

# An Interview with Murhaf Jouejati

*In your op-ed in Al-Monitor on September 2, you emphasize the merits of military intervention by the international community in Syria. Please tell us more about why and how you'd like to see the international community involved in a military engagement.*

**Jouejati:** First, let me explain what I mean by a more vigorous engagement: what President Obama is proposing is that US engagement be limited in time and in scope, with no “boots on the ground.” I think everybody agrees with no boots on the ground; not only in terms of American public opinion and American policymakers, but Syrians and the Syrian opposition itself do not want any foreign boots on the ground. Syrian rebels believe they can do it themselves. But when Mr. Obama talks about a limited operation against Assad, he is saying publicly that all Assad needs to do is turn on the news and know a strike is coming. So all Assad needs to do is hunker down, absorb the blow, declare himself a victor, and continue in his murderous ways against the Syrian people.

What I think the Syrian opposition would prefer by far is the kind of campaign that would degrade Assad’s ability to kill at will. What has been most successful in Assad’s killing machine has been the Syrian Air Force. Assad has been flying bombing sorties, including against bakeries and people waiting in breadlines.

He has also successfully used his surface-to-surface missiles. He is launching SCUD missiles into civilian neighborhoods. If the United States were to take these out, and, simultaneously, were to arm the moderate elements within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that would then create a balance of power. Right now, there is a lopsided balance of power. Assad has the advantage, given assistance from Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia. Assad believes that it is still possible to crush the rebellion militarily, especially when the international community is reluctant and hesitant to get involved. When I talk of a more vigorous American engagement, I do not mean any boots on the ground, but I do mean a no-fly zone. I do mean a campaign that takes out his air force.

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*This interview was conducted on September 3, 2013, four days after U.S. President Barack Obama’s speech on the U.S. response to chemical weapons attacks in Syria. A bill authorizing the use of force against the government of Syria, introduced by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid on September 6, would not pass.*

The boots on the ground would entirely be Syrian, provided that they are equipped. Because until now, the world has been saying, “we will not arm you, Oh Syrians, nor will we defend you. Go out and die.” These conditions are impossible. The Syrians can do it themselves, but they do need the assistance of the international community. But the international community will not act without U.S. leadership, and thus far, we have not seen that.

*Please elaborate on the risks of international engagement in Syria.*

**Jouejati:** The international community claims they fear that arms would fall into the wrong hands. However, I don’t buy this because relevant U.S. authorities have vetted the FSA. They know who the good guys are, who the bad guys are, and they have been satisfied with guarantees provided by the leader of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), General Salim Idris. The radicals have shown themselves to be far better-armed than those moderate elements that we need to support. I think this fear is mostly used as a justification by the international community to do little.

The U.S. [is also worried that it] could be sucked into the morass in Syria. Here, what looms very large, is the Iraqi shadow. However, I challenge the basic premise of this [fear]: Syria is not like Iraq. The difference between the situation in Iraq and that in Syria is that the case in Iraq was an external invasion. In Syria, the populace of unarmed civilians is screaming for outside help. As a result, in Syria the degree of receptivity for the United States will be different than it was in Iraq. I am no Ahmad Chalabi, and I am not pretending that the Americans will be received with roses. This is one reason why most Syrians don’t want

boots on the ground. There is always the danger of miscalculations along the way, and this may take longer than I am claiming here. But again, I think these fears, or potential pitfalls are, for the most part, justifications in order to do as little as possible.

*Given the chemical attack in the eastern suburbs of Damascus on August 21, 2013 and the subsequent lack of international response, what do you think is the reaction within Syrian communities who have been victims of these attacks?*

**Jouejati:** Let me paraphrase a refugee that I saw yesterday on TV--he was asking the reporter whether America was drunk or on drugs. Here is a chemical attack against a civilian population, and America, who is a guarantor of international peace and security and a signatory to the convention banning chemical weapons, is debating what to do. Expectations of an intervention rose dramatically after the attack, when word spread that the Obama administration was going to employ force in response. Expectations went through the roof until Saturday, August 31, 2013, when they heard the announcement that the President was seeking congressional authorization before acting. As I wrote in my op-ed in Al-Monitor, congressional consultation has its upsides and its downsides. I respect America’s democratic process, but in the Middle East, the step back was taken as a major sign of weakness. In fact the Syrian media was referring to the decision as a “historic American retreat.”

