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**BALANCING IMAGE AND INTERNAL DISCONNECT:
THE GOVERNANCE ASPIRATIONS OF THE SYRIAN INTERIM
GOVERMENT**

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Contents

I.   Intro:

The Syrian opposition in exile has drawn a lot of criticism for its incompetence, disunity, and irrelevance–all typical problems of exile groups. The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) itself differs from the usual model of exile groups in regards to a.) its formation–it was officiated by the Coalition, of questionable legitimacy itself (while most exile groups are formed inside the state and have a support base on the ground), b.) its purpose, which is to provide governance services, and c.) it is quite literally no longer in exile.[1] This last point, the fact that the SIG has shifted inside Syria, has fueled much of the curiosity behind this paper.

The SIG was created by the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Armed Forces in March 2013. Initially, the SIG had two main purposes: first, to develop relationships with the Syrian opposition on the ground (especially the local councils) and second, to become a relevant governing entity itself. It has a mandate to provide services, and therefore often defines itself as a technocratic government. The first SIG administration, under prime minister Ahmed Toumeh, was dysfunctional and plagued by charges of nepotism and theft. While it had a large trust fund, only Qatar supplied funding for salaries. When Qatar dropped the funding in 2015, the SIG fell apart completely. In 2016, Abu Hatab won the election to be its next prime minister, and he brought a new strategy: first, to recreate the SIG inside Syria with only a handful of full-time

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[1] "Syrian National Coalition gives Authorization to first Government Inside Syria," RFS Media Office, 7/12/2016

staff remaining in Gaziantep, and second, to limit the mandate of the SIG to only a few of its strongest projects (although it is contested in the media and among my respondents whether or not the SIG has actually committed to limiting its mandate instead of overstretching its operational capacity across multiple ministries.)[2] Irregardless, the fact remains that the SIG and its affiliates view the SIG's ability to provide services as an essential element to increasing it in legitimacy among the Syrian population under rebel-held Syria.

So I ask, "to what extent can an exile group improve its operations and legitimacy among constituents by recreating itself inside its homeland?" This paper does not explore the SIG's impact on the legitimacy of the Coalition, since the Coalition's legitimacy depends on increased recognition from the international community–a complication that I will describe in more detail later. Instead, I seek to explore the operations of the SIG and its legitimacy as a government and especially the impact of recreating itself inside Syria on these variables. How does entering Syria play into the rest of the SIG's strategy? To what extent has the SIG succeeded in their operations and goals and to what extent did the variable of exile effect this? That an exile group could form in exile and then recreate itself inside the homeland while maintaining strong ties to its original counterpart, effectively removes the state of being in exile from an exile group.

The study that follows will illustrate that while exile groups tend to share various disadvantages due to the nature of being in exile, it is not actually the displacement of the group outside its homeland that decreases its effectiveness and relevance. A review of the literature along with the results of my research have demonstrated that the condition of being in exile can be teased apart from its usual variables, and, as in the case of the Syrian Interim Government, all the usual political baggage and exile-related conundrums can follow an exile group when it attempts to reestablish itself back inside the homeland.

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[2] In-person interview, number 4

Regarding terms, I will refer to the Syrian Interim Government as the SIG. I will refer to the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Armed Forces as "the Etilaf" and sometimes "the Coalition" for aesthetics. I will define both Etilaf and SIG as "political exile groups," which is defined in literature on exile politics as the political opposition from outside a nation-state. I shall refer to the areas that the SIG seeks to extend its activities as "rebel-held" although the SIG is also interested in operating in a Turkish-controlled area in the north. The "rebel-held" areas I refer to do not include the Kurdish areas in the north or those held by extremist groups including the Islamic State of the Levant and Sham.

This paper is organized into five sections following the introduction. The review of literature covers the nature of exile in the modern international system. Then I describe the background of the crisis in general and the formation of the Syrian Interim Government which also helps to explain the inefficacy and fractious nature of the Syrian opposition (both in exile and on the ground). The section on my methodology follows. My findings cover some findings and analytical analysis on what I've learned through conducting interviews and news articles on the SIG and its activities. I consider the SIG's recent successes and failures and then note how they attempt to project themselves as a legitimate government. My conclusion considers the SIG's activities in terms of gaining legitimacy as a government and some considerations for including the SIG in American foreign policy.

