G|M|F The German Marshall Fund of the United States
STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali

Op-Med
Opinions on the Mediterranean

November 2013

About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650
F 1 202 265 1662
E info@gmfus.org

How the West should Stop Crippling the Syrian Opposition

by Jean-Pierre Filiu

Since its start in March 2011, the Syrian revolution has presented a challenge to classical interpretations of political protest and conventional attitudes toward armed insurgencies. The markedly grassroots nature of this popular uprising has made the quest for a monolithic leadership elusive. In addition, the various underground groups that make up the opposition have nurtured complex dialectics with exiled militants. The Syrian National Council (SNC) that was established in Istanbul in October 2011 was, therefore, a self-proclaimed patchwork, whose doors were left open to other groups.

The SNC was far more representative and transparent than the Libyan Transitional National Council (TNC) to which Paris, London, and Washington had, as early as March 2011, transferred the legitimacy previously bestowed upon Gaddafi's regime. But in Syria, the Western powers, concerned by the long-term outcome of their intervention in Libya, were not ready to gamble on a national council. They therefore maintained their diplomatic relations with Bashar al-Assad's regime, while openly calling for his ousting.

The Syrian opposition was thus left in a diplomatic limbo, whereby it was recognized as "representative," and later as "legitimate," by the "Friends of Syria" — a loose gathering of like-minded states led by the United States, the U.K., and France. But those three countries kept pressuring the SNC to "widen" its base and become more inclusive, especially of minorities. This continuous pressure, rather than strengthening the opposition, undermined its credibility through a series of arduous conferences in the Gulf or in Turkey that were marred by bitter infighting.

The Downward Spiral of Western Pressures on the Syrian Opposition

The relationship between the opposition inside Syria and militants in the diaspora came under further strain when the guerrilla groups coalesced into a Free Syrian Army (FSA). At the initiative of dissident officers, this FSA controlled an increasingly significant part of the Syrian territory, including half of Aleppo and most of the north, after the summer of 2012. But the FSA was never included as such in the SNC, since the "Friends of Syria" always

shied away from openly supporting any military alternative to the Assad's regime.

The SNC was then caught between two evils: too weak to impose its authority on the factions that were consolidating pockets of self-governed autonomy in "liberated" areas, it was also too poor to channel significant assistance to a population plagued by the bombings, raids, and terror from the Syrian dictatorship. Libya and Qatar were the only true supporters of the SNC, while Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states preferred directly backing more radical factions, including Salafi groups.

In November 2012, the SNC was overhauled and turned into the National Coalition of Revolutionary Forces, united in their demand for an end to the Assad's regime. Moaz al-Khatib, its new president, had escaped Syria only a few months before and his militant credentials earned him genuine respect from a wide range of the militant groups inside Syria. But Khatib had high expectations from the West, and when none of this support materialized, he abandoned his presidency.

The relationship between the United States (along with its European allies) and the Syrian opposition then went into a downward spiral. The Western "Friends of Syria" kept questioning the Coalition's clout, instead of providing it with the financial means to build up a credible alternative to the regime. This procrastination crippled a structurally unstable coalition that was a federation of parties and tendencies, not a pyramidal structure with a clear-cut chain of command.

The Western reluctance to arm the FSA had an even greater undermining effect on the nationalist guerrilla, whose leadership was not able to supply the fighting units with the weaponry and logistics they desperately needed. In the spring of 2013, Assad's army and militias, already strengthened by Russian weapons and Iranian support, was backed by the Lebanese Hezbollah's direct intervention on the battlefield. The radicalization of the conflict following Hezbollah's involvement increased the influence of the jihadi factions on the rebel side, even after their split into the Syrian-centered Nusra front and the al-Qaeda driven ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria).

In July 2013, Saudi Arabia became the main power broker behind the election of Ahmed Assi Jarba as the new president of the Syrian National Coalition. Along with the FSA chief of staff, General Salem Idriss, Jarba toured the Western capitals, pleading for urgent and massive support to the opposition. His argument was that unless the balance of power was altered in favor of the opposition, there would be no use in talking about a "political solution," the new mantra of international diplomacy.

However, all this lobbying did not stop the downward spiral. Western reluctance continued to nurture factionalism inside the Syrian guerrilla and pave the way for increased jihadi aggressiveness. Clashes between the FSA and the jihadi groups intensified in August 2013. The United States' refusal to sanction the massive use of chemical gas by the dictatorship dealt a devastating blow to the credibility of both the Coalition and the FSA.

The Key is Inside Syria, not in Geneva

It might, however, not be too late to reverse this dramatic tide, even without severing diplomatic ties with Damascus, a step that Washington, London, and Paris have refused to undertake so as to keep safe channels open with Assad's regime. But it is critical to move fast — and, inside Syria, to move beyond the sterile diaspora maneuvers, which have proved so frustrating over the past two years.

Aleppo, where 2 million people live in a city roughly divided into two halves, one "loyalist" and one "revolutionary," could become the laboratory for a genuine "political solution" involving the local leaders on the ground, instead of regime or exiled figures. Contributing to confidence-building measures between the conflicting parties in Aleppo could facilitate the post-Assad transition.

The second largest city in Syria is now ruled on its "revolutionary" side by a municipal council that was elected by the various committees active in the city. (The election took place last March in neighboring Turkey for obvious security reasons.) The "liberated" part of the Aleppo province is itself run by a revolutionary provincial council, designated by the acting municipalities in the area, which itself validates the election of new municipalities. Families and homes are divided between the two sectors, and the establishment of monitored channels of some sort between the "liberated" east and "governmental" west of Aleppo would be very welcome.

This said, the key to any success in this direction is the establishment of a revolutionary government inside Syria. This government has to be protected from air raids and artillery bombings. It should be provided with a significant budget to restore public services and, therefore, to stop the flow of refugees into neighboring countries. This would prove far less costly than the management of an additional wave of refugees, which already number 2 million outside Syria.

The undermining of the opposition's credibility through international maneuvers has obviously failed to "unify" the ranks of the Syrian opposition. Only Assad's dictatorship and the jihadi groups have benefitted from this twisted logic. It is high time to interrupt this downward spiral, to empower the local authorities inside "liberated" Syria, and to support a federating partner that would then be able to facilitate the long-expected transition.

About the Author

Jean-Pierre Filiu is professor of Middle East Studies at Sciences Po, Paris School of International Affairs. He has held visiting professorships both at Columbia School of International and Public Affairs and at Georgetown School of Foreign Service. His books, including *The Arab Revolution* (Hurst) and *Apocalypse in Islam* (University of California Press), have been published in a dozen languages.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, Warsaw, and Tunis. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

About IAI

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economics, and international security. A non-profit organization, the IAI aims to disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences, and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities, and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are European institutions and policies, Italian foreign policy, trends in the global economy and internationalization processes in Italy, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, defense economy and policy, and transatlantic relations. The IAI puts out an English-language quarterly (The International Spectator), an online webzine (AffarInternazionali), a series of research papers (Quaderni IAI) and an Italian foreign policy yearbook (La Politica Estera dell'Italia).