We should not brush this aside lightly; the decision has very grave implications. Some of Assad’s supporters were ready to jump ship because America was going to strike. Now they see this American weakness and there is really

no need for them to defect. And this is what makes the Assad regime strong—the loyalists who are fighting with him - the cronies, the barons, the generals - see a determined Hezbollah-Iranian-Russian effort on their behalf contrasted against an America that is seeking justifications to do as little as possible. Given that situation, they are not going to jump ship.

*President Obama, speaking from the Rose Garden on August 31, said that a military strike didn't have to happen immediately. It could happen two weeks to one month after the chemical weapons attack. Given that, he wanted to seek Congressional approval and have a rigorous debate in the United States about what a military strike would mean for U.S. policy in the Middle East. Do you disagree with his sense of timing?*

**Jouejati:** The evidence is not in what I think, it is in what happens. I speak to Syrians on the ground every day. There are certain neighborhoods in Damascus where tanks are going into private garages, the mukhabarat, the intelligence services, are identifying apartments and houses that are empty and are relocating senior officers there. All this gives time for Assad to strengthen his defenses. And in addition to strengthening his defenses, he is continuing on his killing spree in the hope that by the time of a military strike, he would have [taken full control] of the Damascus suburbs. So when one is in Washington, one finds the words about the timing of a strike in a day, in a week, in a month, in a year to be very reasonable and rational. But, when you are in Syria, and you see the redeployment of Assad's army, and the fact that prisoners are moved to targets that are likely to be hit as human

shields, then you know that this announcement about the timing of an attack has concrete consequences.

*One could argue that Assad's defensive preparations for a U.S. strike would limit the Syrian government's offensive ability to launch more devastating attacks on civilian targets. Please comment on the tradeoffs you believe Assad is making between defensive preparations and offensive attacks against civilians within Syria.*

**Jouejati:** What we've seen from Saturday, August 31, until today [September 3, 2013], is both the hunkering down of the regime and simultaneously the continued attacks. On September 2, there were at least 29 sorties over the Damascus suburbs. And the town of Qudsaya, right outside Damascus, has nearly been leveled. This is happening while the regime is also hunkering down [and preparing defensively for the attacks]. It is a large army that Assad has so he can employ some of his forces to kill, and others to hunker down.

*We regularly hear about the tragedies of the past two and a half years in Syria, but do you see any "bright spots" or positive news we should note?*

**Jouejati:** It is very, very difficult to talk about anything that is bright in the last two and a half years. There is one very important element that I think has been missed by the Western media, and that is that Syrians have shed their fear. That is remarkable. I have lived in Syria for a long time, and I know the degree of fear that the people have of the Assad regime. A fear that is not one or two or three

years old but goes back to the early 1960s, with the takeover of the Ba'ath party in Syria. You have nearly half a century of accumulated fear by the citizenry and now they have shed it, now they are coming out, even at the price of their lives. There are a lot of very tragic stories throughout the two and a half years and, although there is increasing sectarianism, and increasing militarization and so on, simultaneously, you have a lot of areas where there is an increased political awareness across sects that Syria will never go back again to dictatorship. And we are seeing this, in those areas that are "liberated" and that are controlled by the extremists – Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – where the citizenry there, as a result of their freedom from the Assad regime, are demonstrating against the strict rules of these religious extremists. So there is an increased political consciousness. But other than that, I really do not see any bright spots whatsoever. All I see is death and destruction.

*Looking toward the future and to an eventual political transition, what do you think will happen to the Syrian military and its intelligence apparatus after the conflict ends? Specifically, please comment on how the future of the security sector will be affected differently, depending on how the transition happens (i.e. with or without international assistance).*

**Jouejati:** This leads me right into The Day After Project (TDA) and I will distinguish between the theoretical, the rosy, the practical, and what may happen. TDA consists of 45 Syrian intellectuals who come from all walks of economic life and represent all religious and ethnic sects in Syria, including Kurds,

Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Circassians, and so on. We come from all political persuasions on the ground, from the far left to the far right. TDA drew on all of us for a period of 6-7 months to explore different issue areas: Transitional Justice, Security Sector Reform, Economic Reform, Constitutional Reform, Electoral Law Reform and the Rule of Law. The objective of these meetings was to come up with a vision for a future Syria. And all these different people, from different walks of life, from different political forces, agreed on the establishment of a civil and democratic state in Syria in which the rule of law rules without discrimination over all of its citizenry. All of Syria's citizens would be equal before the law.

