

Trying to Mold a Post-Assad Syria From Abroad
By Neil MacFarquhar, The New York Times
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ISTANBUL — Emad ad-Din al-Rashid, a former assistant dean at the Islamic law college of Damascus University, opened his MacBook Air laptop and flipped through spreadsheets detailing the unmet needs of seemingly every besieged neighborhood across Syria.

From his spare office in a fifth-floor walk-up on a drab Istanbul street, Mr. Rashid spends eight hours a day calling into Syria, mostly to lobby hundreds of his former theology students to join his new Syria National Movement, patiently building a network that he hopes will one day become the Islamist movement's power base.

While opposition groups are mostly concentrating on ending the brutish rule of President Bashar al-Assad, they are also positioning themselves for the longer-term question of who will rule in a post-Assad era. For that, they know from watching what happened in other Arab countries like Tunisia and Egypt that they need a good ground game.

"The Syrian people don't want to hear about politics right now, they want to focus on toppling the regime," said Mr. Rashid, 47, an amiable man with a neatly trimmed, salt-and-pepper beard. "But you have to be present politically before the system falls."

A broad spectrum of political organizations outside the country are jockeying for position, anticipating a new, democratic government in Syria for the first time since a 1963 military coup established the supremacy of the Baath Party and emasculated the rest.

The jockeying has alienated many Syrians, particularly those inside, who complain that members of the fractious opposition exile group, the Syrian National Council, are fixated more on grabbing appointments that they can leverage into domestic influence later than on forging the unity needed to defeat the government. The wrestling continues nonetheless. It remains unclear which group, if any, will emerge the dominant player.

Given the triumphant sweep of Islamist parties across North Africa, Syria's Islamist leaders itch with anticipation that this is their moment, too. The Muslim Brotherhood is the dominant actor, but two other Islamist organizations, the National Action Group and Mr. Rashid's Syria National Movement, are vying for influence. All are based abroad.

The Syrian branch of the Brotherhood faces obstacles that its counterpart in Egypt, for one, never encountered.

The Egyptian Brotherhood, while technically illegal, was tolerated by the government of Hosni Mubarak. In Syria, by contrast, the Brotherhood has almost no presence, thanks to a 1980 law stipulating the death penalty for membership in the group as well as long years of bloody repression. Most of its current leaders were young men when they fled the country 30 years ago after the government of Hafez al-Assad, the president's father, massacred at least 10,000 people in the central city of Hama.

"We don't have an organization, but we have a constituency," said Ali Sadreddin al-Bayanouni, the head of the Syrian Brotherhood from 1996 to 2010.

Its impact may be further diluted by internal divisions. Rivalry within the Muslim Brotherhood has long pitted its more tolerant Aleppo branch against the more conservative Hama branch. Exile widened those differences because many Aleppans went to the West, while the Hamawis moved to the Persian Gulf.

None of this has stopped the group from trying to build a cohesive network. Mr. Bayanouni, the former leader, estimated the Brotherhood sent between \$1 million to \$2 million monthly into Syria for humanitarian needs.

Abu Anas, a 45-year-old mosque imam in a small village between Hama and Homs, said senior Brotherhood figures called from abroad to ask him to resurrect a network that his father once led.

“They want me to rebuild the Muslim Brotherhood’s group through a charity network by helping poor families, jailed activists and by paying for medical aid,” he said, estimating that the organization spent millions of dollars in his region alone in the last year, adding: “If we could present good services and policies to all Syrians, we will be elected.”

All the Islamist groups agree this is not the time for pushing divisive social issues like banning alcohol or veiling women, and they acknowledge that internal squabbling only serves Mr. Assad’s interests. The longer and more militarized the fight, they and others worry, the greater chance that radical jihadists will become the face and power of the resistance.

The opposition has a plan to avoid that, said Obeida Nahas, 36, a marketing executive and founding member of both the Syrian National Council and the National Action Group. He described it as the “four Ds”: demonstrations, defense, defections and diplomacy. Yet, with chances of success murky, so is the future direction of Syrian politics.

