing acts of senseless destruction and perpetrating behavior such as coldblooded unjustified killings or arbitrary arrests based on flimsy claims of a connection to the regime.<sup>14</sup> These events have even led some communities to associate their methods with those of the regime: an easy association to make, considering that the FSA's troops are mainly defectors from the regime's army. The al-Nusra Front, instead, has developed a reputation for discipline and honesty in some of the areas they control.<sup>15</sup> Their ability to provide social safety nets, basic aid and protection, has helped to earn them popular support. Aleppo's bread shortage episode is telling of these different perceptions: it is widely believed in the city that it was the FSA who stole flour to sell it elsewhere, and that in response to the emergency, the al-Nusra Front took over the distribution of flour to the bakeries.<sup>16</sup>

However, the Front's vision of creating an Islamic state in Syria exclusively under Shari'a law and the Qu'ran, and of using the country as a base to reinstate the Caliphate, together with their markedly jihadist doctrine and intolerance of non-Sunni

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<sup>10</sup> Damien McElroy, "Jabhat al-Nusra faces al-Qaeda sanctions at UN under Anglo-French proposal", in *The Telegraph*, 15 May 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10059587/Jabhat-al-Nusra-faces-al-Qaeda-sanctions-at-UN-under-Anglo-French-proposal.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Blake Hounshell, "Iraq accuses Qatar of financing jihadi groups in Syria", in *Foreign Policy The Cable Blog*, 4 March 2013, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/04/iraq\\_accuses\\_qatar\\_of\\_financing\\_jihadi\\_groups\\_in\\_syria](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/04/iraq_accuses_qatar_of_financing_jihadi_groups_in_syria).

<sup>12</sup> Mona Mahmood and Ian Black, "Free Syrian Army rebels defect to Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra", in *The Guardian*, 8 May 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/08/free-syrian-army-rebels-defect-islamist-group>.

<sup>13</sup> See Martin Chulov, Luke Harding and Matthew Weaver, "Syrian rebels take control of key Assad airbase", in *The Guardian*, 11 January 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/11/syrian-rebels-assad-airbase>.

<sup>14</sup> See Anne Barnerd, "Missteps by Rebels Erode their Support Among Syrians", in *The New York Times*, 8 November 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/world/middleeast/in-syria-missteps-by-rebels-erode-their-support.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Profile: Syria's al-Nusra Front", in *BBC News*, 10 April 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18048033>.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Wood, "Syria: Islamist Nusra Front gives BBC exclusive interview", in *BBC News*, 17 January 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21061018>.

communities,<sup>17</sup> is deeply troubling for the minorities in Syria, who have long lived in a multi-confessional, secular and, at least rhetorically, inclusive state. The Syrian minorities have real fears that they might suffer annihilation and persecution under a future integralist Syria. Conversely, in its blueprint, the “Syrian National Initiative”, developed in early November 2012, the SNC committed itself to promoting Western-friendly goals and a “democratic, civil, pluralistic, strong, and stable state”, and stated that it would fight for the preservation of the country’s sovereignty and geographical and social unity.<sup>18</sup>

The Coalition’s legitimacy has, however, been tarnished by a number of issues. One of its main problems is being perceived by the Syrian population as a group of foreign-backed exiles detached from the horrors of daily life in conflict-ridden Syria and the needs of its people. This perception is strengthened by the fact that the Coalition’s leadership has been sheltering throughout the conflict in its headquarters in Turkey, and that the newly-elected Prime Minister of the interim government, Ghassan Hitto, is a naturalized American citizen who has spent most of his life in Texas. Due to this detachment from realities on the ground, the Coalition seems to lack genuine support amongst the wider population. In addition to this, moderate, middle-class citizens, who should, from a purely ideological perspective, form the bulk of its support, are concerned by the dominant position of the Qatari-backed Muslim Brotherhood inside the Coalition.<sup>19</sup> The controversial election of Hitto in mid-March 2013, supported by the Qataris due to his closeness to the Brotherhood, was a divisive moment, causing the resignation of the former leader Moaz al-Khatib, a Sunni moderate cleric, and raising concerns over the inability of the Coalition to implement its own principles of inclusivity and democracy.