II.   Review of Literature:

The literature on exile is expansive and it includes political science, aesthetic literature, medical studies, and various fields having little to do with opposing the current regime, including psychology, sociology, diaspora studies, and economics. In defining the exile, Shklar says "I despair of ever completing my list."[3] I have chosen to limit my study to the political opposition group that agitates from outside the nation-state with intentions to undermine and eventually replace the current regime. Although exile political activity is not limited to the group structure; an individual in exile can wield impactful political force on the homeland using their popularity, wealth, and political wiles and sometimes immigrant-friendly states develop grand strategy based on the intelligence reports provided by newly accepted exiles.[4]

Political exile has a history far older than the nation-state system, but in this work, I focus on political exile in light of the nation-state system of the modern era. According to Shain, the dynamic of exile may be altered fundamentally due to globalization, transnationalism, and the spread of democracy.[5] Vasanthakumar also noted that the driving force behind exile political representation lies in the "systemic denial of voice in the homeland."[6]

Judith Shklar specifies that it is "government criminality" which drives citizens to question their obligations to obey. While most often "government illegality" is assumed to be due to dire necessity, Shklar asserts that this is rarely the case. The exiles who are treated unjustly by the government, including those driven from their homes, not including economic migrants, criminals or exiles of natural disasters, but those with a good argument for their

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[3] Judith Shklar, "Obligation, Loyalty, exile," *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, (Chicago and London: the Chicago Press, 1998) 45

[4] Yossi Shain *Frontier of loyalty: Political exiles in the age of the nation-state*, (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Brian Auten "Political Diasporas and Exiles as Instruments of Statecraft," *Comparative strategy*, (2006) 25:4, 329-341

[5] Yossi Shain, *Frontier of Loyalty,* xiv

[6] Ashwini Vasanthakumar, "Exile Political Representation," the journal of political philosophy, (2016) Vol 24, No 3

grievances against a polity, create the best opportunity to separate between feelings of national loyalty and the obligation to obey and follow the laws of a polity. While she mentions that in relatively just societies, such as the United States, government abuses against minority groups often do not erode allegiance and loyalty to the state, she finds it to be perfectly rational that this would result in just such a loss of political obligation, though often not that of loyalty to the state.[7]

The difficulty of the political exile has been described in detail by Shain, and I shall summarize briefly. It is generally agreed upon that being expelled from the homeland challenges the survival of a political organization. While exile groups have various interests and goals and form in differing circumstances, Shain asserts that the success of an exile group can generally be measured by its ability to increase in international recognition and internal loyalty. Firstly, the exiles struggle to gain popular support through the narrative of the conflict. They need to draw attention to themselves and to bring to light the illegitimacy or inadequacies of the current regime which is a huge challenge since the regime often controls the flow of information within the state.[8] Secondly, exile groups struggle with financial and diplomatic support from the international community. They must convince foreign entities to support their struggle against the home regime. Foreign support often entails adopting interests that at worst conflict and at best neglect the interests of the exiled group and their underground counterparts at home, which often results in political fissures. A related challenge lies in maintaining a connection to the resistance on the ground. The exiled opposition is expected to garner financial and political support from the international community for their cause, and failure to do so often results in deep disillusionment for the base. Regardless, the base often resents their exiled counterparts for

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[7] Judith Shklar, "Obligation, Loyalty, Exile"
[8] Yossi Shain, *Frontier of Loyalty*

presenting themselves as the leaders of the cause when they are not as deeply involved nor paying as high a price for it as those on the ground.[9] Usually, maintaining a strong connection with internal constituents is essential to the survival of an exile group–if an exile group is known to have a weak connection on the ground, then it is far more likely to be ignored internationally. Exile groups must at least project the appearance of substantial relationships with the base of the cause if they are to convince the international community to provide support.[10]

Other literature on political exile groups tended to focus on the way that states use them, and I divide this literature into two categories: the first one considers how states have used exile as grand strategy. For example, exile was one tactic that Chile's Pinochet would use to consolidate state power.[11] Sznajder and Roniger purport that expelling political dissidents from the homeland (as long as they belonged to a high social class) became an essential element of state formation across the entire continent of Latin America. They argue that the Spanish and Portuguese colonial powers modeled translocation as a method of handling a range of trouble-makers, and as Latin American states gained independence emerging Latin American regimes resorted to expulsion as a tool to use against political dissidents to develop authoritarian systems while avoiding civil war. Exile thus became rooted in Latin American political culture and legislation. The authors assert that Latin American exile politics influenced legislation and norms in the host state, the home state, and even the international community.[12]

The second literature considers the implications of recognizing exile groups. Rangwala and Talmon both take the Syrian opposition as their case study, and view the recognition of the

[9] Yossi Shain, "Frontier of Loyalty"
[10] Yossi Shain, *The Frontier of Loyalty,* 77-79
[11] Thomas C. Wright and Rody Onate Zuniga, "Chilean Political Exile" *Latin American Perspectives*, (July 2007) 155:34, No. 4, 31-49
[12] Sznajder and Roniger, "Political Exile in Latin America" *Latin American Perspectives*, (July 2007) 155:34, No. 4, 7-30

SNC as an attempt at undermining the legitimacy of the current regime in Syria. Shain also describes the "granting, withholding and withdrawing" of recognition as a purely political tactic having little to do with international law (since the standards of such within the framework of international law are constantly in flux).[13] Talmon examines the implications of recognizing an exile group as a legitimate representative of a people when the current regime is still partially in power according to international law and within international politics. He concludes that such recognition has little to do with international law and that it is an impactful though somewhat unmanageable political tool. The impact is basically that such recognition a.) creates in the recognized group a secure client, since exile groups do not want to lose the recognition, and b.) is understood internationally as "an implicit commitment to regime change."[14] Rangwala explores the international community's usage of exiled interim governments, and creates a new concept, which he terms "governments-in-waiting," which is largely a tool for in undermining the legitimacy of the current regime. The government-in-waiting is, basically, the creation of a government that is literally waiting for the current regime to completely collapse.[15]

