

The Syrian Uprising: A Militant Leadership Monitor Special Report

Personalities Behind The Insurgency

QUARTERLY SPECIAL REPORT - APRIL 2012

THE SYRIAN UPRISING: A FOCUS ON PARTIES AND LEADERSHIP

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Sheikh Adnan al-Arour

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1111 16th St. NW, Suite #320
Washington, DC • 20036
Tel: (202) 483-8888
Fax: (202) 483-8337

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Introduction

In this "Quarterly Special Report (QSR) on The Syrian Uprising", we focus on the various parties and leadership involved in the uprising. The QSR on Syria discusses the roles of pivotal actors including the commander of the Free Syrian Army Riad al-Asaad and Sheikh Adnan al-Arour, a Sunni-backed Salafist cleric poised to step-in should Bashar al-Assad fall. We focus not only on the leadership of key movements but also fifteen opposition leaders who, although divided by sharp differences between religious parties and secular ones, have been given a new platform to voice their calls for reform.

Syria stands on the front lines of the geopolitical rivalry between the United States allies of the Sunni-led Persian Gulf monarchies on the one side and Iran on the other. For more than a year Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has resisted international calls to step down. The year-long uprising in Syria has brought the country to the brink of civil war, and this QSR on Syria seeks to introduce some of the major figures involved in the conflict.

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Measuring the Temperature of Revolt in Syria: A One-Year Assessment

Chris Zambelis

March 15 marked what many regard as the first anniversary of the start of the uprising against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and his Baathist regime. As events continue to develop at rapid pace, it is worth taking stock of the state of the revolt and the health of the incumbent regime.

Taking their cue from the monumental developments that toppled entrenched despots and continue to shake the foundations of sclerotic political structures in the Arab world, Syrians took to the streets to protest the corruption, institutional failure, poverty, and authoritarianism that typify life in Syria. Initial calls from protesters for political reforms escalated into demands that al-Assad and the oligarchy of political, business, and military elites that surround him abdicate their control of Syria. The regime demonstrated early on its eagerness to use repression to eradicate threats to its monopoly on power. Al-Assad unleashed Syria's security forces to violently crush exhibitions of dissent. The regime also broadcast its own counter-narrative to the narrative conveyed by the protesters. Amid brutal crackdowns in emerging pockets of opposition in Deraa, Idlib, Hama, Homs, and elsewhere, al-Assad summarily dismissed the grievances highlighted in the demonstrations as propaganda crafted by nefarious foreign forces; Syrians engaged in opposition activities were labeled as "gangs" and "terrorists," essentially enemies of the state (al-Jazeera [Doha], March 24, 2011).

Heightening tensions and growing body counts inflicted by the regime on the largely peaceful protests – the United Nations (UN) claims that up to 9,000 Syrians have been killed since the start of the uprising – compelled members of the Syrian military to defect and turn their arms against the state (al-Jazeera, April 1). Boosted by civilian volunteers, the rise of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) – a loosely knit insurgent movement that has come to act as the de facto military wing of the opposition – added a new and particularly dangerous element to the turmoil in Syria. In many respects, the militarization of the uprising in Syria has brought the country to the brink of civil war (*Terrorism Monitor*, December 16,

2011). Yet, in the face of growing international pressure over the dire humanitarian situation, persisting political unrest and violent rebellion, and hostile geopolitical machinations directed by Syria's rivals against his regime, al-Assad remains defiant.

Political Opposition

Understanding the state of political opposition to al-Assad is crucial to unpacking the conditions that gave rise to the insurgency. Overall, the organized political opposition to al-Assad remains weak and fractured. From the onset, the Syrian National Council (SNC), a broad-based umbrella movement composed of an assortment of opposition activists, including Islamists linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, was mired by controversy.[1] Founded by opposition figures operating in exile, the SNC has been likened by the regime and its other detractors as a tool of Syria's enemies. The SNC's repeated calls for foreign military intervention by Western powers and the Arab League in Syria have been held up as proof by the regime of its ties to hostile actors seeking to destabilize Syria (Al-Arabiya [Dubai], March 12). In advocating for a free and democratic Syria, the SNC purports to speak on behalf of all Syrians, irrespective of sect, class, and ethnicity. At the same time, the SNC is reputed to be dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist currents with a history of violence, including ultraconservative Salafists. The privileged place Syria's Alawite Muslim minority occupies within the Baathist ruling hierarchy – al-Assad and other leading regime figures are Alawites – is a point of grievance among Syria's majority Sunni population. Islamist militants and many orthodox Muslims consider Alawites to be heretics. As a result, Syrian Sunnis sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood or extremist Salafist currents often frame their opposition to the regime through a sectarian prism. The specter of growing sectarianism in Syria is fueling concerns about the potential for the crisis to degenerate into a sectarian-driven civil war akin to what transpired in Iraq. The SNC's formal relationship with the FSA – the SNC has offered to pay FSA fighters salaries to sustain the insurgency – has also raised concerns about the influence of radical Islamists in the insurgency (al-Jazeera, April 1).

The purported influence of radical Islamists within the SNC coupled with its calls for foreign military intervention has caused many of its original allies and supporters to break ranks with the group. Numerous secular- and left-leaning political parties and movements

and others wary of the SNC's pedigree established the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) in late 2011.[2] While staunchly opposed to the regime, the NCC is firmly against any foreign involvement in Syria (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], October 18, 2011). Networks of activists operating under the auspices of the independently-led Local Coordination Committees of Syria (LCCS) in Syria and abroad also continue to organize opposition to al-Assad (*al-Akhbar*, January 17).[3]

Armed Rebellion

The start of the insurgency signaled a dangerous escalation in the uprising. Led by Air Force colonel Riyad Musa al-Asa'd and other defecting officers from the Syrian military, the FSA officially declared its existence in July 2011. The FSA claims to be acting in defense of Syrians. In doing so, the FSA sought to unify the disparate pockets of armed opposition against the Syrian security forces under a common banner. The FSA operates primarily out of the southern Turkish province of Hatay, located adjacent to Syria's northern border with Turkey. Hatay and other parts of southern Turkey are hosting thousands of Syrian refugees who have fled the violence back home. The FSA is also operating out of northern Lebanon. Lebanon is also serving as a haven for Syrian refugees. The FSA is also reported to have established a presence in Jordan and even Iraq. FSA members are equipped with light weapons, essentially the arms carried by the defectors as they abandoned their military positions. While Turkey denies that it is lending tactical and operational support to the FSA, Ankara is perfectly placed to shape the group's actions should it decide to change course. The FSA has staged a series of attacks against Syrian military and security personnel as well as facilities linked to the Baath Party. To bolster its credentials within opposition circles, the FSA leadership is also coordinating with the SNC and other activists.

The sectarian composition of the FSA has raised trepidation about its ties to radical Islamist organizations. The FSA is dominated by low-ranking Sunni conscripts and officers, many of who hail from some of Syria's most religiously conservative regions. Moreover, a number of prominent radical Islamist ideologues, including al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, have voiced their support for the armed uprising (*al-Jazeera*, February 12). Prominent Salafist clerics in Lebanon have also endorsed the FSA (*Terrorism Monitor*, August 4, 2011). The FSA refutes accusations that it is an extremist movement or

that radical Islamist extremists have infiltrated its ranks. At the same time, a number of FSA units have adopted religiously-themed names, including names that suggest affinities for Salafist ideologies. A series of car and suicide bombings in Damascus in December 2011 and subsequent suicide attacks in the capital and Aleppo in January, February, and March 2012 confirmed the worst fears about the ideological trajectory of the insurgency. The attacks, which resulted in hundreds of dead and wounded, are reminiscent of the kinds of attacks that have become the signature of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The previously unknown al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant eventually claimed responsibility for the attacks in Damascus and Aleppo (Al-Arabiya, March 21). It is unclear whether the al-Nusra Front is formally connected to the FSA. Nevertheless, the militarization of the uprising has served as fertile ground for radical Islamists keen on gaining a foothold in Syria. Reports that foreign-born radical Islamists have infiltrated Syria from across the Arab world to fight alongside the FSA are also appearing with increasingly frequency (*al-Akhbar*, March 7). Incidentally, these trends have vindicated the regime's position about the true nature of the opposition. Syria's Christian, Alawite, Druze, and Shia minority communities along with secular Sunnis fearful of the spread of radical Islam in Syrian society remain steadfast in their support of the regime over fears of the alternative.

Geopolitics

Geopolitical considerations are also shaping events in Syria. Due to the regime's ties with Iran, Hizballah, Hamas – the so-called “Resistance Axis” – the evolving crisis in Syria must also be viewed in the context of the competition between regional adversaries and alliance blocs. Syria is on the front lines of the larger rivalry between U.S. allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the other Sunni-led Persian Gulf monarchies that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on the one side and Iran on the other. The Saudi-led GCC bloc exploits the Shia Islamist character of the Islamic Republic and its Alawite-led ally in Damascus as a propaganda weapon to stir up sectarian animosities between Sunni and Shia Muslims. The fall of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and the outbreak of popular demonstrations in seemingly stable autocracies such as Bahrain, Iraq's steady drift into Iran's orbit, and Hizballah's continued influence in Lebanon have put the Saudi-led alliance bloc on the offensive. In this regard, the potential fall or prolonged destabilization of the regime in Damascus

strengthens Riyadh's strategic posture in relation to Tehran. Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners appear intent to exploit these circumstances. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for instance, have called for the arming of the FSA (al-Jazeera, April 5). Reports suggesting the presence of radical Islamists within the FSA are unlikely to deter Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies from supporting the armed rebellion against al-Assad. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia and the GCC have a long history of supporting violent Salafists and other strains of Sunni militancy to advance their foreign policy objectives.

