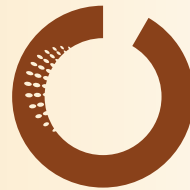


National Options for Overcoming Political Fluidity in Syria

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Omran began in November 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. It publishes studies and policy briefs regarding Syrian and regional affairs in the areas of politics, economic development, and local administration. Omran also conducts round-table discussions, seminars, and workshops that promote a more systematic and methodical culture of decision making among future leaders of Syria.

Omran's work support decision making mechanisms, provide practical solutions and policy recommendations to decision makers, identify challenges within the Syrian context, and foresee scenarios and alternative solutions.

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National Options for Overcoming Political Fluidity in Syria

Summary

On the sixth anniversary of the uprising, the Syrian people are facing highly fluid and unstable political, military and security challenges. The scene is deeply fragmented with concerns over terrorism, refugees and the future of a united Syria. The US stance is further increasing the state of fluidity, especially after the transfer of the regime's chemical weapons arsenal – that turned into a key pillar of the US policy in Syria. This policy has enabled the US to exploit the spillovers that occurred on the sidelines of the Syrian conflict by holding partnerships with the rising regional powers in the Levant. It was keen on reducing the cost of its direct involvement in securing its traditional allies. Consequently, Russia was encouraged to directly interfere in Syria – marking a major development in the course of the crisis in its fifth year.

There is a lack of decisive regional action against the direct Russian intervention in the region, as well as a lack of support to ensure the victory of national opposition forces over the Assad regime. Consequently, the effort to oust the regime and its figures from the country has turned into a multi-layered and a multi-regional conflict. It spilled over beyond Syrian geographical and political borders and became a humanitarian, social and economic crisis threatening the entire Middle East. The international approach to containing the Syrian crisis without tackling the security elements of the conflict has created an environment conducive to religious and sectarian extremism. As a result, numerous movements and organizations have morphed into terrorist and criminal outfits.

Naturally, a severe humanitarian crisis is mounting, affecting the economic infrastructure of Syrian suburbs and cities alike. Current projected poverty levels are unprecedented since the establishment of the modern Syrian state. The newly formed civil institutions in the liberated areas are left with challenges that would exhaust modern states. Local councils, with their limited resources and capabilities, struggle heroically to meet the needs of Syrian citizens.

Researchers at Omran for Strategic Studies, based on their readings of the regional and international developments of the Syrian revolution, conducted research that analyzes the motives behind ongoing Syrian security and economic complications. They offer recommendations and strategies to counter the mounting threats and bring the conflict closer to a resolution. The researchers hope that this book *“National Options for Overcoming Political Fluidity in Syria”* will offer clearer and more accurate vision of the Syrian crisis. They aim to

enable decision makers to take sound decisions in support of the Syrian people and end the suffering imposed by the Assad regime and its allies.

Security Repercussions of International and Regional Behavior in Syria

In his paper, Maan Talaa explores the security and stability situation in Syria which has turned into an ongoing complicated dilemma that is spilling over the Syrian borders. International policies should deal directly with the causes that determine the security and stability in the region. Currently, the international community is only dealing with the after-effects of the conflict, thus jeopardizing the security and stability of the region and pushing towards a global war in Syria.

The paper analyses the security objectives and interests of the regional and international actors in Syria as follows:

