SYRIAN WAR DRAWS IN NEIGHBOURS, AS REBELS, MUSLIM BROS. & NEW “UNITY” ASSEMBLY VIE

Syria’s Opposition Groups Strike Unity Deal Against Assad: Reuters, Nov 11, 2012
Syria’s fractious opposition finally put aside fierce arguments to rally behind a new leader within a new coalition that its Western and Arab backers hope can topple Bashar al-Assad and take over the country.

How Syria’s Neighbors Are Drawn Into Its War: The Associated Press, Times of Israel, Nov. 13, 2012—Syria’s neighbors are increasingly being drawn into the country’s civil war in a variety of ways, whether militarily or due to an exodus of Syrians fleeing the fighting at home. The spillover has raised concerns that the nearly 20-month-long conflict between Syrian President Bashar Assad’s regime and rebels trying to topple him could endanger the entire Middle East.
Missteps by Rebels Erode Their Support Among Syrians: Anne Barnard, *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 2012 — Syria’s rebel fighters are losing crucial support from a public increasingly disgusted by the actions of some rebels, including poorly planned missions, senseless destruction, criminal behavior and the coldblooded killing of prisoners.

How the Brotherhood Builds Power in Syria's Opposition: Hassan Hassan, *The National*, Nov 12, 2012 — The MB is viewed with profound suspicion by most Syrians. Despite 20 months of atrocious violence by the criminal regime, many Syrians - rightly or wrongly - still prefer the regime because they fear the Brotherhood more.

On Topic Links


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**SYRIA’S OPPOSITION GROUPS STRIKE UNITY DEAL AGAINST ASSAD**

*Rania El Gamal & Regan Doherty*

*Reuters*, November 11, 2012

Syria's fractious opposition finally put aside fierce arguments to rally behind a new leader within a new coalition that its Western and Arab backers hope can topple Bashar al-Assad and take over the country. After days of wrangling in Qatar under constant cajoling by exasperated Arab, U.S. and other officials, representatives of groups including rebel fighters, veteran dissidents and ethnic and religious minorities agreed on Sunday to join a new assembly that can form a government-in-exile. They unanimously elected reformist Damascus cleric Mouaz al-Khatib as its president.

Khatib, a soft-spoken preacher who was once imam of the ancient Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, immediately called on soldiers to quit the Syrian army and on all sects to unite. "We demand freedom for every Sunni, Alawi, Ismaili (Shi’ite), Christian, Druze, Assyrian ... and rights for all parts of the harmonious Syrian people," he told reporters. It remains to be seen whether the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces can overcome the mutual suspicions and in-fighting that have weakened the 20-month-old drive to end four decades of rule by President Assad's family. [For the complete story see On Topic links below –Ed.]

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**HOW SYRIA’S NEIGHBORS ARE DRAWN INTO ITS WAR**

*The Associated Press*

*Times of Israel*, November 13, 2012

Syria’s neighbors are increasingly being drawn into the country’s civil war in a variety of ways, whether militarily or due to an exodus of Syrians fleeing the fighting at home. The spillover has raised concerns that the nearly 20-month-long conflict between Syrian President Bashar Assad’s regime and rebels trying to topple him could endanger the entire Middle East. Here is a look at how neighboring states are being affected by Syria’s bloodletting:

Israel
Israel on Monday became the second country to strike the Syrian military, after Turkey. An Israeli tank hit a Syrian armored vehicle after shells from fighting in Syria exploded in Israel-controlled Golan Heights. A day earlier, Israel fired a warning shot near a group of Syrian fighters.

Syrian shells have exploded inside the Golan several times in recent weeks damaging apple orchards, sparking fires and spreading panic but causing no injuries. In early November, three Syrian tanks entered the Golan demilitarized zone, and in a separate incident an Israeli patrol vehicle was peppered with bullets fired from Syria; no one was hurt in the incident and the Israeli military deemed it accidental.

There is concern in Israel that Assad may try to spark a conflict with Israel, opening up the potential for attacks by Lebanon’s militant Hezbollah and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Israel has also warned that Syria’s chemical weapons could be turned on the Jewish state. Still, while no friend of Assad, Israel is also worried that if he is toppled, Syria could fall into the hands of Islamic extremists or descend into sectarian warfare.