The U.S.- and Saudi-backed March 14 coalition in Lebanon is also supporting the political and armed uprising in Syria. The March 14 coalition includes former Lebanese prime minister Sa'ad Hariri's Sunni-dominated Future Movement and the support of Lebanon's Salafist community. The March 14 coalition sees the revolt in Syria as an opportunity to boost its position in Lebanese politics relative to its main rival, the March 8 coalition; the March 8 coalition includes Hizballah and other pro-Syrian political parties and movements. Eager to protect its own interests in Syria, Turkey continues to host the SNC and other Syrian opposition movements as well as FSA leaders. Turkey is also wary of the potential for instability in Syria to affect the Kurdish activism. Israel is also watching events in Syria closely. On the surface, continued instability in Syria would appear to weaken Israel's adversaries Iran and Hizballah. Yet the Baathist regime has proved itself to be predictable adversary for Israel. This is the case even as Israel continues to occupy Syria's Golan Heights region. While Syria has largely abided by its ceasefire agreements with Israel, a post-Baathist Syria may not acquiesce to the current status quo. Instead, a post-al-Assad Syria may opt to muster armed resistance against the Israeli presence on its soil modeled on Hizballah's successful efforts in southern Lebanon.

Outlook

The regime recently declared victory over the rebellion after security forces ousted insurgents from key opposition strongholds such as the Baba Amr section of Homs and the northern province of Idlib. The regime also accepted a United Nations (UN) peace plan aimed at halting the bloodshed (al-Jazeera, March 31). There is little evidence, however, to indicate that a concrete ceasefire is on the horizon. Peaceful and violent resistance against the regime persists in the midst of ongoing crackdowns by the security forces. Continued unrest and rebellion may certainly threaten the long-

term viability of the regime. At this point, however, al-Assad's position appears secure.

The regime's ability to endure can be attributed to a number of factors. Even as Syrian deputy oil minister Abdo Hussameldin announced his resignation from his post in March – Hussameldin is the highest ranking civilian Baathist official to abandon the regime – al-Assad continues to enjoy strong support among critical constituencies across Syria. This includes a significant portion of the Sunni Arab majority and Syria's numerous sectarian minority communities (al-Jazeera, March 8). For the time being, the Sunni and other merchant classes in Damascus and Aleppo also continue to stand with al-Assad even as increasingly harsher economic sanctions hinder their ability to conduct business. The weak and fractured political opposition has so far posed little direct threat to al-Assad, even as the regime's legitimacy continues to plummet amid increasing casualties and oppression. Al-Assad also appears to have successfully mitigated the threat of a revolt among Syria's ethnic Kurdish minority in the country's north and northeastern provinces in the early months of the uprising (*Terrorism Monitor*, June 2, 2011). On the diplomatic front, in addition to Iran, Syria counts on the support of Iraq and Lebanon. Russia and China also continue to lend al-Assad critical diplomatic and moral support. Meanwhile, threats of foreign intervention led by the United States and Arab League seem empty. The diplomatic support al-Assad enjoys from his allies bolsters his position on the international stage and, most importantly, enables his regime to circumvent the numerous economic sanctions packages that have been levied against Syria. Even Jordan, a rival of Syria, has disregarded the various economic sanctions placed on Syria after weighing the economic consequences of cutting trade and business ties with Damascus (al-Jazeera, December 9, 2011).

While defections from the Syrian military continue, critical sections such as the Third and Fourth Armored Divisions, Republican Guard, and other units as well as the various branches of the intelligence services remain loyal to al-Assad. Critical units in the military and branches of the intelligence services charged with crushing the opposition – both political and violent – are led largely by Alawite officers and other loyalists, including members of al-Assad's family, and remain invested in the survival of the regime. The regime can also continue to count on the irregular paramilitaries known as *shabiha* to augment the efforts of military and intelligence forces deployed against the opposition.

From a military perspective, the far better equipped and trained Syrian forces continue to rout the FSA units and other armed elements. Barring a major shift in the geopolitical landscape, the Baathist regime is poised to survive in the foreseeable future, but in a weakened state.

Chris Zambelis is an analyst and researcher specializing in Middle East affairs with Helios Global, Inc., a risk management group based in the Washington, DC area.

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Sheikh Adnan al-Arour: The Salafist “Godfather of the Syrian Revolution”

Jacob Zenn

If the uprising in Syria leads to the overthrow of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Saudi-backed Sheikh Adnan al-Arour will hold sway in the new Syria unlike any other religious, military, or political figure. It would only be the Sunnis in support of al-Arour, however. His fiery call to “mince [the Alawites] who violated all that is sacred in grinders and feed their flesh to the dogs” is but one reason why many Syrians, including moderate Sunnis, have chosen to stick with the devil they know, Assad, than fight for what might come after him. [1]

A Salafist cleric based in Saudi Arabia, al-Arour’s power base within Syria is in the country’s Sunni-majority regions. Protest chants in support of al-Arour are illustrative of the geographic scope of his following: in the al-Khalideyah district of Homs people chanted, “The people want al-Arour;” in Hama they chanted, “It is too soon Master Al-Arour! Don’t give up. Hama’s men are your men. Say to the *Shabbiha* (intelligence) the people of Hama are slaughterers;” in the al-Zayeah district of Idlib they chanted, “It is too soon Master al-Arour. Don’t give up. Our Revolution is more than fine. Thank you, thank you, Wisal [television station];” in Jablah they chanted, “Master al-Arour. Don’t worry about a thing. We are your men and we are ready to drink blood when you order us;” and in Daraa they chanted, “It is still early Master al-Arour. Don’t surrender. Daraa will rebel against the government.” [2]

Syrian Roots

Born in Hama in 1948, al-Arour obtained a Salafist education in his youth and became a follower of the takfiri movement, an ideology in which Sunni Muslims oppose all people who they consider infidels, including the Shi’a and Alawites. Al-Arour studied under Sheikh Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, an influential Albanian Sunni Islamic scholar who lived in Syria during several periods of his life, and under Muhammad Nasib ar-Rifa’i, the self-proclaimed founder of the Salafi Da’wah in Syria who himself studied under al-Albani before the two split over their contrasting ideologies (Elnaif.com, November 26, 2011). Al-Arour is a scholar in his own right, having published several

works, including ‘Three Abandoned Prayers,’ ‘Laws of Obedience,’ and ‘The Lawful Testament.’

In 1972, al-Arour graduated from the University of Homs with a degree in education. During that time, he spent two years in military service where he served as a Lieutenant. He left Syria in 1974 to teach in Saudi Arabia and has not returned to his homeland since then (Alarabiya.net, August 15, 2011).

The circumstances of al-Arour’s departure from Syria are still debated, but according to official reports from Syria he was discharged from military service in 1971 for having raped several of his soldiers. He was convicted of rape on September 28, 1972 with the sentence number 507-208745. [3] He reportedly fled Syria to avoid a prison sentence for this crime, although his supporters argue that the government fabricated the allegations of homosexuality to discredit al-Arour for his opposition to the then Hafez al-Assad regime (Aawsat.com, June 17, 2011).

Al-Arour was officially exiled from Syria in 1982 when the Hafez al-Assad regime crushed an uprising in Hama led by the Muslim Brotherhood and killed as many as 20,000 people. Al-Arour was in Saudi Arabia at that time, but he allegedly belonged to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood throughout the 1980s and orchestrated car bombings and other attacks against Syrian military and academics who differed with his religious views (Syriasteps.com, June 2, 2011).

Exile in Saudi Arabia

Al-Arour now lives modestly in the Malaz neighborhood of Riyadh with his wife, who is also from Hama, and his three daughters and eight sons, all of whom were born in Saudi Arabia and do not hold Syrian citizenship. His 85-year-old mother, still in Syria, was detained after the start of the uprising in revenge for al-Arour’s opposition to the current Bashar al-Assad regime (Alarabiya.net, August 15, 2011).

In Saudi Arabia, al-Arour serves as the Director of Scientific Research and Publishing in Riyadh and is famous for his rebukes of Shi’ism and Sufism, an ideological persuasion that has won him the favor of the rulers in Saudi Arabia. For instance, he received the Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud Award for his studies of the Sunna of the Prophet. He purposefully does not talk much about his personal life, which is one reason why little is known about the more than three decades in

between his departure from Syria in the 1970s and the start of the uprising in 2011.

