Identity, Political System and the Constitution

Abstract: The main problems that the state would have to address in the aftermath of the domestic war include identity, political system and constitution. The Syrian opposition is a diverse group comprising of figures from different ethnic, religious and sectarian backgrounds. It seems that the opposition is able to transform the diversity into an asset in the construction of a state and national identity, development of a sound political system and making of a working constitution. The research shows that the opposition figures have agreement on these major issues despite the diversity among them. The overall agreement of the opposition groups in respect to the construction of a national identity suggests that a common Syrian identity could be constructed and that a unified and unitary Syrian state can be achieved in the aftermath of the civil war. The opposition figures, acknowledging the role of Islam in the political system, do not, however, seek to create a sharia-based state.

Construction of national identity in the aftermath of civil war

The questions asked to the leading opposition figures include those regarding how national identity would be reconstructed after the end of civil war. To this end, participants in the research were asked the following question: “Is it possible to create a national identity that would serve as a common denominator among the constituent peoples and groups in Syria? What should be the basis of this identity?” The most crucial issue in relation to the question is the source of a common identity that would serve as a linkage and tie between diverse social groups in the future Syria. The responses to this question show that generalizations for Middle Eastern affairs may not be particularly applicable to the Syrian case. Almost all opposition figures stated that there is a common identity of Syrianship that would unite the people; there seems to be agreement on this matter. Some of the participants even note that the opposition in fact does not intend to create an entirely new Syria. This emphasis is interesting because it shows that despite the dramatic and tragic developments in the country, the perception of a unified Syria has not been damaged terribly.

Contrary to expectations, Arab identity and/or Islam is not referenced by opposition groups as determinative elements in the reconstruction of a Syrian identity. Opposition figures and groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, known for its religious references, emphasize Syrianship identity rather than a Sunni or Arab identity as a common denominator among the people, which does not indicate, of course, that Islam or Arab identity is not considered important. For instance, a Christian participant noted that he was not a Muslim but grew up in a Muslim community under the influence of Islamic culture, suggesting that Islam inevitably influences Syrian culture and identity. It should also be noted that the Turkmens, although aligned with the opposition forces, strongly emphasize that their “national” (or ethnic) identity should be preserved and recognized in the new Syrian state construction.

This agreement among the opposition groups offers some insights for the future. Despite visible diversity among opposition groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Christians and Turkmens, the opposition is able to reach an agreement on a commonly held roadmap that is free of extremism and radicalism and embraces all religious, ethnic and racial identities. Aware of the diversity in the country, the opposition groups do not see this diversity as a fault line for Syria. The participants,