III.   Background

Thusly, we have explored the struggles of political exile groups in general, which brings clarity to the struggle of the Syrian exiles. I now seek to elaborate on the circumstances of the Syrian opposition in exile. As I will describe below, the situation of the conflict in Syria is not agreeable to the unity or success of the opposition. Some factors leading to the ineffectiveness of

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[13] Yossi Shain, "Governments-in-exile and International legitimization," from *Governments-in-exile in contemporary world politics*, (USA: Routledge, 1991), 219-237
[14] Stefan Talmon, "Recognition of Opposition Groups as the legitimate representative of a people," Chinese Journal of International Law, (June 2013), Vol 12, No 2
[15] Glen Rangwala, "The creation of Governments-in-waiting: the arab uprisings and legitimacy in the international system," Geoforum, (June 2015), 66

the Syrian opposition would be weak civil society prior to the uprising in 2011, the number of actors joining the conflict, the duration and mutation of the conflict, and that the opposition was also funded by competing actors on the international stage.

Since the peaceful uprising of 2011, the Syrian conflict metastasized into a multi-tiered conflict involving numerous actors with various interests. The warring factions include the al-Assad regime and its supporters, Hezbollah, Russia, and Iran, those supporting the rebels, who are largely Sunni and often considered to be extremists–the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey (although this support has been dwindling), the Kurds native to northeast Syria (also supported by the United States), and extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and their competitors. The conflict has generated a great humanitarian catastrophe, with many civilians freezing in the winter, starving to death in besieged towns (especially those near Damascus), and risking their lives to escape the devastation brought on by the crisis–many analysts say that the destruction of Syrian society itself has been the only result of the conflict. Many Syrians rhetorically ask what they have gained from the demonstrations of 2011.[16]

Assad's loss of control over the northern parts of the country bordering Turkey allowed various groups to assert themselves as governance authorities in said territories. In the northeast, the Kurds govern and fight on their own behalf, and ISIS has claimed the city of al-Raqqa as its main headquarters. Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation has allowed the imposition of a Turkish-initiated governance structure over areas between Manbij and Jarablus, near its border. The regime in Damascus currently governs about 17 million people, and the rebels 2 to 5 million.[17] Civilian-led local governance structures have been the most promising development of

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[16] Ali Nehme Hamdan, "On failing to 'get it together': Syria's opposition between idealism and realism," from *MERIP 277 - Iran's many deals*, Vol 45 (Winter 2015)

[17] Interview with Max Blumenthal by Sam Seder on the majority report, "4/28 Max Blumenthal: the proxy war in Syria, social justice and the courts, & remington's self-firing guns," (April 28, 2017)

the Syrian crisis, proving to be the most functional and successful example of decentralized authority. These localized structures have been supported by hundreds of western donors and NGOs.

Syrian Opposition in Exile

The first challenge to the Syrian opposition in exile can be traced back to its history– Syria's security apparatus did not allow for the development of a civil society let alone a legitimate political opposition. The current political opposition formed only when the crisis started and therefore has no history within Syrian society and therefore no recognized leaders for acceptable representation. In addition to the opposition's lack of connection to a base, the base itself within Syria is disunited. Generally, loyalties within Syrian society have historically been less nationalistic and more regional.

The oppression of civil society began shortly after Syria's independence from France, and its transformation into a police state which rules through terror, unlawful imprisonment, and torture can be traced back to the strategies of a military intelligence chief in the mid 1950s, the policies under Gamal Abd al-Naser during the period of the UAR, as well as those implemented by Hafez al-Assad.[18] Hafez al-Assad took power in a military coup in 1970, and Bashar, his third choice for his successor, became president in 2000. Although Bashar was expected across the world to present an opportunity for modernization and liberalization within Syria, he proved to be as heavy-handed as his father. With his ascension to the post in 2000, a western-influenced civil society sprouted, but was soon crushed. Many members of what was called the "Damascus Spring" of 2000 were imprisoned and tortured.[19]

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[18] Mohammad Jameel, *Syria: the roots of tyranny*, al-Jazeera documentary, (March 15, 2017)
[19] Alan George, *Syria: neither Bread nor Freedom*, (London and New York: Zed Books, 2003)

Currently, the armed opposition on the ground is deeply fractured–the makeup and loyalties of each group shifts, divides, and restructures fluidly based on immediate battleground circumstances.[20] The varying goals and interests of the actors involved on the regional and international level have also contributed to the disunity and fracturing of the exile groups and the armed groups on the ground. Initially, the international community was supportive of the Etilaf, and over a hundred states recognized it as the "legitimate representative of the Syrian people." Because the Assad regime seemed to be nearing collapse, many viewed political transition in Syria as imminent. Starting with Nikolas Sarkozy's first "friends of Syria" meeting, the Syrian opposition in exile was greeted by a steady increase in expressions of international recognition. They were given Syria's seat at the Arab League and the Syrian embassy in Qatar. With time, the Etilaf would meet its limits in attaining international recognition. The embassy in Qatar would issue passports that were recognized internationally, but in 2015 it would cease to renew them.[21] Soon, with the persistence of the Assad regime and the increased involvement and commitment of its supporters and the consistent failure and ineffectiveness of the political negotiations between the regime and the opposition, the international community would decrease in supporting the Syrian opposition.