One television program on which al-Arour appeared before the start of the uprising called “Open Dialogue After Taraweeh” features debates between Sunnis and Shiites over religious matters. In this role, typical of his *takfiri* background, al-Arour is famous for making a mockery of Shiism and vehemently disproving and embarrassing Shi’a imams on doctrinal religious matters. [4] He has served the Saudi Kingdom well since the start of the Arab Spring by using the *takfiri* ideology to distinguish crackdowns by infidel rulers—such as Qaddafi in Libya (who was a *kafir* for changing the daw’a in his green book), the Alawites in Syria, and the Iranian Shi’a mullahs—from the good Sunni regimes, such as Saudi ally, Bahrain. Al-Arour justified the crackdown in Manama because the Shi’a protestors had chanted, “Iran, Iran, Iran.” [5]

Spokesman of the Protestors

Al-Arour was a natural selection for the Saudis to promote as the public face of the Syrian protestors. He has legitimacy for having been among the first Syrian clerics to criticize the Assad regime after the first instances of bloodshed were reported in Daraa in March 2011 and for having taken part in the uprising against Hafez al-Assad in 1982. Clerics like him had been given prime time television coverage after the start of the Arab Spring and al-Arour began appearing frequently on the Saudi Wisal and Kuwaiti al-Safa satellite television channels, both of which have a reputation for promoting religious enmity against Shiites. Through his televised appearances, al-Arour became a source of motivation and influence for Salafist anti-regime fighters in Syria. A communiqué from an armed group called the “Supporters of God Brigade” in Hama, for instance, declared allegiance to al-Arour and declared him the “leader of the Revolution (AINA.com, March 29).”

Al-Arour claims he is a preacher of non-violence and has said, “I challenge anyone to prove that I instigated the use of violence in any statement or television interview, and I always say we want peace....” In his speeches, al-Arour has stressed the tactical importance of peaceful rebellion against the regime to expose its brutality. He said, “If you are shot at, run away! But if they shoot at you, we will gain advantage from it! (Alarabiya.net, August 15, 2011)” He has also urged Syrians to flee to Turkey in order to embarrass the Syrian regime and sway international opinion.

He has criticized the inaction of the Arab League in Syria and appealed to Turkey to intervene, saying publicly on television that, “Mr. Erdogan, I think it is time to increase the real actions, the Syrian people welcome you even if you come with tanks... that is because you are Muslim, a patriot, and honest and noble....” [6] Al-Arour went so far as to say on February 10, 2012 on al-Safa TV that, “Good people, there is an unwritten law with regard to treating the wounded. I think we should even appeal to Israel. Maybe that would be easier. Perhaps they would give to us... we appeal to them to treat the wounded (MEMRI, February 15, 2012).”

One of al-Arour’s most famous public appearances was in January 2012 when he visited Libya and stood in front of a missile and said, “This [missile] should have been used against the enemies of the nation. It should have been filled with sugar, rice, and oil for the needy of Libya, the Arabs, the Muslims, and the entire world, instead of being loaded with shells, which left behind handicapped, wounded, bereaved, and orphans.... I’m afraid that the Libyans will be mad at me if I tell them that our tyrant is greater than theirs, despite all the tyranny Libya has undergone.... His criminality is more barbaric.... Beware, oh Syrian people, not to think that victory may come from the Arab League. Beware not to think that victory may come from NATO. Beware not to think that victory may come from the National Council, the Security Council, or anyone else. Victory comes from Allah... (Safa TV, January 2, 2012)”

But the main message of al-Arour is still hatred for the al-Assad regime and Alawaites. In his most viewed YouTube video, al-Arour tells the story of several fathers who went to a police station to inquire about their detained children. Al-Arour said, “Children were imprisoned and tortured... so their fathers went to see the security officer Atef Najib, one of the most disgraceful and most sinister people around President Bashar.... When the fathers asked Atef Najib about their children, he answered: Forget your children, go to your wives and make other babies and if you cannot make babies, bring your women and we will do it (Alarabiya, August 6, 2011).”

Conclusion

Thirty years after supporting the opposition in the Hama uprising of 1982, al-Arour now finds himself in position to take part in another attempt to overthrow the Assad regime, again from abroad, but this time the international media is his number one weapon. He has the full backing of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, which are supporting him as the public face of the protestors. If the uprising succeeds, his return to Syria after nearly four decades could possibly mirror the outpouring of emotion of Ayatollah Khomeini’s return to Iran in 1979, albeit in Syria and among Sunnis.

However, al-Arour will no doubt be a controversial figure in a new Syria. He is not the democrat that foreign supporters of the Free Syrian Army wish to see, nor is he a unifier of religious sects. What he represents is Saudi influence and Salafist ideology and hatred toward Iran and Hezbollah and anything Shi’a or Alawite. A Syria in which he holds power might maintain tolerable relations with the West, but it would be far from the liberal Syria that idealists envision in a post-Bashar al-Assad Syria.

Jacob Zenn is an analyst for the Jamestown Foundation who specializes in insurgent movements in Latin America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Central Asia. He is a lawyer and international security analyst based in Washington, DC. He runs an open-source research, translation, and due diligence team through zopensource.net and can be reached at zopensource123@gmail.com.

Notes:

[1] See 2:27. The Terrorist Adnan Arour threatening syrian minorities.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3lhyT3602Y>. July 13, 2011.

[2] The Syrian Revolution : Hatred Slogans and Extremism. http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=IpXE2M9bN2o#.

Jan. 26, 2012.

(Daraa) The Syrian Protesters - A Bunch of Extremists Loyal to Sheikhs who Promote Hatred.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=RXbFnH1C66c#. Jan. 31, 2012

[3] See 1:27. [Seditious Sheikh Adnan the Heretic Arour Practiced Sodomy]. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUn9BRWXWKY>. June 15, 2011.

[4] See 3:20. syrian sheikh adnan arour puts a trap for a rafidi. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6XhUfPdOEo&feature=related>. May 8, 2011

[5] [Sheikh Adnan Arour Slaps Hasan Nasrallah on the Face].

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QARXKXFmk4I&feature=related>. May 31, 2011.

[6] The Traitor Sheikh Adnan al-Arour invites Turkey to invade Syria.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=4fRzylwznc#! Oct. 7, 2011

Who's Who in the Syrian Opposition: An Overview of 15 Key Opposition Leaders

Sami Moubayed

Syria's opposition can by no means be viewed as one coherent group. It has sharp divisions between religious parties and secular ones, between old and new, and between radicals and moderates, those wanting to bring down the regime through evolution, while others are calling for a revolutionary approach, like foreign military intervention.

For nearly 50-years, all of the Syrian opposition figures were not allowed to practice politics through official channels, prompting them to head to the Syrian underground. The only thing that united them was opposition to the Syrian government, and identical stories of arrest and persecution. The Syrian uprising that began in mid-March 2011 gave these opposition figures a new platform on which they were to re-launch their careers, after years of being forgotten by the world, quarantined by society, and persecuted by the government, for their views. The profiles in this study by no means cover everybody who is anybody in the Syrian opposition. Nor does it break them down by prominence or political weight, since clearly some are by far more influential than the others. It tries to show a specimen of different kinds of Syrian opposition figures, ranging from the capitalistic businessman Riad Seif, onto the conservative Islamist Ali Sader al-Din al-Bayanuni, the communist Riad al-Turk, and finally, the liberal secular, Bourhan Ghalioun. Syrian society, of course, is all of the above.

Hussein al-Odat

A native of Daraa, Hussein al-Odat was born in 1937 and studied journalism, Arabic literature, and geography. He began his career as a schoolteacher in Daraa in the 1960s, joining the ruling Baath Party as a young man. In 1966, he co-founded the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) and served as its director until 1970. Between the years 1971-1981 he served as media consultant to Prime Ministers Abdul Rahman Khleifawi and Abdul Raouf al-Kassem. [1] In 1985 he began to teach journalism at Damascus University and from 1987-1995 was manager of a publishing house called al-Ahali. [2] In 2000, Odat became Managing Editor of *Akhbar al-Arab* newspaper in Abu Dhabi, and was very active with the ‘intellectual saloons’ that emerged with the Damascus Spring, shortly after the death of President Hafez al-Assad in June 2000. A former insider and a veteran Ba’athist, Odat knew the Syrian government inside out and was qualified to speak of its shortcomings, earning him plenty of admirers on the Syrian streets. In 2011, he joined the Coordination Committee, a coalition of secular, Kurdish, and pan-Arabist parties headed by veteran opposition figure Hasan Abdul Azeem. This of course was shortly after the Syrian uprising began in mid-March 2011. Odat and Abdul Azeem seek to democratize Syria through evolution, banking on their credentials as the “local opposition” that knows the country better than those who have been in exile for 30-40 years. They come across as moderates when compared to the foreign-based Syrian National Council (SNC). One of his main principles is refusing any kind of foreign intervention in Syria. [3] He is one of the few figures who is trusted and respected both by the opposition and by the Syrian government.