Under the TDA project, I personally focused on security sector reform. This group pressed the need to have a civilian authority over the military. We need a military that is apolitical and whose function is the protection of Syria's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. The same is true of the police force. With regard to the intelligence services, we advocate their elimination as they are now. In the future, we suggest the establishment of new intelligence services that are apolitical, that answer to civilian authority and are overseen by Parliament, together with the military and the police. The intelligence services that we would recommend for the future are military intelligence for external threat assessment and an internal intelligence service to fight drug trafficking, white-collar crime, corruption, etc.

Now, with regard to de-Ba'athification, we have tried to take several lessons from other countries like Libya, Iraq, and others. From Iraq we have taken a major lesson that we should not and will not "de-Ba'athify," because when you "de-Ba'athify," you paralyze state

institutions. That is because there are many Ba'athis--some of them are genuine in their ideological purity, but others are opportunists and just need to get a better job. Regardless, if you de-Ba'athify, you are going to paralyze the state. So there will be no de-Ba'athification. There will be intelligence services that are apolitical. A national police force committed to enforcement of the law. A law that is stipulated by Parliament, and an army that is also apolitical and under civilian rule, and whose budget comes from Parliament.

This is theoretical; in reality, it's not going to be that easy and that is because you are going to have factionalism within the army. You are going to have some factions that are going to want to be superior to other ones. The idea of civilian authority over the military so far is working with the Supreme Military Council. But at the end of the day, if the military takes over power as a result of the Assad regimes collapse, it may well be that the military would want to protect their interests and to dominate society. If Assad is overthrown with international assistance, I think there would be some oversight over this military, which is a good thing. But the bad thing is, and we see it already today, that different states are pushing their different agendas onto different factions. And they are financing these different factions, which exacerbates the divisions already existing in the opposition.

Finally, what if Assad is ousted through a negotiated outcome? The Geneva initiative sounds very nice, but at the end of the day, it is initiated by two sponsors who do not see eye-to-eye. The United States is of the understanding that the outcome would be the establishment of a transitional government with full executive authority, which means without Assad. The Russians understand it to be with

Assad. So already there is a problem; the sponsors don't agree. You also have to get the two conflicting parties to the table, and Assad is of the view that he could crush this militarily, so he is in no mood to negotiate with anyone and he is in no mood to share power with anyone. If he does go to a potential Geneva conference, it is only to save the face of his Russian mentors. But he will not negotiate in good faith. The only way to have him negotiate in good faith is to level the playing field, that is, to equalize the balance of power.

*In the absence of a resolution, extreme Islamic groups are taking over large swaths of territory, particularly in the areas that are held by the opposition. And they will certainly be spoilers in whatever develops next. How are the Assad regime and the opposition – the Etliaf- addressing the challenges posed by Islamic extremists' influence? Can you tell us where these extremist groups are particularly popular and where they are less popular?*

**Jouejati:** This may surprise you but the Assad regime has not carried out many battles against the extremists thus far. The areas bombed by the regime are [mostly] under the control of the moderates. And that is because Assad has every interest in portraying this fight to the West as a battle against extremist terrorism and a battle between secularism and fundamentalism instead of a popular uprising against him. Let us not forget that al-Nusra is the product, first and foremost, of jihadis who were arrested by Syrian authorities during the war on Iraq. The Syrian government released them under the guise of “presidential pardons” specifically to justify that their fight was against terrorists. And later they were joined by jihadis that came from Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon,

and then from Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Chechnya. The extremists are getting stronger all the time. They were getting stronger in the first six to seven months when this was an unarmed protest against Assad. The international community did not lift a finger to defend the civilian population that was already under brutal attack by the Assad regime.

That vacuum was filled by these extremists who became increasingly stronger, especially since the international community would not help what was, or what became, the Free Syrian Army, which consists of defectors from the Syrian army plus civilians that want to protect their families and homes.

Today, about 60-70% of Syrian territory is controlled by the opposition, but Assad controls around 70% of the population. Assad controls the major cities, whereas the opposition controls the provinces. I can tell you that I am hearing from inside that there is not a lot of happiness with these extremists because they are altering the way of life of Syrians who, in their nature, are not extremists. Islam in Syria is neither Salafi nor Wahabi. It is more like Turkish Islam, a moderate form of Islam, so there have been many demonstrations against the extremists. But at the same time, these extremists are disciplined, they are incorruptible, and they are very good at providing services: bread, water, health care, and so on. So the population tolerates them, uneasily though.

