

Syria Alert Issue IX

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Syrian national coalition for the forces of the opposition and the revolution

*On November 10th the different factions and parties of the Syrian opposition reached an agreement for the foundation of the **Syrian National Coalition for the Forces of the Opposition and the Revolution**. The Coalition elected Mouaz al-Khatib as its president and Suhair Attasi and Riad Seif as its vice-presidents. With the foundation of the Coalition the Syrian opposition made a crucial step toward unification, which is what many Syrians as well as foreign allies of the opposition have been calling for. The three leaders are widely trusted and respected, both within and outside Syria. As representatives of the different trends in the opposition, they are in the best position to build bridges between secular and Islamic groups, civil and military groups, and to the various minorities in Syria. This step towards unity needs the recognition and support of the International Community. Therefore, IKV Pax Christi calls on the **United Nations** to recognize the Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people and start cooperation aiming at the protection of Syrian civilians.*

IKV Pax Christi has worked with Mouaz al-Khatib for several years, and cooperates with Suhair Atassi's network in the Adopt-a-Revolution campaign. For many years, IKV Pax Christi has considered these two and Riad Seif to be true activists for reform. They have been active in the protests and demonstrations since the very beginning of the revolution in early 2011, and have paid a heavy price. They have been intimidated, imprisoned several times and forced, like many activists, to leave the country. They still are highly respected among civil activists and members of the Free Syrian Army inside Syria. Syrian activists welcomed the Coalition widely on social media and expressed their trust in Al-Khatib.

Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, the EU - sympathising with the call for freedom and dignity - has addressed the internal division of the revolutionary movement as problematic for political transition. The formation of the Coalition and the leadership of these three prominent activists with their respective backgrounds now offer new political opportunities.

The International Community should seek cooperation with the Coalition in order to create human security for the Syrian people and put an end to the Assad regime and the Syrian crisis. Only then is there a chance to rebuild the country, to offer security for its citizens and to end the bloodshed that has cost the lives of over 40,000 Syrians. Without the International Community's unambiguous and wholehearted support for the Coalition, Syria

may not be able to re-emerge from the failed-state abyss it has plunged into after 20 months of brutal conflict. Support for the efforts to unite Syria's opposition is desperately needed.

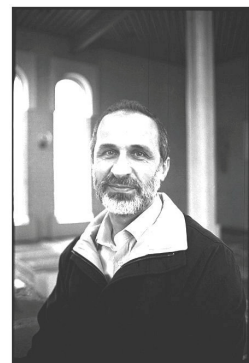
On the 19th of November the EU Foreign Affairs Council will meet. Syria is high on the agenda. IKV Pax Christi calls on the EU to take the following steps:

1. Recognition of the Syrian Coalition for the Forces of the Opposition and the Revolution as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.
2. Cooperation with the Coalition to unite the armed factions and militias under the civil control of the Coalition. Strengthening the capacities of civil activists to address the moral and judicial challenges related to the armed conflict, for instance by formulating a code of conduct for armed factions.
3. Cooperation with the Coalition aiming to guarantee protection of civilians in the 'liberated areas', the regions that are no longer under control of the regime but threatened by air and artillery shelling by the Syrian Army.
4. Cooperation with the Coalition and local civil activists aiming at the (re)building of civil institutions in the 'liberated areas', enabling the peaceful transition in these towns and neighbourhoods, in order to make the Assad regime irrelevant on the ground.
5. Cooperation with the Coalition to ensure a post-conflict Syria For All agenda, based on the principles of inclusion, tolerance, respect for rights of minorities and citizenship.
6. Generous support to the Coalition to meet the urgent humanitarian needs.
7. Coordination with Arab countries and Turkey to ensure the process of unification of the Syrian opposition in the Coalition.

IKV Pax Christi has worked with civil activists in Syria for more than a decade. Over the years, the organization has gotten to know many of the civil activists in Syria, including Mouaz al Khatib and Suhair al Atassi, and has developed a strong working relationship with them. In March 2012 it started the campaign Adopt-a-Revolution (<https://www.adoptarevolution.nl/>) aiming to support peaceful local revolutionary committees. Suhair al Atassi was present at the launch of the campaign. Mouaz al Khatib addressed a seminar IKV Pax Christi organized in November 2011 on Freedom of Religion in the Middle East. When Al Khatib was arrested in May 2012 IKV, Pax Christi joined the international campaign for his release.

Mouaz al Khatib (1960) is a well-known religious and spiritual leader in Syria. Like his father and grandfather before him, he was the Imam of the Omayad Mosque in Damascus. He held this position from the early 1990s until he was dismissed in 1995 for being too reform-minded. Al-Khatib is known as a preacher of moderate and tolerant Islam and is highly respected by both islamists and secular opposition groups in Syria. His preachings and texts speak of a tolerant Islam, with respect for other religions and heterodox groups.

When in 2011 the protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad started, Al-Khatib approached the president with a proposal for a transition plan. Al-Khatib was invited to speak with the president but upon departure from the palace arrested. Since 2011 he has been imprisoned by the Syrian security four times. His arrest caused widespread



protests. During his fourth time in prison he just survived a bomb attack in May 2012. After his release a few weeks later he escaped with his family from the country.

Suhair Atassi (1971) is the representative of local revolutionary committees, the main local civil opposition in many Syrian towns and villages. Atassi, the daughter of Syria's leading politician in the early years of independence, Jamal al-Atassi, is leading the General Council of the Syrian Revolution, an umbrella organization uniting over 40 of these local committees. During the 'Damascus Spring' in 2000-2001 she founded a political forum named after her father. Like other fora, it was disbanded in 2001. Atassi joined the first demonstrations in March 2011 and announced publicly in an interview with Al Jazeera that the revolution had started. A day later she was arrested. After one month in prison and several months in hiding she managed to escape the country. In Europe she has been the representative of the SGCR and spokesperson of local activists in Syria.



Riad Seif (1946) is a self-made businessman who served in the Syrian Parliament in the 1990s and is a veteran of the Syrian opposition. During his years in Parliament he criticized the regime of Hafiz al-Assad for its corruption and called for economic reform. In the brief period of hope after the death of Hafiz al-Assad in 2000 he founded one of the first dialogue groups that marked the Damascus Spring. When he planned to start a new political party to compete with the ruling Baath party in 2001 he was arrested and sentenced to prison for five years. Even after his release he and his family were continuously threatened by the secret services.



When the protests started in 2011, he immediately joined the demonstrations. During some of the demonstrations Seif was publicly beaten up and wounded. Despite these threats Seif stayed in Damascus as the only known representative of the Syrian National Council until summer 2012 when he had to go to Germany for cancer treatment.

*Syria Alert is a policy letter published by the Dutch peace movement IKV Pax Christi
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