Another big challenge is that of keeping control over the dozens of loosely linked political groups under the Coalition’s umbrella: there is a widespread concern that, once the common strategic goal of fighting against Assad fades away, the dozens of groups forming the Coalition will split over their completely different visions for Syria. For example, even though leading Kurdish groups have taken part in the uprisings and the Kurdish National Council has joined the Coalition, many, particularly amongst the Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), still harbour dreams of carving out an autonomous Kurdish entity similar to the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq as a further step in the regional project of Kurdistan, while the SNC has only agreed to administrative autonomy for the Kurdish enclaves. The PKK reestablished itself in Syria in 2011, when the regime subcontracted to it, via its Syrian arm, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the task of cracking down on anti-regime demonstrations in Kurdish areas, as part of its strategy of fomenting sectarian divisions.<sup>20</sup> Finally, due to the

<sup>17</sup> “Jabhat al-Nusra: Syria’s jihadists”, in *The Economist Pomegranate Blog*, 17 December 2012, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2012/12/jabhat-al-nusra>.

<sup>18</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center, *The Syrian National Initiative*, 1 November 2012, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=49872>.

<sup>19</sup> Fehim Tastekin, “Saudi Arabia and Qatar Vie For Influence in Syria”, in *Al Monitor*, translated from *Radikal*, 15 April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/04/saudi-arabia-qatar-vie-influence-syria.html>.

<sup>20</sup> According to Baczko, Dorronsoro and Quesnay, “many conversations with activists and Kurds in Paris, Erbil (Iraq) and the regions of Afrin and Qoban, December 2012 and January 2013, cite arrests, detentions and intimidation by the PYD”. See Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro, and Arthur Quesnay, “Building a

dominant position of the Islamists on the ground, Western governments have so far refused to provide much-needed weapons to the Syrian opposition, who are greatly under-equipped in comparison to Assad's army, fearing that such arms could end up in the hands of radical Islamists.

In mid-June, however, the US President Barack Obama finally authorized his administration to provide arms to Syrian rebel groups. He did so after reaching the conclusion that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons, which he had already referred as the "red line" Assad should not have crossed.<sup>21</sup> This shift in the US policy will surely undermine the (already shaky) possibility to a multilateral negotiated solution over Syria's destiny, a chance that many had envisioned when, on 7 May 2013, the Americans and the Russians made a joint statement calling for a new international peace conference (commonly known as "Geneva II"<sup>22</sup>). This was partly the result of the fact that some players within the "Friends of Syria" have been moving increasingly closer to the Russian position in the past few months<sup>23</sup>, i.e., finding a political settlement between the opposition and the regime. However there were significant strains over the controversial question of the future role of President Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle, whom many opposition players want to see stand down before any negotiation takes place,<sup>24</sup> a position so far backed by the Americans.

The outcome of this diplomatic effort seems already doomed: the SNC has declared that it will not participate, as it will not accept any settlement that contains any prospects for the regime's survival.<sup>25</sup> This reaction was predictable, especially considering the preeminence within the Coalition of the Muslim Brotherhood, the group which has been most persecuted by the regime and which is therefore the most hostile to it, and the influence the Gulf states intent on cutting off Iran. Iran, which might be invited to the talks, is the closest ally of the Alawi regime and a convinced supporter of this initiative.<sup>26</sup> On top of that, due to the extreme fragmentation inside the SNC, there are no guarantees about who would have had the authority to sit at the negotiating table on behalf of the opposition, and whether there is anyone who would be able to deliver compliance with a possible agreement. Most of all, it is very unlikely that any deal can be forced upon the Islamist groups, and especially the al-Nusra Front, who

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Syrian State in a Time of Civil War", in *The Carnegie Papers*, April 2013, p. 26 (note 39), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/04/16/building-syrian-state-in-time-of-civil-war/fzrk>.