From the beginning, the Syrian National Council tried to create relationships on the ground with the local councils. As mentioned above, the local councils gradually and organically developed in areas where central authority gave way. These local councils enjoyed legitimacy among the local constituents and praise internationally for their efficacy. In order to be taken seriously by the international community, the Syrian National Council needed to maintain and project a substantial relationship with the councils. The purpose of the National Council was to

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[20] Ali Nehme Hamdan, "On failing to 'get it together': Syria's opposition between idealism and realism"
[21] Ola Salem, "Syrian embassy in doha ceases passport extensions" *The national*, March 22, 2015,

unite the opposition on the ground and provide political leadership. But soon, the National Council proved incapable of properly including the local councils and did not provide leadership. The opposition on the ground saw little benefit in being affiliated with them. In late 2012, the Council was replaced by the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces, which was considered a notable improvement on the Council and received substantial expressions of legitimization and recognition internationally, as mentioned above. However, the Coalition failed in all the same ways as the Council.[22] Soon, it would form the Syrian Interim Government, ostensibly to mend its weaknesses and aid it in its quest to present the framework of a political alternative to the Assad regime.

Creating the Syrian Interim Government

Originally, there was a debate within the Etilaf about what shape the SIG should take: it should either be a small agency that provides humanitarian services or a body that behaves as much like a government as possible.[23] In 2013, the latter view prevailed. According to Rangwala, the example of Libya and Yemen's "interim governments" influenced the decision-making of the Etilaf in regards to the SIG.[24] Regional fissures would be illustrated by the ineffectiveness of the first prime minister of the SIG, Ghassan Hitto, a Syrian-American activist known to have ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar.[25] Some say that his election was part of a plot by the Muslim Brotherhood within the Coalition to undermine Moaz al-Khatib.[26] With his election, several members of the Etilaf left the meeting in protest, and some announced their suspension

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[22] Maria Aurora Sottimano, "The Syria Interim Government: a dual legitimacy deficit?" panel 1 part A at the conference *Syria: Moving beyond the stalemate*, hosted by Saint andrews university (July 1-3 2015)
[23] In-person Interview, number 4
[24] Glen Rangwala, "the creation of governments-in-waiting"
[25] *al-Arabiya*, "Saudi Reimerges as a powerful middle east player," (July 14, 2013)
[26] al-Jazeera, "Syria: governing in a war zone," (March 24, 2013), and Joshua Landis, "Who is Ghassn Hitto? why was he backed to be prime minister of an interim gov by mustafa sabbagh?" (March 19, 2013)

from the coalition.[27] Inside Syria, the Free Syrian Army rejected Hitto. In his first speech he asserted there would be no dialogue with the Assad regime, which was a direct contradiction to Moaz al-Khatib's stance on the issue. A respondent told me Hitto resigned because he didn't have enough support, and Ahmed Toumeh soon took over. Hitto's stint as prime minister lasted about four months, when he resigned without having been able to form a cabinet.[28]

Ahmed Toumeh was elected in September of 2013 and stated that his government's prime goals would be to provide civil order, security, and basic human needs.[29] His cabinet was made up of two thirds Islamist and one third technocratic secularists.[30] The scope of the SIG's activities from the outset was broad. It provided services to refugees in neighboring states and coordinated with international donors and local councils inside Syria. They provided some governance services inside Syria such as waste management and maintaining roads, and they administered final high school exams, the diploma of which is recognized in Turkey. Many respondents told me that the SIG's best work was in the field of health and education. Sottimano says that the SIG's best accomplishments were in the field of humanitarian assistance and local administration.

Even at its most active period, the SIG would struggle with competing entities on the ground. It received some resistance from local councils, and the local council of Aleppo openly competed with it for aid and projects.[31] One of the SIG's competencies was in distributing aid, and even that was often hampered by donors' specificities or overshadowed by the work of other NGOs and that donors often give directly to the local councils. The SIG had connections with

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[27] Sharif Nashashibi, "Syria's opposition: a crisis within a crisis," *al-jazeera*, (July 8, 2013)
[28] "Syrian opposition elects new provisional PM," *al-jazeera*, (September 14, 2013)
[29] "Syria Opposition 'premier' says order, security top priorities," *al-jazeera*, (November 12, 2013); Kareem Fahim "Syrian opposition elects new prime minister," (September 14, 2013)
[30] In-person interview, number 4
[31] Maria Sottimano, "a dual legitimacy deficit"

nine out of fourteen provincial councils, in rebel-held, regime-controlled, and Daesh-held areas.