Bourhan Ghalion

Born in Homs, a city in the Syrian heartland in 1945, Bourhan Ghalioun studied philosophy at Damascus University and moved to France, where he spent his entire life, with a brief interruption in 1975-1978, during which he taught in Algeria. Until the Syrian uprising began in mid-March 2011, Ghalioun was director of the Centre d’Etudes sur l’Orient Contemporain (CEOC) and a professor of political science at Universite de Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle). In 2000-2001, he was member of the Damascus Spring, an intellectual movement that took place in the Syrian capital, revolved around intellectual debates at

political salons. [4] It was an intellectual movement that debated democracy and civil society in Syria, weeks into the era of Syria’s new President Bashar al-Assad. In August 2011, Ghalioun re-emerged as a founding member and rotating president of the Syrian National Council (SNC), a coalition of high profile opposition figures whose declared objective was to bring down the Syrian regime. [5] It was founded in Istanbul and strongly backed by several world players like the US, France, Qatar, and of course, Turkey itself. A major component of the SNC was the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which was strange for Ghalioun, given his strong secular background. In his capacity as president of the SNC, Ghalioun has made several addresses to the people of Syria, broadcasted via the Doha-based al-Jazeera TV, promising democracy[6] He has sharply been criticized by the Coordination Council that is headed by the Damascus-based opposition figure Hassan Abdul Azeem and its president-in-exile, Haitham Manaa. Both figures accuse Ghalioun of hijacking the Syrian opposition and monopolizing it in the hands of the SNC. Others criticize the SNC for its high Muslim Brotherhood representation and the fact that no Alawites are present in its ranks. To date, however, it is the most high profile opposition group, and has already been recognized by the new leaders of Libya and is likely to obtain similar recognition by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Aref Dalilah

Aref Dalilah was born in Latakia in 1943 and studied at Damascus University, obtaining a PhD from Moscow University in 1972. Between the years 1972-1981, he taught at Aleppo University, and then traveled to Kuwait to work as an economic consultant. In 1986, Dalilah returned to Syria to teach at Damascus University, where he became Dean of the Faculty of Economics. In September 2001, Dalilah gave a speech at the Atassi Forum which led to his arrest. [7] He was tried in Damascus and sentenced to 10-years in jail, but was released in August 2008, three years before completing his sentence. He now stands as an independent opposition figure who is close to Russia, and who is willing to settle for democratizing the regime, rather than bringing it down aggressively. [8] Like many of the “domestic opposition” Dalilah is not enthusiastic about foreign intervention in Syria,

neither Arab nor Western, and opposes any military attack to bring down the Syrian regime. Like Hussein al-Odat and Hassan Abdul Azeem, he is someone who is trusted both by the opposition and by the government itself.

Riad Seif

Born in Damascus to a middle class family in 1946, Riad Seif enrolled at Damascus University but dropped out before obtaining his degree to work as an industrialist. He set up a successful men's wear factory called "400" and became manufacturer under license for Adidas sportswear in Syria. [9] In 1994, he ran for Parliament as an independent. He was re-elected in 1998. After 2000, Seif established an 'intellectual saloon' at his residence and tried to create a political party called the Movement for Social Peace, but was arrested in September 2001 for "attempting to change the constitution through illegitimate means." [10] Among other things, Seif demanded a new Constitution for Syria and for ending the Baath Party's role as "leader of state and society" as mentioned in the 1973 Constitution. Because of his views, he was sentenced to five years in jail. [11] Seif was released in 2005 only to be re-arrested briefly several times since then, the last being in mid-2011. He now markets himself as a political liberal and independent opposition figure, representing the Damascus business community. He is the only former businessman in the Syrian opposition.

Riad al-Turk

Turk was born in Homs in 1930. He joined the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) and was arrested for his views during the era of President Adib al-Shishakli in 1952. [12] Opposition to Gamal Abdul Nasser got him into trouble again, and he was put in jail during the Syrian-Egyptian Union in 1960-1961. When the Baathists came to power in 1963, Turk fled to Lebanon only to return in 1970. He quarreled with the Communist Party leader Khaled Bakdash over the latter's decision to join the National Progressive Front (NPF), a parliamentary coalition of socialist parties under umbrella of the Baath. As a result, Turk left the Communist Party and established the Syrian Communist Party – Political Bureau, which was accused of having strong Maoist tendencies. In October 1980 he was arrested for the third and longest period in his career, remaining in jail until May 1998.

Hailed by the opposition as Syria's Mandela, he has not played an active role in the current uprising, but rather, is viewed as a grandfatherly figure by the young men and women on the streets—a person they trust and respect. [13] He carries symbolic influence, rather than real political clout in today's opposition.

Michel Kilo

The son of a policeman, Michel Kilo was born in Latakia in 1940. He grew up as a staunch secular, studying journalism in Egypt and Germany. Kilo worked for years at the Ministry of Culture. [14] A prolific writer, he wrote frequently for the Arabic press and was arrested briefly for his views in the 1970s, forcing him to flee to France. Kilo returned in the 1991 and began writing frequently for the Beirut daily, *Annahar*. In 2000-2001 he was active in the Damascus Spring and then in the 2005 Damascus Declaration. [15] In 2005, he signed a petition with Lebanese figures and was later arrested, being released from jail in May 2009. He joined the Coordination Committee of Hasan Abdul Azeem in 2011, but then resigned, toying with the idea of joining the SNC, but then settling as an independent opposition figure from his current residence in Paris. He has refused to join the high profile Syrian National Council (SNC) that is currently headed by the Sorbonne University professor Bourhan Ghalioun.

Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni

The ex-chief of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni was born in Aleppo in 1938. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood as a young man in the mid-1950s and rose within party ranks until becoming Deputy General Supervisor in 1977. Two years later, as the Brotherhood clashed with the Syrian government, Bayanuni was exiled to Jordan, and he stayed there until Jordanian authorities asked him to leave in 2000, following a Jordanian-Syrian rapprochement. Bayanouni, who had become chief of the Syrian Brotherhood, took up residence in London. In 2006 he teamed with Syria's ex-Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam, with whom he co-founded the Syrian Salvation Front—an exiled opposition movement that failed to attract any power base in Syria. In 2011, he joined the Syrian National Congress (SNC), which was headed by secular opposition figure Burhan Ghalioun, bent on bringing down the regime in Syria. Bayanuni is close to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in

Turkey and on very good terms with its chief, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In August 2011, he penned an article for *The Guardian* outlining his views, demanding a “free conference of all the nationalist forces in Syria, enabling Syrians to develop a collective national alternative. Syria is an ancient civilization; it needs no external guidance or foreign intervention to determine its future.” [16] The SNC is backed by the Turks, after all, who managed to convince seculars like Ghalioun to work together with Islamists like Bayanuni, which seemed to many as a very unorthodox alliance.

Haitham al-Maleh

A judge turned attorney and political activist, Haitham al-Maleh was born in Damascus in 1931. He studied law at Damascus University and began his political activity during the era of President Adib al-Shishakli in the early 1950s. In 1958-1966 he served as a judge in Syrian courts, only to get dismissed by the Baathists after they came to power in 1963 for criticizing the martial law that they imposed on Syria. He then became a full time human rights lawyer who since 1989, has worked with Amnesty International. In 1980-1987, Maleh served prison time for his critical views of the government, via the Lawyers Bar Association. In May 2001, Maleh co-founded the Human Rights Association in Syria and was elected as its first President. In October 2009 he was arrested again for speaking on opposition news channel, Barada TV, and served time in jail despite his old age, celebrating his 80th birthday behind bars. [17] Maleh was eventually released on March 13, 2011, days before the Syrian uprising broke out. Maleh has since fled abroad, where he joined the Syrian National Council (SNC), a broad coalition of exiled politicians (both secular and Islamist) focused on regime change in Syria.[18]

Fayez Sara

Born in the village of Jeroud in 1950, Fayez Sara grew up in rural Syria and moved to Damascus with his family, then to Lebanon to study political science. [19] The war of 1967 forced him to abort his studies in order to return to Syria, where he became active with Syrian Communists and took up writing as a full-time profession. His views landed him in jail during the years 1978-1980 and upon his release, became more active and famous as a Syrian Communist. [20]

In 1991, Sara famously initiated a petition signed by leading intellectuals opposing Syria’s participation in the Gulf War against Iraq. In 2005, he was a member of the Damascus Declaration and in April 2011, he was briefly arrested for one month and a half in Damascus. [21] He is one of the moderate opposition figures, who refused to join any of the broad coalition groups created after the uprising of 2011, insisting on coming across as an independent.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh

Yassin al-Haj Saleh was born in the al-Raqqa province in 1961. He enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine at Aleppo University in 1978 but was arrested one year later for membership in the outlawed Communist Party-Political Bureau of Riad al-Turk. [22] He disappeared in Syrian jails for the next 16-years, and immediately after being released, re-enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine. [23] He graduated at the age of 40 in 2000, but never practiced medicine, concentrating instead on cultural, literary, and political activism. Al-Haj Saleh appears frequently on TV and writes for the London-based *al-Hayat* newspaper, in addition to the cultural supplement of the Beirut daily, *Annahar*. Additionally, he is one of the founders of the Damascus Declaration, and considered one of the most outspoken, daring, and intelligent political commentators in Syria.

Haitham Manaa

Born in the southern town of Daraa in 1951, Haitham Manaa grew up in a political family where both his mother and father were former prisoners. His uncle Hussein was a prominent Baathist who shifted into the opposition in the 1990s. As a young man, he harbored communist views, volunteering to serve with Palestinian commandos during their September 1970 war with Jordan. Because of his those views, Manaa was forced to flee Syria in 1978, shortly after being elected to the Political Bureau of the outlawed Communist Workers Party. [24] Manaa settled in France, and in 2003, was invited back to Syria when he publically said that no Syrian opposition figure would return home onboard a US tank, shortly after the invasion of Baghdad.

Manaa currently serves as spokesman of the Arab Human Rights Organization and head of the Coordination Committees in exile. He is loudly opposed to the Syrian National Council (SNC), the exiled group of opposition figures who are allied to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In a recent interview on Lebanese satellite TV, he called them, “an assortment of beggars” for seeking international support to bring down the Syrian regime, claiming that regime change should take place from within, with no outside intervention and certainly, no military operations. Manaa, whose brother was killed early in the 2011 uprising, is considered one of the most sensible figures in the Syrian opposition, who commands strong respect in the Syrian street but is viewed with scrutiny by opposition hard-liners who want to bring down the regime at any cost—even if it is foreign military intervention. Briefly in early 2012, the Syrian government toyed with the idea of appointing him Prime Minister—as part of a democracy package that had been requested explicitly by the Russians. [25] Manaa would have been willing to join such a deal, if proper guarantees were given, and if real powers were given to the Prime Minister, where he comes across as a credible figure, and not a rubber stamp premiere, as most premiers have been in Syria since the Baathists came to power in 1963. [26] The idea, however, collapsed before getting past the drawing board. It further drained relations between him and the SNC, with certain figures accusing him of being too soft, while others accused him of “selling out” to the Baathists—which of course—was not true.