- **The United States:** Washington's actions are essentially a set of convictions and reactions that do not live up to its foreign policy frameworks. The "fighting terrorism" paradigm has further rooted the "results rather than causes" approach, by sidelining proactive initiatives and instead focusing on fighting ISIS, while ignoring cooperative security standards in the region.
- **Russia:** By prioritizing the fight against terror in the Levant, Moscow gained considerable leverage to elevate the Russian influence in the Arab region and an access to the Mediterranean after a series of strategic losses in the Arab region and Ukraine. Russia is also suffering from an exacerbating economic crisis. Through its Syria intervention, Russia achieved three key objectives:
 1. Limit the aspirations and choices of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in the new regional order.
 2. Force the Iranians to redraft their policies based on mutual cooperation after its long control of the economic, military and political management of the Assad regime.
 3. Encourage Assad's allies to rally behind Russia to draft a regional plan under Moscow's leadership and sphere of influence.
- **Iran:** Regionally, Iran intersects with Washington and Moscow's prioritizing of fighting terrorism over dealing with other chronic political crises in the region. It is investing in fighting terrorism as a key approach to interference in the Levant. The nuclear deal with Iran emerged as an opportunity to assign Tehran as the "regional police", serving its purpose of exclusively fighting ISIS. The direct Russian intervention in Syria resulted in Iran backing off from day-to-day management of the Syrian regime's affairs. However, it still maintains a strong presence in most of the regional issues – allowing it to further its meddling in regional security.

- **Turkey:** Ankara is facing tough choices after the Russian intervention, especially with the absence of US political backing to any solid Turkish action in the Levant. It has to work towards a relative balance through small margins for action, until a game changer takes effect. Until then, Turkey's options are limited to pursuing political and military support of the opposition, avoiding direct confrontation with Russia and increasing coordination with Saudi Arabia to create international alternatives to the Russian-Iranian endeavors in the Levant.
- **Saudi Arabia:** The direct Russian intervention jeopardizes the GCC countries' security while it enhances the Iranian influence in the region, giving it a free hand to meddle in the security of its Arab neighbors. With a lack of interest from Washington and the priority of fighting terror in the Levant, the GCC countries are only left with showing further aggression in the face of these security threats either alone or with various regional partnerships, despite US wishes. One example is the case in Yemen, where they supported the legitimate government. Most recently in Lebanon, it cut its financial aid and designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Riyadh is still facing challenges of maintaining Gulf and Arab unity and preventing the plight of a long and exhausting war.
- **Egypt:** Sisi is expanding Egyptian outreach beyond the Gulf region, by coordinating with Russia that shares Cairo's vision against popular uprisings in the Arab region. He also tries to revive the lost Egyptian influence in Africa, seeking economic opportunities needed by the deteriorating Egyptian economic infrastructure.
- **Jordan:** It aligns its priorities with the US and Russia in fighting terrorism, despite the priorities of its regional allies. Jordan suffices with maintaining security to its southern border and maintaining its interests through participating in the so-called "Military Operation Center - MOC". It also participates and coordinates with the US-led coalition against terrorism.
- **Israel:** The Israeli strategy towards Syria is deeply part of its security policy with indirect interventions to improve the scenarios that are most convenient for Israel. Israel exploits the fluidity and fragility of the Syrian scene to weaken Iran and Hezbollah and exhaust all regional and local actors in Syria. It works towards a sectarian or ethnic political environment that produce a future system that is incapable of functioning and posing a threat to any of its neighbors.

The paper concludes by focusing on the need to **empower local actors** to preserve them as the backbone of any political process. There is a historic opportunity to empower civil society actors and local councils politically and economically. This would defy the Iranian project that is alien to the regional identity and culture. It will also weaken the trans-national groups and delegitimize them as card which despotic regimes exploit to destroy the local infrastructure and justify their continued rule at the expense of local and regional security and stability.

“Terrorism” as an Approach to End the Syrian Revolution

Sasha Al-Alou focuses on terrorism as a transformer of the Syrian cause; it changed from an unknown variable in the situation to a key factor at the expense of the political cause. Countering terrorism became the key approach to a political solution at the expense of popular demands. The paper is divided into three sections:

First: The industry of terrorism and the role of its actors, over two key phases: its early formation in 2011-13 and later the “investment” phase in 2014-15. The form and impact of terrorism evolved over the last five years and turned from Assad’s terrorism to become framed as a function of the Syrian revolution to become a card played in favor of the regime. The responsibility of the evolution and expansion of terror is detailed as follows:

- 1. The Assad regime:** The Assad regime bears the main and most direct responsibility for creating, feeding and investing in terrorism. The regime worked on turning political activism into a sectarian strife, and hence managed to equate political demands with terrorism. It later entered an open war with the society under the banner of fighting terrorism.
- 2. The Syrian Opposition:** The opposition is indirectly responsible for the expansion of terrorism through a lack of a strategic vision at the political and military levels domestically and abroad. The opposition did not understand the nature and complexity of the intersecting security interests in the Middle East.
- 3. Regional Allies:** Regional actors lack any political or military vision. They focused on tactical actions to improve their political positioning leaving the room for clear and direct actions by regime allies to implement a strategy that prioritizes countering terrorism.
- 4. The International Community:** The international community, led by the US bears the responsibility of growing terrorism due to the limited management of the conflict, focusing on the outcomes rather than the causes, and their failed containment policies in the fight against terrorism.

Second: Countering terrorism as a priority for the political solution track: The breakout of terrorism redrew the course of action taken by the international and regional powers when dealing with the Syrian crisis thus creating major obstacles to a resolution mainly related to the complexity of the Syrian situation domestically and internationally. Military options were no longer considered by the international actors, especially after the direct Russian intervention. The Syrian conflict spilled over to the regional and international spheres through the refugee crisis and ISIS operations in Turkey and Europe.

Today, the opposition faces several levels of terrorism, collectively jeopardizing its political and military positioning in the various phases of any political transition. These levels are as follows:

1. Imminent terrorism threat posed by trans-national groups that has exhausted the Syrian revolution forces.
2. Postponed terrorism threat that will depend on future military and political variables, such as that posed by Jabhat Al-Nusra and People's Protection Units (YPG).
3. Potential terrorism threat that would surface when a new national project or plan for transition is defined and agreed to by the local actors thus legitimating the targeting of other groups not accepting such terms under the definition of fighting terrorism.

Third: Turning threats into opportunities through an effective national partner enjoying regional and international consensus in the war against terror. This offers an opportunity for the opposition to block the path for Assad and the remaining self-centered projects. Moreover, it would be possible to regain control of the ISIS-held territories that offer strategic locations for opposition operations. In this context, it is important to establish a national military entity to manage the fight against ISIS, benefiting from the local and international security resources of those currently in charge of this task.

Establishing a professional military institution would achieve many goals, namely the readiness for the transitional process as a priority, i.e. restructuring the military and security apparatus in Syria. Genuine and professional institutions should be ready in place to counter the regime's institutions during a transitional process, as opposed to separatist or other problematic groups.

The paper concludes by highlighting the need for an internal and genuine change in the behavior of the Syrian opposition by shifting its internal dynamics to internationally represent the revolution. It should adopt a centralized management and work to restore national sovereignty. This change requires a paradigm shift and a transformation in the management of the Syrian revolution according to functions and mechanisms based on the priorities of national security to ensure conformity with the regional and international security systems.

Decentralization Alternatives in Re-building the Syrian State

Hadia Al-Omari, Ayman Al-Dassouky and Mounir Alfakir focused their analytical study on analyzing several decentralization modalities proposed by different actors for future Syria, including their compatibility with societal and economic realities on the ground and possible alternative scenarios. The study looked at the organizational structures and operational challenges faced by local administration councils in Syria to develop the most suitable governance system and test its resilience in handling the status quo.

The study highlights the status of the current local administration system as a product of the continued fragmentation of the state into several unstable local

administration units. The latter emerged under complicated local circumstances with different organizational structures and legal and political frameworks, in addition to the limited resources they manage. However, with the failure of a functioning centralized administration body in Syria, proposing decentralization as a system of local governance becomes a solution for restricting central state functions and services that should be performed by the local government and ensures the integrity and stability of Syrian territories on the long term.