Respondents told Sottimano that the main principle behind their governing style was that of "decentralization," which she remarks would better have been described as "deconcentration" since the SIG's administrative structure was strict and hierarchical and limited the power of local city councils. A few of my respondents remarked that no one respected the authority of the SIG. According to Sottimano, the SIG did enjoy a degree of authority over the local councils–the details of this dynamic shall be found in a work soon to be published.

Although the SIG had access to over a hundred million dollars in a trust fund, Qatar was the only state to provide funds for salaries. The SIG received a 68 million dollar fund from Qatar in January of 2014. By January 2015, the SIG could no longer pay salaries. The SIG was strongly criticized for its handling of Qatar's money. In the span of about a year, SIG earned accusations of nepotism (23 percent of Toumeh's staff was from Deir Ezzor), mismanagement of funds (renting a "luxurious" building of nine flats in Gaziantep), distributing wages to false jobs, among other forms of corruption.[32] Qatar terminated funding in mid-2015.

Dr. Jawad Abu Hatab won the election to become the new prime minister of SIG in May 2016, and began his duties in June. Abu Hatab brought with him a new strategy: a.) the entire SIG would move inside Syria and there would be no paid permanent staff in exile and b.) the mandate of the SIG would shrink to include only the fields that it was most successful in, namely, health and education.[33] A few of my respondents note that the changes of the SIG and its shift inside Syria can be attributed to Abu Hatab's connections and diplomatic talents. More details on his government follow.

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[32] Zaman al-Wasl, "Interim Govt. faces bankruptcy amid mass corruption," Syrian Observer, (February 6, 2015)
[33] Several respondents reported the SIG narrowed its operational focus, but some of them also presented the SIG as maintaining many ministries.

IV.   Methodology and Limitations:

The methodology employed in this project was semi-structured interviewing and media analysis. I conducted twelve interviews: four in-person interviews, six Skype interviews, one Whatsapp interview, and one on the phone. The respondents came through my advisor's networks, and some through those connections' networks. Some of the main questions I sought to answer were:

I.   What was the purpose of shifting inside Syria?

II.   Why did the SIG shift inside Syria when it did and not sooner?

III.   What has changed since the SIG shifted inside Syria?

IV.   Have international donors been more willing to support the SIG since it shifted inside? Why do international donors still exclude the SIG from projects?

V.   What are the limitations of the SIG in its operations?

VI.   What is the SIG's greatest accomplishment/prospect?

VII.   How is the SIG's relationship with Turkey? With armed factions on the ground?

VIII.   What efforts has the SIG made for political representation?

The respondents came from various backgrounds with varying levels of affiliation and political investment in the SIG. For this reason, each interview had to be tailored to suit the experience of the respondent. I did not interview any members of the Etilaf itself, except for its US representative. Nor did I travel to Turkey because the security situation obstructed department funding. Each interview was analyzed individually for the value of its content. None of the interviewees provided very straightforward details about the SIG's current activities.

Many of the most knowledgeable members of the SIG don't speak English very well. In one interview the respondent and I were switching between English and Arabic, and some

interviews were completely in Arabic. Due my limitations in Arabic, some nuance in our conversations were lost.

V.   Findings:

In this section, I will describe the findings of my research. I will first outline some of the SIG's successes and failures, and last, I will describe how the SIG continues to present itself as a government. Although the Etilaf and SIG are both weak actors in Syria, the SIG has achieved some success since recreating itself. For example, Abu Hatab's SIG became more representative than Ahmed Toumeh's had been. The SIG, however, is a small part of the story and so even when they do achieve some success, it may not have perceptible impact.

The SIG wanted to be accepted as a legitimate government, attract material support from the international community, and administer governance projects. These goals would clearly have a cyclical impact on one another, and many exile groups attempt to get this cycle going: more legitimacy on the ground means more donor support while more donor support would mean more effective operations on the ground and increased loyalty and legitimacy within the state. The SIG offered to administer some successful service projects, such as the Syrian Civil Defense Force, the Free Syrian Police, and AJACS' civil registry project, but each organization decided to exclude the SIG from its operations. There is little evidence that the SIG under Abu Hatab has been substantially involved in any other governance projects.

To be clear, the SIG is also not accepted as a government within Syria. As one respondent related, the SIG once designated a building as a legal office for its operations and armed factions destroyed it the next day.[34] The SIG is often simply ignored.

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[34] Skype interview, number 3

In spite of these failures, the SIG still tries to maintain its image before the international community as a legitimate actor on the ground. I will go into more detail about my specific findings below.

