

America's New Proxy, The Syrian National Coalition: The Many Faces of its Leader, Sheikh Ahmad Moaz Al-Khatib

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Completely unknown to the international public only a week ago, Sheikh Moaz al-Khatib has been catapulted to the presidency of the Syrian National Coalition, which represents pro-Western opposition in the Damascus government. Portrayed by an intense public relations campaign as a highly moral personality with no partisan or economic attachments, he is in truth a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and an executive of

The dislocation of the armed Syrian opposition is a reflection of the conflict between the various States which are trying to “change the regime” in Damascus.

We should pay particular attention to the Syrian National Council (SNC), also known as the Istanbul Council, since it was instituted there. This council is guided with an iron hand by the French DGSE (Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure), and financed by Qatar. Its members, who have obtained residency and various other privileges in France, are under constant pressure from the secret services, who dictate every declaration they make.

The Local Coordination Committees (LCC) represent those local civilians who support armed action.

Finally, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is principally managed by Turkey, unites most of the combatants, including the d’Al-Qaida brigades. 80% of these units recognise the Takfirit Sheikh Adnan Al-Arour as their spiritual leader. He is based in Saudi Arabia.

Seeking to regain leadership and bring a little order to this cacophony, Washington ordered the Arab League to call a meeting in Doha, sabotaged the SNC, and obliged as many of the tiny groups as possible to integrate a single and exclusive structure – the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. Behind the scenes, ambassador Robert S. Ford himself allotted the seats and privileges for this assembly, and has imposed as President of the Coalition a personality who has never yet been mentioned in the Press – Sheikh Ahmad Moaz Al-Khatib.

Robert S. Ford is considered to be the State Department’s principal specialist for the Middle East. He was the assistant of John Negroponte from 2004 to 2006, while this master spy was busy applying in Iraq the methods he had developed in Honduras – the intensive use of death squads and Contras. Shortly before the events in Syria began, Ford was nominated as Ambassador to Damascus, and assumed his functions despite Senate opposition. He immediately applied the Negroponte method to Syria with obvious results.

While the creation of the National Coalition objectifies Washington's take-over of the armed opposition, it does not solve the question of representivity. Very quickly, various components of the SLA withdrew. In particular, the Coalition excludes any form of opposition which is hostile to armed struggle, especially Haytham al-Manna's National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change.

The choice of Sheikh Ahmad Moaz Al-Khatib responds to a clear necessity – in order for the President to be recognised by the combatants, he has to be a religious figure, but in order to be accepted by Westerners, he has to appear moderate. And especially, in this period of intense negotiations, the new President has to have a solid understanding of the subject in order to discuss the future of Syria – but this is not a subject to be introduced in public.

US spin doctors quickly gave Sheikh Ahmad Moaz Al-Khatib a make-over, dressing him in a suit but no tie. Some of the media speak of him as a “model” leader. For example, a major US daily newspaper presents him as “a unique product of his culture, like Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma” [1]

Here is the portrait of him drawn up by the Agence France Presse (AFP):

“Sheikh Ahmad Moaz Al-Khatib, the consensual man

Born in 1960, Sheikh Ahmad Moaz Al-Khatib is a moderate religious figure who was for a time the Imam of the Omeyyades mosque in Damascus. He belongs to no political party.

It is this independence, and his proximity to Riad Seif at the origin of the initiative for a wider coalition, which makes him a consensual candidate for the leadership of the opposition.

His background is in Sufi Islam. A religious dignitary, he has studied international relations and diplomacy, and is not linked to the Muslim Brotherhood or any other Islamist organisation in the opposition.

Arrested several times in 2012 for having publicly called for the end of the regime in Damascus, he was forbidden to speak in Syrian mosques by order of the authorities, and found refuge in Qatar.

Born in Damascus, he played a decisive role in the mobilisation of the suburbs of the capital, notably Douma, which was active from the very beginnings of the peaceful demonstrations in March 2011. “Sheikh al-Khatib is a consensual figure who enjoys true popular support on the ground”, underlines Khaled al-Zeini, a member of the Syrian National Council.” [2]

The truth is quite different.

In reality, there is absolutely no evidence that Sheikh Ahmad Moaz Al-Khatib ever studied international relations and diplomacy, but he does have training as an engineer in geophysics. He worked for six years for the al-Furat Petroleum Company (1985-91), a joint-venture between the national company and other foreign enterprises, including the Anglo-Dutch Shell, with whom he has maintained contact.

In 1992, he inherited the prestigious charge of preacher at the Omeyyades mosque from his father, Sheikh Mohammed Abu al-Faraj al-Khatib. He was rapidly relieved of his functions and forbidden to preach anywhere in Syria. However, this episode did not occur in 2012, and has nothing to do with the present contestation – it happened twenty years ago, under Hafez el-Assad. At that time, Syria was supporting the international intervention to liberate

Kuwait, in respect of international law, in order to get rid of their Iraqi rival, and also to forge closer ties with the West. As for the Sheikh, he was opposed to “Desert Storm” for the same religious motives which were proclaimed by Oussama Ben Laden – with whom he aligned himself – notably the refusal of Western presence on Arab lands, which they consider sacrilegious. This position led him to deliver a number of anti-semitic and anti-Western diatribes.

Following that, the Sheikh continued his activity as a religious teacher, notably at the Dutch Institute in Damascus. He made numerous trips abroad, mainly to Holland, the United Kingdom and the United State. Finally, he settled in Qatar.

In 2003-04, during the attribution of oil and gas concessions, he returned to Syria as a lobbyist for the Shell group.

He came back to Syria again at the beginning of 2012, where he inflamed the neighbourhood of Douma (a suburb of Damascus). He was arrested, then pardoned, and left the country in July to settle in Cairo.

His family is indeed steeped in the Sufi tradition, but contrary to what the AFP claims, he is a member of the Muslim brotherhood, and declared this quite clearly at the end of his speech of investiture at Doha. According to the usual technique of the Brotherhood, he adapts not only the form, but also the content of his speeches to his audience. Sometimes leaning towards a multi-religious society, sometimes towards the restoration of sharia law. In his writings, he qualifies Jewish people as “enemies of God”, and Chiite muslims as “rejectionist heretics”, epithets which are the equivalent of a death sentence.

In the end, Ambassador Robert S. Ford has played his hand well – once again Washington has duped its allies. Just like in Libya, France has taken all the risks, but in the major compromises which are to come, Total will have gained no advantage.

Translation
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