Disillusion in Syria’s Armed Opposition

America’s Arms-Length Approach to Syria is Backfiring. Nominally Western-supported opposition groups are rapidly losing members and losing ground, due in large part to ambivalent American policy.

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As top politicians representing the Syrian opposition pushed their case with world leaders on the sidelines of the opening of the U.N. General Assembly, a dozen rebel brigades inside Syria, fed up with waiting for elusive Western support, issued a joint statement rejecting their political leaders and called on both military and civilian groups in Syria to “consolidate under an Islamic framework ... with Sharia as the main source of legislation.”

To many armchair observers, Communiqué No. 1, as the statement is called, appears to shatter the myth of moderates in Syria and exposes opponents of the Assad regime as radical jihadists bent on establishing a repressive Islamic state. The inclusion of Jabhat al-Nusra, a U.S.-designated terrorist group, as a signatory in the communiqué is touted as proof of rebels throwing in their lot with the extremists.

But a closer examination reveals that the issue is much more complex and multifaceted than a demand for sharia law. Instead, the communiqué is a manifestation of the realities in Syria, and a direct result of the international community’s refusal to adequately address the needs of the armed opposition, and the millions of civilians they are trying to protect against a government that used weapons of mass destruction to exterminate its opponents.

The communiqué is significant, but it’s not earth-shattering or immutable. Some of the signatories have taken to social media to explain that the communiqué is a position statement that does not announce a new formation or structured “alliance” as was claimed by some Western pundits. While it includes some powerful groups, many others were not included. And with the exception of a few, most of the signatories are based in Aleppo and Idlib in northern Syria.

Syria is increasingly divided in three, as moderate opposition fighters are attacked by extremists and pro-regime forces, while the Kurdish PYD seeks a semi-autonomous region. Map credit: BBC
Six major points can help clarify the dynamics which led to the issuance of Communiqué No. 1, as well as the recent consolidation of brigades and battalions in southern and eastern Syria.

First, the chemical weapons debate in the West following the regime’s August 21 attack against the Damascus suburbs of Ghouta made it clear to Syrians that the international community wasn’t concerned with how many people were killed in Syria, but only in what way people were being killed. They heard President Obama describe the Syrian crisis as a “civil war we should not get involved in,” and were disillusioned with the president’s bungled response, adding to the sense that the West’s policy of seduction and abandonment left little hope for Western support to end the war.

Second, the communiqué reflects a split between Islamists and extremists on the ground. Although it explicitly denounces the Syrian National Coalition of Opposition and Revolutionary Forces – or Etilaf as the opposition umbrella group is known – the communiqué sends an indirect message to al-Qaida-linked Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) – the worst of the extremist groups – that ISIS will be isolated. Instead of fighting Assad, ISIS recently declared war on the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The signatories of the communiqué further clarified its purpose to this end in a joint statement on October 2. In this statement, they called on ISIS to “withdraw its troops and materiel” from its battle with FSA affiliates “immediately”, and demanded that ISIS “not engage in bloodletting” against opposition brigades or “brand them as infidels and apostates.” The clarifying statement demonstrates that the communiqué was partially intended to show ISIS that these brigades are not alone and will not be easily bullied by ISIS.

Most analysts ignore the co-dependency between the Assad regime and ISIS, highlighted by the fact that few ISIS positions have come under aerial bombardment by the regime, which has aimed its bombs on FSA positions and civilians instead. On September 29, Human Rights Watch documented how regime jets dropped fuel-air explosive bombs on students attending their first day of class in Raqqa, a city where ISIS has a large presence. The airstrike that left 12 students dead and 25 seriously wounded ignored all the assets and personnel ISIS has in Raqqa, choosing to target innocent civilians instead (Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Fuel-Air Bombs Strike School, September 2013).
Third, the communiqué shows the three-front pressure that the entire armed opposition is feeling. In addition to pressure from extremists, there is the Iranian-Hezbollah invasion of Syria that has intensified throughout the year and tipped the strategic balance in Assad’s favor. Violence also intermittently flares up with the Kurdish PYD, the Syrian affiliate of the PKK. The PYD is the most powerful of numerous Syrian Kurdish factions, commanding a substantial militia. The Syrian PYD is at odds with other Syrian Kurdish groups—most notably the Kurdish National Council, which recently joined the Etilaf. In mid-July, the PYD floated plans to create a semi-autonomous region, with a parliament and a constitution. These three factors are forcing the rebels to seek coalitions as a counterweight.

