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Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Still a Crucial Actor

Inclusivity the Order of the Day in Dealings with Syria's Opposition

Petra Becker

Summer 2013 brought severe setbacks for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Firstly, one of its most important regional supporters, Qatar lost its leading role in the Group of Friends of the Syrian People, the alliance of states and organisations backing Syria's opposition, to Saudi Arabia. Secondly, the Brotherhood has been hit by stinging criticism of the Egyptian MB's performance in government and the media witch-hunt against political Islam following the ouster of Mohammed Morsi. In the face of these events the Syrian Brotherhood – to date still a religious and social movement – postponed the founding of a political party planned for late June. Thirdly, the Brotherhood – like its partners in the National Coalition which opposes the Syrian regime – bet on an American-backed military intervention in August/September. This intervention did not occur due to the American-Russian brokered agreement providing for Syria to join the Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

As a result, the National Coalition and its Supreme Military Command have faced defections of major rebel forces, which may lead to a major shift towards Jihadi Salafism and the marginalization of moderate forces on the ground. Yet the Brotherhood remains the best-organised political force within the Syrian opposition alliances and still sees itself becoming the leading force in post-revolutionary Syria. Germany and Europe should encourage moderate forces whatever their political colours and foster the implementation of democratic concepts.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which has operated in exile since the suppression of the 1982 uprising in Hama, has always sought to topple the Assad regime. But like the rest of the opposition, the revolution of March 2011 took it by surprise. Building on exile structures it was, however, relatively quickly able to play a central role in the

formation of opposition alliances: coordinating contacts between groups, participating in all opposition meetings abroad, and organising with Turkish assistance the October 2011 inaugural conference of the Syrian National Council (SNC). In addition to the seats it negotiated for itself, the Brotherhood's tactical dexterity enabled it

to claim seats for ideologically close representatives and groups.

Repeated restructurings and an ever-changing composition mean that even insiders find it impossible to assess the Brotherhood's real weight within the SNC. Moreover, most Brotherhood members of the SNC officially represent other groups. In December 2011, for example, 78 of the SNC's 320 members were from the Brotherhood, but only 20 were on the Brotherhood list. The others counted as independents or representatives of civil society groups and organisations. To this day Brotherhood spokesman Molham Al-Droubi figures as an independent in the SNC membership list. The head of the Brotherhood office in Istanbul and editor-in-chief of the Brotherhood newspaper *Al-Ahd* is listed as a member of the "Revolutionary Youth", while Brotherhood member Bassem Hatahet represents the "National Coalition for the Protection of Civilians", to mention but a few examples.

Apart from its representation on the SNC, three other factors explain the Brotherhood's influence: firstly, the weakness and fragmentation of its rivals from the secular liberal camp; secondly, its ability, unlike them, to forge coalitions, for example with the communist Democratic People's Party, whose central committee member George Sabra is the current SNC president; thirdly its good relations with Turkey and Qatar, both of which play a crucial role in funding the opposition.

But the strength of the Brotherhood led to a loss of confidence in the SNC both among the domestic opposition, which felt inadequately included, and among the secular exile opposition and the Group of Friends of the Syrian People. Accordingly, a new opposition grouping was founded in November 2012, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (National Coalition). Here, liberal and secular forces around the widely respected long-serving dissident Riad Seif sought to place the opposition body on a broader footing and thus win greater support especially

from Western countries. The new formation, however, failed to achieve the objective of changing power relations within the exile opposition. The SNC joined the National Coalition, but operating as a bloc of its own. Furthermore, with Qatari support the Brotherhood was able to insist on the inclusion of other forces that shifted the balance to such an extent that it largely replicates the imbalance within the SNC.