**Lebanon**

Mortars and shells from the Syrian side regularly crash in Lebanon, causing several casualties, though Lebanese forces have never fired back. More dangerously, Syria’s conflict has heightened deep rivalries and sectarian tensions in its smaller neighbor. Lebanon is divided between pro-Assad and anti-Assad factions, a legacy of the nearly three decades when Damascus all but ruled Lebanon, until 2005. Assad’s ally, the Hezbollah militia is Lebanon’s strongest political and military movement.

On Oct. 19, a car bomb assassinated Lebanon’s top intelligence chief, Wissam al-Hassan. Many in Lebanon blamed Syria and Hezbollah for the assassination.

The northern Lebanese city of Tripoli has seen repeated clashes between Sunni Muslims and Alawites — the Shiite offshoot sect to which Assad belongs. Battles in the city in May and August killed at least 23 people total and wounded dozens.

The kidnapping of Lebanese Shiites in Syria by rebels has also had repercussions in Lebanon. In May, Shiites blocked roads and burned tires in protest over the abductions, and later in the summer a powerful Shiite clan took 20 Syrians and a Turk in Lebanon captive in retaliation, all of whom have since been released. Lebanon also shelters about 100,000 Syrian refugees.

**Turkey**

Turkey has struck the Syrian military repeatedly in response to shelling and mortar rounds from Syria since Oct. 3, when shells from Syria struck the Turkish village of Akcakale, killing two women and three children. The incident prompted NATO to convene an emergency meeting and Turkey sent tanks and anti-aircraft batteries to the area. Turkey’s military has also scrambled fighter jets after Syrian helicopters flew close to the border.

There are about 120,000 Syrian refugees sheltering in Turkish camps, with up to 70,000 more living in Turkey outside the camps. Thousands more wait at the border, held up as Turkey struggles to cope with the influx. Turkey also hosts much of the opposition and rebel leadership.

Turkey has called for a buffer zone in Syria where the opposition and civilians would be protected, a step that would likely require international enforcement of a no-fly zone. Russia and China have blocked robust moves against the Syrian regime at the U.N. Security Council, and the United States has been reluctant to use its military in another Mideast conflict.

**Jordan**
Jordan has taken the brunt of the refugee exodus from Syria, with some 265,000 Syrians fleeing across the border. Around 42,000 of them are housed at Zaatari, a dust-filled refugee camp, where riots have broken out several times by Syrians angry over lack of services.

A growing number of stray Syrian missiles have fallen on Jordanian villages in the north in recent weeks, wounding several civilians. Late last month, a Jordanian border patrol officer was killed in clashes with eight militants trying to cross into Syria. Hours earlier, Jordan announced the arrest of 11 suspected al-Qaeda-linked militants allegedly planning to attack shopping malls and Western diplomatic missions in Jordan.

**Iraq**

Sunni and Shiite fighters from Iraq have made their way to Syria to join the civil war — the former on the side of the opposition, the latter siding with Assad’s regime, according to Iraqi officials and Shiite militants. Sunni al-Qaeda fighters are believed to be moving between Iraq and Syria, and some al-Qaeda fighters in Iraq’s western Anbar province have regrouped under the name of the Free Iraqi Army, a nod to the rebels’ Free Syrian Army, Iraqi officials say.

The United States has pressured Baghdad to stop Iranian planes suspected of ferrying arms to Syria from using Iraqi airspace. Iraq has so far acknowledged only forcing two planes to land for inspection and said it didn’t find any weapons either time. About 49,000 Syrian refugees have temporarily resettled in Iraq, according to the U.N. refugee agency.

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**MISSTEPS BY REBELS ERODE THEIR SUPPORT AMONG SYRIANS**

*Anne Barnard*

*New York Times, November 8, 2012*

Syria’s rebel fighters — who have long staked claim to the moral high ground for battling dictatorship — are losing crucial support from a public increasingly disgusted by the actions of some rebels, including poorly planned missions, senseless destruction, criminal behavior and the coldblooded killing of prisoners.

The shift in mood presents more than just a public relations problem for the loosely knit militants of the Free Syrian Army, who rely on their supporters to survive the government’s superior firepower. A dampening of that support undermines the rebels’ ability to fight and win what has become a devastating war of attrition, perpetuating the violence that has left nearly 40,000 dead, hundreds of thousands in refugee camps and more than a million forced from their homes.