<sup>21</sup> White House, *Statement by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syrian Chemical Weapons Use*, 13 June 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/13/statement-deputy-national-security-advisor-strategic-communications-ben->

<sup>22</sup> US Dept. of State, *Remarks With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov*, Moscow, 7 May 2013, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/05/209117.htm>. A previous peace conference was held in Geneva in June 2012. It did not bring about a true settlement, but ended in a broad agreement aimed at forming a transition government in Syria and introducing a long-lasting truce.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Bou Chahine, "Siria: Assad dopo Assad?", in *Limes online*, 26 marzo 2013, <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes/siria-assad-dopo-assad/43962>.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Black, "Syrian rebels react coolly to Russian-US proposal for peace conference", in *The Guardian*, 8 May 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/08/syrian-rebels-react-coolly-peace-conference>.

<sup>25</sup> Qassim Saadeddine, a spokesman for the Supreme Military Council, a unified rebel command formed in December 2012 that comprises high-level members from the FSA, told Reuters: "Unfortunately I don't think there is a political solution left for Syria [...] I think that is clear by now. We will not sit with the regime for dialogue". Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> "Report: Iran 'verbally' invited to Geneva 2 Syria talks", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 30 May 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=314933>.

could not reasonably be expected to step aside after having fought so hard in the conflict.

## 2. Preparing to re-build Syria: learning from the past, looking to the future

There are consistent uncertainties related to this recent deployment of lethal aid to the rebels.<sup>27</sup> As already mentioned, there are widespread concerns that the arms could end up in the hands of the jihadists, who seem intermingled with the Army, and who are at the frontline of the conflict. Also, needed as this move could be to tilt the power balance in favour of the opposition, it could also spur the regime and its allies to further scale up their retaliation, which would trigger a potentially devastating escalation. This is often framed as a lose-lose situation, since if providing weapons carries all of these cons, not providing them means the civil war could tip in Assad's favour. However, this assessment might not take due account of the whole picture.

Considering the insurgency's level of organization, and in the absence of fully legitimate and truly national institutions, further fighting, as well as international financing directed to specific factions, would very likely exacerbate the Sunni/Shi'a as well as the Arab/Kurd rifts, lead to the country's dismemberment into territorial entities/zones of influence, perpetuate the conflict and make the humanitarian disaster chronic. Syria might become a failed state and a frontier land, a safe haven for jihadists under the aegis of the al-Nusra Front, posing a serious security threat to the whole region. However, what is common to all scenarios is the assumption that the moderate opposition forces, plagued by all the shortcomings acknowledged, lack the credibility and strength to master their own cause. Both international interventions and internal actions should therefore be directed, first and foremost, at proactively tackling those shortcomings, with a view to facilitating dialogue and reconciliation in a post-war phase.

Lessons from similar experiences in the region and the nation's own history might serve as a solid basis from which to find ideas, values and good practices to this end, keeping in mind the long-term goal that is the nation and state re-building process. First off, if any lesson can be drawn from the other Arab Spring experiences, this is that while international support to any ruling class in such a geopolitically sensitive region is pivotal, it is not sufficient if unaccompanied by popular confidence. Winning this trust is a huge challenge for which there is no simple recipe, but for which there is nonetheless a starting-point. Building on the strongholds of what has been the national ideology for decades, Ba'athism, i.e. secularism, socialism and pan-Arabism, the opposition, and the Syrian National Coalition in particular if it is going to be the transitional body, needs to re-elaborate those concepts into strong ideas around which all Syrians can unite, recognizing sameness and eliding differences.

Freedom from repression and from state violence, for example, one of the most important claims made by the masses, should be regarded as a top priority in a post-war Syria. In this regard, the FSA needs to address as soon as possible the problem of predatory practices amongst its fighters. These occur partly because of a lack of

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<sup>27</sup> United Nations, *UN Secretary-General's press encounter*, New York, 14 June 2013, <http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=2866>.



coordination, discipline and professionalism. The fighters have no salary, and there is no cohesive command structure, i.e. the brigades' members, who enjoy revolutionary legitimacy, are not loyal to the upper-level leadership, that has been professionally trained. Finally, the national army should be depoliticized: it should not respond to a given political group, but to the Syrian people. Only in this way could it, over time, achieve sufficient legitimacy to disarm the terrorist groups that threaten the physical security and fundamental rights of segments of the population.

