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Syria: The Opposition and its Troubled Relationship with Washington

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The January 28 detention of Riad Seif is the latest development in a campaign of arrests against members of the National Council of the Damascus Declaration launched by Syrian authorities only a week after U.S. President George Bush met with Ma'moun al-Hamsi, Jenkiskhan Hasou, and Ammar Abdul Hamid at the White House in December 2007. The White House has condemned the arrests, but so far the U.S. Chargé d'Affairs in Syria reportedly has not broached the topic with the sole Syrian official with whom he meets, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Faisal al-Mikdad. Although Washington at one point wished for a united Syrian opposition, it has decided to treat the opposition more as a human rights concern than a potential force for political change. Washington's meetings with representatives of the National Salvation Front, the Syrian National Council, Kurdish parties, and the Reform Party, have been confined to general discussions regarding the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative and the \$5 million allocated to Syria.

Sources within the U.S. administration admit that Washington's ability to influence events in Syria is limited due to the lack of strong economic ties. In addition, U.S. officials have misgivings about engaging with some parts of the opposition, for example former Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam, given his history in power. The White House has not yet authorized meetings with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, in order to avoid lending legitimacy to the organization's alternative project. For its part, the Brotherhood does not seem ready for such a dialogue, at least publicly.

The Syrian opposition, especially the National Salvation Front, has miscalculated in its dealings with Washington. It assumed incorrectly that the U.S. administration's contacts with the Syrian opposition marked the beginning of a path toward regime change in Damascus, and that calling for an international tribunal for the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri would pave the way toward this goal. Thus the opposition linked its political fortunes to those of Lebanon. In addition, it is open to question whether opposition figures showed good judgment in meeting with a troubled U.S. president nearing the end of his term.

Relations with the United States are only a small part of the problems faced by the opposition. Unity remains a major challenge. The cohesiveness of the National Salvation Front, for example, lies in the Muslim Brotherhood's need for the support of Khaddam, who has Arab and international contacts—a need the Brotherhood may already be outgrowing.

Inside Syria, the opposition is undergoing a difficult phase not only because of the recent arrests, but also because of the problems posed by the forthcoming elections and the statement of the National Council of the Damascus Declaration. The elections offer an opportunity for independents, leftists, civil society activists, and opponents of dialogue with the regime to buttress their position at the expense of traditional parties—thus maintaining the Declaration's intellectual vigor at the expense of its organizational capacity. As a result, the Damascus Declaration remains an elite-dominated opposition movement that lacks the popular base necessary to push for serious political reforms. It operates within a small arena devoid of self-criticism, without financial or media support and isolated within the Arab world.

The Syrian opposition is also undergoing a transition, moving toward a new set of political concepts and tools championed by a younger generation that has gained momentum through its cultural interaction with Lebanon. This generation seeks to define its identity and its approach to democratic change, relations with the West, and liberalism.

Another set of problems for the opposition relate to Syrian state security. State security's tight restrictions on the opposition's activities make it difficult for observers to determine the effectiveness of its leadership and organizational capacities and its ability to present a national project that goes beyond traditional narratives of the chaotic civil space. Worst of all, members of the Syrian domestic opposition and their family members face continuous threats to their safety and freedom from the state security service, as seen in the recent arrests. Opposition members face severe punishments when they communicate with the Muslim Brotherhood or foreign entities, or when they engage in political activities, especially with Syrian youth. The opposition is also likely to pay the price of the international and the Arab diplomatic standoff with Damascus in the upcoming period.

Despite these problems, the space for expression of dissent in Syria is gradually broadening due to the opposition's efforts, a fact the authorities find difficult to accept. The Syrian regime deals with every issue, be it regional or domestic, as an existential issue and seeks to monopolize all public spaces and even private ones. Thus, while the Syrian Embassy flirts with Democratic candidates for the U.S. presidency, it accuses the opposition of committing treason by merely showing the world that there exists an alternative Syrian voice, albeit a weak and troubled one.

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