The Assad regime will not go to war against them, because it wants to show that this is a fight against terrorism. The Etilaf, and within it the SMC, has distanced itself from extremism and has condemned many of their acts. This goes back to the TDA in Transitional Justice and the Rule of Law. We are in favor of prosecuting in a court of law anybody who

commits abuses and violations against human rights. The SMC distances itself from the activities of the extremists. However, these extremists are militarily more powerful. The SMC doesn't necessarily want to pick a fight with them directly, although many battles have already taken place.

*People say that the extremists fighting in Syria are very well funded. However, the international community has provided hundreds of millions of dollars through the secular opposition for life saving humanitarian assistance and capacity building efforts for good governance. What are the relative impacts of these funding flows on the capacity and effectiveness of the recipients?*

**Jouejati:** The extremists receive money from Sheikh A, Sheikh B, and Sheikh C, and other wealthy individuals in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The moderate opposition, however, is receiving money for refugee relief. The United States thus far has spent almost a billion dollars for emergency relief. To the best of my knowledge, extremely little has been allocated to military requirements, though cell phones, night vision equipment, and communications equipment were also provided. Recently, the Obama administration announced it was going to provide more than non-lethal assistance. But Congress jumped in. Here we are now with the Free Syrian Army having received very, very little, if anything, from the United States other than non-lethal assistance. Other assistance has been provided from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and from Turkey. But again, these countries are helping those factions that best suit their national agendas. However, Saudi Arabia recently took over the dominant role in assisting the Free Syrian Army.

There is talk of creating a fund in which all donors would channel their money to be distributed by the SMC. If that happens, that would be very good news because the money going to humanitarian relief is not supporting the fight, whereas the jihadis are getting large amounts of money that they do not need to account for. It's just a question of channeling the funds effectively and where and how these funds are distributed. Right now, it's mostly to relief efforts and the SMC is getting very, very little. The newest president of the coalition, Mr. Ahmed Jarba, has taken the task upon himself to try to acquire as much funding for the SMC as possible. These funds would go toward the creation of a national army, whose tasks would be to bring down the Assad regime, but also to integrate some of the loose elements out there, and to defeat the extremists.

*One of the biggest frustrations that the international community has had with the Etilaf, the Syrian Opposition Coalition, is that it has been so divided. What are the driving forces behind those divisions and what possible strategies can the Etilaf adopt to overcome them?*

**Jouejati:** Originally, the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition group established before the current Coalition, was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. We have a dynamic here that is very similar to Egypt; the revolution against Mubarak was a young and secular revolution, but the Muslim Brotherhood quickly jumped on its back and hijacked it. It's really the same thing in Syria: it was a young and secular revolution and the Muslim Brotherhood jumped on the back of the SNC to dominate it. That created a lot of

resentment with the secularists, like myself, within the opposition. In both Egypt and Syria, secularists are very disorganized, because authoritarian governments long discriminated against secular, pro-democracy political parties. However, the Muslim Brotherhood is a political party that dates back to the 1930s. Although illegal and operating underground since the 1960s, it is very disciplined, organized, structured, and hierarchical. The secularists faced a very formidable opponent in the Muslim Brotherhood.

Secondly, bear in mind that Syrians have been deprived of the art of politics for the past 50 years. Now, they have been parachuted into a situation where they have to organize politically in order to save a country, which is no easy feat. Additionally, Syrian opposition leaders are scattered all over the world--some inside Syria, many in jails; other are outside Syria living in exile. So, organization is lacking.

In addition to this, the opposition has been courted by many different states, each with its own interests and agenda. Turkey and Qatar support the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E and Jordan are opposed to them. As a result, funds are channeled to different factions, which has exacerbated the divisions within an already-divided opposition. Enter the United States, who says to the Syrian National Council, "you need to expand to include more political forces on the ground," which it does. Now we have the Coalition, but I think it is facing the same problems as the former SNC, which is now embedded in the Coalition. In the Coalition, there is a lack of hierarchy, a lack of structure, a lack of discipline, a lack of organization, a lack of know-how, and a lack of professionalism. Add onto this the personal [ego] factor--the aggrandizement of this person or that person at the

expense of this person or that person—and you start to see the formation of factions. As a result of this infighting and of the opposition's inability to get into Syria to act on the ground, the Syrian body politic is less enthusiastic about the opposition today than it was at the start.

