

Syria Alert

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Syrian National Council, protection of civilians

After 6 months, the popular uprising in Syria, that started in March 2011 has reached a new phase this week as a result of the establishment of a Syrian National Council. This could be a breakthrough in the formation of a united opposition inside and outside Syria.

Opposition groups and demonstrators in Syria keep on calling for the protection of civilians.

IKV Pax Christi calls on the EU to welcome the establishment of the SNC and take necessary steps for the protection of civilians

Announcement of the Syrian National Council

On Sunday 2 October 2011, the Syrian National Council (SNC) presented its founding declaration and organizational structure. This is an important step that was widely welcomed by Syrians inside and outside Syria. The SNC described its aim as to provide "the necessary support for the revolution to progress and realize the aspirations of our people for the overthrow of the regime, its symbols and its head." The SNC aims to establish a civil, democratic state for all its citizens and commits to human rights, judicial independence, press freedom, democracy and political pluralism as its guiding principles. The Council includes the key opposition groups, such as Damascus Declaration, Muslim Brothers, the different ethnicities and religions of Syria, such as Christians and Kurds, the protest movement such as the Local Coordination Committees, as well as independent persons and tribal leaders. The Council also made clear it opposes foreign intervention, but it called on the international community to take on its responsibility to protect the Syrian people.

Over past months, many in the international community have complained that Syria's opposition is so divided, that there is no-one to talk to. The SNC is an answer to that. But the SNC still needs to develop a clear plan for political transition towards democracy, a "road map" with concrete steps. So the main focus should be on such a process now.

- The EU and its member states should welcome the SNC and seek active political dialogue and cooperation with it. The priority for cooperation with the SNC should be on developing a plan for the transition process towards democracy. International experiences and lessons learned can support such a process.
- The SNC is one party to support in developing such a plan, but also other groups should be consulted, for example civil society and groups and personalities, especially those inside

Syria, that are not represented in the SNC (an example is the Tayyar, Movement for Building Syria¹ and relevant religious leaders and groups).

- The representation of women and of a broad specter of Syrians from all regions, religions, ethnicities, political backgrounds and age groups is essential for the success of a transition towards a civil and democratic state.

Increasing concerns for safety of civilians

Concerns about the security situation inside Syria became more serious recently. Defected soldiers have organized themselves to counter the attacks on civilians and are especially active in the provinces Homs and Idlib. The Syrian army continues its attacks on those provinces and dozens of dead are reported daily. Last week a battle took place to take control of the town of Rastan, of which the Syrian army claimed full control. The Syrian government will avoid the establishment of a Syrian version of Benghazi at any price and in that light, worrying reports of serious human rights violations have come from Rastan. Eye witnesses mentioned houses being destroyed with people inside and agricultural spraying planes spraying a white powder². An estimated 3000 persons (out of a population on 70,000) were arrested and held in schools, a factory and the sports club³.

The massive violence by the army, security services and Shabiha (militias supporting the Assad family) lead to people trying to defend themselves and an increased call for armed resistance. There are reports of armed groups being active but the scale and level of organization has not been confirmed. The framing by media of a civil war is therefore incorrect and dangerous. For now, there is a state apparatus attacking civilians and people trying to defend themselves, rather than inter-communal fighting. There has however been a series of assassinations on Alawite figures and figures close to the regime that could spark such inter-communal violence. This is a dangerous development that, according to most analysts, the leadership is aiming at.

To this background and upon the call of the Syrian National Council, it is crucial that the EU and its member states step up their efforts to protect Syrian civilians. A combination of the following non-military means is recommended:

- Increase the monitoring, reporting and protection-by-presence activities of diplomats. The efforts of the US, UK and French ambassadors have been important examples that have been welcomed by Syrians. Other ambassadors should follow them. A coordinated effort of diplomats of EU countries can make a difference and would be an important moral support for the Syrian people .
- Work towards a UN mandate for a longer term presence of human rights observers in Syria.
- Targeted sanctions against the Syrian leadership should have more impact by having them adopted by a wider circle of countries, ensure that loopholes are closed and increased transparency and monitoring of implementation. It is crucial to work with countries that still have leverage in Damascus, such as Arab countries, Iran, Russia.

¹ <http://binaa-syria.com/B/en>

² Eye witness reports to Al Jazeera Arabic and to contact persons of IKV Pax Christi.

³ According to the Local Coordination Committees quoted in <http://www.philstar.com/Article.aspx?articleId=733862&publicationSubCategoryId=200>

- A clear message has to be sent that grave breaches of human rights and crimes against humanity will not go unpunished. These violations should be monitored and documented to prepare for the option of persecution of those responsible by the International Criminal Court or other bodies. Individual countries can also prepare lists of persons responsible for grave breaches of human rights. It is important that those responsible on a lower level are also documented, to emphasize their individual responsibility. While for these lower echelons amnesty deals could be worked out to ensure they defect, the top leadership should not be offered any amnesty.

The Council of Ministers of the European Union will discuss next week the policy towards Syria and necessary steps following the earlier sanctions. A clear and united position of European countries, and an inclusive approach to non-Western, more reluctant countries can make a difference to meet the challenges of further escalation of violence in Syria.

Syria Alert is a policy letter published by the Dutch peace movement IKV Pax Christi. This is the first issue of the policy letter. For further information please contact:

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