Religious tolerance should also be defended and practiced so as to respect the secular history of the country, as well as the ongoing revival of religious sentiment often correlated with periods of intense suffering. Embracing such sentiments might prevent them from escalating into extremism, and instead provide an opportunity to counter a jihadist and exclusivist interpretation of Islam. For a real national reconciliation process to happen, Alawites must not become the scapegoats for the regime's crimes, and must not be alienated. The Alawi community has a good relationship of trust with other minority groups, and within it there are some of the most experienced people in governing Syria, people that might be precious during the transition phase. The experience of the failed *de-ba'athification* in Iraq, where key people from the Ba'ath party were removed from their positions following the overthrow of Saddam, and then had to be called back for their unique capacity to handle issues of government, should serve as a lesson.

Regarding the Ba'athist past, values such as social justice and solidarity should be explicitly endorsed and turned into practical action, thus taking possession of the traditional role of Islamists, who often in the Arab world enjoy greater consensus thanks to their action in tackling social inequalities and fundamental needs better and sooner than the State. It is worth highlighting here that the Syrian economy is wrecked, so much so that state bankruptcy is not far away. The funds needed for reconstruction are estimated at USD 45 billion, as the government has almost run out of foreign currency.<sup>28</sup> It is fair to say that, in light of such an economic disaster, the plans and means required for reconstruction will be pivotal in shaping transition. Not only are international funds needed, but a proactive engagement on the ground by both international partners and local actors also needs to materialize, keeping in mind that a well-managed post-war reconstruction is key to smoothing the transition process and therefore facilitating political stabilization.

It is also worth mentioning that, as is already happening in other post-Arab spring countries, the people would very likely hold a new government accountable for its transparency, or lack thereof, during the transition phase. To this end, it is necessary to normalize the legal system in rebel areas by rehiring judicial personnel, establishing a common code of law, and integrating local courts into one hierarchical system. In this matter, for example, international support might be decisive, as it could also be in order to marginalize actors such as the al-Nusra Front, who have already put in place parallel judicial institutions legitimated only by Shari'a. In addition, in some northern territories, the PYD has established independent administrative institutions, thus marginalizing

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<sup>28</sup> Ranie Nasser, Zachy Mehchy, Khalid Abu Ismail, *The Socioeconomic Roots and Impact of the Syrian Crisis*, Damascus, Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), January 2013, <http://www.scpr-syria.org/en/S34/%E2%80%9CSocioeconomic-Roots-and-Impact-of-the-Syrian-Crisis%E2%80%9D-2013>.

other Kurdish parties that are fragmented and have no military organization, including the Kurdish National Council, which is closer to the SNC.

One of the main risks, therefore, of disunity is the growth of separate administrative entities, which would persist, and therefore polarize, identity differences within the population. The fragmentation of the country along ethnic and sectarian lines would endanger the idea of national solidarity, a founding principle of any reconciliation process. In addition, the rise of groups competing to rule given territories, carved out from the national soil on a sectarian or ethnic basis, would lead to the decoupling of key institutions, such as legal and military institutions, thus preventing the establishment of a nation-wide legitimate and shared code (and rule) of law, as well as the formation of a depoliticized army or police force. Reconstruction too would be affected, and with it social justice, chiefly because such groups would compete for reconstruction and development aid, very likely re-allocating it on a political-clientelistic basis. Conversely, a democratic settlement, based on conflict resolution experiences and theories, should include policies of integration, offering minorities access to power through existing structures, such as political parties, and accommodation, based on the sharing of power (as in consociational initiatives or other such formulas). Even Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad had to create a democratic façade within national institutions by, for example, placing personnel from the majority and other minorities in high-ranking but symbolic positions. This tactic prevented the communities from teaming up against the regime, while giving them incentives to abide by the status quo. It also contributed to forging a sense of representativeness through some kind of power-sharing which, evidently, even an autocratic government needs in such a multi-ethnic and politicized society. By the same token, it is a fact that the Kurdish issue has to be dealt with by granting some degree of autonomy to the Kurdish enclaves, which, however, being dependent on the Arab regions for their food and energy supplies, and being formed of three non-contiguous pockets, would hardly seek complete secession, if granted the right degree of representation.