Leaving Exile

Recreating itself inside Syria was, ostensibly, one of the SIG's tactics to become a legitimate government. The SIG accomplished this by electing a prime minister from inside Syria and replacing most SIG officials with men from inside Syria.[35]

The main accomplishment of the SIG is that it is now located inside Syria. Previous cabinets of the SIG have been in Gaziantep, a major obstacle in the SIG's attempts to present itself as a government. Rather than describing it as a "return" to Syria, officials describe it as a reformation within Syria. All the Ministers and important officials were selected from within Syria, with only a handful of staff remaining in Turkey.[36] Moving inside Syria has had only a limited improvement on SIG's reputation since only a few people are aware that it happened. Regardless, the SIG's reputation improved somewhat due to shifting inside, and one of the effects is that the Etilaf could travel inside Syria when it previously was not able, suggesting that some armed groups appreciated the SIG's shift inside Syria. Many Syrians, however, still think of the SIG as the corrupt exiled government living lavishly in Turkey and out of touch with their reality.

A high level official stated that one of the main purposes of the SIG is to represent the revolution and the people living in areas where the regime's control had fallen. Moving inside Syria, he said, increased the SIG in credibility as a representative (not a government).[37] Below, I

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[35] Shadi Eljoundi, Skype interview, number 2
[36] Shadi Eljoundi, Skype interview, number 2
[37] Skype interview, number 4

will explore some ways that the SIG has improved as a representative of Syrians living in rebel-held areas.

The PM spent about two and half months traveling around Syria assessing needs, interests, and selecting employees for the SIG. This was an improvement on the original SIG which was formed in Gaziantep and whose ministers were lived comfortably in exile except for a few. Dr. Jawad Abu Hatab won the election to be prime minister in May of 2016, and assumed office in mid-July. During this gap period, he traveled inside Syria, meeting with local council officials, influential personalities, and attending conferences, some of which had over a hundred attendees. The main goals of these visits were to a.) inform the people that the SIG was a new government that would be based inside Syria, b.) to select ministers and their employees, and c.) to assess needs inside Syria and whether or not the SIG would be "accepted."[38] Although I was not able to get a clear answer on what it means to "assess needs" and for the SIG to be "accepted," it is clear that according to Vasanthankumar's framework, simply by selecting officials and employees from within rebel-held Syria the SIG could more effectively represent those communities. For example, during the recent chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun, the SIG's Minister of Health in Idlib helped rescue victims of the attack and SIG helped health and media organizations to access the town to document the attack.[39] In cases of besieged areas, the SIG sometimes had to close down offices. At other times, the SIG believed that its presence in besieged areas increased their legitimacy as a representative entity, as a respondent stressed, they are "from them" and they experience their problems "completely and in person."[40]

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[38] Shadi Eljoundi, Skype interview, number 2
[39] Ibid.; "Syrian Interim government confirms assad regime behind chemical attack on khan sheikhoun," Etilaf official news feed, April 14, 2017
[40] Fakhr al-Din Al-Arian, Skype Interview, number 5

The value of political representation cannot be measured precisely, but it is a tool that political exiles pursue in their quest for greater international recognition. It is the reason that the Syrian National Council gave way for the creation of the Syrian National Coalition which was the same motivation behind the creation of the SIG. None of my respondents made any such claims, but I think that could be because political representation is usually associated with democratic elections. Vasanthakumar prefaces her framework with the notion that political representation is not necessarily democratic. She states there are two conditions for an exile group to become a political representative of its people: firstly, the representative must be able to determine constituents interests either because they are able to express them, the representative can assess them, or shape them. The second criteria is that the representative must be motivated to pursue constituent interests, not personal interest. To a degree, the SIG has succeeded in both.

Appearing as a Government

As will be discussed later, it is typical of groups seeking to present themselves as legitimate governments to mimic the organs of a state, collaborate with other organizations that are legitimate, and create and amend legislation.[41] The SIG engages in several of these activities and it also maintains a narrative of unity with local actors on the ground, and also implies that they are more active and effective in governance projects within Syria than they truly are through public appearances, interviews (with me and other media sources), and their website. The Etilaf presents the SIG on its newsletter and website as a vital actor on the ground in Syria. The basic narrative is that the SIG is apolitical, that it plays a valuable role in activities on the ground, that the SIG is a technocratic provisional government which represents the needs of the Syria people and that the local councils act are an extension of the SIG.

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[41] Leben Moro, Martina Santschi, Rachel Gordon, Philip Dau, and Daniel Maxwell, "Statebuilding and legitimacy: experiences of south sudan," Secure livelihoods research consortium, (January 2017)

The most palpable tactic the SIG uses to present itself as government is that they call themselves a government. They have a prime minister, and seven ministries. In my Whatsapp interview with prime minister Jawad Abu Hatab, he mentioned that several of the SIG's ministries remained active in Syria: the ministries of health, education, higher education, local council administration, and agriculture, etc.[42] In May, the SIG published an article that says the prime minister stressed the importance of its ministries despite the lack of funding with little elaboration.[43] This type of communication is typical of the SIG. The SIG says that it "collaborates" with other organizations, it has "ministries," and is most effective in the fields of education and health. I was unable to gain more clarity about these activities in my interviews. In the case of education, several media sources grant the SIG credit for being involved, but there is still little elaboration on the nature of their activities.[44]

When I asked two SIG officials about how the SIG defines itself, they answered that the SIG is not a complete government.[45] It is temporary and seeks to provide services including "enacting laws and regulations."[46] For example, the SIG amended a Syrian law to allow for the formation of local councils.[47] On the SIG's website, there are several resolutions published regarding a variety of topics from agriculture to civil society to education.