On the initiative of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People a new attempt was launched at the end of May 2013 to contain the influence of the Islamists in the National Coalition by integrating additional secular forces. By including a bloc around the left-wing intellectual Michel Kilo the intention was to also strengthen the bloc seeking a negotiated solution rather than outright military victory. But once more this measure was watered down. After days of talks, under massive pressure from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the proposed twenty-two secular liberal members were joined by fourteen new representatives of the revolutionary movement, largely from the Islamist spectrum, and fifteen from the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

While the Brotherhood is certainly not solely to blame for opposition power struggles, many hold it responsible for the opposition's paralysis. That applies to left-wing, liberal and rival Islamist forces, as well as activists and rebels operating within the country. For example, in a declaration of 30 March 2013 the FSA accused the Brotherhood of obstructing the work of the opposition and blamed it indirectly for the death of thousands of Syrians.

Qatar losing the leading role in the Group of Friends of the Syrian People to Saudi Arabia in May 2013 brought about a new turn of events. Saudi Arabia is fundamentally critical of the Brotherhood, not least because a monarchy finds no place in the latter's ideological platform. Ahmad Jarba's election as president of the National Coalition in early July 2013 can also be attributed to Saudi Arabian influence. As a leader of the Shammar tribe he enjoys

traditionally close relations with Saudi Arabia. While the Brotherhood thus appears to have lost influence in the National Coalition, it nonetheless remains the best-organised force within it, and with Mohammed Farouq Tayfour indeed provides one of its three vice-presidents.

Postponed Party Launch

Developments in Egypt led the Brotherhood to delay realisation of a long-planned project: in summer 2012 the Brotherhood, to date a religious and social movement, had announced plans to set up a political party with a modern liberal programme open to politicians from the liberal spectrum and members of other confessions. In the last week of June 2013 a spokesperson announced that the Brotherhood and other moderate forces would hold a three-day conference in Istanbul, at the end of which a new party was to be launched. On the agenda, he said, was the discussion and adoption of statutes, choosing a name and electing the leadership of the new party, which is to consist of one-third Brotherhood members and two-thirds other moderate Islamists and Liberals.

Selected dates in the history of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

1945/46 Emergence of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, followed by phase of political participation
1963 Baath Party seizes power, Muslim Brotherhood banned
1963–1982 Phase of militarisation and armed struggle
1980 Emergency Law 49: membership punishable by death
1982 Armed uprising and Hama massacre, exile

Conference participants confirmed that a name had been agreed, the National Party for Justice and Constitution. The Arabic acronym is *waad*, which means “promise”. Statutes were also agreed, and Brother-

hood member Mohammed Hikmat Wulaid was elected as the provisional leader of the party, with Rimon Maajoun and Nabil Qassis there are also two Christians in the leadership. But at the same time the conference decided to wait for a more suitable time to publish the statutes and launch the party. Yet the work on the ground continued and the party opened offices both in Istanbul and Aleppo, preparing for an official launch in November 2013.

Structure, Base and Strategies

In parallel to its political involvement in the opposition alliances, the Brotherhood has been working since 2011 to consolidate its domestic base. During its first decades in exile the Brotherhood coordinated its work primarily from Amman and London, but in 2011 shifted its main presence to Turkey, where it set up an office in Istanbul and operates from the Turkish-Syrian border region. In April 2013 the Brotherhood’s supreme guide (i.e. leader), Riad Al-Shaqfeh, declared that it had begun setting up offices in certain rebel-held areas. The first Brotherhood office in Aleppo officially opened in August 2013.

Its well-organised exile structures and a large reservoir of loyal followers allowed the Brotherhood to expand its base in Syria. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood claims several thousand members in 130 countries, but reliable information on membership is not available. The Brotherhood counts many exile Syrians who are loosely associated with the organisation through study circles or other front organisations as followers, although they are not strictly speaking members.

The Brotherhood pursues various strategies and employs diverse means to establish structures within Syria:

Humanitarian aid: From the beginning of the uprising the Brotherhood was in a position to provide effective humanitarian aid, profiting from well-networked family structures especially in its former strongholds in Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Idlib. It

is supported by the similarly Islamist-influenced Turkish aid organisation İHH. At the beginning of 2013 activists associated with the Brotherhood in Turkey founded their own humanitarian organisations, under the umbrella organisation *Watan* (Arabic for “homeland”) to supply aid to Syria.

