

PROJECT SYNDICATE

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Uniting Syria

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BERLIN – Syrian opposition activists regularly express disappointment with the level of international support that they receive. Although the last meeting of the so-called “Friends of Syria” (a group of countries that convenes periodically to discuss Syria’s situation outside of the United Nations Security Council) brought more financial aid, the degree of genuine outside commitment to their cause remains questionable.

The United States, the European Union, Turkey, and most Arab countries agree that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime is no longer legitimate. They have intensified sanctions against the government, and have provided different kinds of support to opposition groups. Some states have delivered automatic weapons, ammunition, and rocket-propelled grenades. But arms deliveries have dried up, and the rebels’ pleas for anti-aircraft weapons remain unanswered.

Moreover, neither Syria’s neighbors nor Western governments are willing to intervene militarily. Indeed, despite expressions of solidarity, they have refused to establish a protection zone for Syrian civilians along the border of neighboring states, or to impose a no-fly zone for Syrian military aircraft. As a result, Syrian opposition groups believe that they have been left to confront Assad’s brutal regime alone.

But Syrian oppositionists must recognize that the lack of decisive international action is not only the result of Russia and China vetoing any meaningful action in the Security Council, or NATO countries’ unwillingness to enter into another war in the region. In fact, the international community is waiting for Syria’s disorganized opposition to transform itself into a coherent, effective force as much as the opposition is waiting for the international community. This entails forming a common platform that represents all relevant groups, including the Local Coordination Committees, the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union, and the Free Syrian Army’s military councils.

To be sure, the rebels have made some progress. They have created four regional military councils, which have helped to consolidate leadership and solidify their control over significant areas of the country, particularly near the Turkish border.

Yet the Syrian opposition has so far failed to present itself as a unified actor. This is astonishing, given that highly respected, influential figures and political parties have been speaking for the opposition at international gatherings.

The Syrian National Council (SNC), for example, includes many such figures, and has managed to gain material support from several countries. But it is not inclusive enough to

serve as the Syrian opposition's sole representative. Attempts to enlarge the SNC have been unsuccessful, owing to reservations expressed by some important groups, such as the Democratic Forum, about joining an organization that relies on foreign sponsors.

The Syrian opposition needs to establish an umbrella organization accepted by all, including the *de facto* civilian and military leaders who have emerged locally over the last year and a half. These groups already share a common goal – to bring down Assad's regime – and most of them (with a few ultra-militant exceptions) hope to build a peaceful, inclusive, and democratic state.

Influential opposition figures – such as former parliamentarian and political prisoner Riad Seif and the SNC's former leader, Burhan Ghalioun – have proposed promising strategies for forming such an umbrella organization. For example, a “group of wise persons” who do not seek political positions could oversee the creation of a provisional council that includes all relevant political groups and coalitions, the military councils, the business community, and religious leaders.

But such plans have not been realized, owing to the absence of a cooperative culture. Given that Syrians were socialized in a deeply authoritarian system, even those who are fighting for a democratic system are inexperienced in the art of coalition building. Also, potential politicians have never been able really to measure their popularity in democratic contests. As a result, not a few of them overestimate their actual influence and tend to compete for leadership rather than cooperate.

Syria's opposition leaders do not need to sweep their political differences under the rug in order to gain the international community's support. They simply need to create a common body that all relevant groups on the ground can accept, as the Libyan opposition did when it set up the National Transitional Council.

After that, they should establish a legitimate authority inside Syria that can administer liberated areas, distribute aid, and provide services to civilians. Such a transitional authority could call upon the international community for needed support more easily than an exiled rebel group could.

The Syrian revolution is essentially a civilian and political rebellion against dictatorship – one that is gradually unraveling Assad's regime. The opposition must begin to lay the groundwork for a new order based on unity and cooperation. Otherwise, smaller groups of armed militants – supported, or even manipulated, by external actors – will dictate Syria's future.

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