It is critically important to understand that the FSA and the Islamist groups who issued the communique have differing views of a future Syria, but both views include a unified state, and both seek to avoid a de facto Iranian-sponsored partition—unlike ISIS or the Assad regime. Before the use of chemical weapons, the top concern for the mainstream armed opposition was that Homs province would fall to Hezbollah and pro-Assad forces, precipitating a breakup of the country. Were this scenario to unfold, it would drive a wedge between opposition-held areas, and consolidate Assad’s link between Damascus and his costal strongholds. The Assad-Iran-Hezbollah alliance would then control a belt of territory running from Lebanon’s Bekaa, through Homs and Damascus in Syria and Baghdad in Iraq, all the way to Tehran. It would bring Iran closer to creating a sectarian zone of influence comprising the main Syrian ports, Hezbollah supply routes, and the borders with Lebanon and Israel.

Fourth, the communiqué is a symptom of the limited international support for Gen. Salim Idris, who leads the ostensibly Western-backed Supreme Military Council (SMC). The brigades who issued the communiqué have not thus far explicitly rejected the leadership of Idris and the SMC; in fact, some of the leaders of the same Islamist brigades had participated in Idris’ election, voluntarily joining the SMC in December 2012.

But the goal of professionalizing and aggregating the armed opposition to topple the regime hasn’t been achieved, and many constituent groups appear deeply frustrated that they received little support. The U.S. policy of accommodating Russia and seeking negotiations – not victory – has delayed this assistance, and the practice of empowering the armed opposition just enough to pose a threat to the Assad regime has limited the SMC’s ability to build legitimacy throughout the country, and rebel groups started to look at other options to unify their command and win the war.

Fifth, the communiqué is also a symptom of supply lines that have circumvented the SMC. As the U.S. outsourced the provision of supplies to the armed opposition to its regional allies Qatar and Saudi Arabia, multiple channels came into existence that created and exacerbated divisions on the ground. Funneling weapons and money through the SMC was designed to end the fracturing of the opposition, but donors still earmarked supplies for particular brigades, undermining the SMC’s legitimacy and effectiveness. The SMC couldn’t assign supplies based on tactical or strategic need, rendering it more of an interlocutor than a command structure.
Sixth, the communiqué is indicative of a trust deficit between the armed and political wings of the opposition. Although the new Etilaf leadership has improved the relationship between the two, and the most recent round of Etilaf expansion included 15 representatives of the SMC, the exiled opposition isn’t fully trusted due to insufficient transparency, significant international influence, and an unenviable record of being unable to get international support.

Syrians can see that the Etilaf is under heavy pressure from the U.S., that the U.S. has been bested by Russia in its Syria policy, and that Washington is working towards rapprochement with Iran. These factors lead Syrians to believe that the U.S. will not help the Etilaf get a good deal out of an eventual peace negotiation because the U.S. is more concerned about Russia and Iran.

It is difficult for people on the ground to wholeheartedly support the Etilaf as their negotiators because they know the opposition has little influence on the international powers bringing them to the negotiating table. Syrians are afraid Etilaf may be forced to accept a bad deal. The fact that the UNSC resolution that codified the U.S.-Russian agreement to disarm Assad of his chemical weapons arsenal failed to ascribe blame for the CW attacks, include a trigger under Chapter VII, or even threaten sanctions in case Assad is found in non-compliance only affirms the validity of Syrians’ concerns. The administration might be touting the UNSC resolution as a “breakthrough,” but Syrians are under no illusion: it was a victory for Russia and Mr. Putin, and a boon for Assad.

Six Dynamics which Led to Communique No. 1:

* Myopic international focus on eliminating the Assad regime’s chemical weapons
* Split between Islamists and Extremists
* Three-front pressure on the opposition from Iran/Hezbollah, extremists, and the Kurdish PYD
* Meager international support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) command, the Supreme Military Council (SMC)
* Outside supply lines which circumvent the SMC
* Trust deficit between armed and political wings of the opposition
Communiqué No. 1 arose due to a variety of factors on the ground, and a confused U.S. policy towards Syria has made clear that the West has no intention of helping Syrians end their struggle against more than four decades of one family’s rule. Without addressing their underlying grievances, Washington risks further alienating rebel forces in Syria, thereby hurting its long term interests in the country and the wider region.