Fidaa Hawrani

Fidaa Hawrani is the daughter of Akram Hawrani, a veteran leader of the Baath Party during the years 1952-1963. Her father, a former Speaker of Parliament and Vice-President, was one of the heavyweights during Syria’s short-lived parliamentary democracy in the 1950s. He is considered “godfather” of the socialist movement in Syria who almost single-handedly revamped rural Syria in the 1950s, awakening its political appetite for power and change from the capitalistic and landowning system that had prevailed since Ottoman times. Born and raised in Damascus in 1956, Fidaa grew up under the towering influence of her father, and was exiled with him when the Baath Party came to power in the 1960s, first to Lebanon and then to Iraq. She studied medicine at the University of Baghdad and became active in politics at an early age.

A native of Hama, she now operates a hospital in the city that caters to the wounded in the current uprising. Her hands-on community work in Hama has made her a prime opposition leader in the city, challenging the Muslim Brotherhood, who traditionally, have always had the upper hand in Hama. [27] Hawrani was one of the founders of the Damascus Declaration and in December 2007, served as president of the opposition group, which led to her arrest by Syrian authorities. She was released in June 2010. [28]

Louai Hussein

A book publisher and political activist who rose to fame during Syrian uprising that started in mid-March 2011, Louai Hussein was born in Damascus in 1960. An early member in the outlawed Communist Workers Party, he was arrested for his underground activity in 1984-1991. Upon release he devoted his time to writing articles and books, establishing Petra Publishing House in Damascus. [29] In March 2011, he was arrested in the Syrian capital, only days after outbreak of the Syrian uprising. [30] Shortly after his release, Hussein engaged in dialogue with the Syrian government, aimed at democratizing the Syrian regime from within, rather than bringing it down by force, as the case in Egypt, or through military intervention, as the case in Libya. More recently, he established a coalition called, “Movement for Building the State” bringing several opposition figures under one umbrella that tries at pushing for democratic change from within Syria, rather than through foreign military intervention.

Hasan Abdul Azeem

Hassan Abdul Azeem was born in Tal Mneen, a village in the Damascus vicinity in 1932. He studied law at Damascus University and has worked as an attorney since 1957. Abdul Azeem was very active in supporting Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser and creation of the Syrian-Egyptian Union in 1958. When union collapsed, a disenchanted Abdul Azeem teamed up with his friend and colleague Jamal Atassi to form the Democratic Arab Socialist Unionist Party, aimed mainly at restoring the Syrian-Egyptian Union. [31] In 1964, he was co-founder of the unlicensed Arab Socialist Union that was headed by Atassi, and rose in rank to become deputy secretary-general in 1985. When Atasi died in the summer of 2000, Abdul Azeem

replaced him as the party's Number One. [32]

During his prolific career, Abdul Azeem was arrested several times, the first in 1963 and the latest being in 2011. After the Syrian uprising broke out in March 2011, Abdul Azeem founded and chaired the Coordination Committee, a broad coalition of seculars, Arab nationalists, and Kurds, who have been involved in serious talks with the Russians, the Brits, and the Arab League, aimed at democratizing the Syrian regime. The group's main policies are: no to sectarianism, no to foreign intervention, and no to violence in Syria. He is reportedly a favorite of Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi, who like him is an Arab nationalist at heart. [33] Abdul Azeem, like his colleague Haitham Manaa, is willing to settle for democratization from within, and is opposed to outside intervention, as requested by the Syrian National Council (SNC). [34] If a "democracy package" were to pass in Syria, with Russia's fingerprints all over it, Abdul Azeem would certainly get to name ministers in any cabinet—but due to old age—he would not assume a government job at this stage. He is one of the most moderate and high profile figures in the Syrian opposition that is based inside Syria, who is trusted both by the Syrian government and the Syrian street—especially in the Damascus suburbs—where he is by far more powerful than any of the other opposition figures, including the SNC.

Radwan Ziadeh

A dentist turned politician, Rawdan Ziadeh was born in rural Damascus in 1977 and studied dentistry at Damascus University. Years later when he went to the U.S., he continued his education at Harvard University. In 2001-2002, he worked as editor-in-chief of Tayarat Magazine and was secretary of the Syrian Organization for Transparency. Ziadeh played an important role in the "Damascus Spring" and served on the Board of the U.S.-based Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID). [35] He is the founder and director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies and co-founder and executive director of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Washington DC. He is one of the big names on the Executive Council of the Syrian National Council (SNC), a broad coalition of opposition figures in exile, headed currently by Bourhan Ghalioun. In recent months he has toured world capitals with the SNC, meeting with the Foreign

Ministers of Turkey and Russia, the Foreign Secretary of the UK, and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Dr. Sami Moubayed is a Syrian writer and political analyst. He is the author of many books on Syria including Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000 (Cune Press 2005).

Notes:

1. Author interview with Hussein al-Odat, August 9, 2005.
2. Ibid.
3. Al-Watan Online, January 1, 2012.
4. Forward Syria, "Old vs. New Guard in the Syrian Opposition", August 2011.
5. RIA Novostia, "Sorbonne professor appointed head of Syrian opposition council", August 30, 2011.
6. Al-Jazeera TV, November 5, 2011.
7. Author interview with Aref Dalilah, February 2, 2001.
8. Forward Syria, "Old vs. New Guard in the Syrian Opposition", August 2011.
9. Author interview with Riad Seif, July 16, 2001.
10. The Daily Star, September 15, 2001.
11. The Daily Star, "Riad Seif to run for office from behind bars", May 10, 2001.
12. Forward Syria, "Old vs. New Guard in the Syrian Opposition", August 2011.
13. Al-Hayat, July 29, 2011.
14. Author interview with Michel Kilo, February 20, 2005.
15. Ibid.
16. The Guardian, August 30, 2011.
17. The Guardian, July 4, 2010.
18. Forward Syria, "Old vs. New Guard in the Syrian Opposition", August 2011.
19. Al-Akhbar, "Fayez Sara: Al-Rajul Allazi Absar Rabiyan (Fayez Sara: The Man Who Saw Spring)", August 11, 2011.
20. Forward Syria, "Old vs. New Guard in the Syrian Opposition", August 2011.
21. Al-Emirates Al-Yawm, April 21, 2011.
22. Reason Magazine, "Interview with Yassin Al-Haj Saleh", May 5, 2005.
23. The New York Times, "Prisoner of Damascus", April 10, 2011.
24. Forward Syria, "Old vs New Guard in the Syrian Opposition", August 2011.
25. Asia Times Online, "Russia's Democracy Package for Syria", January 7, 2012.

- 26. Ibid.
- 27. Forward Syria, “Old vs. New Guard in the Syrian Opposition”, August 2011.
- 28. France 24, June 27, 2010.
- 29. Forward Syria, “Old vs. New Guard in the Syrian Opposition”, August 2011.
- 30. Alsharq Alaqsat, March 23, 2011.
- 31. Al-Akhbar, “Hassan Abdul Azeem: Syria’s Homegrown Dissident”, September 21, 2011.
- 32. Ibid.
- 33. Gulf News, Russia seeks a win-win solution for Syria”, January 31, 2012.
- 34. BBC, Syrian opposition rivals in Cairo scuffle, November 9, 2012.
- 35. Forward Syria, “Old vs. New Guard in the Syrian Opposition”, August 2011.

The Right Hand of Bashar al-Assad: A Profile of Maher al-Assad

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

The younger brother of Bashar al-Assad, Maher al-Assad (1967), was in the past relatively unknown. Recently, he has become notorious as the ‘Butcher of Homs’ (The Times, March 3). He is seen as the alleged mastermind behind government repression. As a result he is often compared to his uncle Rifaat al-Assad, who brutally crushed the 1982 uprising in Hama, but lost his power after a failed coup attempt against Hafez al-Assad.

Background

Maher al-Assad (1967) was born in Damascus, and is married to Manal Jadaan al-Assad with two children (Global Post, June 27, 2011). He received his secondary education at the Academy of Freedom School, where all of al-Assad’s sons studied [1]. There are claims that during his time in school Maher was a misanthropic and sullen teenager, who found solace in combat sports and weapons (Le Express, March 15, 2011).

He initially studied business in Damascus (The Majalla, Nov 2, 2011), but after finishing his degree he entered the military service [2]. When his older brother Basil died in a car accident in 1994, there was speculation he would be the successor of Hafez al-Assad. Instead Hafez chose Bashar, who lacked Maher’s military experience and had studied to be an ophthalmologist in London [3].

Succession issues

Some say Maher was too young to succeed Hafez [4], while others suggest Maher was seen as too unstable and aggressive to succeed his father (The Majalla, Nov 2, 2011). The latter viewpoint was in large circulation in 1999 after he shot his brother-in-law, General Assef Shawqat, over Maher’s disapproval of Shawqat’s relationship with Bushra, his elder sister [5]. They were also rumoured to struggle over who had the ear of the president (CNN, March 26, 2012).