The study focuses on key administrative structures starting with opposition's local councils, Democratic self-Rule Administration, local administration by armed groups, the ISIS's public administration, and the Assad regime. Though different in their political and legal frameworks, these structures share a number of similarities. However, the reasons leading to their emergence, the challenges they face and the accumulated experience differs greatly. Numerous challenges will emerge upon trying to integrate or coordinate between them during and post-political transition period. The current situation is best described as follows:

- The opposition's local councils gained experience through managing the affairs of land taken from the regime over the last four years. However, they faced serious challenges in adapting to political developments and fell short of institutionalizing their centrality in managing the affairs of their communities. They managed to introduce the principle of smooth and regular transition of leadership by holding regular elections, whereby they developed their political identity. However, they are regularly faced with attempts to limit their representative role politically and reduce their function to the provision of local services.
- The public service commissions and bodies formed by the national resistance armed or *jihadi* groups managed to provide a number of basic services to citizens in their locality, making use of the logistical, security and financial support offered by armed groups. However, they failed in adopting a unified legal framework, and suffered from a lack of political legitimacy because of the backing by armed groups and not on the free will and consensus of residents in their districts.
- Democratic Self-Rule Administration managed to achieve a political presence due to support from the PYD, while they struggle to expand outside their popular strongholds. They suffer from a decreased popularity due to the violations practiced by its armed wing, namely the PYD, and their polarizing policies within the Kurdish population.
- The local administration structures established by ISIS and the regime share a political and legal legitimacy crisis. Their local entities are deemed as repressive tools, formed without citizen approval and participation.

Administrative Decentralization

The proposal for decentralization in Syria is highly controversial based on the perceived political and ideological functions and how it could be a pretext for the partition of Syria. It also raises legitimate questions as to the justification of adopting decentralization and the most appropriate form and mechanisms of implementation. As calls increase to adopt decentralization as a guarantee for a durable and peaceful post-transitional period, it is important that such calls address the reality of restructuring the state in different forms considering the continued state of conflict.

Working towards administrative decentralization offers a chance for national agreements to organize a voluntary transformation towards the transitional phase as a de facto situation. However, their success in the current and transitional phase depends on the capacity to handle the following challenges:

1. Take into consideration the rebuilding of the state and its institutions.
2. Meet basic service needs of residents.
3. Ensure the societal grounds for local security.
4. Restore social cohesion.
5. Achieve local development for residents.

Under the broad proposal for administrative decentralization, the study recommends to restructure current administrative units into new administrative provinces, with Damascus and its suburbs under a special provincial governance. These provinces will be granted a wide range of executive administrative authorities to manage their local affairs, resources (while balancing an equitable distribution to other provinces), and security through provincial councils elected by the local population. This should be accompanied with the forming of sub-local councils at the city and village levels through direct and free elections. Sovereign functions are to be entrusted to the central government. The above vision can be detailed with respect to its ability to fulfil the current challenges and objectives:

- 1. Rebuilding the state and its institution:** Administrative decentralization ensures the participation of all sectors in the building process. The central government and provincial councils share the responsibility of rebuilding state institutions, whereby the central government is responsible for drawing the national strategy and ensuring good governance standards are being implemented by the provincial councils. Provinces, on the other hand, focus on developing local plans and empowering the local communities.
- 2. Meet basic service needs of residents:** Decentralization reduces administrative costs and waste of resources. It allows local regions bordering neighboring countries to benefit from their positive influence. This helps improve their development options and enhance the local economy.

- 3. Local security and social cohesion:** Decentralization mitigates social tensions through granting provinces an expansive authority enabling them to conduct sustainable social reconciliation programs.
- 4. Achieve local development for residents:** Societal linkages between residents of provinces help local economies. Administrative provinces will focus on different professions to enhance economic integration and help bridge the social rift caused by years of centralized rule.

In conclusion, administrative decentralization is most notable for maintaining an effective center to manage the state in a new manner based on managing each province's interests and their relations with other provinces and the outside world, including sovereign and central government institutions, while avoiding regional fluctuations, seeking the best interests of each province, and ensuring the unity of Syria.