Influence on the revolutionary committees inside Syria: By its own account the Brotherhood ensured that its young activists joined the local revolutionary committees inside Syria at an early stage. In Idlib and Aleppo it is reported to have founded revolutionary committees itself. But according to activists inside Syria the Brotherhood’s influence in the committees is limited. Reading the discussions in the electronic forums of the Syrian revolutionary committees another phenomenon also becomes clear: the Brotherhood has frittered away support through its contentious role in the exile opposition.

Participation in building a civil administration: The Brotherhood participates in the establishment and working of an alternative civilian administration in the so-called liberated territories. This was the case for example in Aleppo, where in elections in early March 2013 five Brotherhood members were elected to the twenty-nine-member civil administration council. Brotherhood members are also represented in the Syrian Civil Administration Councils (SYCAC) network, which identifies, trains and funds the newly emerging local councils.

Establishing Brotherhood media: The Brotherhood has begun publishing its own newspaper, *Al-Ahd* (“the covenant”), which has been circulating in rebel-controlled territories since early March 2013. It initially appears fortnightly. Plans to go daily have not materialized so far. The editors try to give the paper a modern appearance but their choice of topics – devoting great attention to Brotherhood history and ideology – makes it more party organ than mass-circulation paper.

Building Brotherhood military structures:

In September 2011, just one month after the regime forced the protest movement into militarisation through massive attacks on Homs and Hama, the Brotherhood began preparations for an organisation to secure military influence: the General Committee to Protect Civilians (GCPC). Its task is to make contact with existing militias and link them to the Brotherhood through financial and logistical support. The GCPC is led by Haitham al-Rahme, a moderate Islamist from Quseir near Homs who is linked to the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has been supplying funding to several rebel groups: the Tawheed Brigade that dominates in Aleppo and surroundings, the Farouq brigades concentrated around Homs, and the so-called Shield brigades, which operate in various locations. However, militia loyalties fluctuate and are generally based less on ideology than on the financial strength of donors. According to activists on the ground the influence of Brotherhood-related militias is restricted to the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs and Damascus – which were also Brotherhood strongholds in the 1970s. In contrast, Brotherhood-related militias do not play any role in the other provinces, neither in the north-east nor in the Euphrates region, nor along the coast or in the south. The defection of some of the rebel forces, among them the Tawheed Brigade, from the National Coalition and its Supreme Military Committee can be seen as evidence that the Brotherhood’s influence on militias is limited and diminishing. Although leading members of the Brotherhood admit their discomfort with the announcement of the “Army of Mohammad” in the north and the “Army of Islam” in the south, they abstain from criticising them openly.

Religious Networks

Over the past three decades Syrian society has increasingly turned to religious conservatism. The regime promoted this trend

by coopting and generously funding quietist religious leaders. These elites, which are overwhelmingly anchored in affluent urban milieus, engaged in religious instruction and proselytising, education and welfare through various organisations. Examples include the missionary and welfare organisation of the Zayd movement, whose leader Sheikh Osama al-Rifai fled abroad in autumn 2011; the Abu Nour Institute, an Islamic education institution founded by the late Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro; and al-Qubaysiat, a strongly hierarchical religious women's organisation whose work concentrates on Islamic instruction and education. Since about 2000 the latter has succeeded in recruiting particularly wives of influential businessmen and decision-makers.

The Brotherhood could use the networks maintained by these groups and institutions for its work within Syria, and is likely to have already established relevant contacts before the revolution. By its own account the Brotherhood leadership began building new underground networks within Syria after the Assad handover from father to son in 2000.

Objectives and Wings

Unlike its counterpart in Egypt, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is not a movement with a broad popular base. Its political goal is to create a socially just Islamic society, achieved through education and missionary work rather than by forcing sharia upon the population. It assumes that the dissemination of Islamic values will gradually persuade society to adapt its laws to sharia, and sees such a society as the nucleus of an all-embracing community of Islamic societies.

Pragmatism vs. Dogmatism

After its founding in the mid-1940s the Brotherhood went through a phase of political participation, during which cooperation with nationalist and left-wing

groups forced it to consider their ideas.