The rebel shortcomings have been compounded by changes in the opposition, from a force of civilians and defected soldiers who took up arms after the government used lethal force on peaceful protesters to one that is increasingly seeded with extremist jihadis. That radicalization has divided the fighters’ supporters and made Western nations more reluctant to give rebels the arms that might help break the intensifying deadlock.…

Twenty months into what is now a civil war, both supporters and opponents of the government are trapped in a darkening mood of despair, revulsion and fear that neither side can end the conflict. In recent months, both sides adopted more brutal — even desperate — methods to try to break the stalemate, but they achieved merely a new version of deadlock. To many Syrians, the extreme violence seems all the more pointless for the lack of results.
The most significant shift is among the rebels’ supporters, who chant slogans not only condemning the government but also criticizing the rebels. “The people want the reform of the Free Syrian Army,” crowds have called out. “We love you. Correct your path.”

Small acts of petty humiliation and atrocities like executions have led many more Syrians to believe that some rebels are as depraved as the government they fight. The activist from Saraqib said he saw rebels force government soldiers from a milk factory, then destroy it, even though residents needed the milk and had good relations with the owner.

“They shelled the factory and stole everything,” the activist said. “Those are repulsive acts.” Even some of the uprising’s staunchest supporters are beginning to fear that Syria’s sufferings — lost lives, fraying social fabric, destroyed heritage — are for naught.

“We thought freedom was so near,” said a fighter calling himself Abu Ahmed, his voice catching with grief as he spoke via Skype last month from Maarat al-Noaman, a strategic town on the Aleppo-Damascus highway. Hours earlier, a rebel victory there ended in disaster, as government airstrikes pulverized civilians returning to what they thought was safety.

Even within Mr. Assad’s most solid base, his minority Alawite sect, discontent spilled over last month in a clash that began in a coffee shop in the president’s ancestral village, Qardaha. Some were shaken recently by heavy casualties in the disproportionately Alawite military and militias, according to Fadi Saad, who runs a Facebook page called Alawites in the Syrian Revolution.

On the rebel side, the Aleppo battle catalyzed simmering frustrations among civilian activists who feel dominated by gunmen. One Aleppo activist said she met with fighters to suggest ways to cut government supply routes without destroying the city, to no avail. “You risked the lives of the people for what?” the activist asked. “The Free Syrian Army is just cutting the nails of the regime. We want results.”

Nominal leaders of the Free Syrian Army say they embrace ethical standards, contend that the government commits the vast majority of abuses and blame rogue groups for bad rebel behavior. But that did not ease the disgust after last week’s video. It shows men writhing on the ground, staring up and screaming in terror. Rebels stand over them, shouting a cacophony of orders and insults. They move like a gang, not a military unit, jostling and crowding, kicking prisoners, forcing them into a pile. Suddenly, automatic weapons fire drowns out the noise. Puffs of dust rise from the pile, now still.

“All the ugly stuff the regime practiced, the F.S.A. is copying,” Anna, a finance worker in Damascus, said of recent behavior. She blamed the government for making society abusive, but she said the rebels were no better. “They are ignorant people with weapons,” she said.

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**HOW THE BROTHERHOOD BUILDS POWER IN SYRIA'S OPPOSITION**

*Hassan Hassan*

*The National*, Nov 12, 2012

Lieutenant-Colonel Hussein Harmoush, one of the first Syrian army officers to defect, was contacted by the Muslim Brotherhood shortly after he arrived at a refugee camp in Turkey's Hatay province in June of 2011. He was one of a small group of defectors, the Free Officers. Brotherhood members visited him several times and promised him logistical, financial and material support in exchange for "cooperation". Lt Col Harmoush replied "tell me what you want and I will decide accordingly", Lt Basim Khaled, speaking for the Free Officers, told me in an interview. " They wanted him to follow their directions and support them politically."
No agreement was reached but the Brotherhood members stayed in touch with Lt Col Harmoush. They also contacted a more recent, higher-ranking defector who agreed to cooperate. That officer, Colonel Riad Al Asaad, formed a new entity, the Free Syrian Army, without informing the Free Officers. The Brotherhood then abruptly dropped contact with Lt Col Harmoush, who was captured by Syrian authorities under mysterious circumstances in August 2011, after disappearing in Turkey.