Local Economic Development: a Prerequisite for Social Stability in Syria

In the last chapter of the book, Mohamed al-Abdullah outlines key policies required for the stimulation of economic development in liberated Syrian provinces. The goal is to achieve societal stability through sustainable funding as a prerequisite for successful developmental programs, and through customized livelihood investment projects. The essential prerequisites for a sustainable development policy are ensuring stability and economic security for residents, and enhancing post-war educational programs.

Development represents a key approach to solving the complex societal threats to instability by targeting the aspects directly affecting residents' lives. The success of economic development policies depends on the availability of funds needed for implementing developmental programs and the capacity of local and international actors to make effective use of available resources. Moreover, educational institutions must regain their strengths to provide the required human resources to implement economic and development plans.

Financing Economic Development Projects

The scarcity of funding is a key obstacle to the success of local economic development, especially after local capital dried up due to the cessation of conventional economic activities. These plans require the provision of various financial resources to launch development programs in liberated areas. They also need the mobilization of local resources to ensure availability of local funds without total dependency on the international community and the donor organizations. A number of priorities should be highlighted to ensure self-sufficiency:

- 1. Introduce local taxes through local councils:** including taxes, property taxes and fees for local services.
- 2. Introduce small-sized and micro finance programs:** to ensure the participation of poor and marginalized segments of society in development.
- 3. Encourage investments by Syrians in the diaspora:** Effective development programs should have reasonable return on investment rates that would attract the capital of Syrians living abroad. This will require a national campaign to attract the investments of Syrian investors.
- 4. Encourage money transfers by Syrians abroad** since they are a key source of income for Syrian families inside Syria allowing them to maintain the purchasing power of local currency.
- 5. Manage and mobilize foreign funds** efficiently and effectively to enhance economic development priorities and provide a comprehensive database to assess local needs.

Provision of Livelihoods

There is a great lack of industrial and development projects inside Syria, in addition to deteriorating capacity of residents to find alternative means to ensure the sustainability of their livelihoods. Large segments of local communities depend on aid provided by the local and international relief organizations. While dependency is a serious threat to the future of development policies in Syria, there is also the threat of the inability of donor organizations to sustain their funding over time. An urgent plan is needed to tackle the following priorities and overcome the problem of abject poverty:

1. Informal commercial activities should be contained to address labor market defects, through new social, economic and institutional reforms to prevent people from practicing such activities and to provide enough job opportunities.
2. Current means of livelihood should be maintained through encouraging labor-intensive industries such as farming, livestock production, recycling, and small businesses that ensure continuity and reliable sources of income.
3. Introduce new development programs through economic empowerment for poor families and women, as well as provide educational and professional training.
4. Livelihood programs should be maintained by involving local and international relief agencies, local councils and the Syrian Interim Government in setting up, executing and monitoring local development plans.

Education

Education and professional development is key for guaranteeing the success of any development policy. Current statistics indicate a failed educational system that threatens an entire generation with illiteracy and lack of opportunities. Creative methods should be adopted to reduce illiteracy rates among present generations through the following means:

1. Removing obstacles to full access to primary education enrollment for children, by providing educational supplies, revamping Syrian schools, training professional teachers and developing new educational programs that take into consideration the effects of forced dropout phenomenon.
2. Providing alternatives for students who are not able to enroll in schools by using alternative technology and mobile learning centers.
3. Develop parallel intensive courses to make up for missed school years by means of a specially developed curriculum to expedite and enhance student performance in order to help them reach their expected level of achievement.
4. Train teachers in special programs on how to teach in war conditions, with assistance from local councils and the selection of suitable human resources.
5. Provide the necessary funding to revive education in Syria by reaching out to local and international donor organizations.
6. Conduct public awareness campaigns to highlight the need for students to resume their traditional and non-traditional educational activities.


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