



Policy Briefing: The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change

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The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change

Despite early attempts for unity in the Syrian opposition, the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011 saw the emergence of two major groups in the political opposition: the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB) - formed in spring 2011 - and the Syrian National Council (SNC) – formed in the autumn of the same year. The origins of this split predate the Syrian uprising with similar rifts having appeared in the last serious attempt at unity – the Damascus Declaration (formed in 2005). Broadly, the NCB appeared as a coalition of mostly internally-based opposition, including political parties and individuals of the “traditional” opposition (i.e. the left and Arab nationalists). Externally-based Islamists (most notably the Muslim Brotherhood), and several independent academics and political figures, coalesced around the SNC.

The most manifest difference between the ‘internals’ and the ‘externals’ has been in their respective stances towards the regime and regime change. SNC figures have been happy to advocate for the complete overthrow of the regime and, consistent with this, were quick to support the militarisation of the uprising and the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The NCB – although stating consistently that it believes in regime change – has subordinated regime change to the greater goal of comprehensive democratic reform and the preservation of national unity, whereby maintaining the Syrian state’s integrity (as opposed to the regime’s) is crucial. At a wider level, it insists on a negotiated solution to the crisis and to an anti-interventionist and non-violent stance.

In calling for peaceful resistance in the face of regime brutality the NCB has been accused of being elitist and insensitive to the reality of revolutionaries on the ground. Indeed, their adherence to (arguably) defunct political principles over pragmatism, is perceived as long on principle but short on substance. Finally, the NCB’s closeness to Russia, China, and other states considered by many to be close to the Assad regime, has been another widespread point of contention.

Although the NCB’s reach on the ground is difficult to determine, its operational impact is limited. While the group has adapted to deliver relief where it can, research suggests that it is short of resources, seemingly exacerbated by its unwillingness to accept funding from abroad. Contemporary civil society groups like the Non-Violence

Movement (NVM) – which has similar ideological positions to the NCB – have indicated that only weak relations between the two groups exist, and that they do not agree with certain NCB political actions. The NCB's limited ground-level capacity explains why its profile seems to be dominated by its media presence – most notably through the group's head of external operations, Haytham Manna.

[Anti-intervention, anti-militarisation and the struggle to remain relevant](#)

Given the NCB's ideological background, it is hardly surprising that the group found itself on the back foot as the militarisation of the conflict in Syria intensified. The NCB has consistently rejected the use of violence in fulfilling the goals of the revolution, with Haytham Manna in particular arguing early on that the FSA had no clear strategy and exerted insufficient control over brigades on the ground. Equally, the NCB has consistently rejected the idea that the international community should intervene against the Syrian regime. Although the NCB rhetoric has undoubtedly become more responsive to the realities on the ground and the nature of the armed struggle, its more recent attitude towards the FSA is one of pragmatism rather than actual support – i.e. accepting the inevitability of armed opposition given regime violence. So while the organisation does not technically support the FSA's resort to armed violence, it has stated that the FSA could be used to protect (peaceful) protests.

[Negotiated transition: regime change, but not the downfall of the state](#)

The insistence of the NCB on peaceful, yet comprehensive, regime change necessitates – according to its founding principles and statements in the media – a negotiated transition away from the current regime, including dialogue with elements of it. Perhaps this, more than anything else, is the most divisive of the NCB policy positions, which has led to widespread accusations that it is connected and sympathetic to the regime. Although there is very little case to be made that NCB members are anything but staunch opposition (given the history of its constituent parties and the fact that many NCB members continue to be detained by the regime), the NCB's position on regime change specifically rejects the dismantling of the state apparatus. By definition therefore, the organisation is placed in a precarious position with regard to the multitude of political, administrative and military structures

that continue to develop in the opposition areas in response to regime (and state) withdrawal.

Meanwhile the NCB's popularity increases among the Syrian constituencies who have more to lose from the type of regime collapse that would result from the armed opposition's victory (typically moderates, minorities and secular constituencies). This also explains why the Syrian regime has shown some tolerance of the NCB: the existence of a group like the NCB, whose ideology – in principle – is founded in the same secular and nationalist discourse as that of the Ba'ath Party, lends respectability to the ailing Syrian government. There is further evidence, however, that there are disagreements within the regime about this attitude, and indeed that tolerance of the NCB is decreasing which arrests of NCB members on the increase. Finally, although there may be some connections between NCB members and pro-reform elements of the regime, the latter are actually regarded as very weak within the Syrian government at present.

What future for the NCB?

The NCB has consistently stated the need for all international actors to come to a unified position on Syria, for the goals of the opposition to be realised, and the conflict brought under control. It has been an enthusiastic advocate for Geneva I and II, and has been involved in discussions with both “Friends of Syria” countries and Russia. It is fair to state that it is in the international arena that the NCB has found the most success.

Given the current distance between the positions of the National Coalition (NC) and the Syrian regime however, it seems unlikely that the NCB will be able to assume the role of mediator or interlocutor between the parties to the Syrian conflict. Also, the NCB's difficulty in forging connections with civilian and military opposition groups inside Syria makes it hard to see what influence it could exercise on the ground. Thus, the success or otherwise of the NCB (and of NCB-like programs) depend more on the development of more “intermediate” civil groups and whether pro-reform elements within the regime and the state are able to become more prominent. Current evidence suggests that such developments may be a long way off.

For further information on the NCB and our Syria work, please email syria@integrityresearch.com.



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