The story shows how the Muslim Brotherhood - an Islamist group with little representation within Syrian society, due to decades of systematic cleansing by the Baathist regime - has successfully built influence over the emerging opposition forces. The MB is viewed with profound suspicion by most Syrians. Despite 20 months of atrocious violence by the criminal regime, many Syrians - rightly or wrongly - still prefer the regime because they fear the Brotherhood more.

Activists downplay that fear, partly because the MB had acted behind the scenes. But its resistance to inclusiveness that would challenge its monopoly has become clear during the opposition's meetings in Doha. The Brotherhood has been resisting a US-backed initiative to form a more representative political entity, a plan that Syrians desperately need to reverse Brotherhood domination of the political process…

Some observers have criticised the US-backed plan that would include various political and regional forces hitherto unrepresented, effectively replacing the Syrian National Council. But the claim that foreign interference would undermine the popular legitimacy of these entities is invalid: the Brotherhood's political monopoly was made possible in the first place by foreign interference - the council was formed in Turkey, which has links with the MB - and by partial international recognition. That monopoly needs to be reversed by those countries.

The Syrian National Council took over six months to set up, largely due to disagreements over the role of the Brotherhood. When the council was finally formed in October 2011, the MB was given a bigger share of representation than, say, the Damascus Declaration - a group of reformist intellectuals formed in 2005 - in itself a major achievement for the organization.

Moreover, according to Muhammad Ali, an Istanbul-based Syrian analyst, some members of the Brotherhood have joined the SNC as independents, to ensure the organization the upper hand. That is why, even though the Brotherhood has reduced its representation in the SNC from 25 per cent to 20 per cent under the new "reforms", it is still a kingmaker.

It is hard to gauge precisely the MB's popular base, but historical evidence and well-established social dynamics offer useful insights. Tribal and Kurdish areas have over 30 per cent of the population and are loyal to their local leaders and increasingly to Salafi Islam. Non-Sunnis form 30 per cent of Syria's population and Kurds 9 per cent.

These bases of ethnic and religious minorities, plus the tribes - altogether making up at least 70 per cent of the population - have been outside the MB's influence in the past and will remain so. Add to that the business community in Aleppo and Damascus, which has historically had social ties with moderate religious clergy and whose interests lie in a secular-leaning government…

On what basis, then, does the Brotherhood dominate political and military councils today? In a democratic Syria, the Brotherhood would have the right to engage in politics and build support. But its current dominance is not justified by true representation and this is one of the major causes of rift and hesitation among Syria's political and social forces. Its dominance needs to be addressed with urgency by activists and countries that have leverage in Syria.
ON TOPIC

Syria's opposition groups strike unity deal against Assad: Rania El Gamal & Regan Doherty, Reuters, Nov 11, 2012—Syria's fractious opposition finally put aside fierce arguments to rally behind a new leader within a new coalition that its Western and Arab backers hope can topple Bashar al-Assad and take over the country.

Tug Of War Among Syrian Opposition: Shane Farrell, NOW Lebanon, November 9, 2012—Apart from wanting the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his cohorts, there seems to be very little that unites the Syrian opposition. The Syrian National Council (SNC), the main opposition group and once-great hope for proponents of regime change, has long been marred by infighting, defections and accusations of Muslim Brotherhood dominance, as well as of being out of touch with Syrians on the ground.

Israel Hits 'Source' Of Second Syrian Mortar Shell: Yaakov Lappin, Tovah Lazaroff, Jerusalem Post, Nov. 13, 2012 — Israel fired at and struck two Syrian mortar launchers on Monday, following the second time in as many days that Syrian artillery shells exploded in Israeli territory. A tank from the 401 Armored Brigade fired at the Syrian targets in what was an escalated Israeli retaliation to Syrian fire. Unlike Sunday’s exchange, the IDF fired with the intention of hitting its target, as part of a new policy designed to deter Syrian forces from firing into Israel.

When two employees of UNRWA, the United Nations organization for Palestinians, were killed in Syria, one by a sniper and the other in a crossfire, the organization responded by deploring “the tragic loss of life." It was even more subdued when Syrian artillery shells slammed into a United Nations school for Palestinians in a Damascus suburb….These mild responses were utterly unlike the cries of condemnation and calls for war-crimes investigations that came forth when an Israeli shell struck outside an UNRWA school during the 2009 Gaza.