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# What Does the Syrian Opposition Believe?

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There are increasing calls for international intervention in Syria after this weekend's massacre in Houla, where Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces murdered more than 100 civilians. Obstacles to intervention remain, however, especially concern that the opposition to Assad's regime is dominated by religious fundamentalists. Until recently, for example, the Syrian National Council, a group of exiled opponents of the regime, was led by Burhan Ghalioun, whose unwillingness to counter the Muslim Brotherhood was widely viewed in the West as a troubling sign of Islamist influence.

But a confidential survey of opposition activists living in Syria reveals that Islamists are only a minority among them. Domestic opponents of Assad, the survey indicates, look to Turkey as a model for Syrian governance -- and even widely admire the United States.

Pechter Polls, which conducts opinion surveys in tough spots in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, completed the Syria opposition poll in December 2011. Respondents were contacted over a secure Skype connection by someone they could trust -- all native Syrians -- who asked them to fill out a short questionnaire anonymously in Arabic. Interviewers were selected from different social and political groups to ensure that respondents reflected a rough cross-section of overall opposition attitudes. To ensure confidentiality, the online survey could be accessed only through a series of proxy servers, bypassing the regime-controlled Internet.

Given the survey's unusual security requirements, respondents were selected by a referral (or "controlled snowball") technique, rather than in a purely random fashion. To be as representative as possible, the survey employed five different starting points for independent referral chains, all operating from different locations. The resulting sample consisted of 186 individuals in Syria identified as either opposition activists themselves

(two-thirds of the total) or in contact with the opposition.

What do these "inside" opposition supporters believe? Only about one-third expressed a favorable opinion of the Muslim Brotherhood. Almost half voiced a negative view, and the remainder were neutral. On this question, no significant differences emerged across regions.

Most of the survey's questions asked, "On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means the most negative and 7 the most positive, how would you rate your opinion of X?" Answers of 1 to 3 were considered negative, 4 as neutral, and 5 to 7 as positive.

While many respondents supported religious values in public life, only a small fraction strongly favored Shariah law, clerical influence in government, or heavy emphasis on Islamic education. A large majority (73%) said it was "important for the new Syrian government to protect the rights of Christians." Only 20% said that religious leaders have a great influence on their political views.

This broad rejection of Islamic fundamentalism was also reflected in the respondents' views on government. The poll asked each respondent what country he or she would "like to see Syria emulate politically," and which countries the respondent "would like to see Syria emulate economically." The poll listed 12 countries, each with a scale of 1 to 7. Just 5% had even a mildly positive view of Saudi Arabia as a political model. In contrast, 82% gave Turkey a favorable rating as both a political and economic model (including over 40% extremely favorable). The U.S. earned 69% favorable ratings as a political model, with France, Germany and Britain close behind. Tunisia rated only 37% and Egypt 22%.

Iran was rated lowest of any country included in the survey, including Russia and China: Not even 2% of respondents had positive views of Iran as a political model. Fully 90% expressed an unfavorable view of Hezbollah, including 78% with the most negative possible attitude.

One of the surprises in the results is the scope of the opposition's network inside Damascus, despite their difficulties in demonstrating publicly. One-third of the respondents, whether activists or sympathizers, said they live in the Syrian capital. (To protect their privacy, the survey did not ask for more precise identification.)

This "inside" opposition is well-educated, with just over half identifying as college graduates. The ratio of male to female respondents was approximately 3 to 1, and 86% were Sunni Arab.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, they were ambivalent about Syrian Kurdish demands for "political decentralization" (like autonomy). Views of "Kurdish parties" were evenly divided among negative, neutral and positive. (Such feelings are evidently mutual: In the six months since the survey was completed, Syrian Kurdish organizations have increasingly decided to go their own way, separate from the other opposition groups.)

Based on a statistical analysis of the survey, most secularists among the respondents prefer weak central government, presumably as a way to safeguard their personal freedoms. On the other hand, the one-third of respondents who support the Muslim Brotherhood also tend to have a favorable view of Hamas, despite the latter movement's previous association with the Assad regime.

The survey demonstrates that the core of the Syrian opposition inside the country is not made up of the Muslim Brotherhood or other fundamentalist forces, and certainly not of al Qaeda or other jihadi organizations. To be sure, a revolution started by secularists could pave the way for Islamists to win elections, as has occurred in Egypt. But the Syrian opposition is solidly favorable to the U.S. and overwhelmingly negative toward both Hezbollah and Iran.

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