In addition, there are divisions between opposition activists living inside Syria and those outside the country. It is a very artificial division, because many who are outside Syria were very recently inside the country. This coalition is manned by representatives of local forces on the ground, like the Local Coordination Committees, the revolutionary committees, and the SMC, so they are represented in the Coalition. When the Coalition takes a position, it is as a result of a consensus of those representatives who are represented on the ground. So, while I agree that the Coalition is weak and divided, I would not go to the extent that the Western media has been portraying it. The opposition can, and should, do a much better job though.

*If you were to give Ahmed Jarba, the current head of the Etilaf, one piece of advice in overcoming some of these challenges that you explained, what would that be?*

**Jouehati:** A very short time ago I was with him and we spent a few days together during the first meeting between the Coalition and the United Nations Security Council, so I got to know him. I was impressed by the fact that he was far more comfortable with Saudis, Qataris, and other Arabs than he was with Westerners, though one needs a balance. I was very impressed with the fact that he is a good listener, he takes advice, and he understands his limits. But it is very difficult to build

institutions and for people to understand their tasks and their chain of command and to be disciplined enough to perform their functions. Right now, there is a lot of overlap and a lot of wasted energy. If I had any advice for him, I would say, "do not just lobby the Saudis, Americans and the French for support. Go to Syria's liberated areas and build a solid, sustainable institution. Try not to depend on any foreigners – you can do it yourself. If there is outside assistance, that would be complementary, but at the end of the day, you need to work in an institutional fashion to be effective."

*Surveys on the ground in Syria have revealed Syrians' impressions of the Etilaf. Over time, their perceptions have become more and more pessimistic. One of the frustrations that Syrians note is that the Etilaf acts more like a foreign ministry focused on external affairs than it resembles a national, political opposition with an internal focus. Can you react to that sentiment?*

**Jouehati:** I don't blame them because they are sitting inside Syria, experiencing a whole lot of violence, and when they turn on their TV, they see a delegation of the Etilaf going to Paris, Istanbul, Washington or London. They see the Etilaf more like a travel agency than a Foreign Ministry. I don't blame them. Syrians need to see concrete results on the ground. But what they don't understand is, to have concrete things on the ground, you do need to build institutions, and this is no small task.

Within the TDA, I am working hard as its chairman. So people on the inside say, what are you doing? You are going from one 5-star hotel to another, because they haven't yet grasped the fruits of the labor. And I think this

is a normal phenomenon. Take any administration that comes to power, see the public opinion ratings with regards to how they view the President or the administration, and take the same survey three years later and you will find, almost inevitably, a drop. And this is not only in the United States; it is true across the world. And it is again the same thing with the Coalition, there is excitement at first, and then, as time goes by, when they still don't see much on the ground, then their enthusiasm drops. So I don't blame them that they are saying this in Syria. First, the coalition has not delivered satisfactorily, I admit that readily. But two, they do not know how much work is going into this.

*Do you think the Etilaf should build offices inside Syria?*

**Jouejati:** The Etilaf should have a presence in Syria. The advantage is that you are together with the people and you show them that you can have an alternative government to Assad. If Assad collapses, the sky is not going to fall over the heads of Syrians. Show them that there is an alternative. On the negative side, this would be a great target for Assad's forces. If there was a government headquarters in any one of the towns that have been liberated, before too long it's going to be targeted by SCUD missiles. But I do believe firmly in the need for the Etilaf to have a presence on the ground and I can tell you that the Etilaf is now working on forming such a government. Its headquarters may or may not be inside Syria but it will have people on the ground providing basic services

*Tell me how you think this all ends.*

**Jouejati:** It all depends on what Washington does right now. Washington is the key. It is really the key. If it provides the necessary assistance to the moderate opposition and if it engages seriously against the Assad regime, then the moderates within the opposition are in a position to come out of this with a Syria that is hopefully united. If, however, the United States simply does limited actions in order to show the international community that it has done something, then I think the extremists will be in a dominant position in certain areas of Syria. I don't think the Kurds would want to break away from Syria, but the already-existing fragmentation would certainly increase. I think the Alawis would want a corner of their own. We are talking about the fragmentation of Syria, and I think sectarianism would increase. So everything, or most things, is a function of what Washington does, not in six months or in a year, but right now.

*What do you think the news headlines about Syria will be in early 2014?*

**Jouejati:** If things are as they are now, the headlines will be about the deepened fissures in Syria and the consequences of deeper fragmentation. These divisions are spilling over into the rest of the region. Readers of these headlines might say to himself, "if only we had done something at the very beginning, we would have had a totally different picture now." **PRISM**