The SIG has collaborated with dozens of internationally recognized organizations, such as GIZ, Chemonics, and Spark. Another respondent said that their work with those organizations is likely little more than memorandums of understanding.[48] The SIG also claims on its website,

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[42] Whatsapp interview with Dr Jawad Abu Hatab

[43] " الدكتور جواد ابو حطب يؤكد على دور الوزرات رغم ندرة الدعم المالي," SIG website, (April 3, 2017)

[44] Khaled al-Khateb, "How syrian opposition is making up for teacher shortage," *al-monitor*, (April 7, 2017)
[45] In-person interview, number 1; Skype interview, number 4
[46] Skype Interview, number 4; Fakhr al-Din al-Arian, Skype Interview, number 5
[47] Skype Interview, number 4
[48] Phone interview

Abu Hatab's SAGA speech, and in interviews with me that they collaborate with NGOs to pay

salaries of thirty thousand employees inside Syria, half of whom are teachers.

Misrepresentation

Sometimes, the SIG misrepresents its capacity. In two interviews with SIG officials, and

Dr. Jawad Abu Hatab's SAGA speech, they mentioned the Free Syrian Police and civil registry

projects in a way that suggested the SIG was substantially involved, even though one of my

respondents–a lead developer of the civil registry project–informed me that the SIG is not

involved in either of those projects.[49]

Another instance of misrepresentation was in employment inside Syria. I was told that the

SIG employs about 200 people directly and 30,000 indirectly through other entities' funding, and

this same idea was repeated on the SIG's website and in the SAGA speech.[50] Half of the

employees paid indirectly through the SIG are said to be teachers. When I asked for details I was

told that the SIG collaborates with NGOs that pay the 30,000 employees, but the collaboration is

not direct. The NGOs pay directorates, and the directorates distribute salaries, but they also

report to the ministries of the SIG. When I asked if it's possible to say that the SIG "distribute

salaries" and I was told that they do not (although they did help to distribute humanitarian

funding under Ahmed Toumeh).[51]

My findings have demonstrated that the SIG wants to present itself as a government and

attempts to do so through every available resource. While their mimicry of governmental

structures has failed to impress those at home and abroad, the fact that they have moved inside

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[49] Skype Interview, number 4; In-person interview, number 4; Abu Hatab's SAGA speech
[50] Shadi el-Joundi, Skype Interview, number 6; Skype Interview, number 4; SIG web page; Abu Hatab's SAGA speech
[51] Skype Interview, number 4; Maria Sottimano, "a dual legitimacy deficit"; Another peculiarity was in the Whatsapp interview, wherein prime minister Abu Hatab told me that the SIG pays teachers only a hundred dollars a month, and that the teachers were leaving the SIG for NGOs that paid more.

Syria has been respected by those who are aware of the change. Their misrepresentations are made in the form of implications and suggestions. The SIG does not boldly state their contributions to projects like the Free Syrian Police and the civil registry project, but they mention it in ways that would easily lead a listener to assume they are substantially involved. Despite the SIG's efforts to gain legitimacy, it still has not made extensive efforts to draw attention to itself.

VI.   Conclusion

My argument for this paper is that the condition of being in exile can be teased apart from its usual variables, and, as in the case of the Syrian Interim Government, all the usual political baggage and exile-related conundrums can follow an exile group when it attempts to reestablish itself back inside the homeland. There are several essential differences between the case of the SIG and other cases of exile groups that have been successful in returning home as viable political parties, such as the Iranian exiles during the Iranian revolution and the National African Congress. The crisis in Syria has metastasized into a multi-party proxy war, while successful exiles have contested regimes in states that remained relatively orderly. Successful exile groups have strong support within their respective states and face a relatively agreeable international climate.

The SIG is now out of exile, but it still struggles with many of the usual problems that an exile group would have, including the need for donor support, weak relationships with relevant parties on the ground, and of course, powerless within the vicissitudes of the international climate. As before, the SIG is still largely about its image, and uses this image to garner more attention and support. One of the effects of being out of exile, however, is that the SIG is now

poised to take advantage of administrative opportunities when they arise, although its lack of

funding may put it at a weaker position than it had been under Toumeh.

The SIG has never been a prominent actor on the ground, and even in its most effective

moments, under Ahmed Toumeh funded by Qatar, the SIG has been met with rejection and

competition for funding from the local councils that it claims to represent. Despite its failure as a

technocratic government, the SIG continues to exist for political reasons. Firstly, the SIG hopes

that the international community will decide to use it to administer parts of Syria, and secondly,

the SIG remains a diplomatic tool for the SNC. The SIG's administrative aspirations are not

completely far-fetched. Recently, Turkey has collaborated with the SIG in governing parts of

northern Syria, especially Jarablus. The volatile nature of local power structures in Syria may

provide another opportunity for the SIG to be prevailed upon by other actors. As for its image,

the SIG might be a useful tool in undermining the legitimacy of Bashar's regime, but it has not

succeeded in garnering much international attention. This may be due to a lack of funding and a

lack of support for the SIG within the exile community. Abu Hatab may have told a rebel leader

that if they collaborated then the SIG could act as a "facade" before the international community

to mask rebel infighting.[52] This offer demonstrates that not only has the SIG accepted their role

as a tool for image, but also that they attempt to use their image to manipulate actors on the

ground in Syria.