Syria expert Joshua Landis argues the opposite - that Bashar was groomed to become a leader by his father, while Maher was supposed to become the enforcer

(New York Times, June 7, 2011). During Bashar's preparations for leadership, Maher was improving his military capabilities by commanding a Republican Guard brigade, which also allowed him to establish personal ties with military officers (BBC, May 18 2011). After his father died in 2000, Maher was promoted from the rank of major to lieutenant colonel and later became part of the Central Committee of the ruling Ba'ath party [6].

Military Connections

Maher al-Assad became known as an intelligent military officer who was well-organized but also had a cruel streak (New York Times, June 7, 2011), and established a reputation for strong and ruthless leadership when he took command of the elite Fourth Division and Republican Guard brigade (The Majalla, Nov 2, 2011).

Maher has remained a close advisor to Bashar, and allegedly persuaded President al-Assad to curtail his political openness in 2000, during the short lived 'Damascus Spring' (BBC, May 18, 2011).

Maher continued to play a role in security and intelligence matters. In 2003, Maher al-Assad allegedly attended a series of informal meetings in Jordan with Israeli officials to discuss the resumption peace talks that eventually failed (Haaretz, May 6, 2003). Later, he was accused of sending weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon to pressure Israel, and was allegedly behind the order to withdraw Syrian troops from northern Lebanon (Intelligence Online, March 21, 2003). In 2004, he was part of a delegation to talk with Kurdish leaders, after Syrian security forces crushed a Kurdish uprising in northern Syria [7].

A year later, both Maher and Shawkat, were mentioned in a preliminary report by United Nations investigators as one of the people who might have planned the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (BBC, May 18, 2011).

Business Ties

Although Maher al-Assad is known for his military role, he also has ties with several important Syrian companies, businessmen and has played an important role in Lebanon's economy [8]. The al-Assad family continues to dominate Syria's political, military security and economy. As a result Maher and his cronies'

actions were sanctioned by the regime and his heavy-handed tactics against demonstrators financed by the government.

Businessmen Khalid Qaddur, Raif al-Quwatli, Mohammed Hamcho, and Rami Makhlouf enjoy close ties to Maher al-Assad. Rami Makhlouf, Maher's cousin, controls as much as 60 percent of Syria's economy (The Majalla, Nov 2, 2011), and did business with Maher in Lebanon. There are, however, some tensions between the two [9].

Maher's involvement with Al-Shahba Telecommunications Limited has undergone scrutiny. It is a firm set up by Soulieman Mahmoud Marouf, Mohammed Hamcho and Maher's office manager Khalid Qaddur. Maher has used the business to acquire sniper guns for Syria's militias (Mettransparent, April 24, 2011). In 2006, MP Saad Hariri told U.S. officials that Waheeb Company, a partner of Maher al-Assad, was used to smuggle nerve gas to Lebanon (Wikileaks, Sep 18, 2006).

Other allegations suggest that Maher controlled the media site Cham Press through Mohammed Hamcho (4), and that Maher benefited from a billion dollar money laundering operation at the Lebanese al-Madina bank, which was involved in the UN oil-for-food scandal (Fortuna Magazine, May 4, 2006). Furthermore, he is allegedly involved in the cross-border trafficking of drugs and weapons, and has control over Al-Dunya TV, which is dedicated to the regime's propaganda (Le Express, March 15, 2011).

The Butcher of Hama

Despite Maher's long history of participation in Syrian politics, he recently acquired a bigger name for himself by suppressing Syria's uprising that began in 2011. There are claims he participated personally in the killing and torturing of opposition activists. The Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan personally criticized Al-Assad's brother for killing civilians in June 2011 (Today's Zaman, June 10, 2011).

According to Syria expert Raymond Hinnebusch, the uprising only served to further empower Maher al-Assad as well as other hardliners [10]. A Syrian diplomat suggested that Maher's control of Syria's security apparatus makes him "first in command, not second in command" (New York Times, June 7, 2011).

Rumors have also increased that Maher might challenge his brother's rule – much like his uncle Rifaat tried to do against his father in 1983 (BBC, May 18, 2011). But there is no evidence that he has sufficient power to do this, and Bashar al-Assad himself rejected the rumours that Maher would seek to take the reins of power by betraying his family (Al Arabiya, June 20, 2011).

In the end, Maher is proving to be vital to the survival of the al-Assad dynasty in Syria. Syrian state documents show that the cohesion of the Syrian army depends heavily upon Maher, and confirms his crucial role in the crackdown (Telegraph, August 9, 2011). Maher's Fourth Armoured Division succeeded in driving out the rebels in the Baba Amr district of Homs which marks a temporary success in the counterinsurgency campaign of al-Assad's regime (AFP, March 2 2012).

It is clear that the unrest in Syria is not yet over and Maher al-Assad will most likely continue to play a leading role in the Syrian political landscape.

Wladimir van Wilgenburg studied Journalism and New Media at Leiden University and is studying international relations at the University of Utrecht. Van Wilgenburg writes freelance articles on the Middle East and is an editor at the Kurdish newspaper Rudaw, based in Erbil, northern Iraq.

Note:

[1] "Maher Al-Assad: brother of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad". Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, 2 (7), August 2000: http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0008_sd1.htm

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Shmuel Bar, "Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview", Comparative Strategy, 25: 2006: http://www.herzliyaconference.org/_Uploads/2590Bashars.pdf

[6] "Maher Al-Assad ". Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, 2 (7).

[7] Gary C. Gambill, "The Kurdish Reawakening in Syria", Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, 6 (4), April 2004, http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0404_s1.htm

[8] Shmuel Bar, "Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview", Comparative Strategy, 25: 2006: http://www.herzliyaconference.org/_Uploads/2590Bashars.pdf

[9] Ibid.

[10] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: from authoritarian upgrading to revolution?", International Affairs, (88) I, January 2012, pp. 95-113: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x/pdf>

The Free Syrian Army: An In-Depth Profile of Colonel Riad al-Asaad

Francesco F. Milan

Colonel Riad al-Asaad served in the Syrian Air Force since the late 1970s. As of July 2011, he is the commander of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which currently represents the main dissident military organization opposing Bashar al-Assad's regime. During his meetings with the media, al-Asaad explained he eventually decided to defect as he felt the regime was targeting him as a dissident, after he had been interrogated by Syrian military intelligence officers in order to find out whether he had been carrying out subversive activities: with the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution, al-Asaad claimed, the Syrian regime became increasingly suspicious towards part of its military officers, who consequently defected to opposition forces (Al Arab, October 08).

Colonel al-Asaad eventually left Syria along with a small group of officers in July 2011, heading for the Turkish city of Hatay, where a refugee camp has been set up. Since his defection, he has assumed a hard-line stance towards the Syrian regime, often comparing al-Assad's fate with that of other toppled leaders of the Middle East: "I expect a bleak future for President Bashar al-Assad and his aides. Their fate will not be much different than that of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi who had in the past called himself the king of kings and is now hiding from his own people like a rat" (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, October 07, 2011). He also refused to define the ongoing conflict a 'civil war', mainly in order to stress the means disparity between Syrian people and the regime, and the cruelty of the latter: "[This] is not a civil war. It is rather a war by the regime against its own people. It is a gangster's campaign against the Syrian people. Ironically, the regime perceives the Syrians as slaves. That is why this criminal gang is launching a war against a helpless people" (Middle East Voices, December 02, 2011).

Since he reached Turkey, al-Asaad has been quite active in promoting FSA's cause and ideals, in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of both the Syrian population and the international community. He tried to stress the military, rather than political, nature of the FSA, underlining how politics should be a matter for the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition front

formed in Istanbul in August 2011, and how FSA's role should be to side with and defend demonstrators from the regime's attacks. He made this point clear in an interview released in December 2011: "[FSA] supports the Syrian National Council, which represents the Syrian people. We are not seeking a military coup - I assure you we are not. So far, we are not interfering in politics. We rejection factionalism and we do not indulge in politics. The Free Syrian Army was formed on non-partisan, non-political grounds. It is the country's army, for all Syrians, with just one mission: to protect the homeland and its citizens. The Free Syrian Army is not involved in politics now and won't be in the future" (Middle East Voices, December 02, 2011). But relations between the SNC and FSA have strained over time. Despite reiterated public reassurances from both sides, Colonel Al-Asaad's outburst with which he defined SNC members "traitors" has shown how tense relations between different factions are (Reuters, February 17).

Throughout his months at Hatay's refugee camp, Colonel al-Asaad listed a set of objectives FSA should pursue. Regime change is the main goal, and he is adamant that this must occur through the use of military force. However, at the moment FSA lacks the numbers and equipment to challenge the Syrian Army in a direct confrontation, so al-Asaad has been strongly advocating for the creation of either one or two buffer zones – the main one being along the Turkish-Syrian border, the other one on the border with Jordan. According to him, these buffer zones would be a fundamental turning point in the revolution, as their creation would help new defectors to escape from pro-regime forces and join FSA, giving a strategic advantage to opposition forces: "[The creation of a buffer zone] would help a great deal because it would encourage soldiers and officers who want to defect, but are scared to do so due to a lack of protection. They are forced now to continue with the Assad regime, but once a safety buffer zone is created, a lot of soldiers and officers will be encouraged to defect, which would greatly impact the regime's army, as it would collapse from within" (Middle East Voices, December 02, 2011). But the international community's reactions towards al-Asaad's requests have been cold, and the general approach, as the recent meeting of the 'Friends of Syria' group has shown, seems to reflect some degree of skepticism towards how cohesive and united defectors are, and towards SNC leadership potential (Al Arabiya, February 24).

