

## Policy Paper on Breaking the Syrian Stalemate

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### A. Introduction

The conflict in Syria has lasted nearly two and a half years and future prospects for peace and reconciliation look bleak. The Assad regime has demonstrated exceptional resilience to popular and democratic calls for change, and many stakeholders believe that the President has turned the revolution into a civil war by proxy. Meanwhile, the National Coalition (NC) has struggled to provide a compelling alternative vision around which the opposition can unify. This has led to bouts of infighting and an ongoing inability to gain legitimacy on the ground.

Core to both Assad's strength and frustrations towards the NC, is Syria's perceived abandonment at the hands of the West and other Muslim countries. Some elements within the opposition feel obliged to seek new means to challenge the Assad regime, including violent extremist groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra (JAN). These groups espouse ideologies that challenge the very values, rich cultural history and hopes of moderate mainstream members of the local population. Those at greatest risk are women, who are seeing their initially hard-won rights replaced by a discourse that is framed in conservative interpretations of Islam.



However, many Syrians (including many moderates and women) will continue to support such groups on the basis that these have demonstrated success against the Assad regime. In addition, several have provided effective support to local communities when other national and international groups have been noticeably absent. Consequently, stimulating the emergence of a moderate and tolerant society involves much more than condemning those who hold back such a movement. It also involves the clear demonstration and communication of how the international community is committed to helping the opposition achieve its primary aims.

Despite the apparent bleakness of the situation, there is hope. At the strategic level, the NC may have suffered from image and credibility issues. However, it has also showed signs of progress - for example it has improved outreach to local councils. Meanwhile, at the ground level, the Syrian community has demonstrated strength in the face of divisive issues such as sectarianism, and an ongoing eagerness to work towards a better future Syria.

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## Problem Description

International policy makers must address and answer four important and perhaps uncomfortable questions:

1. How can the international community win back legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian public when the perception is one of international abandonment and/or pursuit of self-interest?
2. How can the international community realistically push for reconciliation and unity when the perception is that outside countries want to promote a state of flux?
3. Should Western countries oppose extremist groups if, by doing so, this further weakens the opposition and so contributes to disunity?
4. If these issues can be resolved, what is the most effective structure and process for implementing change?

## Recommendations

How can the international community win back legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian public when the perception is one of international abandonment and/or pursuit of self-interest?



**The first step for the international community is to recognise that its current strategy on Syria is not working and/or is backfiring.**

Many Syrians see the current Western strategy of non-intervention as a thinly veiled lack of desire to 'own the problem'. There is a domestic perception that foreign nations are fearful of upsetting the precarious balance within the international community if they change their level of involvement. Unfortunately, this strategy of non-involvement has led to over 100,000 deaths and ever growing accusations of foreign 'mispolicy', hypocrisy and marginalization. These outcomes are unacceptable and highlight the redundancy of the current international strategy towards Syria.

**The second step is for the international community to admit that its strategy has not worked.**

Faced with a current strategy that is not working, the international community must either work harder to justify or must radically change the strategy. For example, no sufficient explanation has been given for the difference in foreign policies towards the revolution in Libya and that of Syria. This has fueled a number of local conspiracies and grudges that risk haunting the international community for decades to come. The international community has a responsibility to improve communication of its decisions and the factors that impact on such decisions. It must do so in a coherent and consistent manner – for example, the domestic perception is one of ever-shifting lines in the sand as the US government tries to avoid involvement despite rhetoric on chemical weapons. Likewise, there must be stronger commitment from all stakeholders over organizing and attending events such as the Geneva II Conference, designed to encourage progress towards realistic and achievable solutions to the crisis in Syria.

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### **Thirdly, the international community must address operational shortfalls**

The geography of Syrian opposition can be broken down into three general areas – those that are fully liberated, those that are focused on ongoing conflict, and those that exist as pockets of dissent in regime held areas. In all three cases, the international community has badly failed in its provision of support to those who need it most. Liberated areas are



somewhat functional and yet cities like Raqqa lack basic food and materials. What is distributed is badly organized. Meanwhile, pockets of revolutionary support in regime strongholds (such as parts of Damascus) are effectively under siege from regime forces. Basic foods, materials, and services are seized by regime forces and/or sold for unaffordable prices. The net result is one of ambivalence (at best) or strong rejection (at worst) towards the objectives and programmes undertaken by aid agencies and their partners. The international community must recognise that provision and distribution of aid is sub-optimal and that current measurements of effect are either lacking or sub-standard.