When the Baath Party took power in 1963, it banned the Brotherhood and pursued a radical secularisation policy. This led to the Brotherhood splitting into three wings:

1. the politically moderate Damascus wing, led by supreme guide Issam al-Attar (in exile from 1964), which rejected armed struggle against the regime;
2. the conservative Hama wing under Marwan Hadid (1934–1976), which propagated armed struggle as the only means to change the regime;
3. the equally conservative Aleppo wing, whose leader Sheikh Abdel Fattah Abu Ghudda (1917–1997) also favoured armed struggle but unlike Marwan Hadid argued that such a course required better preparation and therefore had to wait for a later opportunity.

While the Damascus wing no longer plays any role, the other two still exist today. The Aleppo wing is regarded as liberal and pragmatic. Under Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni (born 1937 in Aleppo, supreme guide from 1996 to 2010) the Brotherhood undertook several attempts to reach an understanding with the regime, but without success. Nonetheless, in the 1990s and again after the accession of Bashar al-Assad, Brotherhood supporters were released from prison or permitted to return to Syria. But at no point did the regime concede larger concessions such as legalisation or lifting Law 49 of 1980, which places the death penalty on membership.

The Hama wing is more conservative and more irreconcilable towards the regime. When Riad al-Shaqfeh (born 1944 in Hama) emerged in 2010 as victor of the internal elections for supreme guide this was interpreted in the press as evidence of the decline of the Aleppo wing. The background was criticism of the Brotherhood leadership's line during the Gaza War of 2008/2009, when it suspended opposition activity against the regime in order to strengthen the "resistance front" against Israel.

Al-Bayanouni's pragmatic course had already led to conflict in 2005, when the

Brotherhood joined renegade vice-president Abdelhalim Khaddam to form the National Salvation Front. The move met with incomprehension among Brotherhood supporters and in other opposition groups, as Khaddam had been a central figure in the Assad regime for decades and moreover stood accused of massive corruption.

Also under al-Bayanouni's leadership the Brotherhood published the so-called national pact of honour on political work in May 2001, in which it distanced itself from violence and argued for cooperating with other political forces towards a pluralist Syria. In 2004 it presented a comprehensive programme with "The Political Project for the Future Syria". This document casts a vision of Syria as a modern, pluralist state, a parliamentary democracy based on the principle of equality of all citizens, and a state embracing the rule of law and division of powers. The programme speaks of a revitalised Islam compatible with the principles of modern governance, including women's rights, minority rights, free speech, freedom of religion, etc.

Liberalism vs. Conservatism

However, closer scrutiny of the document reveals crucial points that are formulated extremely vaguely. That bears the danger of freedoms being curtailed through the backdoor of religious norms and values. Some critics see the choice of formulations as a wilful strategy, although it is more likely that the lack of clarity is due to the broad spectrum of opinions within the Brotherhood, which discussed the project intensively for three years before its members were able to agree on a final version.

For all its vagueness, certain restrictions of freedoms are nonetheless identifiable, especially concerning women and the media. Although the final version recognises equality of the sexes as a fundamental principle and accepts the right of women to political activity and political office, this position is relativised by a traditional role attribution under which men and women

complement one another and the main task of the woman lies in the family – although it should be noted that such views are also held by conservative European and American parties. Another restriction is associated with the statement that women are equal with men "apart from a small number of legislative provisions [based on sharia]". For example, citing sharia on inheritance clearly disadvantages women. While not progressive, this position corresponds to the current legal position in Syria and as such is not retrogressive.

The document states that media laws should conform with "the basic principles of the *umma* [Islamic community] and noble human values" and be responsible for promoting "purposeful art". Censorship is restricted to protecting the "principles of the *umma*", but without defining who formulates these principles and values nor who decides whether they are being observed.

Generation Conflicts

Because the programmatic discussions are conducted behind closed doors, it is unclear what ideological fractures exist and where they run: between the old wings as occasionally claimed in the media, or between the generations? The founding of the National Action Group can be interpreted as the expression of a generation conflict. It was established in 2010 by Brotherhood members close to al-Bayanouni, such as Ahmad Ramadan and al-Bayanouni's long-serving office manager, Obeida Nahhas. The group's mostly young members espouse a moderate and liberal Islam. In the SNC it has about the same representation as the Brotherhood, but because many of its members also belong to the Muslim Brotherhood it is difficult to clearly distinguish the two.