A final, crucial element to be underlined is the need for a strong unifying ideology that in some way borrows from the country's traditional identity and creates a new synthesis. The ability of the current regime to develop a collective narrative and to shape national identity based on the Ba'ath ideology (and its elements of pan-Arabism, secularism and socialism) was arguably the single element that contributed the most to creating its consensual basis. It is difficult to imagine a new rise of the Ba'ath ideology in its entirety in the post-Arab spring context, as it would hardly be as effective as it was in the past. There are a number of explanations for this. First of all, the revolutions were country-centric: people protested against the deficiencies of their own countries' institutions, and advocated country-specific reforms. Secondly, the typically Ba'athist rejection of pluralism can no longer be defended. Finally, the Arab countries seem, today more than ever, far apart, due to their substantially contrasting interests and goals. Nonetheless, there are principles related to this ideology, in particular the idea of seeking a collective renaissance through social progress and modernization, which, if properly re-adapted to a new context, could be appealing to the Syrians, for whom such ideas are also part of the traditional national narrative.

## Conclusions

To counter the current deterioration and escalation of the Syrian conflict and instead put into practice a nation and state-building process in line with the values and actions hereby suggested, there is need for a concerted effort by the opposition forces, emphasizing the sense of ownership of this process. Although the absolute priority is to stop the bloodshed, it is not too early to draft a plan for reconstruction, which could already be implemented in rebel-held areas. Such a plan could be drafted within the framework of international organizations such as the United Nations and the Arab League, and with the involvement of local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and a significant engagement on the part of the SNC and various parts of Syrian civil society. This plan should promote, to the greatest extent possible, inclusiveness and transparency, and affect the population directly and concretely. Any opposition group able to put together such a plan would also gain significant political capital to be used in order to team up with other groups. Continuing to indulge particularisms and divisions, instead, would likely alienate the SNC's allies further, conveying the idea that the SNC is just not able to lead its own game, and strengthening the position of the Assad regime. The SNC should start looking for a common ground among its own internal factions, as well as dialogue with other opposition forces to find shared goals which could take shape in a plan similar to the one outlined in this paper, and should prepare to re-build the country.

Simultaneously, the opposition urgently needs to gain cross-cutting legitimacy among the various groups constituting the Syrian population. Oded Haklai's study of minority rule over the majority is an excellent theorization of legitimation, which could serve as an inspiration for the opposition.<sup>29</sup> His theory argues that this kind of rule is characterized by a government ideology that tries to blur the distinctions between the minority and the other groups. The strategies commonly used are the establishment of a common strategic goal, so pressing that it overshadows contradictions, and assimilation (or appearance thereof) by the ruling minority itself. The pan-Arab identity did the assimilation trick for the Alawites. The "common strategic goal" was instead a common threat (Israel) that prioritized immediate cooperation over divisions. An open anti-imperialism, anti-Americanism and aversion towards those Arab countries which were compliant, or which made alliances, with the West were additional strong-points of an effective and compelling narrative that ensured the regime's grip on power. It is worth noting how the Islamists have already capitalized on these feelings: when the United States declared the al-Nusra Front a terrorist organization, a large part of the population stood by the organization's side, and let the press know they were honoured to be disliked by the Americans because the Syrian people despise the American government.<sup>30</sup>

Finding a valid new common strategic goal, as in Haklai's theory, and diverting from counter-productive particularisms, could provide the basis for a reshaped Syrian national identity, and finally offer a clear vision for the country, while also countering the feeling of uncertainty that is harboured by many segments of the Syrian population. A

<sup>29</sup> Oded Haklai, "A Minority Rule Over a Hostile Majority: The Case of Syria", in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Autumn 2000), p. 19-50, available at <http://academia.edu/1551568>.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Wood, "Syria: Islamist Nusra Front gives BBC exclusive interview", *cit.*

plan of the kind proposed here is, at this stage, as pressing as diplomatic discussions or providing weapons to the opposition, and would probably be more effective in terms of retaking possession of a revolution that has already been hijacked, as well as in terms of starting the process of the reconstruction of Syria as a state and a nation.

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