How can the international community realistically push for reconciliation and unity when the perception is that outside countries want a state of flux?

### **Women as credible voices**

The international community must focus on identifying the credible voices within Syrian society, and then work towards amplification of such voices. One example is that of women, who form a powerful potential barrier to men joining extremist groups. At a time when attempts are made to divide Syria geographically, ethnically, politically and religiously, it is critical to demonstrate some form of unity. The international community must seize the opportunity to stimulate greater cohesion across the female population - at international events such as Geneva II as well as part of local initiatives.

### **The inevitable change in women's roles**

Given high casualty rates and the faltering economy, the role of women in Syria will necessarily evolve dramatically in coming months and years. The international community must recognize these changes and work in partnership with such groups to achieve realistic objectives. This includes support to women's working schemes, as well as improved awareness of rights (in the workplace, society, under Islam etc.).

### **Strategic communication campaign on compromise**

As it currently stands, the situation in Syria is locked in stalemate and the most realistic outcome is one where both sides are obliged to yield some ground. However, although many Syrians are tired of the conflict, a compromise must be negotiated and not enforced for it to win public approval. This requires the careful planning and implementation of a strategic communications campaign, with assistance and buy-in from the international community, National Coalition and local councils.

Should Western countries oppose extremist groups if, by doing so, this further weakens the opposition and so contributes to disunity?

### **Understand the context in which extremist groups operate**

The international community must understand that demanding the disappearance of extremist groups will not succeed. Such groups exist for a number of reasons. Three important reasons (but there are many) are:

- Vengeance: Deep grievances from those who have suffered personal loss.
- Religiosity: Propensity to resort to more extreme versions of religion in the absence of other more tolerant religious support structures
- Ideals: Admiration for groups that show exceptional bravery and focus in challenging the Assad regime

The international community must be prepared to define a more realistic line between those extremist groups that threaten global safety and those that are the temporary focus of grievances and frustrations in the absence of alternatives.



### **Creation of an alternative narrative instead of a counter-narrative**

Rather than condemn extremist groups, the international community must work to make alternative realities seem both more appealing and more attainable. Syrians will naturally gravitate to a vision of peace, moderation, tolerance and progress as this has been the status quo within the country for thousands of years prior to the coming of the Assad regime. However, at present, the international community is not investing enough effort in this area. It must recognize the importance of treating the illness (lack of hope and alternative vision) and not the symptom (flow towards violent extremist groups).

If these issues can be resolved, what is the most effective structure and process for implementing change?

### **The importance of local, grassroots structures**

Despite the symbolic value of the National Coalition, the reality is that progress on the ground lies more in the hands of Local Councils and the network of activist groups currently operating across the country. The international community must invest properly in understanding and empowering these groups.

### **The importance of making the NC look good**

Although the international community must be seen to deliver real assistance, it must also be cleverer in brokering support so that the National Coalition can take some of the credit. Failure to do leads to ongoing erosion of credibility, whereas success will turn the NC into a more compelling structure around which all opposition groups and individuals can gravitate.



### **The requirement for speed and flexibility**

The situation in Syria is fragmented, fast-changing and complex. The current bureaucracies that characterize so many international community organizations are unable to keep up, leading even to counter-productive efforts. The international community must consider the creation of a hub, or hubs, of rapid assistance. These network of networks can respond more immediately, with greater flexibility and with greater focus on where it is needed most.



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**Demonstrate success in one place and then build out**

It is important to communicate a strategy and narrative that reaches and addresses the whole country. However, given the complexity of the situation in Syria, it is not advisable or even feasible to implement a programme across the whole nation at the same time. The international community should look to consolidate opposition successes as a means to co-opt further support for the revolutionary movement. In practical terms, this means a focused and sustained campaign within part of North Syria, perhaps Raqqa and/or areas in Aleppo.

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