In the past months, al-Asaad did not seem supportive towards the possibility of a foreign military intervention on Syrian soil, and has criticized the way in which observers from the Arab League conducted their monitoring in January, calling for the United Nations Security Council to intervene: “The Arab League and their monitors failed in their mission and though we respect and appreciate our Arab brothers for their efforts, we think they are incapable of improving conditions in Syria or resisting this regime. For that reason we call on them to turn the issue over to the U.N. Security Council and we ask that the international community intervene because they are more capable of protecting Syrians at this stage than our Arab brothers” (Arab News, January 17).

Should the current regime collapse, Colonel al-Asaad plans to proceed with the creation of a new Syrian Army, which should be free from the ethnic and religious cleavages that characterize the actual structure of Syrian armed forces. Currently, defectors are mainly low ranking soldiers and conscripts of Sunni origin, but Al-Asaad expects that those who will join FSA in the next months will come from all backgrounds: “We reject sectarianism, as we have suffered from it under this regime for forty years of injustice and oppression that used a sectarian approach” he stated in an interview. “As for us, we reject such an approach and we are open to all people and allow all factions to join the FSA, with no discrimination whatsoever between Alawites, Druze, Christians and even Kurds” (Middle East Voices, December 02, 2011).

The main question surrounding Colonel al-Asaad’s command is to what extent he is actually in control of the Syrian uprising. So far, many of his statements seemed to be over-confident and unverifiable. According to him, in October 2011 army defectors fighting against al-Assad’s regime numbered around 10,000, but by January 2012 he claimed he could count on roughly 50,000 men, all of them falling under the flag of the Free Syrian Army. [1] As of November 2011, he was claiming he had full control of all forces fighting against the regime in Syria: “There are officers assigned to command different areas, and each one is communicating with his area and coordinating with officers in that area. So we are in complete coordination with each other. Operations are carried out with my knowledge and they are carried out in a systematic, well thought-out strategy against Assad’s forces.”

However, observers could not fail to notice that Syrian fighters openly ignored al-Asaad’s order to implement a ceasefire while Arab League’s monitors were in Syria: the wave of attacks against pro-regime forces raised serious questions about FSA’s actual control over fighters. Al-Asaad’s failure to establish a communication channel with the Arab League while its observers were deployed in Syria also represented a meaningful sign of his limited capabilities and political leverage.

His reiterated claims that some of the attacks are in fact ‘false flag’ operations carried out by Syrian loyalists in order to discredit his name make quite a weak argument – in a video message about the Baath Party headquarters’ attack in Damascus, he referred to an attempt to tarnish the image of the Syrian revolution, while in an interview to Al Jazeera in early January he mentioned the regime’s successful attempt to take advantage of his order to escalate military operations against the regime: “[Bashar al-Assad] blew up the neighborhood of al-Maidan to put the blame on us.” [2] Al-Asaad also had to deny FSA’s involvement in the bombing of governmental buildings occurred in Aleppo in mid-February, after Colonel Aref Hammoud, a fellow member, claimed it was indeed an attack carried out by FSA.

In fact, the first months of 2012 have highlighted how Riad al-Asaad’s leadership is being constantly challenged. Since early February, the arrival of a higher-ranking defector, General Mustafa al-Sheikh, has caused great havoc within FSA, leading some military defectors to suspect his loyalty. After reaching Hatay, al-Sheikh refused to join FSA, and created the “Higher Revolutionary Council”, a military body that openly aims at controlling FSA. The new council managed to recruit sympathizers from FSA’s ranks, such as Major Maher al-Naimi, an FSA spokesperson who has now joined the Higher Revolutionary Council (Hurriyet Daily News, February 08). In an interview, FSA member Colonel Malik Kurdi defined al-Sheikh’s move as “a knife in the back of the revolution.” “We were surprised by this”, he said, “General Sheikh defected and did not join us. He announced this council — it’s his business. We have nothing to do with it. We don’t know anything about it or its aims, but we question its formation at this point. We think it’s an attempt to split the armed opposition” (Al Jadeed, February 07).

SNC is facing internal troubles as well. After Burhan Ghalioun’s re-election in February, the fracture between the secular and the Islamist factions became apparent,

especially as the Muslim Brotherhood Alliance backed the candidacy of former judge and human rights activist Haytham Maleh. Criticism towards its leaders has grown, and so has divisions between different blocs.

So far, Riad al-Asaad has failed to prove his military leadership in deeds, making it increasingly hard to trust his self-referred claim that he and FSA are in full command of the Syrian uprising, while it is still to be determined if there actually is a strategy and a clear hierarchy behind FSA, and in FSA/SNC relations. In the evolving constellation of opposition movements, factions, and blocs, al-Asaad seems progressively more isolated, now apparently outranked and threatened by General al-Sheikh, and systematically overlooked by SNC key members and the international community. He probably still retains more credibility than anyone else in the eyes of anti-regime fighters in Syria, but this alone will not be enough in the struggle against Bashar al-Assad.

Francesco F. Milan is a PhD Candidate in the Department of War Studies at King's College in London.

Notes:

1. Interview on Al Jazeera, January 6, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JomeYlvC7Mw>.
2. Ibid.

Militant Leadership Monitor, February 29, 2012

Salih Muslim Muhammed, Leader of PKK Syrian-Affiliate PYD

Michael M. Gunter

Salih Muslim Muhammed (born in 1951, married with five children, and a chemical engineer) fled from his Syrian home to the Gare (Goran) Mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2010 where he lived in a camp maintained by the *Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat* (PYD) or Democratic Union Party, an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). However, the Assad regime allowed him to return to Syria in October 2010, and he quickly became the surprisingly successful leader of the rejuvenated PYD that had been created in 2003.

Salih Muslim Muhammed currently plays a complicated, but potentially important role in the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad that has been raging since March 2010. Some argue that in effect Muhammed's PYD has become *Shabihas* (militiamen of Assad) unlike the other 13 or so odd Kurdish groups in Syria. (Henry Jackson Society, March 2012). Indeed, Assad's late father Hafeez al-Assad (died 2000) long granted the PKK a virtual alliance and safe house in Syria until Turkey's threat to go to war in 1998 forced Assad to sign the Adana Agreement under which Syria finally expelled the PKK.

However, once Turkey began supporting the Syrian Arab Spring uprising against Assad in 2011, the Syrian regime apparently began playing the PKK card again against Turkey by inviting Muhammed back and allowing him to operate relatively freely (*Terrorism Monitor*, April 9). Assad had already sought to appease the Syrian Kurds (who possibly make up 2 million of Syria's total population of roughly 26 million) by lifting long-running restrictions against them. In this newly-found role Muhammed has strongly opposed Turkish influence upon the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) and (Syrian) Kurdish National Council (KNC), regarding them as lackeys of Turkey and other outside forces (Ekurd.net, March 7, 2012). Indeed, he went so far as to state that Turkey, the supporter of the SNC, was a greater enemy than Assad (Firat News, accessed February 28).

As a result, the PYD was the only Syrian Kurdish party that boycotted the 11-party KNC opposition conference in January 2012 that was held in Irbil, the capital of

the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) whose president is Massoud Barzani (Rudaw, February 6). Barzani has been working closely with Turkey in recent years to improve the economic and political position of the KRG and also, at the behest of Turkey, pressuring the PKK to come to a settlement with Turkey. Thus, the PKK, as the enemy of Turkey, has not been on good terms with Barzani. This is all the more true given Salih Muslim Muhammed's position that Barzani supports the KNC, which is supported by Turkey to the detriment of the true interests of the Syrian Kurds. Accordingly, Salih Muslim Muhammed declared: "We see that this effort by the Kurdistan President [Barzani] for reconciliation in Syria will lead to the disintegration of [the] Syrian Kurds" (Rudaw, February 6). These strained ties between the PYD and Barzani's KRG are not likely to improve in the near future.

The following month (February 2012), Muhammed also declined to attend the SNC's Friends of Syria conference held in Tunisia that brought together representative of some 60 states and numerous Syrian opposition groups (Rudaw, February 28, 2012). Thus, Salih Muslim Muhammed's actions have served to fracture Kurdish unity in Syria and oppose Turkish aid to the Syrian opposition, actions that have helped Assad continue to survive. Salih Muslim Muhammed's actions have also made it more difficult for the United States and other Western states to effectively support the Syrian opposition. However, Muhammed denies any support for Assad and can point to members of his PYD being detained by the Syrian regime and his own denunciations of the regime (Pydrojava.net, April 12, 2012). Thus, the alliance between Muhammed's PYD and Assad is more implicit, temporary, tactical, and only partial. Muhammed has also built the PYD into a relatively strong player in his attempts to outflank his Turkish enemy by gaining greater influence among Syrian Kurds. Muhammed's weakness, however, might be the traditional PKK inclination his PYD has inherited to either be the unchallenged leader of the Kurds and thus reluctance to join in any alliance of equals or go it alone. Thus, he risks eventual isolation in the complicated mosaic of Syrian politics.

