

# Syrian National Initiative: Figleaf for Invasion?

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The formation of the Syrian National Initiative (SNI) was announced last week with much fanfare, replacing the discredited Syrian National Council as the latest front organization for the ongoing war against the Syrian state. Naturally, it was formed in Qatar. As a leading conduit for Western arms, funding and propaganda in the region, the choice of venue was ideally suited to spell out the imperial nature of the operation to anyone who had missed it.

The timing was as indicative as the venue. Hilary Clinton's outburst that the Syrian National Council was no longer fit for purpose and that the Syrian opposition needed a 'more inclusive' body if it wanted greater Western support, was made on October 31st. The plan for the Syrian National Initiative was presented two days later by Riad Seif, having been "developed with the help of the US State Department", according to the Carnegie Endowment website. Seif, according to the same website, is a "good friend" of former US ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, himself a protégé of John Negroponte, who ran the Central American death squads out of the US Embassy in Honduras in the 1980s. David Cameron then headed to the region, announcing on November 7th, in the arrogance typical of his class, that the Western powers had an opportunity to "shape the opposition" in Syria. Various self-styled opposition spokesmen and figureheads met with US, British, French and Turkish officials in Doha the following day, and three days later the Syrian National Initiative was born.

Whatever this new 'opposition bloc' is, it is certainly not the "sole representative of the Syrian people", as has now been claimed by France, Turkey and the Gulf states. A referendum in February of this year saw 89% of voters support a new Syrian constitution which commits the government to far-reaching political reforms, including the end of the one-party state; and opinion polls conducted by Yougov last year suggested that 55% of Syrians inside Syria (as opposed to the wealthy emigres who tend to monopolise Western media coverage) want Assad to remain as President. Indeed, a Free Syrian Army commander in Syria's second biggest city Aleppo recently admitted that 70% of the population of the city support Assad, and that "it has always been that way".

The SNI cannot even claim to be the legitimate representative of the Syrian opposition; i.e. of those Syrians who want to see Assad deposed. The National Coordination Committee, comprising most of the leftist opposition to Assad, and who are opposed to Western intervention and the militarization of the conflict, have wisely not endorsed the project; and one opposition activist told Reuters that "The people inside Syria don't see in the initiative a national vision. They see it as a way to undermine the revolution." Even amongst the groups actually involved, many are clearly only there because they do not want to miss out on any Western money and weapons that may be distributed, rather than out of any commitment to its aims, or unity of purpose with other members. Even the Muslim Brotherhood, the

largest political entity amongst the Syrian armed opposition, were vociferous in their opposition to the colonial nature of the initiative, with their spokesman Zuhair Salim initially claiming there was little difference between Hilary Clinton's statement and the Balfour Declaration – before jumping on the bandwagon a few days later nonetheless.

Clearly, this grouping of disparate rivals and factions bound together solely by their opportunism suggests a coalition that is likely to be not only unstable, but dysfunctional. Fearing this, almost all of the real issues were left undiscussed at the Doha conference. As Professor Amr al-Azm has put it, “there are few details regarding the structure of the new coalition, or the mechanisms for decision-making within it. Nor is there a timeline for achieving its political goals in place. This all points to a clear lack of strategy and planning on the part of those who put this coalition together and those currently leading it.”

But none of this matters to the instigators of the group. Cameron and Clinton have cobbled this group together for one reason and one reason only – to provide a figleaf of legitimacy for the ramping up of their proxy war against Syria; a war they are still hoping to take all the way to an all out British-French-US bombardment.

A massive escalation is clearly being planned in London and Washington. US and Turkish officials have been speaking about placing US Patriot missiles on the Syrian-Turkish border; British general David Richards said on Sunday (November 11th) that the RAF are preparing for a Syrian mission this winter; and reports are now emerging Free Syrian Army troops – with SAS support – have been stepping up attacks on Syrian air defense systems over recent months. Without air support, the rebels cannot win; any illusions otherwise were dashed by the dismal failures of the rebel offensives in July and August. What has been holding the West back so far has been two things: Chinese and Russian intransigence at the UN Security Council, and the US President's unwillingness to get embroiled in a new war during an election campaign.

The British government were quickest off the mark, their statements that they would now be dealing directly with Syrian armed groups being issued literally within hours of Obama's victory on November 7th; as military analyst Shashank Joshi put it, “With the re-election of Obama, what you have is a strong confidence on the British side that the U.S. administration will be engaged more on Syria from the get-go”. With the failure of all attempts to bully China and Russia into acquiescence, plan B is now underway: bypassing the UN Security Council altogether, and attempting to find some alternative legal justification for invasion, however flimsy. Indeed, Phillip Hammond, British Defence Minister, told Andrew Marr last Sunday that his department had effectively been ordered to come up with precisely such a pretext: “At the moment we don't have a legal basis for delivering military assistance to the rebels. This is something the Prime Minister keeps asking us to test – the legal position, the practical military position, and we will continue to look at all options.”

This is where the Syrian National Initiative comes in. The hope is that they will serve as the legal figleaf for the coming onslaught: if they are the legitimate representatives of the Syrians, the argument will go, and they invite us into their country, then it is not really an invasion – and therefore, not illegal. It is nonsense, of course – but the powers who argued that the WMD gossip of an Iraqi taxi driver constituted a legal basis for the war on Iraq are clearly beyond shame in such matters.

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