While it did not announce an alliance, the communique set off a chain reaction among other groups that were similarly dissatisfied with inadequate Western support for the SMC, and equally worried about extremists. Shortly after the release of Communiqué No. 1, fifty brigades and battalions in southern Syria joined to form Jaysh al-Islam, rejecting the Etilaf and slamming as “unsubstantiated claims” conjecture by pundits that Saudi Arabia was behind its formation. On October 2, four brigades in eastern Syria followed suit, citing the same fears of foreign militias and disillusion with the FSA. On October 3, more brigades in the South consolidated into the Amjad al-Islam Coalition and will likely join forces with Jaish al-Islam, and on October 5, factions in Tal Abyad in Raqqa province consolidated into al-Hamza Brigade. Some of these new coalitions, and others in Hama and elsewhere, have issued statements rejecting the Geneva negotiations.

This trend is likely to intensify amid the Obama administration’s hesitancy to increase support. In fact, the author is already aware of plans for further significant consolidation outside the structure of the SMC. These events should be a wake-up call to American policymakers of the dangers of allowing U.S. foreign policy to meander aimlessly into the future or be eternally married to accommodating Russia in Syria. They should not be used as an excuse of further inaction that is leading to the disintegration of Syria, frustration of allies, emboldening of enemies, and spreading instability in the region. An arms-length approach to state disintegration in the heart of a volatile region can only end in tragedy.

CONCLUSIONS

Realignment of groups within the armed opposition is a consequence of failed American policy and should not be an excuse for more weak policy.
Refugees, IDPs, and those in need of Humanitarian Assistance

- Over 6.8 million people in need of Humanitarian assistance (UN, April 2013)
- 5 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Syria (UN, September 2013)
- 2.1 million refugees in neighboring countries. (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, October 2013) Please See additional details on the refugee crisis on the next page.

Children

- More than 1 million child refugees (UN, September 2013)
- 3,000 schools damaged or destroyed, 1,000 others used to house displaced persons (UNICEF, September 2013)
- 2 million children have dropped out of school (UNICEF, September 2013)
- 3.1 million children living in dire situations inside Syria (UNICEF, October 2013)

Casualties and Detainees

- 115,000 people have been killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, SOHR, October 2013)
- 6,561 Children Killed (UN, June 2013)
- Tens of Thousands of political detainees imprisoned solely on the basis of their peaceful activity. Many have been held for long periods and tortured (Human Rights Watch, October 2013)

Medical and Other Infrastructure Destroyed

- 57% of Hospitals Damaged (Syrian American Medical Society, SAMS, October 2013)
- 36% of Hospitals Destroyed (SAMS, October 2013)
- 78% of Ambulances Damaged (SAMS, October 2013)
- 50% of Physicians Fled, 70% of Other Medical Staff Fled (SAMS, October 2013)
- 90% Loss of Medication Manufacturing (SAMS, October 2013)
- Over 1.2 Million Homes Destroyed (UN, September 2013)
- 75% of factories are no longer operating (Der Spiegel, August 2013)
SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Families Fleeing Violence
2.1 million Syrian refugees in five neighboring countries

1 in 5 people is a Syrian refugee
LEBANON
775,991

1 in 12 people is a Syrian refugee
JORDAN
525,231

EGYPT
126,717

SYRIA
4.25 million internally displaced

TURKEY
494,361

IRAQ
194,234


SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Rapid Escalation
The rate of Syrians escaping their country has accelerated drastically. More than 1 million people fled in the first five months of 2013 alone. An average of 6,000 people now become refugees every day.

SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Children Caught in War

More than 50% of Syrian refugees are children who’ve lost everything.

Graphics produced by:

MercyCorps
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Founded in 2005 in Burr Ridge Illinois, the Syrian American Council is the largest Syrian-American community organization in the United States. It serves to amplify the voice of the Syrian-American Community. SAC includes members from all segments of Syrian society, and has over 20 chapters nationwide with thousands of supporters. It is an organization devoted to community organizing, awareness-raising, youth empowerment, media outreach, advocacy, and support for Syrians seeking to build a free and democratic Syria.