

# Trip Report: Meeting the Syrian Opposition in Antakya and Istanbul

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Jul 27, 2012

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**During a recent trip to Antakya and Istanbul, David Pollock and a European delegation met with more than 100 Syrian opposition figures to discuss border controls, involvement of the Muslim Brotherhood, and ways in which the United States can assist the opposition.**

**H**aving recently returned from a European Foundation for Democracy sponsored trip to Antakya and Istanbul, during which a European delegation and I met over 100 Syrian opposition figures, a number of important observations come to mind. First, one of my strongest impressions is that things are not what they seem. It is very difficult on the ground to be sure who it is that you are really talking to and what they represent. Second, Turkish officials maintain a striking degree of control over Syrian opposition forces inside Turkey. Third, the Muslim Brotherhood is pervasive not only within the Syrian National Council (SNC), but among many opposition groups -- mostly outside Syria. Lastly, there is a striking cynicism and anger among fighters within Syria toward the outside world for not providing enough practical support.

## Things Are Not What They Seem

**M**any times throughout the trip, we experienced people privately telling some of us one thing and others something completely different, and talking about each other in quite derogatory ways behind each other's backs, while trying to take over meetings from each other.

For example, we met with a Syrian sheikh who runs the Jamiyat al-Shura al-Khairiyah on the Jordanian side of the border, which is supposedly a humanitarian organization. He gave us an extremely long, eloquent, and detailed presentation about the good work he is doing and said that we are all equal and we all believe in the compassionate and merciful prophets. He then asked us to support his good work for the Syrian people. Then after that meeting, he took aside a Palestinian Muslim member of our delegation, and said, "You know, when you talk to these Europeans,

you have to be like a fox. You have to say all these nice things, but you know that we don't really mean any of it."

I was struck by the pervasiveness of this uncertainty and duplicity. Personally, I support the Syrian opposition, but I think we need to be very clear about the pitfalls when we try to pick and choose. So that is my first conclusion: Don't jump to conclusions. Even about whom you think you are dealing with.

## **Turkish, Not Syrian, Border Controls**

**T**he degree of Turkish control not only over Syrian camps, but also over the extent that Syrian opposition forces are given permission to travel to particular places in and out of Turkey, is quite striking.

For example, we met with the official Free Syrian Army (FSA) spokesman, who lives in a remote village in the hills, approximately 20 kilometers away from camp Apaydin, where most of the FSA in Turkey lives. The reason behind this is that the Turks apparently do not want people to meet those FSA soldiers, and will not allow most people to enter the camp. Inside the camp, however, the FSA commanders and soldiers are confined by the Turks and have only limited contact with the FSA inside Syria.

At the same time, what is really striking is the degree to which, even before the bombs went off in Damascus, the Syrians seemed to be losing control of some of their border posts. Syrians of all backgrounds seem to be free to move between Syria and Turkey with only Turkish permission. The Syrian government now seems to have lost control of its borders in every direction. Groups of Syrians came to meet us from inside Syria and when I asked them how exactly they got out of Syria, not only did they give pretty convincing explanations, but they offered very genuinely, I believe, to take us in with them if we wanted and to bring us back to Turkey.

With regards to the Turkish stance toward the Syrian opposition movements, many different kinds of Syrian groups and movements are allowed to set up offices in Turkey. But there is a distinct Turkish preference for some parts of the opposition movement; they favor the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Syrian National Council.

## **Muslim Brotherhood Control of Outside Opposition**

**I**t is clear that the MB is trying, as much as possible, to dominate the SNC as well as general Syrian opposition activity. We witnessed this in very practical terms, as they tried to take over meetings we had with other factions, non-partisan groups, and FSA people. We pushed back at every turn, but after some meetings, Syrians would come up to us and tell us "we are sorry if the Muslim Brotherhood got in here and tried to take over part of the meeting, but we are not them and they are not us." This happened often enough that it was an issue.

Other groups in the Syrian opposition oppose the Muslim Brotherhood for a variety of reasons: they are secularists, they are set on their own political ambitions, or they don't like Turkish influence on the Brotherhood. An unfortunate paradox has emerged in which well-meaning and well-connected Syrians are setting up new groups every day, saying, "I am going to unify the opposition." Some of these groups are impressive, but they are quite fragmented, a trend that we see across the region.

As in some other countries, the Islamists tend to be relatively well organized, well disciplined, and unified, even if they do not represent the majority. This is the case in Syria among the outside opposition, but not on the inside, where the MB still has a limited presence. However, these other groups may not be a match for the discipline and unity of the MB in the political battle as the regime collapses.

## **Views of Inside Opposition: What Do They Want from Us?**

**W**e met with many people who are fighting and organizing relief work throughout Syria, who came into Turkey for a variety of reasons: for training, to get supplies, to rest, to meet with outside opposition and foreigners. They made it very clear that they want communications equipment, medical supplies, and anti-tank and anti-aircraft

weapons. They do not want more meetings, political support, training, and declarations.

The extent of cynicism and even anger at the outside world for not doing enough of a practical nature was striking. We heard over and over that "you are complicit in the slaughter of the Syrian people." It was not that "you are not giving enough support," but "you do not want Assad to fall" and "you want Syrian people to be slaughtered."

Sadly, most of these Syrians hold Israel responsible for preventing greater U.S. support. Aside from one exception, this view was nearly unanimous. In spite of, or perhaps because of, this very weird perception about Israel's power, whenever we asked, "If Israel offered weapons or help, would you take it?" the answer was almost always, "definitely"!

When we spoke about outside help, a very clear distinction emerged: They do not just want a no fly zone or a humanitarian safe haven, but a no drive zone and safe passage from the borders deep into Syria. Yet what we heard most was, "Give us anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons. We don't even need your air cover or corridors. Give us the weapons and we will do it ourselves."

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