Mr. Nahas and his allies say they are religious conservatives rather than Islamists, not unlike Turkey’s governing party, which they call an inspiration but not a model. The age of ideology is dead, Mr. Nahas said in an interview in the lobby of a modest Istanbul hotel. Instead, he said, the generation that fomented the Arab Spring wants a limited, nonideological state that treats all its citizens equally.

“We are trying to find common ground, something that would create a national identity that would include all political groups,” Mr. Nahas said.

Mr. Nahas did not sound terribly distant from Mr. Rashid, who described wanting to create a country for Muslims, instead of a Muslim country, implying that the former is more welcoming of Syria’s sectarian patchwork. “Political Islam ruins the nature of religion,” he said. “Religion becomes a political card.”

But secular Syrian politicians mocked their professed differences as blowing smoke. Many Syrians, they said, blame the Brotherhood in tandem with the government for the violence that rocked the country starting in 1979, after a Brotherhood offshoot massacred military cadets from the same Alawite sect as the Assad family. The bloodshed left a legacy of mistrust and bitterness that lingers to this day.

“The Muslim Brotherhood monopolizes everything — the money, the weapons, the S.N.C.,” said Kamal Lebwanly, a dissident physician released last November from nearly a decade in jail in Syria. He quit the Syrian National Council in February, labeling it a stalking-horse for Islamic rule. “The S.N.C. has a liberal peel covering a totalitarian, nondemocratic core,” he said, adding that long exile meant the Islamists were out of touch.

Even liberals still within the council worry that the Islamists are disassembling, not so much divided as playing different roles for different constituencies while waiting to grab power. “In most Arab revolutions, the Islamists seemed to accept to remain in the second row,” said Samir Nachar, a member of the Syrian National Council’s executive committee. “But after the revolution was over, they became its leaders.”

The Brotherhood’s supporters argue that Syria’s diversity, with large minorities of Alawites, Christians and Druze, will defeat any effort to impose Islamic law. They argue as well that democracy is a natural fit because Syria has long adhered to the Sufi school of Islam, which fosters a more individual, ecstatic relationship between a believer and God. Experts countered that Sufism should not be confused with liberalism.

Syrian Brotherhood leaders winced when asked about Islamist parties dominating postrevolutionary Egypt, acknowledging that it hurt their credibility among Syrian minorities and some foreign supporters, particularly the United States.

"I wish that they had taken a more inclusive stance," said Molham Aldrobi, 48, who serves on the executive boards of both the Syrian National Council and the Brotherhood. He and others cited the Brotherhood's accommodating record in Parliament before 1963 as their future blueprint.

Brotherhood leaders said that they had spoken with officials from the Obama administration in the past year, but that Washington remained wary about who might triumph in Syria, including the radical jihadis.

But analysts say that fears of an organized jihadi network are overblown, for now at least. "There is a tremendous amount of rhetorical smoke," said Brian Fishman, an expert on extremist Islam at the New America Foundation in Washington. "But it is hard to figure out their strength."

Some experts say that Washington is selling the Syrian Brotherhood short as well. "Even a cursory analysis should lead them to the realization that the Syrian Brotherhood is the most closely aligned with their objectives in the region," said Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Doha Center in Qatar. "It is as anti-Iran and anti-Hezbollah as you can get for an Islamist movement."

Ultimately, the battle for Syria's future boils down to identity, whether Syrian society is by nature religious or secular, and how either identity might be represented by whatever replaces the stifling Baath Party. Will Syria's diversity tear it apart, or can a pluralistic, democratic nation that respects equal rights emerge from its jumble of rival religious sects, ethnic groups and age-old tribes?

"It is plausible that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood will come to the fore," said Cengiz Candar, an eminent Turkish analyst of Arab affairs. "But it is too early to deduce anything significant. They are in an incubation period. Who knows who will be around eventually?"

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