Some observers suggest that after the March 2011 outbreak of the revolution youth in the Brotherhood became frustrated when the leadership blocked the recruitment of larger numbers of young

people inside Syria out of concern that opening the organisation would leave it vulnerable to subversion. Another reason for its reticence might be that a substantial intake of new members could have disrupted power relations within the Brotherhood. This “underground mentality” is rightly criticised by the Brotherhood youth, as even members of the leadership admit. How is the Brotherhood to win confidence as long as it is unwilling to reveal its statutes or declares that the names of three out of five of the supreme guide’s deputies are secret?

The Brotherhood has plainly recognised the need for reform. That can be seen both in the April 2013 election of women to the consultative council and executive committee and in the holding of a youth conference in December 2012. At the conference 350 young members spent three days preparing proposals that were later presented to the consultative council. For the young Brotherhood members it was a revelation to have young women and men discussing together in the working groups.

Conclusion and Outlook

The Syrian Brotherhood has worked hard since the beginning of the revolution to re-establish a basis in Syria. But judging by the discussions in the internet forums of the Syrian revolutionary movement it has lost ground again through the bickering in the exile opposition. Like the other opposition groups it is accused of placing its own ambitions above the interests of the Syrian population. The poor performance of the Egyptian Brotherhood in government also causes it difficulties. And since the ouster of Egyptian President Morsi, who stems from the Brotherhood, political Islam has faced an aggressive media campaign across the whole Arab world. At the same time the Syrian Brotherhood has been the only opposition force capable of consistently pursuing strategies and finding majorities. It has long exercised internal democratic mechanisms and is motivated to modernise

and rejuvenate. To that extent it is likely to play a more than negligible role in the future Syria, all the more given that no other opposition grouping has to date succeeded in agreeing shared goals and strategies.

For thirty years the Brotherhood has been much better protected against the disruptive tactics of the Syrian intelligence services than other opposition groups, because it recruits selectively (members need a personal recommendation and must complete a probationary period) and has operated underground. But this advantage becomes a disadvantage where the Brotherhood needs a certain degree of transparency to win popular trust.

The ultimate ideological direction of the Brotherhood is likely to become clear only when currently vague concepts need to be concretised, specifically in the context of parliamentary or governmental responsibility. Also only then will it be seen if the Brotherhood can integrate the broad spectrum of positions, or fragments into several parties. Not least, ideological developments and influence will also depend on positions adopted by other Islamist currents such as conservative and moderate Salafists.

In free elections absolute majorities for the Brotherhood or other Islamist currents are not to be expected, assuming that Syria retains its present borders. For neither the religious minorities that make up about 30 percent of the population nor the more nationalist or left-leaning Kurds, who represent about 12 percent, are likely to vote Islamist. Finally, a considerable proportion of Arab Sunni Syrians are also secular-leaning.

Recommendations

Europe is already supporting the Syrian opposition through bilateral measures and in the frame of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People. Looking ahead, three maxims should be observed. Europe and its partners should, firstly, work to support the emergence of new political and civil

society structures in Syria and in this connection seek dialogue with representatives of all political currents in society. This should include, for example, discussing concepts of modern governance with these actors. Young actors especially should be shown how democratic processes function in Europe and how political rights and freedoms can be guaranteed. There are important roles here for Germany's political foundations, political parties and parliaments as well as European NGOs.

Secondly, Europe will be most likely to boost its credibility by respecting democratically elected bodies and avoiding seeking to shape the opposition to fit their own preconceptions. All dialogue-willing actors in opposition bodies and in a future transitional government should be accepted as partners for dialogue.

The choice of dialogue and cooperation partners, thirdly, should not be restricted to actors that are already politically organised. Instead, it would be important to integrate into such efforts those who are currently working to maintain public life and multi-confessionality through the revolutionary committees and newly established local civil administrations.

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