In a wide-ranging interview held in November 2011 (KurdWatch, Nov. 8, 2011) Muhammed blamed Turkey for spreading rumors that he was behind several recent assassinations of various other Kurdish leaders in Syria such as Mashaal Tammu who was assassinated in October 2011 as well as more recently Abdullah

Bedro's three sons, Muhammed Xelef Ciwan, Nesredin Berhik, and Dr. Serzad Hac Resid (*Today's Zaman*, March 28, 2012). Muhammed also readily admitted that "we apply Apo's [the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's] philosophy and ideology to Syria." Muhammed continued by declaring that "we have put forth a project: 'democratic autonomy.'" This term, of course, comes right out of Ocalan's latest books published in English (*Prison Writings III: The Road Map to Negotiations*, 2011; and *Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century*, 2011). Salih Muslim Muhammed elaborated that "we as the Kurdish Freedom Movement . . . reject classical models like federalism, con-federalism, self-government, and autonomy," explaining that "our goal is the formation of a new Kurdish society, the formation of a free person, a person with free will. . . . The point is to renew society from the bottom up (KurdWatch, Nov. 8, 2011).

Muhammed also demanded "the constitutional recognition of the Kurds as a second ethnicity in Syria." Although this demand might make Assad think twice about his tactical ally, Salih Muslim Muhammed further claimed that "the PYD has opened Kurdish cultural centers and language schools. . . . We are profiting from the unrest." However, he also criticized the opposition Syrian National Council for signing an agreement with Turkey: "We consider anyone who does not publicly take a stand against the Turkish position to be one of Turkey's henchmen" (KurdWatch, Nov. 8, 2011). In a later text conversation, Salih Muslim Muhammed cited the cryptic proverb "a wise enemy is better than an ignorant friend" to explain how the Assad regime viewed him and why the PYD was cooperating with the Syrian regime (Pydrojava.net, April 12, 2012).

To explain the PYD's new-found strength, Azad Muhiyuddin, a member of the Movement of the Youth in the West (apparently an allusion to the Kurds living in Syria constituting Western Kurdistan) said "they [the PYD] have taken on the conflicts that the [other Kurdish] parties [in Syria] have been waging for more than forty years. . . . The PYD is trying to show the people that it represents the interests of the Kurds. . . . They offer numerous services and are active in social welfare. . . . Thus the people are joining those who do things for them (Kurdistan Tribune, March 23, 2012).

Although it is difficult to see clearly through the complexity that is Syria today, Salih Muslim Muhammed's PYD is likely to continue to grow in strength within the multifaceted Kurdish movement in Syria because the

other Kurdish parties are so divided and therefore weak. In addition, Salih Muslim Muhammed has the proven organizational skills of the PKK in back of him as well as his own. If Turkey were to intervene in Syria, it would face the possibility of Salih Muslim Muhammed helping to lead vigorous PKK opposition as part of those Syrian nationalists who inevitably would oppose such outside interference. The same would apply to any intervention from Barzani's KRG. Finally, Muhammed also has positioned himself in the morass of Syrian politics so as to have connections with both the Assad regime and its opposition. Thus, whoever ultimately wins in Syria, Salih Muslim Muhammed is likely to still be standing.

Michael M. Gunter is a professor of political science at Tennessee Technological University and the secretary-general of the EU Turkey Civic Commission.

The Syrian Uprising: A Timeline of Key Events (February 5, 2011 – April 8, 2012)

17 February 2011: A demonstration breaks out outside Al-Hamidiyah Souq in Damascus to protest the police beating of a local shop owner. Several men block a road and chant, “The Syrian people will not be humiliated.” As many as 1,500 demonstrators join in before secret police and government officials arrive on the scene, including Syria’s interior minister, who disperse the demonstrators and promise an investigation.

6 March 2011: A number of teenage boys are arrested in Daraa for writing on the walls of the city a slogan of the Arab Spring: “The people want to overthrow the regime.”

10 March 2011: Dozens of jailed Kurds in Syria from the Yakiti Party and from the Democratic Union start a hunger strike in solidarity with other activists who initiated hunger strikes in a prison near Damascus three days earlier.

15 March 2011: Syrian activists call for another “Day of Rage” in Syria to protest the arrests of the teenage boys in Daraa.

18 March 2011: Five people are killed as security forces disperse crowds in Daraa during one of several demonstrations across the country. This is the first deadly violence reported in the uprising. Over the next days, Daraa is sealed off with no one allowed to enter.

23 March 2011: Protests continue in Daraa, and Syrian state media release images of guns, hand grenades, bullets and stacks of Syrian currency allegedly seized from a mosque in Daraa.

25 March 2011: Troops open fire on protesters in several cities and protestors clash with police on the streets of Damascus.

19 April 2011: Government passes a bill lifting 48 years of emergency rule.

26 April 2011: Thousands of soldiers backed by tanks and snipers fire on civilians in Daraa where armed security agents conduct house-to-house sweeps. Neighborhoods are cordoned off and checkpoints are erected. Electricity, water and cell-phone services are cut. At least 11 people

are killed and many others lay wounded in the streets.

18 May 2011: The U.S. imposes sanctions on Bashr al-Assad and six senior Syrian officials for human rights abuses, freezing any assets they have in U.S. jurisdiction. The Swiss government passes a measure restricting arms sales to Syria and freezing the assets and banning the travel to Switzerland of 13 senior Syrian officials.

7 June 2011: Syrian soldiers mutiny in the town of Jisr al-Shughour. The loss of control exposes cracks in the regime and its ability to contain ongoing protests.

5 August 2011: After several days of a ferocious assault on the city of Hama, now the epicenter of anti-regime protests, hundreds are killed by Syrian security forces backed by tanks and snipers. U.S. President Barack Obama calls the reports “horrifying.”

18 August 2011: The United States, Britain, France and Germany and the European Union demand that Bashar al-Assad resign.

4 October 2011: Russia and China veto a European-backed U.N. Security Council resolution threatening sanctions against Syria if it does not immediately halt its military crackdown against protestors.

6 October 2011: Syrian troops storm villages close to the border with Turkey, hunting armed military defectors.

24 October 2011: The U.S. pulls its ambassador out of Syria over security concerns.

8 November 2011: The U.N. human rights office says the death toll for the uprising is 3,500.

12 November 2011: The Arab League votes to suspend Syria’s membership, a rebuke to a regime that prides itself as a bastion of Arab nationalism.

27 November 2011: The Arab League approves sanctions against Syria to pressure Damascus to end the crackdown, an unprecedented move by the League against an Arab state.

30 November 2011: Turkey suspends all financial credit dealings with Syria and frozen Syrian government assets.

7 December 2011: President Bashar al-Assad denies ordering his troops to kill peaceful demonstrators, telling U.S. television channel ABC that only a “crazy” leader kills his own people.

12 December 2011: U.N. rights chief Navi Pillay says more than 5,000 people have died in the Syrian uprising.

23 December 2011: Two car bombs explode near intelligence agency compounds in Damascus, killing 44 people in the first suicide attacks since the uprising began.

28 December 2011: Syrian security forces open fire on thousands of anti-government protesters in Hama, killing at least six people — one day ahead of a visit by Arab League observers on a mission to end the crackdown.

2 January 2012: An explosion hits a gas pipeline in central Syria and the government blames “terrorists.” The opposition accuses the government of playing on fears of religious extremism and terrorism to rally support behind Assad.

6 January 2012: Exactly two weeks after twin bombings in Damascus, another explosion rips through a busy intersection and police bus in the capital, killing at least 25 people.

28 January 2012: The Arab League halts its observer mission in Syria because of escalating violence that killed nearly 100 people in three days as pro-Assad forces battle dissident soldiers in suburbs on the eastern edge of Damascus in the most intense fighting yet so close to the capital.

30 January 2012: A gas pipeline near the Lebanese border is blown up. Gunfire and explosions are reported in the Damascus suburbs.

3 February 2012: An assault by government forces in Homs kills more than 200 people and wounds hundreds.

4 February 2012: Russia and China veto a resolution in the U.N. Security Council backing an Arab League plan for Assad to step down.

6 February 2012: The U.S. Embassy closes in Damascus and the U.S. pulls all its diplomats out of Syria.

24 February 2012: Foreign ministers from more than 50 countries meet in Tunis for the inaugural “Friends of Syria” meeting.

26 February 2012: Syria holds a referendum on a new constitution, but the West dismisses it as a “sham.” The next day, activists say the death toll from nearly a year of unrest has surpassed 8,000.

1 March 2012: Syrian troops take control of Baba Amr after a government assault that raged for weeks. The rebels retreat, having run low on weapons under unbearable humanitarian conditions. Syria’s main opposition group, the Syrian National Council, forms a military council to organize and unify all armed resistance.

8 March 2012: Syria’s deputy oil minister announces his defection in an online video, making him the highest ranking official to abandon the regime since the uprising began.

13 March 2012: Syrian military forces take control of the northern rebel stronghold of Idlib along the border with Turkey, a major base that army defectors of the “Free Syrian Army” had held for months.

15 March 2012: On the first anniversary of the start of the uprising, thousands march in a pro-Assad rally in Damascus. Tanks and snipers continue to besiege Daraa.

29 March 2012: U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon joins Arab leaders at an Arab League summit in Baghdad and urges Bashar al-Assad to implement a U.N.-backed peace plan to end the violence.

1 April 2012: At a second “Friends of Syria” meeting, Western and Arab nations warn Bashar al-Assad not to delay adopting the peace plan.

2 April 2012: Council that Syria has accepted an April 10 deadline to begin withdrawing its troops from towns and cities and for a truce to start 48 hours later.

8 April 2012: Syria demands written guarantees insurgents will stop fighting before it pulls back troops under the peace plan.