Throughout my research, I've examined the SIG's attempts to gain legitimacy as a

governing actor. Some reflections on the legitimacy literature has helped to shed light on the

SIG's plight. Recent definitions of legitimacy have been captured by Suchman, who defined it as

"the generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or

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[52] Hassan Hassan, "Turkey's role in idlib remains a delicate one," *The National,* (June 27,2017)

appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions."[53]

Weber noted that legitimacy as a government is characterized by the "legitimate use of violence." Other discussions on a legitimate government have suggested that power is a prerequisite. In other words, an entity must first be in power before it begins to convince others that the arrangement is appropriate. Exiled political groups are generally powerless, and so it seems that a discussion on legitimacy may not suit the topic of exile politics. Shain has also made clear legitimacy follows domination; likely one key reason that he chose to discuss exile politics in terms of loyalty, recognition, and betrayal instead of legitimacy.[54] While this literature helps to explain why it was problematic to ask about the legitimacy of an exile group, it also helped to clarify why asking was necessary. The literature on legitimacy has shown that the SIG mirrors some attempts by rebel groups and other non-governmental agencies who strive to gain legitimacy as governments. For example, my research has shown that the SIG mimics some properties of governments, partners with legitimate and internationally respected organizations, and tries to take credit for governance projects whenever possible, which are all common behaviors of organizations or groups that strive to gain legitimacy in wielding power.[55] While this can be viewed in terms of "image," it can also be viewed as failed attempts at gaining legitimacy.[56]

As an exile group that aspires to govern, the SIG looks to the international community for support. But does the SIG have anything to offer United States policymakers? US policy on Syria has, since the beginning, been noncommittal and wavering. Weak US leadership has allowed the conflict in Syria to fester and mutate from an uprising, to a civil war, to a multi-party

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[53] Suchman M. C., "Managing legitimacy: strategic and institutional approaches," *Academy of management review*, 20, (1995), 574
[54] Yossi Shain, "*Frontier of Loyalty,*" 164-166
[55] Daniel Maxwell et. al. "Statebuilding and legitimacy: experiences of south sudan"
[56] Shain "*Frontier of Loyalty,*" 124-129

proxy battle resulting in great humanitarian disaster and conflict spillover in the form of

terrorism, overwhelming refugee need, and an emboldened Russia. US policy in Syria should

seek to establish stability and safety whenever the opportunity for it arises. As the US-led

coalition succeeds in driving ISIS and other terrorists from their posts in various Syrian cities,

there will be an opportunity for other groups to take over governance responsibilities in its stead.

While there are local actors in each polity that would be interested in governing each area, the

SIG may prove to be an effective tool in governance. Working together with the SIG would be

strong indicator of recognition, ergo, a delegitimization of the Assad regime, which may not turn

out to be a controversial stance in the future. Many scholars on Syria have long attested that the

state would remain fractured and unstable as long as the Assad regime remained, and as the

international community appears more eager to find an end to the crisis, the main actors become

more open to removing the Assad regime.[57] The SIG may prove to be a useful partner in post-

ISIS operations. Firstly, the SIG is the only Syrian organization interested in governing across

the state. A nation-wide bureaucratic network would aid in establishing stability across rebel-

held and post-ISIS Syria. Abu Hatab made an effort to select ministers from inside Syria,

including some ministers in besieged cities and townships. These selections were made based on

their technical knowledge, so perhaps future stabilization efforts could streamline their efforts by

relying on Abu Hatab's selections. Partnering with the SIG in future operations may encourage

Syrians and the international community to believe that there is a Syrian representative or

presence in a project, granting it more legitimacy.

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[57] Frederic C. Hof, "Securing eastern syria," the atlantic council, (May 24, 2017)

Appendix: Interviews

In-person Interviews:

1. 2/6/2017, Washington DC, English

2. 3/16/2017, Washington DC, English

3. Kenan Rahmani, 3/29/2017, Washington DC, English

4. 4/1/2017, Washington DC, English

Skype Interviews:

1. 3/29/2017, English

2. Shadi Eljoundi, 4/6/2017, Arabic

3. 4/6/2017, English

4. 4/18/2017, Arabic with English translator

5. Fakhr al-Din al-Arian, 4/18/2017, Arabic

6. Shadi Eljoundi, 4/20/2017, Arabic

Phone Interview:

1. 4/21/2017, English

Whatsapp Interview:

1. 4/16/2017 Jawad Abu Hatab, Arabic

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